



Is Japan Truly ‘Back’? Prospects for a More Proactive Security Policy

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Summary points

- Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan’s ‘dynamic defence’ doctrine will remain at the heart of security policy, with a focus on North Korea and China’s more assertive regional defence posture.
- US–Japanese ties will remain strong, but will be supplemented by a stress on a broader range of new security partnerships with states such as India, Australia, Russia and the Philippines.
- Democracy promotion and a broad concept of ‘security’ encompassing resource security, energy needs and traditional peace-keeping initiatives will be key features of Japan’s foreign policy.
- Institutional change, including the establishment of a reinvigorated National Security Council and constitutional changes to allow a more flexible role for the armed forces will be a core goal.
- Success in promoting security goals will depend on the continuing improvement of the economy, a strong performance by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in the July parliamentary elections, continued close cooperation with its conservative allies, and an ability to defuse tensions with key regional partners, especially South Korea.

Introduction

The return to power in December 2012 of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) under Shinzo Abe and the new prime minister's forceful declaration during his February 2013 visit to Washington that 'Japan is back'¹ have prompted speculation about the future direction of Japanese foreign and security policy. Critics of Abe have argued that he is a nationalist intent on restoring Japanese pride by whitewashing the country's wartime past, fostering military expansionism overseas and pursuing a narrow conservative agenda at odds with the interests of Japan's neighbours. More moderate voices suggest that the prime minister is a pragmatist, simply seeking to enhance the responsiveness of Japan's national security apparatus by developing more flexible bilateral and multilateral security partnerships and important domestic institutional innovations to enhance government decision-making authority. For now, on balance, the second interpretation appears more persuasive. This paper identifies core themes that stand out from an initial analysis of the new government's foreign and security policy.

Abe served as prime minister between 2006 and 2007 but his tenure was marred by confusion over policy management, speculation that the leadership was insufficiently focused on prioritizing key objectives, internal cabinet divisions, financial scandals involving senior members of the government, and Abe's poor health, all of which forced him to resign in September 2007 in the face of sharply declining popularity levels.

This time, however, since reassuming the premiership on the back of a landslide election for the LDP that delivered the party (along with its New Komeito coalition partner) a commanding 325 seats in the 480-seat lower house of parliament, Abe has been careful to avoid the pitfalls of his first administration. His strategy has been to focus initially on economic recovery – the core policy concern of the electorate – by developing a three-pronged policy, informally dubbed 'Abenomics', of reflationary monetary easing, expansionist fiscal policy and structural reform. While it

is too early to say whether this new approach will deliver lasting economic growth, initial signs, including an export-boosting decline in the value of the yen, an upswing in Japan's equity markets and positive commentary from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), suggest that consumer and producer confidence is on the rise and that the economy may be on track to recovery, with recorded annualized growth in the first quarter of 2013 at 3.5 per cent, significantly ahead of other developed economies.²

Securing economic growth is a key factor in sustaining the popularity of the LDP, a critical issue in advance of the forthcoming elections for parliament's upper house in July, and already Abe is benefiting from unusually high approval levels for an incumbent prime minister (with percentages mostly in the high sixties since the start of the year).³ This popularity may also be the key factor enabling Abe to pursue a number of security and foreign policy initiatives that represent a sharp departure from the consensus that has shaped much of post-1945 Japanese politics. In the context of the Cold War, successive prime ministers adopted an intentionally restricted role for the security forces. Now, confronted by arguably more immediate and serious security challenges, both in East Asia and further afield, Abe appears to be promoting a more ambitious and assertive defence posture.

Critics of Japan, particularly in South Korea and China, sometimes present this as dangerous revisionism and a possible first step in the direction of a more militarized foreign policy. To more sympathetic observers, this is merely the continuation of the gradual development of a more proactive approach consistent with Japan's non-offensive defence norms, that allows it to escape from the negative legacy of the post-war US occupation and a political settlement that has long prevented it from functioning as a 'normal country'. How Abe manages this process of reformulating the country's foreign policy will have a major impact on how it is perceived regionally and globally, and it is likely to have significant consequences for Japan's influence both as a key ally of the United States and as an independent foreign policy actor.

1 Josh Rogin, 'Japanese Prime Minister to Washington: "I am back"', *Foreign Policy*, 22 February 2013. See also Shinzo Abe, 'Japan is back. Keep counting on my country,' speech available at: http://csis.org/files/attachments/130222_speech_abe.pdf.

2 "G8 needs to deal with impact of Abenomics", says Hyun Oh-seok', *Financial Times*, 2 June 2013; 'Lagarde welcomes Japan's big stimulus,' *Financial Times*, 7 April 2013; 'Global economy lacks strong source of demand growth', *Financial Times*, 17 May 2013.

3 'Approval rating for Abe Cabinet rises to 68%', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 15 January 2013; 'Cabinet's approval rating drops to 68%', *Nikkei*, 27 May 2013.

Continuity in defence policy

Japan's twin core security challenges of North Korea and China remain largely unchanged, but have arguably intensified over the last year.

The threat posed by a *de facto* nuclear North Korea has increased in the wake of Pyongyang's medium-range ballistic missile launch in December and its third nuclear test in March. Together with its more belligerent rhetoric, its threats to launch nuclear attacks against its immediate neighbours and the United States, and a more confrontational approach from the young and relatively inexperienced Kim Jong-un, this has made Japan's governing elites and public opinion increasingly nervous about the growing capabilities of North Korea as well as its apparently hostile intentions.

Where China is concerned, a steady increase in official defence spending, slated to increase by 10.7 per cent between 2012 and 2013, from \$106.4 billion to \$119 billion,⁴ together with a dramatic increase in air and sea-based incursions into Japanese territorial space surrounding the contested Senkaku or Diaoyu islands,⁵ have heightened bilateral tensions, and raised US anxieties about a possible shooting war between Asia's second and third largest economies.

Alongside these immediate bilateral problems, Japan's government remains actively engaged in confronting wider, non-traditional security challenges, whether, for example, in combating piracy in Southeast Asia, off the coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, or in promoting peace-keeping initiatives in the Middle East or in South Sudan.

The Abe administration's core strategy for dealing with these challenges is focused on reviewing the country's basic security blueprint, the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) – the latest version of which was inherited in 2010 from the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) administration, as well as on establishing a new Medium-term Defence Review that is expected to be completed by the end of 2013. Additionally, the

government has made it clear that it plans to re-examine, over the course of the next two years, the framework governing its relationship with its principal ally, the United States, via a reassessment of the US–Japan Defence Guidelines of 1997.

Doctrinal continuity

It is likely that this process will see no fundamental deviation from the doctrinal principle of 'dynamic defence' that is at the heart of current defence planning and has been steadily evolving under past administrations, beginning with the government of Junichiro Koizumi in 2004, and continuing under Prime Ministers Abe and Yukio Hatoyama in, respectively, 2009 and 2010. This approach has emerged in a post-Cold War context where the defence establishment has sought to move away from a relatively static security posture focused on confronting the challenge from the Soviet Union, primarily to the north of Japan, to one that engages more flexibly with the maritime threats emerging to the southwest. According to Japan's National Institute for Defence Studies, this involves a three-pronged approach that embodies:

- Network-building through a process of enhanced alliances and security partnerships;
- Capacity-building within a number of developing nations, such as Cambodia and Timor Leste, and the continued use of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in vital peace-keeping initiatives; and
- Maintaining maritime order.⁶

In the case of the third of these initiatives, the focus has been on improving intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. A cursory examination of security policy in 2012 highlights a number of key evolutionary changes that are likely to remain at the heart of the Abe administration's approach. These have included:

⁴ Scott Harold, 'China's defense spending mystery', The Rand Blog, <http://www.rand.org/blog/2013/03/chinas-defense-spending-mystery.html>.

⁵ Since September 2012, there have been some 130 sea-based intrusions by Chinese vessels into Japanese territorial waters, heightening Japanese defence concerns that the People's Liberation Army Navy is attempting to establish *de facto* administrative control over the waters surrounding the Senkakus, as a means of challenging Japan's control over the islands, which it both owns and occupies. See 'Air and marine patrols must increase vigilance to defend against China', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 26 April 2013.

⁶ National Institute for Defence Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2013*, May 2013.

- Closer cooperation between US naval forces and Japan's Coastguard and its Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF);
- Enhanced training and simulations to guard against attacks on Japan's Nansei islands, including the Senkakus;
- The planned redeployment of some 9,000 US Marines to Guam; and
- The development of a 'multi-layered' defence policy that encompasses joint exercises with old and new security partners. (Examples of this include joint exercises between Japan, Australia and the United States in 2011, and between Japan, the United States and South Korea in 2012.)
- Acquisition of a next-generation fighter aircraft, the F-35A;
- Development and acquisition of unmanned aerial vehicles or reconnaissance drones, such as the Golden Hawk;
- The construction of new facilities for the Air Self-Defence Forces in Naha, Okinawa to bolster the defence of the Senkakus;
- Closer coordination between Japan's Ground Self-Defence Forces and US Marines;
- Establishment of a new Cyber Attack Response Office;
- The upgrading Japan's Aegis ship capabilities to bolster the Ballistic Missile Defense capabilities; and
- Provision for an additional 287 SDF personnel.⁸

Security innovation

While the Abe administration is unlikely to deviate from past defence policy, there are a number of ways in which the government has signalled its intention to prioritize security interests. The most obvious sign of this has been increased defence spending. Under the current budget this amounts to ¥4.68 trillion, a 0.8 per cent increase on the previous year that is relatively modest numerically but symbolically significant since this is the first increase in defence spending in 11 years.⁷

Enhanced capabilities

Much of the increase in spending is intended in the first instance to boost Japan's defence capabilities, with a particular focus on the potential threat represented by China's growing military assertiveness, as well as the North Korean security challenge. Consequently, the 2013 defence budget will fund a number of key innovations including:

- Acquisition by the MSDF of new P-1 patrol aircraft and more AWAC and E2C early warning surveillance aircraft;
- Extension of the life of existing escort vessels and submarines by 5–10 years;
- Development of a new surface-to-surface missile;

Alliance diversification

In addition to strengthening Japan's defence capabilities, the Abe administration also appears to be deliberately diversifying its security partnerships by branching out beyond the focus on its core alliance relationship with the United States, as well as by widening its security remit to include key energy security issues. This is demonstrated by a commitment to a series of critical foreign and defence ministerial 'two plus two' meetings, expanded beyond the existing US–Japanese and Japanese–Australian frameworks to include a new security dialogue with Russia.⁹ It is also reflected in efforts to expand security cooperation with countries such as India, the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as recently negotiated nuclear energy agreements with Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Notwithstanding the nuclear safety concerns associated with the 2011 Fukushima disaster, the Abe administration is also seeking to boost its export revenue and fashion a new series of energy 'strategic partnerships' by developing these new agreements.¹⁰

Values-based diplomacy

Underpinning this approach has been a commitment to democratic values that reflects a more overtly ideological dimension to security planning that has been largely absent from post-1945 foreign policy commitments. During

⁷ 'Japan defence budget to increase for first time in 11 years', Bloomberg, 30 January 2013.

⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Defence Programs and Budget of Japan. Overview of FY 2013 Budget*, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_budget/pdf/250516.pdf.

⁹ 'Japan, Russia envisage future ties with strategic eyes', *Nikkei*, 1 May 2013.

¹⁰ 'Japan signs Turkey nuclear deal', BBC News, 3 May 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-22398356>; 'Abe clinches nuclear technology deal with Abu Dhabi', *Japan Times*, 3 May 2013.

the previous Abe administration in 2006–07, this focus was addressed very deliberately and reflected in Foreign Minister Aso Taro's articulation of plans to promote 'an arc of Freedom and Prosperity' in East Asia. This initiative foundered on fears (felt particularly acutely by Australia) that it might be construed by policy-makers in Beijing as an attempt to contain China. Although the current approach shies away from such an explicit strategy, democratic principles remain central to the government's approach.

Political values are also at the heart of constitutional reform – another key signature innovation of Abe's approach to foreign and security policy. The prime minister is committed to revising the 1947 constitution, a document that many conservative politicians see as lacking full legal legitimacy given the prominent role by the US occupation authorities in drafting the original document. Part of the argument in favour of revising it is ideological and bound up with identity politics, in particular a conservative wish to ensure that the constitution, as the foundation for the country's self-image, reflects Japan's indigenous values. Part of the argument is also pragmatic, in particular a desire to revise Article 9, prohibiting Japan from maintaining a standing army other than for purely defensive purposes.

Abe has argued that it makes little sense, given Japan's role as the world's fifth largest defence spender, for the country not to be explicit in referring to its armed forces as a military, and has suggested that the SDF be renamed the National Defence Forces (or *Kokubo-gun*).¹¹ He has also stressed the importance of relaxing the ban on Japan's participation in collective security initiatives. At present, Japanese and US forces are able to work together in defending Japanese territory but not in a scenario in which Japanese forces are required to protect US military assets that are not directly involved in protecting Japan.¹²

The challenge for Abe in pursuing his constitutional reform agenda is part institutional and part political. While a narrow majority of Japanese – 56 per cent according to recent opinion polls – favours the idea of constitutional reform, it is not clear on what basis it does so.¹³ Some identify

with the conservative security priorities associated with the LDP, but others wish to see progressive social values, such as rights associated with gender equality, more deliberately and explicitly enshrined in any revised constitution. Additionally, to some of Japan's neighbours (particularly those countries that bore the brunt of its colonial expansion in the 1930s), the constitutional reform process is seen as a proxy for historical revisionism and a more assertive, muscular nationalism. If Abe continues to push vigorously for constitutional change, as he appears minded to do, there is a risk that this will provoke further criticism from countries, most notably South Korea and China, already alarmed by his recent public statements apparently questioning Japan's wartime responsibilities.

Parliamentary politics

A first step for Abe in effecting reform of the constitution is revising Article 96, which currently stipulates that a two-thirds majority is required in both houses of parliament (together with simple majority support in a popular referendum) to change the constitution. In pursuing this preliminary goal, the LDP is backed by its key conservative political allies, most notably by the Japan Restoration Party (JRP, or *Ishin no kai*), a new, nationalistic party led by two outspoken, if not demagogic politicians – Toru Hashimoto and Shintaro Ishihara, the former governor of Tokyo – that has recently shot to prominence as the third largest party in the lower house. An additional proponent of constitutional reform is the smaller political grouping known as Your Party (*Minna no To*), a splinter party formed by disaffected ex-LDP politicians favouring economic liberalism and more accountable government.

The current balance of Diet political forces provides the LDP (along with New Komeito and the JRP) with a secure block of at least 378 out of 480 seats in the lower house, sufficient to overturn Article 96. In the upper house, the situation is less clear-cut. At present, Abe can count on 119 out of 242 seats and needs a decisive win in the forthcoming July election to have a hope of revising the constitution. On current projections, the LDP looks set to win the July contest, but

11 'Abe pushes constitutional reform, "national defence military" in Diet comments', *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2 February 2013.

12 'Japan is Back. A Conversation with Shinzo Abe', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 May 2013.

13 'Most Japanese want Constitution revised', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 May 2013.

potentially will fall short of a two-thirds majority. If this is the case, the government may hope to turn to more conservatively minded members of the main opposition DPJ, to persuade them to support the revision agenda.

Institutional change

More effective security policy is not only a product of constitutional reform. Abe hopes to enhance the effectiveness of government decision-making by setting up a new, reformed National Security Council (NSC). Plans for an NSC loosely modelled on its US counterpart were part of Abe's first administration, but were a casualty of bureaucratic infighting and a dysfunctional cabinet.¹⁴ In revisiting this issue, Abe appears to have opted for a more coherent version of the original proposal. The Mark-2 NSC will concentrate national security decision-making in the hands of four key political officials: the prime minister, the foreign minister, the defence minister and the chief cabinet secretary.¹⁵ These four, supported by a 100-person staff, will be charged with responsibility for improving crisis management in a variety of scenarios, and there will be new provisions for contingencies such as authorizing a first strike against a potential ballistic missile launch from North Korea, or revising Japan's International Peace Keeping Law to enable the SDF to respond in the event of Japanese civilians being caught up in crises abroad, such as in the recent Algerian hostage crisis.¹⁶

Bilateral strategies

Institutional and constitutional changes require considerable time. A more immediate option for the Abe administration in realizing its security goals is to concentrate on its core bilateral relationships. This can be seen in three key areas.

Bolstering US–Japanese ties

On his high-profile visit to the United States in February 2013 Abe reiterated his commitment to the alliance

relationship with the United States.¹⁷ There is little doubt that Japan is crucially dependent on the United States in meeting its primary security challenges in East Asia. This is especially true over the Senkakus and Japanese officials have been assiduous in seeking public reassurances from the United States that it will come to the defence of these island territories in the face of any potential future hostilities from China. The difficulty for the Obama administration is that it remains officially neutral on the sovereignty dispute, although Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel have made it clear that the United States is firmly committed to protecting Japan's administrative rights over the territory.¹⁸ For its part, Japan has provided a limited degree of reciprocal reassurance to the United States that its alliance commitments are strong, whether through making progress on the perennial issue of Okinawa base realignment issues (Abe has, for example, secured an agreement to effect the partial return of the US Makiminato facility to local Okinawa control by 2015¹⁹) or by agreeing to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) despite strong opposition from agricultural interest groups at home.

Containing China

In April, the cabinet approved a Basic Plan on Ocean Policy that, among other things, set out provisions for improving surveillance and closer coordination between the Coastguard and the SDF.²⁰ Japan's ability to manage its potential points of conflict with China remains in doubt and, notwithstanding the continuing economic importance of China to Japanese exporters as Japan's largest trade partner, tensions remain acute. They have been heightened by recent visits by Japanese cabinet-level officials to the Yasukuni Shrine (the controversial site in Tokyo which commemorates a number of prominent former class-A Japanese war criminals) and by public, internet-fuelled disaffection on both sides of the bilateral relationship.

14 'Abe to push for Japanese NSC, constitutional reform in first term', *Mainichi*, 26 January 2013.

15 'Abe to take on intel-gathering taboos', *Japan Times*, 11 May 2013.

16 'Japan may review rules of engagement for defence forces', *Nikkei*, 8 February 2013.

17 Rogin, 'Japanese Prime Minister to Washington: "I am back".'

18 'Hagel mentioned Senkakus at Japan's behest', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2 May 2013.

19 'Abe sticks to guns on Futenma', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 7 April 2013.

20 'China's "core interests" comment over Senkaku Islands uncalled for', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 29 April 2013.

Abe's approach has been to concentrate on strengthening a variety of competing bilateral political and security ties with other countries, including India, and most recently with France as a means of hedging against China. A similar instinct underpins the decision in April by Abe, European Council President Herman Van Rompuy and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso to begin talks in a range of non-economic fields, including defence and science and technology.²¹

Offsetting these likely sources of conflict have been some potentially fruitful bilateral defence exchanges between Chinese and Japanese officials, as well as apparent efforts by senior US diplomats to moderate bilateral tensions, but for now it remains unclear how far such steps will help to advance Japan's security interests.

Preliminary engagement with North Korea

In May, Isao Iijima, a personal envoy of Abe, visited North Korea for high-level talks with senior members of the government. His visit concentrated on resolving the fate of 17 Japanese civilians abducted by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s.²² This humanitarian issue remains largely problematic given North Korea's failure to provide comprehensive information on the fate of those abducted, beyond an initial group of five whose status was clarified in 2002 and 2004 during earlier bilateral talks.

The significance of this recent round of talks lies in the opportunity it provides for a wider dialogue and the offer of Japanese economic assistance to North Korea sufficient to persuade it to re-engage with the international community and open the door to a constructive resolution of the nuclear issue. Were it not for the abduction issue, a normalization of relations would probably see Tokyo providing Pyongyang with economic aid worth somewhere between \$5 billion and \$10 billion – not much by global financial standards, but a significant proportion of North Korea's annual GDP, which is estimated at roughly \$27 billion. In the past, the preliminary stumbling block to such a deal has been the need to

persuade the family members of the Japanese abductees to support a wider dialogue with North Korea.

Prime Minister Abe has long been an enthusiastic supporter of the families of those abducted, and his willingness to sanction Iijima's initiative may reflect some moderation on the part of their family members. There have been suggestions of a generational split emerging, with the parents of those missing pushing for a more pragmatic compromise with North Korea in the hope that it may reveal new information, and the siblings insisting that full clarification of the fate of all those abducted is necessary before there can be any movement towards bilateral normalization.²³

Abe's limitations and the outlook for Japan

For the immediate future, the success of Abe's attempt to enhance Japan's foreign and security policies will rest on two key issues: the continuing health of the economy and the LDP's performance in the forthcoming elections to the upper house of parliament.

A slowdown in economic growth, or the failure of the Bank of Japan to deliver on its two per cent inflation target, may begin to undermine economic confidence at home. Already, there have been some signs that the rebound in Japanese stock prices has not been as buoyant or as decisive as initially seemed to be the case. This in turn may dent the prime minister's popularity and also hurt the LDP's prospects in the July elections. Moreover, the broad grouping of conservative politicians favouring constitutional reform may not be sufficiently robust. Divisions have recently emerged between the JRP and Your Party, following controversial remarks by JRP leader Toru Hashimoto on the role of the so-called 'comfort women' – Asian women forcibly recruited as sex slaves for the Japanese military during the 1930s. Additionally, New Komeito, the LDP's official coalition partner, has been publicly noncommittal on the constitutional reform issue, while hinting privately that it wants environmental policy concessions from the government as a price for its cooperation on supporting reform of Article 96.²⁴

21 'Japan woos EU to boost trade, counter China', *Nikkei Weekly*, 1 April 2013.

22 'Abe takes up abductions issue', *Nikkei Weekly*, 27 May 2013.

23 Personal interview with senior Japanese official.

24 'Abe unveils revision road map', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 17 April 2013.

Bilateral tensions with South Korea may also act as a major block on enhanced trilateral security cooperation between it, the United States and Japan. Earlier agreements between Japan and South Korea to sign two key security agreements on logistical and intelligence cooperation founded during the administration of President Lee Myung-bak owing to South Korean public opposition, and there are few signs that these agreements are about to be put back on the table. Indeed, current bilateral ties are at an especially low ebb, dogged by tensions over 'comfort women' and the territorial dispute associated with Japan's sovereignty claim over South Korea's Dokdo island, or Takeshima as Japan refers to it. Some 71 per cent of Japanese reportedly have a negative view of relations with South Korea.²⁵ Since the new administration of President Park Geun-hye disagrees with Japan's recent overtures to North Korea, stressing its reliance on the United States and increasingly turning its attention towards China, it is difficult to see relations between Seoul and Tokyo improving rapidly in the immediate future.

Mutual distrust is also intensifying in the context of Sino-Japanese relations and failure to resolve the Senkaku/Diaoyu problem may store up further problems for the Abe administration. Limited practical steps, such as the activation of a telephone hotline between the Chinese and Japanese militaries, might help defuse tensions, but even these remain difficult to realize. A cynical observer might speculate that such tensions have been intentionally fostered by some Japanese politicians in order to boost populist support for the LDP in the July elections. For now, there is no concrete evidence to support such a claim, but the electoral dust may need to settle after July before the government can dispassionately take stock of its bilateral relations and begin to promote a more constructive approach unencumbered by history and national-identity politics.

At a minimum, an initial assessment of the Abe administration at this early stage in its time in office suggests that this is a government with clear ambitions to develop a more coherent, focused and proactive foreign policy. Whether it has the political resources and diplomatic agility to realize these goals remains to be seen.

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²⁵ "71% consider relations with S. Korea "bad", *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 7 April 2013.