Asia Programme
Meeting Summary

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Japan's 'Proactive Contribution to Peace': Implications for Regional Security

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Introduction

This document is a summary of two presentations on Japan's 'proactive contribution to peace', which were delivered on 5 June 2014 at Chatham House.

The event was opened with a presentation from Akio Miyajima, Senior Visiting Academy Fellow with the Asia Programme at Chatham House and Minister Plenipotentiary at the Embassy of Japan in the United Kingdom, which focused on the development of Japan's security policy over the past 25 years. This was followed by a presentation by John Swenson-Wright, Head of the Asia Programme at Chatham House, exploring the motivations behind and criticism of Japan's security policy. The event was chaired by Sir John Boyd, Chairman of Asia House and British Ambassador to Japan (1992–96).

The presentations formed part of the discussion group series funded by the Nippon Foundation and held in partnership with it and the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation.

The presentations were held on the record. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent the views of Chatham House.

Akio Miyajima

Akio Miyajima began by thanking the audience for the opportunity to talk about Japan and its 'proactive contribution to peace', stating that there were a number of popular misconceptions regarding this policy. The first is that the policy represents an abrupt change; the second, that it only regards military and security concerns; and the third, that it marks Japan's return to militarism.

Drawing upon Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue the previous week, the speaker noted that it is no longer possible for any one country to secure peace independently; it is because of Japan's dependence on the peace and stability of the international community that it wishes to become a more 'proactive contributor to peace'. Shinzo Abe first expressed this 'proactive contribution to peace' based on principles of international cooperation at his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2013. He noted that the United States has welcomed and supported Japan on the issue of exercising its right to collective self-defence, as has each ASEAN country, India, Australia, France and the United Kingdom. At Chatham House's London Conference , held on 3 June 2014, Foreign Secretary William Hague expressed his support for Japan's bigger security role including the right to collective self-defence.

Akio Miyajima explained that Japan's 'proactive contribution to peace' has been a policy under development for the last 25 years and has gone through four stages of development before entering the current fifth stage.

The first stage occurred during the Gulf Crisis following the Cold War. Japan wanted to contribute to solving the crisis in some way, but found that only very restricted modes of cooperation were possible. While Japan was able to make a large financial contribution and, after the war, dispatched mine sweepers to the Gulf, there remained a strong sentiment that the country should have been able to do more.

Around the same period, the Japan Self-Defence Forces (SDF) started participating in UN peacekeeping missions. The first involved the elections in Cambodia in 1993.However, during the dispatch of the SDF to Cambodia, a Japanese UN volunteer was killed. This resulted in much debate in Japan over whether or not the country should continue to engage in UN peacekeeping missions. Shortly after this, a Japanese civilian policeman, was attacked and killed in an ambush while on patrol at the Thai-Cambodian border. As a result, public debate intensified over whether or not Japan should withdraw from Cambodia;

although, in the end, the decision was taken to remain. The speaker noted that during this period it was realized that the abilities of the SDF were severely restricted. For example, the SDF were not allowed to use their weapons to protect civilians (such as Japanese NGO workers) but were only permitted to use weapons to protect themselves and their own facilities.

The second stage in the development of Japan's 'proactive contribution to peace' came with the North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993–94 and the launch of a ballistic missile over Japan in 1998. Akio Miyajima noted that these events resulted in a strong sense of defencelessness in Japan and in urgency to work more closely with US forces to cope with this type of threat. Prior to the missile launch, the US-Japan Security Alliance had been prepared only for an armed attack against Japan. After lengthy debate, a new bill was enacted to enable the SDF to provide logistical support to the United States in the non-combat arena in case of a contingency surrounding Japanese territory. At the same time, Japan began its discussions regarding the development of anti-ballistic missile capabilities.

The third stage followed after the 9/11 attacks in New York when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and President George W. Bush were in power. The speaker explained that the Japanese government had to decide on the best course of action to engage in the Iraq War and the 'war on terror'. In the end, Japan enacted a special law enabling Japanese forces to engage overseas in refuelling operations by coalition forces in the Indian Ocean. After the war, Japan also sent ground troops to Iraq, the furthest that it had ever sent troops, and engaged in the reconstruction assistance effort in non-combat areas. During this period, Japanese troops worked together with UK peacekeepers. However, the speaker noted that, had their UK colleagues come under attack, the interpretation of the Japanese constitution would have forbidden Japanese forces from acting in their defence.

The fourth stage involved anti-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden where, again, the government was required to develop a special law in order to enable involvement in this international cooperation effort.

Akio Miyajima explained that, as demonstrated by these four stages, the Japanese government has always been required to undergo a process of intense domestic debate, parliamentary approval and public scrutiny whenever it has attempted to engage more proactively in promoting the security of the international community and gradually expand the scope and role of its international cooperation.

He explained that the fifth and current stage is centred on the tensions in the South and East China Seas, the continued threat of North Korea, as well as other global issues including international terrorism, cyber security and space – all challenges that cannot be resolved by one country acting alone, or even bilaterally. It was on this understanding that Shinzo Abe formed his first government in 2006, when he tried to set-up a National Security Council (NSC) and enacted an advisory panel to study the legal basis for Japan's participation in UN collective security measures and collective self-defence. However, due to his short time in office, these efforts were never completed. Since Abe's return to power in 2012, he has not only tried to revive the Japanese economy, but also these areas of national security.

In December 2013, the Abe administration established the NSC and adopted a National Security Strategy (NSS) and new National Defense Program Guidelines. The speaker explained that the advisory panel had just submitted a report to the government on a number of issues, including the right to collective self-defence and that the prime minister had given instructions on how to proceed with the discussion, including on 'grey zone' emergencies, which would be possible without constitutional discussion, UN collective security and the issue of collective self-defence. The government is engaging in debate within

the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and with its coalition partners, the Komei party. He explained that, step-by-step, relevant bills will be prepared and submitted to the parliament for deliberation.

Akio Miyajima identified six strategic approaches that Japan will take-up in accordance with its NSS.

- *Strengthening and expanding Japan's capabilities and roles*, for example, off Hokkaido. Japan is to purchase new Ospreys and surveillance airplanes and, step-by-step, is seeking to modernize its forces.
- *Strengthening the Japan-US Alliance*. Both sides have agreed to revise the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation, outlining more concrete roles and missions as well as areas for cooperation and coordination.
- *Strengthening diplomacy and security cooperation with partners*. Akio Miyajima highlighted the importance of strengthening not just military-to-military relationships, but also developing relations with countries that share Japan's values, such as the ASEAN countries, South Korea and the United Kingdom. He also highlighted the importance of developing Japan's common interests with China and regional organizations.
- *Making an active contribution to international efforts*, particularly with regard to human security, promoting the role of women, the rule of law and extending overseas development assistance.
- *Strengthening cooperation based on universal values to resolve global issues*, through initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership.
- *Strengthening domestic foundations and promoting domestic and global understanding*.

Akio Miyajima, citing again Shinzo Abe's speech at the Shangri La Dialogue, emphasized that Japan would continue its path as a democratic and peace-loving nation, and that respect for rule of law and human rights are deeply rooted in the Japanese DNA. He asserted that fears that Japan might return to a period of militarism like the 1930s are totally groundless. He noted that, while Japan is firmly committed to working with other countries to promote peace, at the same time, it must protect the interests of the Japanese people. He commented that Japan must work more closely with allies such as the United Kingdom, which share the same basic values. To conclude, he encouraged the United Kingdom to deepen its engagement in Asia in order to enable more opportunities for the two countries to work together.

John Swenson-Wright

John Swenson-Wright opened by posing a question that has recently animated much discussion regarding Japan – how should we view the current administration, and particularly Prime Minister Abe? He noted that there is lively debate within the media regarding whether Abe is a nationalist who has turned back the clock towards a vision of Japan that is unwelcome in the region, or whether, as many in the Japanese policy-making community argue, he is a pragmatist responding to a new set of security challenges not only in the region, but more widely throughout the globe.

He went on to examine the reasons behind the critical interpretation of the Abe administration. He noted that there have been a number of issues with historical resonance that have divided Japan from its neighbours and commented on the unfortunate imagery that was recently picked up by the global media,

showing Abe sitting in an aircraft bearing the digits '731'.[1] He noted, sceptically, that some commentators had seized upon this uncomfortable image as an attempt by the Abe administration to signal a more nationalistic posture.

At the heart of many of the regional controversies has been the issue of how best to memorialize the war. The speaker noted that visits to Yasukuni shrine remain highly contentious and reflect a very important debate in Japan that has drawn criticism from many countries, most importantly China and South Korea.

The speaker reflected on whether efforts towards constitutional change in Japan should be seen as a legitimate expression of a country that is trying to generate a new political space for debate in order to define its national identity, or whether it represents an attempt by an unrepresentative group of conservative elites to enforce a particular image of Japan on its own people and within the wider region.

Some have tried to define the changes in terms of generational politics. The biographical association between Abe and his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi (prime minister from 1957 to 1960), who many on the left associate with Japan's experience in Manchuria in the 1930s, has been seen as problematic in some quarters. In addition, the intervention of local politics and the fact that one of the Abe administration's key coalition partners, at least in the campaign for the lower house in December 2012, was the new political grouping of Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party) - seen by critics as a group with unambiguous nationalist credentials – is cited in some quarters as further evidence that the Abe administration is pursuing a revisionist, nationalist agenda.

John Swenson-Wright asserted that all of these factors, together with Abe's own writings in *Towards a Beautiful Country*,[2] written during his time as a candidate for the prime ministership in 2005/06, have been seized upon to argue that Japan is pursuing a nationalist agenda. This has been further reinforced by the emergence of more strident views, not just on the part of conservative politicians, but also among young Japanese, in what is seen as a troubling indicator that the country may be moving backwards.

However, he argued that there is a danger of over-interpreting these symbolic examples of domestic political debate, noting that Akio Miyajima had set out a more persuasive argument in terms of what is actually happening. He agreed that the changes in Japan should be seen as part of a long-term series of incremental changes, noting that the government's presentation of its security policy dates back to the 1980s when Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone signalled that Japan's security interests extended beyond Japan into a global context. Nakasone famously spoke of Western and Japanese interests as 'indivisible', commenting that Japan was an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' for the Western alliance in the Pacific. Indeed, if we look at the actual material changes that have been introduced as a result of Japan's most recent reforms – a 0.8 per cent increase in defence spending and a 1.7 per cent increase in the size of the SDF over five years – these should not be seen as alarming changes, but rather a necessary and practical response to alterations to Japan's security environment.

John Swenson-Wright argued that the recent shift in Japan's strategic doctrine is to enable a more flexible security policy and dynamic defence posture, which will increasingly focus on security challenges in Southeast Asia. He suggested that the hardware currently being introduced into the Japanese SDF – whether helicopter-carrying vessels or the development of a counter-strike capabilities – reflects a very real anxiety within Japan about its alliance with the United States. According to a recent opinion poll, 38 per cent of Japanese are reported to express distrust regarding the reliability of Japan's relationship with

[1] Reminiscent of the notorious Unit 731 that engaged in war crimes during the 1937-45 Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War.
[2] Shinzo Abe, *Utsukushii Kuni E*. (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2006).

the United States. He noted that this growing disquiet was prompted by the nature of the Barack Obama administration (whereby Democratic administrations tend to be viewed more critically from Tokyo than Republican ones) and also the absence of senior Japan hands in the current US administration.

John Swenson-Wright argued that Japan's attempts to develop new security partnerships – with Australia in 2007 and India in 2008 – could be seen as a security 'insurance policy' to compensate for the perceived doubts associated with the US-Japanese relationship. This has been extended by the Abe administration's decision to further reach out to the Philippines and Southeast Asia in terms of provision of hardware, but also political and diplomatic capital. In his first year in office, Abe has travelled to around 23 countries which, in contrast to previous administrations, reflects the government's desire to put equal, if not more, weight on the importance of developing these new diplomatic relationships as on the economy.

The establishment of a base in Djibouti, the first Japanese military base to be established overseas since 1945, illustrates the Abe administration's desire to increase Japan's presence overseas. This can further be seen through the recent relaxation of Japan's ban on arms exports, in place since the 1960s. Such changes illustrate a willingness on behalf of the Japanese government to change the rules of engagement so that its SDF can not only protect themselves in case of attack, but can also actively engage in confronting problems such as maritime piracy.

To conclude, John Swenson-Wright outlined some of his personal thoughts on how to assess the recent developments in Japan's security policy and the motivations behind the prime minister's decisions. Referencing Abe's most recent visit to the Yasukuni shrine, he commented that it was unpersuasive that Abe had made the visit in order to keep more conservative elements of the Liberal Democratic Party on board as, electorally, Abe's position remains secure until at least 2016. He noted that cynical observers might argue that Abe's willingness to engage with controversial issues has partly been an attempt to shift the centre of political gravity within Japan. With a Japanese public that is already anxious about the country's vulnerability, increasing criticism from its neighbours could have its own logical dynamic – making it easier to sell at home some of these pragmatic changes in the field of collective security and institutional change.

John Swenson-Wright argued that the South Korean-Japanese relationship is an important but weak link that could enhance Japan's security preparedness in the region, and he noted that there needs to be much more emphasis on identifying commonalities over the history debates that exist within the region – not just in Japan, but also in China and South Korea. He noted that there must be a much less plaintive attempt by the Japanese establishment to bring on board the US political leadership and that the personal bilateral ties that link Japan, South Korea and China must be restored. History must be debated in a much broader context with a greater emphasis on jointness that involves greater coordination within the Japanese government but also with the United States' key allies.