

## **Japan Unlikely to Redirect Defense Policy**

by David Fouse

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The tripartite earthquake, tsunami, nuclear disaster in Japan has security analysts scrambling to determine the repercussions of these tragic events for the region and world. Some have suggested that the disaster could cause Japan to redirect defense policy away from the priorities adopted in the 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), moving Japan further from the preferences of US defense planners toward a more inward-looking focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. While recovery and reconstruction will preoccupy the Japanese government for the immediate future, it is unlikely that a major reversal in Japanese defense policy will result from these tragic events.

Japan's 2010 NDPG, released only last December, indicated that Japan perceives China's ongoing military expansion and "expanding maritime activities in the region's surrounding waters" as a matter of growing concern and that Japan in turn will reinforce its defenses in its southwestern island chain. Japan pledged to strengthen its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities along with developing a more mobile and flexible force structure that is better coordinated to respond to any contingency that might arise in this area. A substantial transformation of Japan's major weapons platforms will be involved, with considerable reductions in tanks and artillery, while bolstering the number of submarines, surface to air missiles, advanced fighter aircraft, and air transport.

The cost of reconstruction and decontamination in Japan's northern provinces will increase pressure on defense budgets and possibly delay procurement of major new military platforms such as new submarines and replacements for Japan's aging F-4 fighter aircraft. Doubts about whether Japan would fully fund its new defense plan had surfaced prior to this catastrophe. Yet, estimates of the scope of the economic devastation, some as high as \$300 billion, are not in a range that would overwhelm a \$5 trillion economy. The costs of disaster recovery are much more likely to slow the pace of Japan's defense transformation than redirect its orientation.

A poor evaluation of the Japanese Self-Defense Force's (SDF) performance in this disaster by the Japanese public could drive political leadership to deemphasize the growing "external focus" of Japan's defense policy, a focus that has

been encouraged by the United States. Thus far there are few signs that the Japanese public has developed a critical view of the SDF's response.

And one has to question whether the focus of Japan's new defense policy is truly external. The strategic outlook driving the new NDPG, and elaborated on by prime ministerial advisory committees under both the Liberal Democratic Party in 2009 and the Democratic Party of Japan in 2010, portrays a security environment in which the United States is less capable of providing deterrence in the "gray zones" of Japan's disputed territories and waters, necessitating Japan to step up its own defense capabilities in this area. The US welcomed the new NDPG's direction (if not its strategic assessment) and was consulted during its formulation. Japan's improved ISR capabilities in the southwest seem well integrated with US plans to keep watch on Chinese maritime expansion.

But the fears driving Japan's defense transformation are encroachment by emerging powers on territories it claims as its own. Japan shows no signs of softening or relinquishing these claims as it deals with this disaster, as evidenced by the April 1 release of its annual Diplomatic Bluebook. The restatement of Japan's sovereignty claim to Takeshima (known as "Dokdo" to the South Koreans) effectively dried up an outpouring of sympathy and assistance from South Koreans at a time when Japan most needed that support. The heavy-handed response of the Chinese government following Japan's arrest of the captain of a fishing trawler near the Senkaku islands (known as the Diaoyu islands in China) last September will not be quickly forgotten, nor will Russia's recent decision to reinforce military forces in the disputed Northern territories.

The silver lining of this horrific tragedy has been the outpouring of sympathy and support for Japan from the international community, including its neighbors. The assistance efforts of US forces in *Operation Tomodachi* may soften the stance of the Japanese public toward US bases in the country, while contributions from China, South Korea, and Russia have been deeply appreciated by Japanese leadership. The disaster, while tragic, has provided a respite from mounting tensions over North Korean provocations and festering territorial disputes. One can only hope that the moment will not be wasted and that productive dialogue on outstanding issues will follow this reduction in tensions.

It seems improbable, however, that the disaster will provide a magic bullet for problems that have been building for decades. Japan's recent shift in defense policy represents another incremental step in a long-term transformation to cope with its security environment. It is unlikely that this disaster will change the direction of that transformation, even if it slows it down.

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