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Japan's 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines - Reading the Tea Leaves

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On December 17, Japan's Cabinet, under the leadership of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), published Japan's ten-year defense strategy, known as the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG). In response to a rapidly transforming strategic environment, the 2010 NDPG—the first by a non-Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government—delineates a number of major changes. At the same time, “reading between the lines” finds that the NDPG is equally significant for what it reflects about the continuity in Japan's defense policy. Both aspects are of considerable significance for US policymakers.

Adam P. Liff, Ph.D Candidate in Political Science at Princeton University, explains that Japan's 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) “delineates a number of major changes. At the same time, ‘reading between the lines’ finds that the NDPG is equally significant for what it reflects about the continuity in Japan's defense policy.”

Toward a “Dynamic Defense Force” and Heading Southwest

In a major revision, the 2010 NDPG replaces Japan's erstwhile “Basic Defense Force Concept” (*kibanteki boeiryoku koso*), which was focused primarily on passive deterrence and—if necessary—defense against a full-scale (Soviet) invasion, with a “Dynamic Defense Force” (*doteki boeiryoku*) aimed at actively deterring the most probable threats to Japan's national security and contributing to regional and global stability. To achieve these goals, the NDPG calls for a flexible force structure consisting of mobile units capable of rapid deployment in response to diverse contingencies and enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation on a host of nontraditional security issues.

In addition to modest reductions in the number of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) personnel, tanks, and artillery, the NDPG also emphasizes the importance of improving the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) ability to defend Japan amid the “immediate and grave destabilizing factor” of North Korea and mitigating “concern” about China's rapid military modernization and naval activities in the East China Sea. In response to the threat of North Korean missiles, the NDPG calls for the deployment of PAC-3 air defense units nationwide and for the construction of two (for a total of six) Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) Aegis destroyers equipped with SM-3 missile interceptors. With regard to China, the NDPG calls for the deployment of new forces to address a defense “vacuum” and “surveillance gap” around Japan's remote southwestern islands. This shift southwest includes a planned increase in the MSDF's fleet of submarines from 16 to 22 (the most since the 1940s), stationing an E-2C AEW aircraft and an additional squadron of F-15s in Okinawa, and new radar and GSDF units on the Nansei islands east of Taiwan.

Continuing a trend since 2001 toward a more proactive and global role for the JSDF, the 2010 NDPG defines Japan's peace and stability as inseparable from that of the international community. Significant space is devoted to calling for an expansion of the JSDF's role in peace cooperation activities and humanitarian assistance, as well as non-traditional security operations such as disaster relief, counter-piracy, and counter-proliferation. The document also reveals that Japan will consider loosening severe restrictions on the GSDF's freedom of action in UN peacekeeping operations.



Reality Check and Implications for the United States

At first glance, the latest revisions to the NDPG appear to suggest that Tokyo is increasingly “realist” in its response to Japan’s rapidly changing security environment. Indeed, alliance handlers in Washington should be encouraged that the DPJ administration refers to the alliance as “indispensable” and has adopted a fairly pragmatic stance on defense issues. Nevertheless, several items are conspicuously absent from the NDPG, yet deserve mention.

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First, despite the acknowledged reduced threat of invasion from the north, the NDPG calls for a reduction of only 1,000 GSDF personnel and makes no mention of reducing bases in Hokkaido. Second, a widely anticipated “loosening” of Japan’s normative ban against arms exports was scrapped last week in order to placate the opposition Social Democrats in advance of an upcoming vote on the FY2011 general budget. “Loosening” the ban would have paved the way for joint development and production of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter with the United States and its allies and, eventually, exports of the SM-3 Block IIA sea-based missile interceptor to NATO members. Third, despite its call for enhanced security cooperation with the United States and its allies, the NDPG does not mention the recommendation of an advisory committee to “reinterpret” Japan’s constitution to allow for collective self-defense. Fourth, the NDPG makes no mention of a general law (*ippanho*) to govern overseas dispatch of the JSDF, ensuring that sending JSDF abroad will continue to require Diet approval on an ad-hoc basis (and thus be susceptible to use as a political football). Fifth, despite references to the importance of air superiority, no decision has been made about which next-generation fighter will replace the Air Self-Defense Force’s (ASDF) obsolescent fleet of 1970s-era F-4EJs. Lastly, despite the fact that Japan’s defense budget has fallen steadily over the past decade and currently stands at a mere 0.89% of GDP, any increase has been ruled out for several years due to “severe fiscal circumstances.”

The NDPG should send a clear message to those who hope for Japan to become a “normal” country—a vague concept to begin with—and help the United States “balance” a rising China and/or contribute to US-led military operations overseas. In stark contrast to China, whose defense budget has roughly quadrupled over the past decade, Japan’s defense budget has actually *shrunk* during the same period. Proposed changes in the NDPG are a response to very specific threats and largely consistent with Japan’s longstanding policy of “defensive defense” (*senshu boei*). Japan’s defense policy vis-à-vis North Korea is a prophylactic response to possible missile attacks; it is unclear what military role—if any—Japan would play supporting the United States in the event of conflict on the Korean Peninsula or the precipitous collapse of the regime in Pyongyang. In contrast to the United States, the shift southwest is driven less by the Taiwan issue or the abstract challenge of a rising superpower than by worries about the specific threat that China’s military modernization and naval activities pose to Japan’s remote southwestern islands. Finally, domestic support for expanding the JSDF’s global role is largely limited to its involvement in non-traditional security operations under UN auspices; Japan will probably not play an active role in US-led military operations abroad anytime soon.

In sum, although the 2010 NDPG reflects a progressively more pragmatic and threat-oriented defense policy, of roughly equal significance is its degree of continuity. Despite an external security environment widely seen as increasingly threatening to Japan’s interests, proposed changes to Japan’s force structure are limited. Legal obstacles, such as Article Nine of Japan’s pacifist constitution and normative obstacles, such as a ceiling on Japan’s defense budget at 1% of GDP along with restrictive bans on arms exports and the use of force overseas, persist. Together with structural challenges—especially a public deficit roughly twice the size of GDP, the rapidly increasing cost of advanced weapon systems, and an atrophying domestic defense industry—these obstacles all but guarantee that Japan will not play the kind of assertive role in Northeast Asia and the world that some in Washington would hope.

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