

## **Beating up on Tokyo: good fun, bad policy**

by Brad Glosserman

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Publication of Japan's newest defense white paper has triggered the usual dark speculations about the country's future. Conversations in Beijing and Seoul begin with the premise that Japan is becoming more right wing in its defense policy and political orientation. Yes, the nation of "Asahi-reading realists" is becoming less blinkered in its assessment of the regional security environment. But the evolution in Japanese security thinking is evolutionary: changes remain incremental and the bulwarks against a radical shift remain firmly in place.

The white paper rightly notes that the Asia-Pacific region "is considerably rich in political, economic, ethnic, and religious diversity, and conflicts between countries/regions remain." North Korea's missile tests and nuclear program are considered "a significant threat" to Japan, while China's military modernization effort and lack of transparency "are a source of concern," as are "its expanding and intensifying activities in waters close to Japan."

The white paper concludes, reasonably enough, that "defense capabilities are vital for ensuring an appropriate response to various contingencies arising from the security challenges and destabilizing factors, which are diverse, complex, and intertwined..." In particular it calls for "building up functions such as warning and surveillance, maritime patrols, air defense, response to ballistic missiles, transportation, and command control communications ..." To the objective observer, these all look like defensive measures.

Nevertheless, recent conversations in China and Korea have been punctuated by alarm about Japanese intentions. Revisions in the outer space law and national energy policy, and the call for reinterpreting the constitution to allow Japan to exercise its right to join collective self-defense efforts, all elicited criticism and concern. The critics are right to note a rightward drift in the center of gravity of Japanese national security policy. The Democratic Party of Japan under Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko has embraced an agenda that would warm the heart of – and spark considerable envy in – its Liberal Democratic Party predecessors. To some degree, this reflects the prime minister's own inclinations, but it is also part of a wider phenomenon: the left in Japan is dis-spirited and fighting for its political life after three years of disappointment under DPJ rule, while the right is rejuvenated and focused on a particular agenda (as always).

But the basic *defensive* orientation remains. Rarely noted by the critics, the white paper also points out that "Japan has been building a modest defense capability under the

Constitution for exclusively defense-oriented purposes without becoming a military power that could threaten other countries, while adhering to the principle of civilian control of the military, observing the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, and firmly maintaining the Japan–U.S. Security Arrangements." Considerable emphasis is also put on multilateral and cooperative efforts to boost regional security.

Alarm about revisions of national energy policy focus on the inclusion of language identifying nuclear power as a "national security" concern in amendments to the Atomic Energy Basic Law. This language doesn't mean that Tokyo is hell bent on acquiring a nuclear weapons capability; it means reliable supplies of energy are indeed a matter of national security. An advisory panel has endorsed the exercise of the right of collective self-defense, but the Cabinet Legislation Bureau has ruled out any reinterpretation of the charter to permit such a move without actually changing the constitution. Don't hold your breath. And finally, as a reminder of how potent obstacles are and how sensitive security policy remains, the government has shelved legislation to change rules of engagement for the Self-Defense Forces as they participate in peacekeeping activities. They still aren't allowed to shoot unless they are fired upon first. Add the public's deeply ingrained pacifism and general budget restraints, and the prospect of a militarized, aggressive Japan looks unconnected to reality.

Efforts to put Japanese defense thinking in context frequently fall on deaf ears in Asia. Rather than highlight the white paper's identification of South Korea as the country that "shares the closest relationship with Japan historically and in various areas such as economy and culture," Koreans focus on language that says Japan retains a claim to Takeshima – the islands that Korea holds as Dokdo. The white paper also begins with a positive assessment of China's evolution, noting that Japan "welcomes the fact that China, which is growing into a big power, has started playing a major role in the world and the region in both name and reality." Meanwhile, Chinese counter that Japan is playing with fire when it reasserts its claim to the Senkaku/Daoyutai islands. Chinese analysts liken Japan to North Korea, insisting that the tail threatens to wag the dog and warning that Tokyo could drag the US into a conflict with China over the disputed territory.

Those claims aren't just disingenuous and the obstinacy isn't just frustrating – they are dangerous. The misreading of Japanese intentions filtered through the lens of history and political correctness – Korean and Chinese analysts privately agree with this analysis, but won't say so in a public setting – rattles neighbors and has the potential to trigger a cycle of action and reaction. Even though every nation in Northeast Asia proclaims its own benign intentions, it sees its neighbors' actions as demanding a response, a situation that looks alarmingly like a security dilemma. So, even if my

characterization of Japanese intentions is correct, the misinterpretations and reactions that might be triggered could destabilize the region.

This dynamic is another reason why it is so important for Japan to build stronger ties with South Korea. Apart from the goals, interests, and values they share, and the ability of the two nations to leverage their strengths when they work together, sustained cooperation and collaboration – the planning perhaps even more than the actual doing – is a confidence building measure that can dampen tensions. These measures remind the Japanese that they are not surrounded by hostile nations.

Of course it is important for Koreans to better understand Japanese thinking and behavior. But it is equally (if not more) valuable for Japan to know that it is not isolated within the region, that it has a partner with which it can work and that seeks to engage Tokyo as well. This is an important vote of confidence for Japan, one that will help keep it outward-oriented when domestic pressures demand an inward focus. This confidence will diminish Japan's fears that the regional security environment, while complex, is not hostile to Japan. While Japan continues to trod a well-worn path in its security policy, isolation and intimidation could make the currently unfounded fears of Japan's neighbors quite real.

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