

# Japan's Strategic Challenges in Asia

**H. D. P. Envall\***

Often, a change of government implies a shift in a nation's strategic direction. In Japan, however, the return of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to government in December 2012 — replacing the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) — has brought about no such change. Under Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, in his second time as leader after an unsuccessful period in 2006–07, the Japanese government is continuing to pursue strategies developed under DPJ Prime Ministers Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda which broadly follow the normalisation agenda pursued by Japan through the post–Cold War period. In particular, the Japanese government's focus remains on the strategic challenges presented in the East China Sea and on the Korean peninsula. The one issue where the new government may implement major change is constitutional reform and the right to collective defence.

## **Japan's Major Relationships**

Both LDP- and DPJ-led governments have struggled to maintain solid, constructive relationships with other Asian nations in recent years. Under Prime Minister Jun'ichirō Koizumi, the LDP found its dealings with China and South Korea especially troubled due to Koizumi's visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine and other historical disputes. The DPJ under Yukio Hatoyama (2009–10) sought to reverse this, especially in terms of the Chinese relationship. However, its policy was undermined by several incidents in 2010, most notably the collision between a Chinese finishing boat and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel near the disputed Senkaku islands (known as Diaoyutai to the Chinese).

During his first term as Prime Minister, Abe also visited China and South Korea in an attempt to mend the difficulties experienced under Koizumi. At

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the same time, Abe attempted to establish a regional framework which was viewed as seeking to contain China. In particular, Abe advocated for India to join the Trilateral Security Dialogue, a grouping which included Australia, Japan and the US. Though this initiative had lost momentum by late 2007, it demonstrated that Abe was a key supporter of closer relations with India<sup>1</sup>. In 2006, Abe had contended that Japan should pursue closer relations with India, in a group of ‘Asia-Pacific democracies plus America’ (including Australia), while then Foreign Minister Tarō Asō also promoted the idea of an ‘arc of freedom and prosperity’ linking these countries. Abe may be seeking to follow a similar approach today. In late 2012, he argued for the creation of a ‘security diamond’ encompassing Australia, India, Japan, and the US (specifically, Hawaii). He has also been active in strengthening Japan’s ties in Southeast Asia, especially with those countries that he perceives share similar values of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these shifts however, Japan’s key strategic relationships in Asia remain fairly consistent. The most important of these continues to be the military alliance with the United States. Now more than 60 years old, the alliance is still the bedrock of Japan’s security guarantee, notwithstanding the tensions that regularly erupt over the issue of US military bases in the prefecture of Okinawa.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this keystone relationship, the rise of China is Japan’s greatest strategic challenge. Recent tensions over the Senkaku Islands further underscore this point. The most obvious partner for Japan in the region, beyond the US, continues to be South Korea. However, the ongoing territorial and historical disputes between the two countries mean that this relationship remains significantly underdeveloped. Finally, Japan’s other two important strategic relationships are with Australia and India. Japan has signed joint security declarations with both countries (with Australia in 2007 and with India in 2008), and in 2013 finalized an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement with Australia.<sup>4</sup>

### **Article 9: No Longer a Peace State?**

A major area of potential change in Japanese strategic thinking is in the area of constitutional reform. Abe has long hoped to revise the Constitution especially the famous ‘peace clause’ (Article 9) which prohibits Japan from maintaining armed forces for ‘settling international disputes’ and does not

recognise the ‘right of belligerency of the state’. Before becoming prime minister in 2006, Abe argued that constitutional revision was both a ‘symbol’ and a ‘concrete approach’ to achieving a ‘restoration of independence’ for Japan. After becoming prime minister, he stated that he hoped to ‘accomplish’ constitutional revision while ‘in office’, a sentiment he repeated in 2013. Although failing to carry out these plans during his first term, the LDP passed legislation enabling a referendum to be held on constitutional revision.<sup>5</sup>

This time around, Abe has continued pushing for constitutional reform. However, he has not focused his attention on outright revision but has also opened up the possibility of further extending the government’s interpretation of the Constitution. Abe seems chiefly concerned not with excising or amending Article 9 but with reinterpreting the Constitution so as to remove the prohibition on collective defence. An advisory panel, originally established by Abe in 2007, was reconvened and is expected to promote such a reinterpretation, with the panel’s head, Shunji Yanai, arguing this position publicly in August. Abe has also appointed Ichirō Komatsu, a known supporter of reinterpretation, as the new head of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau (CLB), the bureaucracy tasked with interpreting Article 9.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Abe’s efforts there are a number of roadblocks that lie in the way of such reform. The complexity involved in revising the Constitution (a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament as well as a majority at a national referendum) may explain why Abe has postponed the constitutional debate until next year and is considering reinterpretation rather than just the bolder but more difficult task of revision. However, there are challenges to reinterpreting the Constitution. Although the LDP almost universally supports reinterpretation, the bureaucracy may still oppose it. The CLB has historically resisted any moves towards change on collective defence. Abe’s hope appears to be that a stronger CLB director general would be able to push the change through even if stymied by the bureaucracy. A further political challenge for Abe is the question of how to manage the LDP’s coalition partner, New Komeito. Traditionally adverse to any reinterpretation of Article 9, New Komeito leaders have publicly expressed their doubts about whether change is necessary.<sup>7</sup>

## **Strategic Continuities under Abe**

Japan's strategic thinking during the Cold War was dominated by the Yoshida Doctrine, under which Japan relied on the US for its security (in return for providing bases) and instead focused on economic development. In the post-Cold War period, Japan has slowly shifted away from this approach. Under what has been described as security 'normalization', the country has become more active internationally and assumed greater responsibilities within the US-Japan alliance.<sup>8</sup> Outside constitutional reform, the Abe administration appears largely to be following the normalisation agenda.

A key turning point in recent Japanese strategic thinking occurred in 2010 with the release of the National Defence Program Guidelines for the period beginning in 2011 (FY2011 NDPG) by the DPJ. If taken in the context of the Yoshida Doctrine, the FY2011 NDPG was a radical document. It finally abandoned the narrow Cold War focus on defending against a 'full-scale invasion' by the Soviet Union, emphasising instead the need to prepare for more limited 'gray zone' conflicts over territorial disputes occurring in the maritime region to the southwest of Japan under the concept of 'dynamic defense'. Yet, the FY2011 NDPG also represented a return to Japan's post-Cold War orthodoxy after the missteps of the DPJ under Prime Minister Hatoyama. Hatoyama had promoted a multilateral strategy that sought to find a more evenly balanced position for Japan between the US and China under the rubric of *yūai* (fraternity). As this strategy was undermined by worsening regional relations, the DPJ used the FY2011 NDPG to return to a more familiar Japanese strategy of developing its own defence capabilities and cooperating closely with the US and its allies. In these respects, it was a document entirely at ease with previous LDP thinking and the post-Cold War normalisation agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, with the LDP's return to power under Prime Minister Abe, the new government has not sought to undo the FY2011 NDPG even as it plans to release a new version for 2014 and beyond. Although Minister of Defense Itsunori Onodera was initially unsure of whether 'dynamic defense' helped Japan's 'deterrence capability', there is little in the interim report released in July 2013 to suggest a divergence from the 2010 approach. For instance, the report continues to stress the likely rise in 'gray

zone' (*gurē zōn*) conflicts, as well as the need to strengthen intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, it is possible to identify four basic strategic priorities that have emerged during the nine months of the Abe administration; the first three fit within the broad direction of the FY2011 NDPG, while the fourth has been the (largely missed) ambition of every government since the economic bubble burst in 1991. These are to:

- 1) increase defence spending (or at least reverse its decline in the short-term);
- 2) strengthen Japan's security institutions;
- 3) continue the reorientation of Japan's defence posture (southward and towards new types of conflict and crisis, such as a nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula); and
- 4) revitalise the Japanese economy (through Abe's 'three arrows' of economic reform).

### **Strategic Outlook**

Overall, Japan's current strategic environment is in a state of flux with significant new challenges emerging, especially China's greater assertiveness in the East China Sea. Despite this, Japan's response (aside from the exceptional and as yet unrealised areas such as constitutional revision) has been to continue with the pattern of slow normalisation established across the post-Cold War period: a gradual strengthening of defence capabilities and institutions combined with a widening of Japan's strategic relationships across Asia. Multilateralism and regionalism have not disappeared from Japanese diplomacy; however the weaknesses made obvious under Hatoyama have highlighted the dangers in basing strategy on too optimistic a reading of regional stability. The danger for the Abe administration is that it might move too far in the opposite direction. If the government fails to reassure the region of Japan's intentions, it risks adding to Asia's already problematic security dilemma and so might worsen the very regional disorder it hopes to avoid.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Medcalf, 'Chinese Ghost Story', *The Diplomat*, (14 February 2008) available online: [thediplomat.com/2008/02/14/chinese-ghost-story/](http://thediplomat.com/2008/02/14/chinese-ghost-story/) (accessed 31 October 2013)

<sup>2</sup> For Abe's 2006 arguments, see S.Abe, *Utsukushii Kuni e* [Towards a Beautiful Country], (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2006) pp. 158–61. For his 2012 statement, see S.Abe, 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond', *Project Syndicate* (27 December 2012) available online: [www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe) (accessed 31 October 2013). Regarding the 'arc of freedom and prosperity', see Y. Hosoya, 'The Rise and Fall of Japan's Grand Strategy: The "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" and the Future Asian Order', *Asia-Pacific Review* vol. 18, no. 1 (2011) pp. 13–24. Finally, on Abe's Southeast Asia strategy, see D. D. Trinidad, 'Abe's ASEAN Tour', *East Asia Forum*, (6 September 2013) available online: [www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/09/06/abes-asean-tour](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/09/06/abes-asean-tour) (accessed 31 October 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For Okinawa's basing problems, see H. D. P. Envall, 'Underplaying the "Okinawa Card": How Japan Negotiates its Alliance with the United States', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* vol. 67, no. 4 (2013), pp. 383–402.

<sup>4</sup> On Japan's difficulties in the East China Sea, see S.A. Smith, 'Japan and the East China Sea Dispute', *Orbis* vol. 56, no. 3 (2012) pp. 370–90. Recent Japan–South Korea relations are well described in B.Taylor, 'Japan and South Korea: The Limits of Alliance', *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 5 (2012), pp. 93–100. On Japan's India relationship, see S.Gupta, 'Japan–India Strategic Ties: Still Stuck in "Feel Good" Mode', *East Asia Forum*, (12 June 2013) available online: [www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/06/12/japan-india-strategic-ties-still-stuck-in-feel-good-mode/](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/06/12/japan-india-strategic-ties-still-stuck-in-feel-good-mode/) (accessed 31 October 2013)

<sup>5</sup> S. Abe, *Utsukushii Kuni e*, p. 29; J. Tang, 'Abe Aiming to Realize Constitution Revision during Prime Ministership', *Kyodo News*, (19 December 2006); and 'Abe on "Historical Mission" to Amend Constitution', *Asahi Shimbun*, (13 August 2013). See also H. D. P. Envall, 'Abe's Fall: Leadership and Expectations in Japanese Politics', *Asian Journal of Political Science* vol. 19, no. 2 (2011), pp.149–69..

<sup>6</sup> R.Yoshida, 'Abe-Revived Body Looks to Authorize Collective Defense', *Japan Times*, (6 August 2013), available online: [www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/08/05/national/abe-revived-body-looks-to-authorize-collective-defense/](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/08/05/national/abe-revived-body-looks-to-authorize-collective-defense/) (accessed 31 October); Komatsu Posting Sets Stage for Reinterpretation, *Japan Times*, (8 August 2013), available online: [www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/08/08/national/komatsu-posting-sets-stage-for-reinterpretation/#.UnH2u3CBk7o](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/08/08/national/komatsu-posting-sets-stage-for-reinterpretation/#.UnH2u3CBk7o) (accessed 31 October)

<sup>7</sup> According to a recent poll, 97 per cent of LDP politicians believe the Constitution should be revised. See 'Most LDP Candidates Favor Revision of Constitution', *Kyodo News*, (29 June 2013) available online: [www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/kyodo-news-international/130629/most-ldp-candidates-favor-revision-constitution](http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/kyodo-news-international/130629/most-ldp-candidates-favor-revision-constitution) (accessed 31 October). For more on the CLB, see R.J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 46–51. On New Komeito's public statements, see 'Already Allowed Self-Defense Right Enough for Japan: New Komeito Head', *Jiji Press*, (26 July 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the Yoshida Doctrine, see Samuels, *Securing Japan*, pp. 34–6.

<sup>9</sup> On the DPJ's strategic failures, see H. D. P. Envall and K.Fujiwara, 'Japan's Misfiring Security Hedge: Discovering the Limits of Middle-Power Internationalism and Strategic

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Convergence’, in W.T. Tow and R.Kersten (eds.) *Bilateral Perspectives on Regional Security: Australia, Japan and the Asia-Pacific Region*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 60–76.

10 A. Mie, ‘Onodera to Review Defense Plans, Up Spending’, Japan Times, (31 December 2012); and Ministry of Defense, Government of Japan, ‘Bōeiryoku no ArikataKentōniKansuruChūkan’ [Interim Report on the Current State of Defense Capabilities], (26 July 2013) available online: [www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2013\\_chukan/20130726.pdf](http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2013_chukan/20130726.pdf). (accessed 31 October 2013)



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