

Japan's Shifting Security Environment

A interview with Christopher W. Hughes

By Christopher Acheson

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The resignation of Prime Minister Naoto Kan and ascension of Yoshihiko Noda as Japan's new prime minister last month underscore efforts by the Democratic Party of Japan to refocus its policies and rebuild the party's public standing. Yet Japan is facing more than a change in administration. More significantly, the country is confronted with the challenge of shifting both its defense strategies and regional priorities in order to maintain a stable security environment in the Asia-Pacific, especially in the East China Sea.

Japan security expert Christopher W. Hughes provides insight into the country's evolving security environment, the effects of this evolution on the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the potential impact of an arms race between China and Japan on the region. Hughes is Professor of International Politics and Japanese Studies at the University of Warwick. This interview appeared on the NBR website: www.nbr.org.

The United States and Japan have cooperated on security in the Asia-Pacific for over 50 years. What is the current status of the U.S.-Japan alliance?

The answer to this question depends on one's expectations for the alliance. In the past few years, and especially during the Koizumi administration and subsequent LDP administrations, the condition of the alliance was overhyped, particularly by U.S. and Japanese alliance managers who, to advance their own ends, described the relationship as being in its best condition ever. For sure, very important precedents were set in this period for broadening cooperation on a global scale through initiatives in the Indian Ocean and Iraq, and we may one day see a return to these types of operations. However, comparisons with the U.S.-UK alliance, besides being

inaccurate about the supposed excellent state of that relationship, raised false expectations while glossing over continuing fundamental problems in the alliance, such as the flawed relocation agreements relating to Futenma. More seriously, Japan had not fundamentally changed its strategy of hedging its military commitments both inside and outside the alliance.

Conversely, since this alleged high point under Koizumi, perceptions of the alliance have swung in the opposite direction in the last two years under the new DPJ regime. The alliance is now viewed as being in crisis, with the DPJ fundamentally undermining the relationship. Yet such talk is not only disingenuous in ignoring the fact that the LDP bequeathed the nearly intractable Futenma problem to the DPJ, but also inaccurate because it measures current alliance cooperation against the inflated expectations of the Koizumi era, while overlooking the more basic yet essential work that has continued under the DPJ to strengthen the alliance.

Hence, my answer to your question about the status of the U.S.-Japan alliance is that it has never been in as great or as dire a shape as many have suggested. Instead, I would argue that the relationship is in relatively good shape if measured by more sober expectations. Relating to its core functions of defending Japan and contributing to stability in the Asia-Pacific, the alliance continues to be strong: the Defense Policy Review Initiative (DPRI) realignment process, with the exception of Okinawa, continues to grind on in the mainland; Japan and the United States continue to enmesh their command and control functions and strategies through ballistic missile defense (BMD); the interoperability of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and U.S. military is inching forward; and the DPJ is highly cooperative with U.S. nuclear initiatives.

Nevertheless, even as the alliance has been strengthened, it still contains highly brittle elements that could jeopardize cooperation. The most obvious of these is Okinawa. The DPJ has adopted LDP-style tactics in trying to push through the existing agreement and may try to kick the Futenma can down the road or buy Okinawan support through subsidies. More fundamentally, Japan and the United States must improve mutual understanding of the core functions of the alliance. In particular, they need to prioritize cooperation through regional contingency planning rather than engaging in fanciful global adventures.

The United Nations allows every nation the right to collective self-defense. Although Japan has chosen not to exercise this right, its 2011 defense white paper emphasizes strengthening security relations with the international community. What is the line between cooperative security relations and collective self-defense?

Japan's position, formally at least, is relatively clear on the division of its security responsibilities in line with the principles of the non-exercise of the right of collective self-defense and of engagement in cooperative security. Japan maintains that its self-imposed ban on the exercise of collective self-defense prevents it from using armed force to assist the United States or other partners outside Japanese territory, as this exceeds the level of force necessary for self-defense allowed under Article 9 of its Constitution. Although not explicitly stated, this position allows Tokyo to hedge against entrapment in U.S.-led military expeditions.

However, Japan's ability or willingness to hold the line between cooperative security and collective self-defense is likely to be increasingly challenged. Japan is reaching out to other U.S. allies and partners in order to strengthen the bilateral alliance and to constrain China's rising influence in East Asia and beyond. These cooperative security relations include so-called strategic partnerships with Australia and India, joint exercises, cooperation in disaster relief operations, an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA) with Australia, and even talk of a possible ACSA with South Korea. At the same time, Tokyo is likely to face renewed pressure from Washington to breach its ban on collective self-defense for BMD and regional contingencies. The fact that Japan is increasingly comfortable in working with U.S. partners means that it could be integrated relatively seamlessly into a multilateral collective self-defense framework.

Why is Japan concerned with the increased Chinese military presence in the East and South China seas?

Japanese concerns about China's expanding maritime presence in the East and South China seas are not a mystery. These concerns, which were graphically demonstrated last September, are focused on disputed gas fields and the Senkaku Islands. Japan is worried about the possibility of China attempting to seize these territories or even far-flung islands in Okinawa as part of a

bilateral dispute or in order to complicate Japan's freedom of action to support U.S. power projection capabilities from bases in Okinawa in a Korean Peninsula or Taiwan contingency. Moreover, beyond China's ability to threaten Japanese territory directly and to disrupt the regional balance of power, its growing ability to project power into the East and South China seas could threaten sea lines of communication vital for Japanese trade and energy security.

Japan recently completed its second Hyuga-class helicopter carrier, India is beginning to modernize its navy, and China is on track to develop and build two aircraft carriers in the next decade. Do you see the potential for an arms race between China, India, and Japan? If so, how can it be prevented?

I am more sanguine about the possibility of avoiding a destabilizing arms race between India and Japan, given the potential for maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean as well as to check rising Chinese naval power. The arms race between Japan and China, though, is real. Japan's recent defense procurements are clearly designed with China in mind, even if they cannot be openly described in such terms. Japanese helicopter carriers can play a key role in containing China's expanding submarine capabilities. Japan also looks set to augment its submarine fleet to impede Chinese power projection in the East China Sea. Likewise, its ballistic missile defense may help deter an attack on U.S. bases on Okinawa, and the new F-X fighter's primary role will be to prevent China from gaining air superiority in the region.

How to halt this ongoing arms race is a more difficult question. Such a military build-up may not necessarily be destructive if it produces a carefully calibrated balance of power and both sides can assume the other will act rationally. However, dampening the arms race is the lower-risk option. Achieving such an outcome will require greater military transparency and confidence-building measures on both sides, which in turn can only be sustained by improved efforts at diplomatic rapprochement.

The increasing global deployment of the JSDF over the last two decades signals a gradual shift in Japanese foreign policy. How do you see Japan's defense strategy evolving in the coming years?

Despite the bluster of nationalists, or the condescending tone of government officials, I think deep down Japanese policymakers know that it is “game over” for any serious military autonomy in the future. The heightened international structural pressures of North Korea’s nuclearization and China’s rise, coupled with Japan’s own relative decline in power, mean that Japan will be increasingly forced to rely on the U.S.-Japan alliance. The DPJ administration initially attempted to break out of Japan’s cycle of extreme strategic dependency on the United States, but was tripped up by its own foreign policy inexperience, U.S. intransigence over Okinawa, and China’s assertiveness over the East China Sea.

Consequently, I see Japan’s defense strategy and military power as being increasingly channeled via the mechanism of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The country’s 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines introduced new concepts, such as the dynamic defense force, along with bolstering power projection capabilities. In the future, I expect to see enhanced JSDF cooperation with the United States in planning for East Asian regional contingencies, as well as limited JSDF participation in U.S.-led coalitions beyond the Asia-Pacific. In this sense, Japan will likely continue along the trajectory of becoming a more active military power, but one operating largely within the confines of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

At the same time, this is not likely to be an entirely smooth process for either side. I expect Japan to continue to hedge its commitments to the United States to avoid entrapment scenarios, which may generate bilateral friction and encourage political suspicion of U.S. domination of Japan’s security posture. The United States at times may be confronted with a rather paranoid, obdurate, and unpredictable ally grappling with the humiliations visited upon it by North Korean provocations and China’s enhanced status and frustrated by its security dependence on the United States. I call this “resentful realism,” which contains dangers both for Japan itself and for the region. Ultimately, however, Japan and the United States probably have little choice but to stick together in “odd couple” fashion to manage their own relative declines and insecurities in the Asia-Pacific.

*Christopher W. Hughes is the author of [Japan's Remilitarisation](#) (2009) as well as of the chapter "[Japanese Military Modernization: In Search of a 'Normal' Security Role](#)" in *Strategic Asia 2005–06: Military Modernization in an Era of Uncertainty* (2006).*

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