

HITTING A MOVING TARGET

53

IMPLICATIONS OF JAPAN'S MISSILE DEFENCE

Kristian Kurki

BRIEFING PAPER 53, 12 February 2010



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

HITTING A MOVING TARGET

IMPLICATIONS OF JAPAN'S MISSILE DEFENCE



Kristian Kurki
Researcher
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Briefing Paper 53
12 February 2010

- The ballistic missile defence (BMD) has been promoted as a means to counter the security concern posed by North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes. While these could threaten Japan in theory, the likelihood of an attack by North Korea is negligible as the consequences of such an action would compromise the survival of the North Korean regime.
- Conversely, an exaggerated response to North Korea's missile programme increases the risk of even further unpredictable provocations by North Korea.
- Other regional actors, especially China and even Russia, may counter Japan's increased defence readiness with even greater military presence in the region, leading to an exacerbation of regional tension.
- BMD, and intensified defence measures at large, will contribute to a perpetuation of rivalry between Japan and its East Asian neighbours, restricting Japan's diplomatic manoeuvrability and reducing its future policy options towards consolidating a regional security architecture.
- BMD should not be seen as a test case in the validity and future integrity of the US-Japanese defence alliance. Disparate political and cultural traditions aside, shared economic interests and values suffice to ensure the continuity of the alliance, which is not as fragile as recent media reports have suggested.

The Transformation of the World Order research programme
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs



Photo: Edward O'Connor

A contradiction lingers between Japan's defence policy and its ambitions for a stable East Asian security architecture. On the one hand, Japan is seeking examples of European international institutions upon which to lay the foundations of an East Asian regional institution that would consolidate a peaceful formation of co-existence among the region's nations. On the other hand, Japanese defence officials have been aspiring to deploy a ballistic missile defence (BMD) as a deterrent against North Korea, yet these plans run a high risk of becoming a stumbling block to Japan's ambitions of institutionalized stability.

The BMD programme has quietly unfurled in Japan over the past decade, at the forefront of America's sphere of influence in the western Pacific region. North Korea's missile test in August 1998, which saw a mid-range scud-type projectile fly over Japanese airspace, triggered an unprecedented level of alertness in Japanese defence policy-making. Since 1999, the United States and Japan have laid out plans to cooperate on constructing an advanced, double-layered *Aegis*-class missile interception system along Japan's western edge. The capability is already partly functional, and has been tested with both successes and failures.

Along with a surveillance satellite and upgraded coastal guard capacity, the BMD programme represents yet another step of the recent line in proactive security measures from Tokyo. These advances, whether based on sincere intentions or not, have the potential to become hot potatoes in the security architecture of the East Asian region. The BMD is promoted as a means by which to

provide security against missile attacks from the specific threat of ballistic missiles, primarily from North Korea but also other hostile parties who have access to (North Korean) missile technology. Yet the applicability of the BMD is not limited to North Korean-made missiles—it is universal, and therefore bears strategic and political consequences of a much greater scope than merely Japanese homeland defence. It implies an intensification of rivalry not only between Japan (and the US) and North Korea, but other regional actors as well. Severing security ties with the US is not an option for Japan, but the BMD, if fully deployed, will most likely complicate Japan's international relations in East Asia and amount to an impediment to Japan's regional diplomatic manoeuvrability, making it increasingly dependent on US priorities and precedents.

A conveniently inconvenient neighbour

Japan's conventional post-war defence posture has remained low-key as a consequence of its pacifist constitution, its position as a US protégé and its "historical burden". Nonetheless, Japanese defence policy-makers do soberly recognise prevalent security challenges, and the obvious one is that posed by the provocative regime of North Korea, which has been recognised as Japan's primary security concern for a number of years consecutively. This has led to an increased mobility and the readiness to respond to specific potential threats, a pattern that is becoming a conspicuous characteristic of Japan's post-Cold War defence policy.

North Korea, commonly represented as an embodiment of militarism, nationalism and non-compliance coupled up with a ballistic missile and nuclear programme, is an intimidating neighbour to Japan. While Japan is not threatened by North Korea's outdated and poorly equipped marine and air forces, it is well within reach of the North Korean *Nodong* missile, apparently based on designs of a Scud-B or Scud-C, and an array of warheads along North Korea's eastern coast are reportedly aimed at Japan. A number of recent unilateral advances in Japan's defence policy have been motivated by incidents instigated by North Korea, including upgrading the coast guard's facilities after a North Korean spy boat's incursion in 2002 and launching the first in a series of spy satellites in 2003.

The timeline of Japan's BMD programme is no exception, coinciding neatly with developments on the Korean Peninsula. A year after the first North Korean nuclear crisis 1993–1994, Japan's defence agency commenced its first BMD study to assess possible architectures of the BMD system and its costs. In December 1999, only months after North Korea's surprise missile test fire over Japanese airspace sent shockwaves throughout Japan, the Security Council of Japan and the Prime Minister's cabinet approved a Japan-US Cooperative Research Project on BMD. Realisation of BMD plans progressed rapidly under Koizumi's conservative administration during 2001–2006, which coincided with a similarly disposed leadership in the United States under President George W. Bush. However, the consistent stream of North Korean missile tests, most recently during summer 2009, has kept the North Korean threat in the headlines. For those who support the augmentation of Japan's defensive capabilities, North Korea has been a conveniently inconvenient neighbour indeed.

However, a problematic element of the North Korean security concern, and one that Tokyo has been disinclined to consider, is the question of what would motivate Pyongyang to launch an attack on Japan. Hostile rhetoric aimed at Tokyo is commonplace in the North Korean press. The nationalist North Korean leadership harnesses popular support and gains legitimacy by antagonising not only the US but also Japan, who colonised Korea in the first half of the 20th century and therefore obstructed Korean independence and integrity. But these factors alone

should not be enough to make any conclusions regarding whether Pyongyang harbours real intentions of launching an attack on Japan. On the contrary, such an action would legitimise a vehement response by Japan and her ally, the United States, with most likely disastrous consequences for the survival of the Kim regime which hitherto has done everything in its power to stay seated on its throne. Besides, several sources as well as 21st-century diplomatic history suggest that the North Korean elite does not recognize any fundamental obstacles to a rapprochement between their country and Japan. At superficial glance, North Korea transpires as a particularly alarming threat, but that perceived threat defies logic.

Plans to develop BMD around Japan have escaped controversy and international dispute due to a number of factors. One probable reason to this is the fact that the programme has unfurled within a more or less consolidated sphere of US interests. As such, it does not represent a significant shift in Japanese-American defence policy *vis-à-vis* China. The main point of tension remains around Taiwan, and the stand-off is already there. Another factor that undermines debate is the lack of transparency in and awareness of Japanese defence priorities. The shield is ostensibly directed towards the security concern posed by North Korea, but by any logic Japan's long-term concerns should be posed by much bigger entities in the region: China and, assuming it re-awakes to its eastern dimension, Russia. The missile defence system is designed to shield Japan and regions east of it from a weapon of a specific form, not from a specific source, and therein lies the predicament of the matter. China's and Russia's responses to the programme have so far been slight, downright conspicuously absent, but a missile shield that could compromise their military credibility would pose an obvious challenge to their regional—even global—influence.

The ambivalence of self-defence

The precariousness of the BMD programme is exacerbated by another complex factor: the difficulty of drawing a line between defensive and offensive force. At home, Japan has justified the strategic necessity of BMD, firstly, by underlining the security concern posed by North Korea's missile programme and, secondly, by referring to Japan's unique

position as a country denied the right to possess offensive military capability and therefore needing to compensate for this shortage. In spite of an ever-greater presence of Japan's Self-Defence Forces in international peacekeeping, crisis management and anti-piracy operations, the Japanese constitution still contains its paradoxical ninth article, which denies the country the right to have an army, to wage war and to resort to military means for any other purpose than self-defence after, or immediately in the face of, a hostile attack. In other words, acquisitions of weapons with blatant offensive capability still stir up controversy in Japan, but the threshold to deploying defensive installations is far lower. However, the issue of defensive versus offensive capability is highly ambivalent. For one, the difference between a defensive and an offensive weapon or weapons system is often not the nature of the weapon itself, but the manner in which it is used, and a defensive stance *vis-à-vis* an offensive one is defined by policy. This becomes tangible in a 1950's policy spelled out by the Japanese government, stating that Japan's constitution allows it to attack an enemy base in self-defence if there is no other means of protecting the nation from an emergency, for instance through a "guided bomb attack." Then director general of Japan's former Defence Agency (now Ministry of Defence) Shigeru Ishiba reiterated this interpretation in 2003. Such deductions, however, rarely surface in public debate.

Secondly, Japan's defence forces are to an increasing degree gearing themselves up to a wider array of operations: not exclusively for missions to defend their national integrity or sovereignty, but to contribute to international peacekeeping, crisis management and anti-piracy operations for the sake of, as Japanese governmental sources regularly put it, "Japan's as well as the international community's peace and stability." Consequently, the defence forces are being equipped for environments beyond those challenges it might face in the vicinity of Japan proper. This factor is relevant to the implications of BMD insofar that BMD, although not a fully mobile capability as such, nonetheless becomes recognised as an inherent component of that military entity which manifests itself as an increasingly mobile—and potentially offensive—force.

While the shield has sparked little international controversy so far, it does have all the necessary

ingredients for yet another point of conflicting interests between Japan and its East Asian neighbours, most notably China. Such contradictions are already numerous, including territorial disputes and issues regarding interpretations of history, and increasing or intensifying these contradictions will lead to diminishing diplomatic manoeuvrability. Japan needs all the political leverage it can possibly harness as it currently seeks to establish a regional defence framework which to consolidate a security architecture in East Asia within. Moreover, it entertains hopes of membership in the United Nations Security Council. Stable relations with its neighbours will be an essential condition for any success with these ambitions.

The emergence of an interactive alliance

The US-Japanese alliance now has more moving parts than it used to. As long as Japan's 1955 system of government was in place, rooted in firm ties between LDP backbenchers and bureaucrats, Japan remained a predictable US ally. The inauguration of Japan's new government led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in August 2009, however, coinciding with Barack Obama's democratic administration in the White House, has given conservative analysts cause to fear drastic changes in the alliance and implications to the BMD programme. Japanese politicians have expressed opinions to the effect that Japan's current national security concerns may not warrant the implementation of a fully-fledged, expensive and politically sensitive missile defence. Not only could BMD complicate Japan's external relations, but the task of nurturing domestic support for the programme already prompts a number of challenges. The Japanese public is regularly reminded of the troublesome developments in North Korea and surprisingly many are genuinely worried about their nation's security, but they hesitate to support large public investments amid Japan's serious fiscal predicament.

The DPJ has pledged its commitment to promoting a greater level of autonomy in Japanese foreign policy, which has hitherto followed the precedents set by American foreign policy. If this pledge is realised and Japan manages to make its own distinct mark on its foreign affairs, it will necessitate some degree of recalibration of the relationship between Tokyo and



Photo: Naixn (flickr)

Washington and form a more dynamic alliance than previously. Equating the fate of BMD with the fate of the US-Japanese alliance, however, is tantamount to hyperbole, and this is especially true now that the Obama administration is committed to the advocacy of non-proliferation and the politics of engagement. However, although symbolically significant, the BMD should by no means be seen as a make-or-break issue for the US-Japanese alliance. Since the Cold War, the United States has strengthened its ties with key partners-come-allies around Asia, from Japan and Australia all the way to India. Japan remains a solid component of this whole, with vested economic interests in the prevailing US-led order and, equally importantly, in the sustained growth of the Asian region.

Nonetheless, BMD has numerous proponents with a range of motives. A cooperative effort between Japan and the US, the BMD programme is viewed by some as a test-case to assess the integrity and future durability of the US-Japanese alliance, making policy-makers loth to lay it down for political or ideological motives, regardless of the programme's adverse fiscal consequences and possible implications for Japan's relations with its Asian neighbours. This line of reasoning easily leads to exaggerated conclusions; Japan has previously declined US requests for more equal military burden-sharing in the alliance without compromising the integrity of the relationship. The alliance is very unlikely to hick-up as long as Japanese security interests do not contradict those of the US or, even, vice-versa.

Moreover, at an expected cost of one trillion yen, BMD is a substantial vote of no confidence in the constructivist forces in East Asia's international politics. Conservative researchers have claimed that "Tokyo can't afford Obama's faith in disarmament", especially now that America's growing economic dependence on China may render Washington unusually inclined to appease Beijing. Such views, however, are steeped in a firm conviction that the East Asian region, as it stands, is inherently confrontational, that laying down defences equates to a concession to rival powers, and that rival powers will inevitably be inclined to promote their interests even by force. But no matter how intimidating the political environment, Japan has to be realistic about its own outset. Albeit (still) the world's second-biggest economy, it remains a geographically constrained country in a highly precarious geopolitical position, squeezed between a rising global power to its west and a gradually waning superpower to its east. The only prudent policy choices for Japan are those that promote friendly intentions on both flanks.

Kristian Kurki

Researcher

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

ISBN 978-951-769-251-9

ISSN 1795-8059

Cover photo: tanakawho (flickr)

Layout: Tuomas Kortteinen

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs 2010

www.upi-fia.fi