

6 February 2015

# Japan-UK Ties and the Quiet Revolution in Japanese Foreign Policy

Shinzo Abe's foreign policy has raised concerns about Japan's seeming remilitarization. For John Hemmings, these concerns miss the point. Tokyo's growing confidence abroad and commitment to liberal internationalism now make it an ideal partner for Britain and Europe.

By John Hemmings for ISN

On 21 January 2015, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and Defence Minister Gen Nakatani met with their UK counterparts, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon in London at what was the first UK-Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial. The meeting – known as a 2+2 – was remarkable for two reasons. The first was Tokyo's commitment to an ambitious program of policy cooperation with London. The second was the realization in Whitehall that Japan's approach towards security has fundamentally changed. While the Western press and policy community have written much on Japan's changing security stance, and even more about the man behind those changes – Prime Minister Shinzo Abe – there has been less consideration of the implications for British and European security. Overall, the January meeting raised important questions about the nature of Japan's new security posture. As Japan pivots away from the 'neo-mercantilist' policies it pursued during the Cold War, it is increasingly embracing the principles of liberal internationalism in its foreign policy. This makes Japan a highly appealing security partner for Britain and Europe.

## A quiet revolution

Until recently, Japan was seen as a 'pacifist' country: its leadership disdained geopolitics and seemingly had few ambitions to wield hard power or enter into security relationships beyond its primary relationship with the United States. In a strategy that became known as the Yoshida Doctrine, the country focused on being a 'neo-mercantilist' power that remained uninvolved in Cold War flashpoints. Over time, however, this policy stance became a victim of its own success. Though Washington was bound to defend Japan, it received little by way of burden-sharing or regional security cooperation in return. Tensions grew during the 1980's when many in the West – such as Paul Kennedy and Ezra Vogel – predicted that Japan would overtake the US as the world's largest economy. Washington believed that Japan was free-riding on US defence spending and shirking its commitments to the alliance.

Were Prime Minister Yoshida alive today, he would barely recognize Japan's growing global security

posture. While Japanese security cooperation with the UK remains less extensive than with other US allies, such as Australia and South Korea, the January meeting was nevertheless impressive in scope. For one, it resulted in a [Joint Statement](#) and [Annex](#) whereby the two countries pledged to continue cooperating on issues ranging from disarmament and non-proliferation to maritime security and anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. They also acknowledged growing bilateral cooperation in the space and cyber realms, and looked forward to signing an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). This would allow for military-to-military servicing and repair, and would provide the foundation for joint military operations. In addition, the UK acknowledged and supported Japan's growing cooperation with NATO and the EU, noting that JSDF vessels have been participating in Operation Ocean Shield alongside the EU Naval Force. The core of the meeting, however, was the launch of a number of joint-defence equipment and technology projects, including an air-to-air missile and chemical protective gear, and discussion of the possibility of exporting Japan's P-1 maritime patrol aircraft to the UK.

Seen from Europe, Japan's behavior might be explained as *realpolitik*. After all, Japan has had a front row seat as China has re-emerged as a great power and rapidly built a modern and highly capable military. While China's economy experienced double-digit growth for more than a decade, Japan's once-mighty economy stagnated. In 2010, China's economy surpassed Japan's in aggregate terms. Certainly, some would argue that Japan's outreach is merely a way of enticing Europe to become more involved in East Asia. There is some truth to this. Japanese political elites and foreign policy bureaucrats have watched Chinese assertiveness on its periphery with mounting concern over the past decade. Indeed, one Japanese official called the 2010 clash over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands 'a wake-up call'. Continued North Korean belligerence and its acquisition of nuclear weapons have also sharpened Japan's concerns about regional security.

But Japan's outreach to other regions is about more than narrow self-interest. European policy-makers should be aware that the quiet revolution in Japanese foreign policy has internal drivers as well. Japan is in the midst of a serious identity shift, comparable to that which followed the Meiji restoration or the growth of militarism in the 1930s. In the process, it has come to realize that distant regional and global issues directly affect Japan, and that it can no longer expect the West – namely Washington – to ensure its security while it focuses on amassing economic power. Despite criticism of his historical revisionism, Prime Minister Abe seems determined to retain the moral aspect of Japan's pacifist identity. In Japanese, his foreign policy is referred to as *sekkyokuteki heiwashugi* (積極的平和主義, *sekkyokuteki heiwa shugi*), which literally means 'active pacifism.' In English, this becomes 'active contributor to peace.'

### **From neo-mercantilism to liberal internationalism**

Abe's foreign policy outlook, while admittedly fed by Japanese conservatism and nationalism, mixes Japan's pacifist identity with a strong strand of liberal multilateralism. Nobukatsu Kanehara, one of Abe's closest foreign policy advisors and a current Assistant Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary, is the clearest of these voices. He and other members of Abe's inner circle – such as Shotaro Yachi (Chairman of the NSC) and Assistant Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobushige Takamizawa – have been the most active in promoting this new outlook. As they see it, Japan's challenge is not to oppose or contain China as a rising power – as many in Beijing believe – but to guide China through its 'bullish' phase and teach it how to become a responsible, rule-abiding power. Time and time again, Abe and his team have based their foreign policy outlook on liberal democratic values. Odd though it may sound, this marks a clear break from the past: neo-mercantile Japan positively avoided value-based policies during the Cold War, with postwar Prime Minister and Yoshida-Doctrine-adherent Miyazawa Kiichi going so far as to say that Japan's foreign policy was, in fact, "a pretense of a foreign policy" and that "the only value judgments we can make are determining what is in Japan's interest."

This shift is one that European policy-makers would do well to heed. Though it hardly guarantees that Japanese forces will be joining their British counterparts in future military engagements, it does mean that Japan will no longer watch from the sidelines. Tokyo has become an active defender – with hard power, if necessary – of the liberal international order. In practice, European and Japanese security communities are on the verge of a significant increase in security cooperation on issues ranging from ISIS, to Russian revanchism in the Crimea, to evolving space and cyber security challenges. Even with a defence spending cap far below European states (hovering just above 1%), Japan maintains one of the largest and most modern military forces in the world and has much to offer in terms of defence technology. Furthermore, it is likely that its defence spending will rise in the years to come.

Japan's quest for security over the past two decades has led it to abandon the narrow mercantilism it once trumpeted. Situated in a dynamic region with not one but two rising powers – China and India – Tokyo has come to realize that it can no longer passively accept regional security guarantees from others. In coming to this realization, it has developed active and willing partnerships with Canberra and Delhi, among others. Moreover, Japan has begun to ask a question that it has avoided for nearly six decades, i.e., what is Japan's moral role as an international actor? Though far from answered, the fact that an answer is now being attempted should be welcome news for Europe. While Japan's militarism is still remembered by many in Asia, it has unquestionably become a positive contributor to international stability. With its heavy lift capabilities, its large naval force, and growing cyber capacities, Japan has become an increasingly useful partner for the UK, for NATO, and for other EU states. In a world beset by challenges – including economic ones – Japan now offers a capable and welcome hand.

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[John Hemmings](#) is an Adjunct Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS and a doctoral candidate in the International Relations Department at the LSE, where he is working on a thesis on strategic hedging, alliance structures and security policy in the Asia Pacific.

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## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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