



Japan's new approach to national security

by Elena Atanassova-Cornelis

December 2013 marked an important turning point in Japan's evolving security and defence policies. While the debate about Japan's so-called security 'normalisation' has been going on now for more than a decade, by releasing three national security-related documents the conservative government led by Shinzo Abe since 2012 has dissipated any doubts that may still linger regarding the 'why, what and how' of Japan's national security.

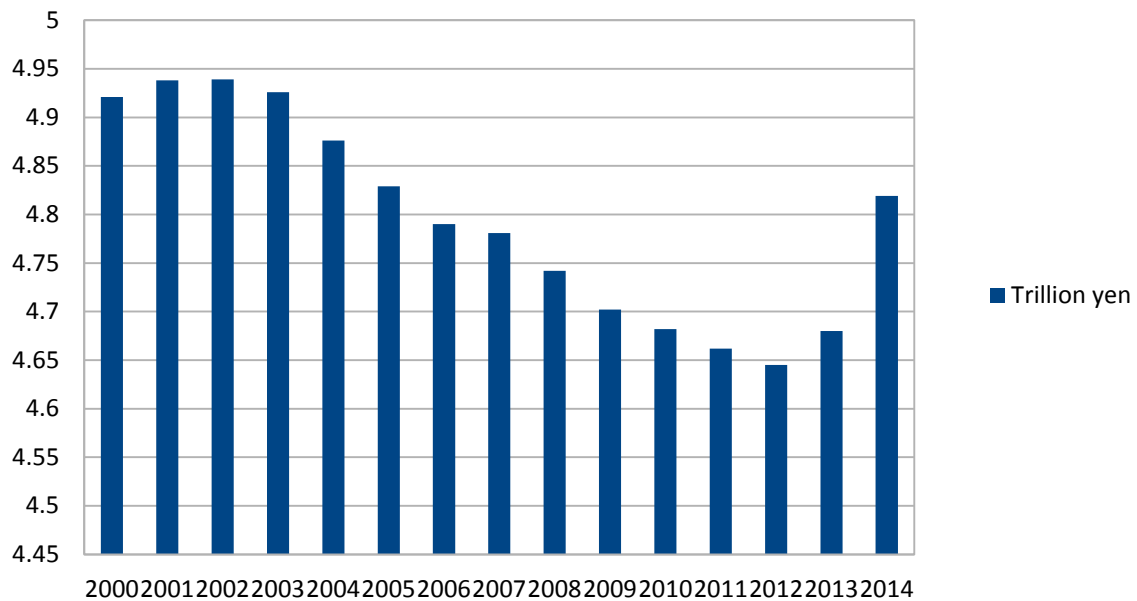
In December 2013 the Abe administration adopted the first ever National Security Strategy (NSS) of Japan – together with the country's new national security doctrine, namely the National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG), as well as the Mid-Term Defence Programme for 2014-2019. The last two documents replace the 2010 NDPG and the Mid-Term Defence Programme adopted by the previous, centre-left government of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Centred on a policy of 'proactive contribution to peace', the NSS sets out the main guidelines for Japan's national security for the next decade, including for the areas of sea, outer space and energy. It also seeks to promote, both domestically and internationally, a better understanding of the country's strategic objectives and responses.

Drivers: the 'why' of national security

The driving forces, as discussed in the 2013 NSS and the NDPG, are based on Japan's assessment of both the global and regional strategic environments, and include a detailed list of specific security challenges at both levels, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Japan's national security policy is driven, first of all, by a strong perception of a shifting balance of power at the global level since the start of the twenty-first century. In this regard, the documents make reference to the emerging countries, especially to China's increasing international presence, as well as to the changing relative influence of the US. Specific threats to Japan's security at the global level include international terrorism as well as the threats stemming from the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and their means of delivery, such as ballistic missiles (BM). The Abe administration further underscores the problems related to maintaining 'open and stable seas', which include piracy, maritime disasters and, generally, the safety of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs). What stands out here, in particular, is the reference to the growing risk of incidents at sea, not least as a result of competition between

Japanese defence spending 2000-2014



Source: Japanese Ministry of Defence

(Figures exclude expenses related to the reduction of the burden on local communities in the framework of the realignment of US forces in Japan)

states over natural resources and unresolved sovereignty issues. Specifically, the South China Sea disputes are provided as an example in the NSS.

At regional level, in the Asia-Pacific, the shifting balance of power is said to give rise to regional tensions. Northeast Asia is singled out as an Asian sub-region with a large concentration of military power and where countries have diverse security views (as well as different political systems). There is also an explicit concern about escalation of the so-called ‘grey zone’ disputes over territorial sovereignty and interests – which, in Japan’s view, further complicates the Asia-Pacific strategic environment.

Specific regional security challenges to Japan’s national security discussed in the NSS and the NDPG are not new, and include North Korea’s Ballistic Missile (BM) and nuclear developments as well as China’s military modernisation and its intensified activities in the seas and airspace around Japan. However, it is the increasing concern about maintaining the rule of law at sea that appears to be of primary importance for the Abe administration. The perception that Beijing is attempting to unilaterally change the status quo ‘by coercion’, disregarding international law and infringing upon the freedom of navigation, refers to Japan’s dispute with China over the Senkaku (Diayou) islands in the East China Sea. The Abe government sees China’s overall behaviour as an ‘issue of concern for the international community, including Japan’.

The overall conclusion, therefore, is that the security environment surrounding Japan ‘is becoming increasingly tense’.

Principles and objectives: the ‘what’

The core principles of Japan’s national security, as introduced in the post-war years, are said to remain unchanged. These include maintaining an exclusively defence-oriented policy, not becoming a military power that poses a threat to other countries, and adhering to the three non-nuclear principles of not possessing, not producing and not introducing nuclear weapons in the country. The main message that the Abe administration seeks to send is one of continuity: Japan remains ‘a peace-loving nation’. However, while the framework is unaltered, it is the content – namely the shift in the NSS from the hitherto ‘one-country pacifism’ to ‘proactive pacifism’ – that suggests new security aspirations.

Based on this new national security principle and in line with its long-standing policy of international cooperation, Japan is expected to become a ‘proactive contributor to peace’. The country’s contribution to international security has been made primarily in the framework of the UN, including in humanitarian relief missions and peacekeeping operations. Japan has a self-imposed ban on exercising its right to collective self-defence based on the interpretation of Article 9 (also known as the ‘peace clause’) of its 1947 post-war Constitution.

As Abe has prioritised Constitutional revision in order to allow Japan to enter into collective self-defence arrangements, the shift in the NSS towards proactive pacifism seeks to open up the way for Abe to move forward on this policy initiative. This shift has alarmed some of Japan's neighbours, notably China and South Korea. As both countries suffered under Japan's imperial rule in Asia in the first half of the twentieth century, they now warily watch Abe's every step aimed at expanding Japan's security role.

The justification for Tokyo's move towards security activism, as discussed in the NSS, includes the 'severe' security environment that Japan faces and the Abe administration's belief that the international community expects the country to become an active contributor to international peace. Furthermore, the successful pursuit of Tokyo's national interests – such as maintaining sovereignty and achieving prosperity – is seen to be directly linked to the country's efforts in the area of international cooperation. In line with this thinking, Abe's national security objectives stress – in addition to deterring threats from reaching Japan (national level) and improving the regional security situation in the Asia-Pacific (regional level) – Tokyo's role in global security and in building a stable international community (global level).

Security responses: the 'how'

Japan's strategic approaches to national security may be divided into three major groups: strengthening Japan's own capabilities and roles; enhancing the US-Japan alliance; and cooperating for global peace and stability. The strategic thinking of the Abe administration reveals a comprehensive picture of diplomatic and defence policies as well as the utilisation of diverse resources designed to address challenges at the three levels mentioned above – the national, the regional and the global.

Japan's capabilities and roles

Although the NSS mentions the strengthening of Japan's diplomatic creativity and its 'soft' (or non-military) power as well as its role in international organisations, the weight of this strategic approach appears to be placed on enhancing the country's military capabilities, namely its 'hard' power.

The document introduces the 'highly effective and joint defence force' concept, which emphasises collaborative operations among the three branches of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF), i.e. Ground, Maritime and Air SDF. This new 'dynamic joint

defence force' will be equipped with advanced technology and able to deter diverse threats, as well as respond in a swift and integrated manner to various contingencies. These can include, for example, a potential occupation by enemy forces of a remote island. Such a scenario has arguably been considered by the Abe government: in April 2013 it adopted a five-year blueprint for protecting the nation's maritime interests, partly as a response to Chinese claims in the East China Sea. In this regard, the NSS mentions that Japan will protect and develop remote islands near national borders as well as examine 'the situation of land ownership' in such areas.

The maritime dimension of Japan's national interests is underscored and well reflected in the nature of the capabilities to be enhanced and the specific contingencies to be tackled. The former include, for example, capabilities for maritime surveillance and law enforcement as well as the SDF development of 'full amphibious' capability that would be necessary – in the Abe administration's view – for the potential recapturing of an occupied island. Primary contingencies include ensuring the safety of sea and airspace surrounding Japan and responding to offshore island invasion, along with responses to BM attacks and threats in cyberspace. The NSS and the NDPG express Japan's determination to 'fully protect its territories' and 'not to tolerate any change in the status quo by coercion', thereby sending a quite unequivocal signal to China. The defence of the Nansei islands in Southwestern Japan, in particular, will be strengthened. To this end, 52 amphibious vehicles and 17 Osprey transport aircraft will be introduced, which will seek to provide the SDF with landing capabilities comparable to those of the US Marine Corps. Furthermore, the NSS calls on Tokyo to play a leading role in maintaining and developing 'open and stable seas', especially by seeking to ensure the safety of SLOCs.

Other capabilities that are to be strengthened include, among others, information-gathering and intelligence analysis as well as satellite manufacturing and dual-use technologies. The NSS further underscores Japan's participation in joint development and production of defence-related equipment, as well as its exports of weapons and military technology. By lifting restrictions on weapons exports and engaging in joint manufacturing of arms, it is hoped that Tokyo will enhance the international competitiveness of its defence industry.

The strengthening of Japan's defence capabilities goes hand in hand with changes in military spending. The current fiscal year, which started in April

2013, has marked an increase of 0.8 % from 2012 and the first increase in defence spending after 10 consecutive years of decline. Military spending is projected to rise by more than 2.5% (to ¥4.81 trillion) in FY 2014. In 2010, the DPJ-led administration earmarked ¥23.5 trillion (US\$227 billion) for the 2011-2016 five-year defence programme. For its part, the Abe administration's Mid-term Defence Programme for 2014-2019 projects a five-year defence spending of ¥24.7 trillion (US\$240 billion). This will constitute a 5% increase to the military budget over five years.

The US-Japan alliance

In line with previous policies, the Abe administration sees the alliance with the US – based on common strategic interests and universal values – as ‘the cornerstone of Japan’s security’, also playing an indispensable role in fostering peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. The NSS calls for enhancing the effectiveness of the bilateral security arrangements, for instance by revising the Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation and strengthening bilateral ties in the areas of Ballistic Missile Defence and maritime affairs. However, the ‘hidden’ message that the NSS seems to send is one of strategic uncertainty. This concerns the sustainability of the US commitments to Asian-Pacific security against the background of America’s tight fiscal and economic situation and, especially, China’s rise. Japan, therefore, appears to emphasise the strengthening of its own defence and deterrence capabilities as the best way of responding to a ‘severe’ regional environment while maintaining its alliance with the US.

Cooperation for global peace and stability

With regard to international cooperation, the Abe administration prioritises enhancing Tokyo’s ties with countries that share with Japan ‘universal values and strategic interests’. In the Asia-Pacific region, these are the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, ASEAN nations and India. Those outside Asia include notably European countries, especially the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland. Furthermore, the NSS calls on Japan to develop cooperative relations with emerging powers, such as Brazil and South Africa, and countries in the Middle East, as well as contribute to stability in Africa.

Special attention in the NSS is also given to Tokyo’s role in promoting multilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, including in the framework of ASEAN+3, as well as trilateral dialogues, such as the Japan-China-Korea grouping. Concerning China,

Abe’s thinking is dominated by the long-standing Japanese objectives of encouraging Beijing to ‘adhere to international norms of behaviour’ and enhance its ‘transparency’ in military affairs. While constructing a ‘mutually beneficial relationship’ with China is the long-term goal, urging the PRC ‘to exercise self-restraint’ appears to be an urgent priority for Abe, indeed, reflecting Japan’s concern about Chinese behaviour in territorial disputes in the Asia-Pacific.

Other initiatives that Japan is expected to pursue largely represent continuity of previous policies. These range from contributing to UN peacekeeping operations and the international disarmament efforts, to promoting the rule of law and the free trade system, as well as the strategic use of foreign aid. Abe’s policy approaches at the global level thus appear to emphasise Japan’s ‘soft’ power, which stands in contrast with the focus on ‘hard’ power envisaged for Japan to deal with regional challenges in Asia.

So ... how much of a change?

The release of the NSS and the new NDPG by the Abe administration does not seem to indicate a watershed for Japanese defence strategy. Tokyo’s concerns related to China’s rise, which is one of the main driving forces behind Japan’s security normalisation, are long-standing. Since the 2000s, Japan has responded to the shifting power balance in Asia in incremental steps. These have now come to include a stronger maritime security focus, as well as an increased resolve on the part of Tokyo to stand up to Beijing.

The domestic debate on Article 9 revision and the need for more international contributions, too, has been a major characteristic of the security debate in Japan in the past decade. What seems to be new is the (implicit) emphasis placed on Japan’s own efforts, rather than on its alliance with the US, for responding to the changing security environment.

All in all, Abe’s NSS is significant not because of the shifts it appears to introduce, but because it provides a clarification regarding Japan’s path towards ‘proactive pacifism’ – a tangible trend in Japan’s security policy since the start of the century. It now seems quite clear that, for Japan, there is no turning back.

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