



## GROWING UNCERTAINTY FOR JAPANESE SECURITY PLANNERS

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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Former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro Nakasone marked his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday May 27 by calling for constitutional change to legalize the country's armed forces. While Prime Minister Abe Shinzo no doubt appreciates the comments, they won't be enough – no matter how much Nakasone is respected – to overcome resistance to constitutional revision. That Nakasone must continue to make the case for constitutional revision 30 years after leaving the prime minister's office is proof of how powerful those obstacles are, despite the growing urgency of security issues. Yet constitutional questions are only part of a constellation of concerns that demand the attention of Japan's security planners.

Nakasone and Abe are of like mind on key issues, and Nakasone laid a foundation for many of Abe's policies. A World War II naval officer, he entered politics two years after war's end, commencing a political career that took him to the Prime Minister's Office, which he occupied from 1982-1987, a term that made him the fifth longest-serving prime minister in postwar Japan. During his tenure, he forged the "Ron-Yasu" relationship with US President Ronald Reagan, creating the template for the bromance between Abe and the current occupant of the White House.

That relationship reflected, at its core, a shared assessment of the strategic environment. Both men saw the Soviet Union as a threat to global order, and as Reagan took up the struggle against "the evil

empire," Nakasone promised to contribute by turning Japan into "an unsinkable aircraft carrier." As part of that pledge, he ignored the informal policy that limited the defense budget to 1 percent of GDP. And this occurred only a few years after a Japanese foreign minister was forced to resign after referring to the US-Japan relationship as "an alliance."

Nakasone was no zealot. An unabashed nationalist, he was also a realist. He built good relations with Washington as well as with neighboring countries' governments. The anger and ill will triggered by his 1985 visit to Yasukuni Shrine prompted him to forego future visits while serving as prime minister. A former secretary of Nakasone, [explained](#) that "The foundation for Nakasone politics is that Japan must not pursue its own happiness at the expense of other countries." While Abe is a similar conservative nationalist, his policies have been marked by a similar pragmatism, even if he doesn't go quite as far as Nakasone in his concern for the happiness of other countries.

Nakasone's call to action comes at a particularly apposite moment for Abe. Japanese defense planners are in the final stages of preparation for the next National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and the accompanying Mid-Term Defense Plan, both of which are due by year's end. The first lays out the thinking that will guide security policy; the second identifies the programmatic and procurement decisions that make the NDPG real.

In March, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Research Commission on National Security offered its take on what Japan should do. The LDP group's recommendations [range](#) from ways to strengthen Japan's indigenous defense industries to the acquisition of unmanned aerial systems. It calls for the deployment of SDF officials to internationally sanctioned peacekeeping operations, and stepped up cooperation with partner militaries. Japan is urged to do more in the realms of cyber and space as well as increase readiness. It [proposed](#) that Japan dispense with the 1 percent limit on defense spending—echoing Abe's [statement](#) in March 2017 that he was prepared to ignore the policy – and

strive for the 2 percent target that the US is demanding of its NATO allies.

Key issues include the decision to acquire more *Aegis* missile defense batteries, as well as the development or acquisition of power-projection capabilities. This discussion includes the purchase of F-35B aircraft and other means of pre-emptive action against foreign forces, and the retrofitting of ships (such as the helicopter carrier *Izumo*) to turn them into aircraft carriers.

Hanging over much of the discussion of security policy is Abe's desire to realize constitutional reform during his tenure in office, a term that many expect to be extended for another two years after the LDP holds party elections in September. (Abe's re-election is not certain. One political observer persuaded me that he will be lucky to survive to July, but I was then assured two days later by a former Cabinet minister that Abe will be prime minister through the 2020 Olympics.) Japan remains deeply divided by the prospect of constitutional reform. One recent poll [shows](#) a strong majority opposed to constitutional revision on Abe's timetable even though a smaller majority acknowledges the need for amendment.

That gap hints at a problem not only for constitutional reform but for all policymaking, and especially in the controversial areas of defense and security. Whether the result of scandal or just fatigue after five years in office, Abe is struggling with public support. He is a ruthless electoral tactician, but his ability to defeat a weak and divided opposition has not given him the mandate he needs for substantive change. Recent polls show Cabinet support ranging from the low 30s to the low 40s, while nonsupport is typically 10 percentage points higher, from the high 40s to the low 50s. In this environment, it will be a challenge to implement any bold policy.

This has implications beyond defense. Earlier this year, Japan ended its longest expansion in 30 years when the economy posted its [first quarterly decline](#) since the fourth quarter of 2015. Next year, economic headwinds will intensify when the government follows through with its plan – twice

delayed – to increase the consumption tax from 8 percent to 10 percent. The Rugby World Cup and the Olympics will provide much-needed boosts in 2019 and 2020, respectively, but they are palliatives, not real answers to Japan's economic problems. A weak prime minister will have limited ability to address those challenges. (Nakasone also had big economic plans: he set in motion the privatization of state tobacco, telephone, and railway holdings.)

There is another big problem that Japanese security planners must face, and it is one for which there is no good answer: the extraordinary shifts and uncertainty that now define the external security environment. The LDP National Defense Commission surveyed the neighborhood and noted that Japan “faces its biggest crisis in the postwar period,” an assessment that reflected North Korea's aggressive nuclear weapons and missile program and China's newly assertive foreign policy, its military modernization efforts and its efforts to rewrite the status quo throughout Asia.

Those are, in truth, longstanding concerns. Japan's uncertainties have become much greater recently. A former senior defense official asked how planners could make policy when they couldn't predict the status of forces on the Korean Peninsula – not just those of the North. Would the Peninsula still be divided, he wondered. Would US forces still be present in three years?

He hinted at, without saying directly, the concern that surfaces with greater frequency in Tokyo (and every other allied capital I've visited in recent months): Will the US continue to be a reliable partner and ally? That question has assumed greater significance amidst rising tensions with China, Russian attempts to re-establish itself as a regional player, and US policy reversals elsewhere in the world. Tokyo has doubts about US commitment to the region in general, as well as to regional institutions and relationships. In some conversations, the concern is a G2 between Washington and Beijing; in others, it is of a transactional approach that turns its back on the alliances and partnerships that have guided US policy for the last half century. Although particulars vary, the common theme is growing uncertainty

about fundamentals and how Japan can respond to that unease.

For all the experience garnered in Nakasone's 100 years, that is a problem he never faced.

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