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Defending Japan

Reviewing the 2018 White Paper

*Titli Basu**

Three key developments unfolded in Japan in August 2018: the Ministry of Defence (MOD) released its annual Defence White Paper; requested a 2.1 per cent increase in the 2019 budget; and instituted an Exploratory Committee on the Future of Self Defence Forces (SDF) with the objective of reviewing the current National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG) and the Mid-Term Defence Program (MTDP). The subsequent consolidation of political strength in September 2018 at the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) presidential election extended Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tenure till 2021. Analysing these developments in the backdrop of Prime Minister Abe's top priorities—managing the United States (US)-Japan alliance under the Trump Presidency and delivering on the 'great responsibility' of redefining Japanese post-war security orientation—unpacks Tokyo's key challenges. These are, essentially, balancing between sharing greater burden within the alliance framework to ensure regional security on one hand, and weighing regional sensitivities and deeply fractured domestic constituencies on the other.

The alliance with the United States constitutes the fundamental pillar of post-war Japanese foreign and security policy and has served as a 'public good', contributing to the stability of the Asia-Pacific. While extended deterrence under the US-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of Japanese security policy, Tokyo has the challenge of managing

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Washington's expectations within President Trump's 'America First' approach on one hand and adapting to a fast altering regional security landscape on the other. Managing the geostrategic and geo-economic contours of the alliance under the Trump Presidency is a daunting challenge for Tokyo. Since Abe came to power in December 2012, Japan has further stepped up to shoulder greater responsibilities within the alliance arrangement. It formulated the first National Security Strategy in 2013 and instituted the National Security Council; incrementally expanded the scope of Article 9 to exercise a limited collective self-defence initially through a Cabinet decision in 2014 and subsequently through a package of security legislations in 2015; revised the US-Japan Defence Cooperation Guidelines in 2015 for augmenting operational coordination; extended the five-year Host Nation Support (HNS) package covering 86.4 per cent of total costs; eased the conventional defence spending cap of 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP); loosened the arms export ban; intensified political debate on acquiring strike capabilities (*teki kichi kōgeki*); and reorganised structures, including the institution of Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA) and accelerated research and development (R&D) for attaining technological superiority. In addition, the Abe administration is currently debating the MTDP, the five-year procurement plan, in addition to reviewing the NDPG to defend Japan.

Furthering the narrative of Japan navigating the most severe security environment in its post-war history¹ and prioritising Tokyo's threat perception, the 2018 White Paper has upgraded the threat emanating from North Korea by replacing the term 'serious and imminent threat' with 'unprecedentedly serious and imminent threat' compared to the previous White Paper. The historic Singapore summit, in June 2018, between President Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un diluted Tokyo's 'maximum pressure' campaign vis-à-vis Pyongyang on the one hand and raised concerns of whether Trump's North Korea policy reflects Tokyo's national interests. In reality, even though Pyongyang has not conducted new tests, the road to denuclearisation in the Korean Peninsula is increasingly appearing challenging. For Japan, which is well within the range of the Nodong missiles, there is 'no change to the underlying status of the North Korean nuclear and missile threat'² in addition to several instances of illegal ship-to-ship transfer by North Korean vessels in the high seas, in violation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

With reference to China, notwithstanding the institution of the China-Japan maritime and aerial communication mechanism in May 2018 with the objective of preventing accidental collisions between SDF and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the 2018 White Paper maintained its assessment of 'strong security concerns' with regard to China's unilateral attempts to alter the status quo around Japan. As a maritime state, Japan has consistently articulated, both individually and within regional frameworks, the importance of securing the rules-based maritime order. In addition to this, the White Paper has closely evaluated PLA's advancing operational competence and enhanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. It further indicates that infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) may amount to 'further expansion of the PLA's activities in the area such as the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean.'³ This concurs with one school of thought that argues as Beijing seeks overseas bases, the PLA may secure improved access in BRI countries.⁴

The US-Japan alliance constitutes the cornerstone of Japan's security policy and American presence in the Asia-Pacific, despite the fact that the decades-old alliance with the US has often been critically analysed through the prism of the abandonment/entrapment complex.⁵ Moreover, President Trump's narrow transactional approach is redefining the nuances of the conventional hub-and-spoke alliance system, cultivated during the Cold War, that has served as an anchor of the East Asian order. Even as Trump's behaviour is undermining several post-war norms and practices that underpinned the alliance, the 2018 White Paper underscores the criticality of improving deterrence by way of buttressing Japan's security alliance with the US; in addition to strengthening its security network with like-minded nations within the concept of *Proactive Contribution to Peace*, reinforcing the 2016 Legislation for Peace and Security and strengthening defence industrial and technological base in order to sustain 'quality and quantity of highly advanced defence equipment'.⁶ Accordingly, the Japanese defence administration has urged to 'squarely face the harsh reality' surrounding Japan and articulated the need for focused resource allocation to priority areas, including building cross-domain capabilities in new areas including space, cyber and the electromagnetic spectrum in addition to the more conventional land, sea, and air domains.

THE NORTH KOREAN QUESTION

The threat perception vis-à-vis North Korea outlined in 2018 White Paper is in keeping with the Japanese official position as articulated in policy speeches in the National Diet⁷ following Pyongyang's sixth nuclear test, ballistic missiles launched over Oshima Peninsula and Cape Erimo of Hokkaido Prefecture in violation of UNSC Resolution 2375 and the Hwasong-15 inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) falling within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the latter half of 2017. The outcome of the Singapore summit has failed to reassure Japan that Trump's North Korea policy reflects Tokyo's national interests. Chairman Kim left Singapore as a smart negotiator with several concessions for North Korea⁸, such as no reference of complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation (CVID) in the Joint Statement, no explicit timeframe for denuclearisation, safeguarding regime stability, and unilateral suspension of the US-South Korea war games since it will 'save tremendous amount of money'⁹ for the US. Keeping Tokyo out of the loop¹⁰, decoupling ICBMs and short- and mediumrange missiles, and the treatment of the abduction issue¹¹ by the US administration has elevated Japan's concerns. Moreover, Trump's suspension of the US-South Korea command-and-control exercise—Ulchi Freedom Guardian—is perceived to be considerable concession without any tangible deliverables from North Korea. This also endorses the Chinese 'suspension-for-suspension' proposal where Beijing urged for 'dual freeze', wherein Pyongyang halts nuclear and missile testing in return for the suspension of US-South Korea large-scale military exercises. If Trump continues with this approach of suspending joint exercises, it will erode American alliances in Asia. Japan's concerns reflect its worry about whether the US is shifting away from the 'ironclad' security guarantee towards the region in support of the 'America First' policy.

THE CHINA CONUNDRUM

Even as China-Japan relations are witnessing a 'tactical détente'¹², developments in the East China Sea and Chinese activities around the Senkaku Islands have raised concerns (see Figure 1). For instance, the presence of Shang-class submarines in contiguous waters near the Senkaku Islands in January 2018, increasing numbers of Chinese coast guard vessels and, sometimes, the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) intelligence gathering vessels (AGIs) navigating Japanese territorial waters, and Chinese oil and gas exploration and drilling rigs that allegedly

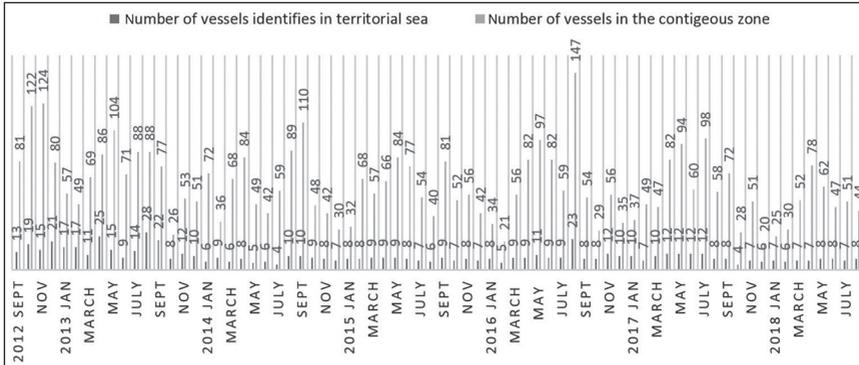


Figure 1 Alleged Violation by Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands

Source: based on data drawn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Japan, available at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000170838.pdf>, accessed on 25 September 2018.

host advanced radars, helipads, and have dual use potential. Even though the Japan-China maritime and air liaison mechanism was instituted on 8 June 2018 with the objective of managing maritime contingencies in the East China Sea, coast guards are not within its scope.

As a maritime state, Japan has strongly urged for upholding the maritime order founded on peaceful settlement of disputes and universal rules, including the rule of law and freedom of navigation. Besides the Defence White Paper, Tokyo’s 2018 Basic Plan on Ocean Policy stresses on building comprehensive maritime security by gradually augmenting defence capabilities founded on NDPG and MTDP, and bolstering Maritime Domain Awareness capability with more patrol vessels, information gathering satellites, coastal radars, protected information sharing between the MOD, the Japanese SDF and the Japanese Coast Guard on one hand, and reinforcing the international maritime order by coordinating in global frameworks on the other.¹³

DEFENDING JAPAN

The White Paper thus urges for ‘drastically’¹⁴ developing Japan’s ballistic missile defence capabilities and the subsequent budget proposal factors in two Lockheed Martin Aegis Ashore land-based ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems, estimated to cost US \$3.6 billion. This is steeper than the initial quotation as Japan is keen on the Lockheed Martin Solid

State Radar (LMSSR) that will enable response against lofted trajectory projectiles. The system is expected to be operational in 2023 and the batteries will be deployed in the Akita and Yamaguchi prefectures. In December 2017, the National Security Council and the Cabinet decided to introduce two Aegis Ashore batteries with the aim of bolstering upper tier interception by Aegis-equipped destroyers. Japan has a multi-tier defence system with upper and lower tier interception by Aegis-equipped destroyers and Patriot PAC-3 system, respectively. Meanwhile, Japan is also introducing Joint Strike Missile (JSM) for its F-35A stealth fighters and modifying existing Japanese F-15 fighters to be furnished with Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (LRASM) and extended-range Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSM-ER).¹⁵

With the objective of refining its response capability, Japan, in cooperation with the US, has developed the SM-3 Block II advanced ballistic missile interceptor. Earlier in July 2018, Japan upgraded the first of its two Atago-class destroyers to operate the Aegis system. The first destroyer, Maya, costing US\$ 1.51 billion, will be commissioned in 2020 while the second one is likely to be commissioned in March 2021. It has the capability to launch SM-3 Block IIA ballistic missile interceptors. In a related development, the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) and the US Missile Defence Agency (MDA) effectively tested a SM-3 Block IB Threat Upgrade (SM-3 Blk IB TU) interceptor missile from guided-missile destroyer JS Atago (DDG 177) in September 2018.¹⁶

For the defence of remote islands, Japan has stepped up its defence posture in the south-west with the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Brigade in March 2018 and units in Amami Oshima, Miyako Islands and Ishigaki Islands. It also instituted the Southwestern Air Defence Force in July 2017. To defend the remote islands, Japan is developing supersonic glide bombs which can be launched from missiles and is also promoting the deployment of surface-to-ship guided missile units on Miyako and Ishigaki islands in Okinawa.¹⁷ Besides this, Japan's approach emphasises on positioning units, intensifying intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in peacetime and acquiring maritime and air superiority. Previously, Japan instituted the ninth Air Wing at its Naha Air Base to advance its defence posture in the south-west. In addition, a coast observation unit was established at Yonaguni.¹⁸ Furthermore, to ease transportation and deployment of units, Japan is focussing on improving LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank) transport and introducing V-22 Ospreys and C-2 transport aircrafts.¹⁹

As Japan formulates the new NDPG and Mid-Term Defence Program by the end of 2018, the LDP has proposed converting its Izumo-class helicopter destroyers into an aircraft carrier that can deploy the F-35B Lightning vertical short take-off and landing strike fighter. This will eventually convert the helicopter destroyers from sea control platforms into potential strike carriers. This is likely to cast doubts on Japan's longstanding exclusively defence-oriented policy. While Japan will have to navigate concerns such as constitutional restraints and regional responses, Tokyo will seek to rationalise the decision by interpreting it as self-defence given the considerable advancement in PLAN capabilities.

Even though the US is committed to the security of Japan through the full range of capabilities, including nuclear forces, the necessity to assume larger responsibility to support the alliance is a priority for Tokyo as it is aware of the possible entrapment concerns prevailing among a segment of the American strategic community owing to Article 5 of the Treaty.²⁰ The 2018 White Paper argues that it is 'more important than ever to strengthen the US-Japan alliance for the security of Japan.'²¹ With the revision of the US-Japan Defence Cooperation Guidelines in 2015, a qualitative depth has been added to the security partnership. Institutional changes have reinforced mutual planning, intelligence-sharing and crisis response to several traditional and non-traditional scenarios in peacetime or during contingencies. The institution of new standing Alliance Coordination Mechanism, created with the objective of enhancing operational coordination and strengthening bilateral planning, facilitates communication among civilian and uniformed alliance managers. Ensuing the enactment of the peace and security legislations, the revised Guidelines reflect adjustments in several areas wherein the SDFs would defend US forces and assets during operations related to the defence of Japan.

REGIONAL RESPONSE

Tokyo's neighbours in the region, including China and South Korea, have responded critically to the latest White Paper. China's Foreign Ministry asserted that contrary to the 'groundless and irresponsible' Japanese claims of assertive Chinese behaviour altering the status quo by coercion, China is pursuing 'normal maritime activities'.²² Furthermore, the Foreign Ministry cautioned that Japan should 'not try to seek excuses for its arms expansion'.²³ Meanwhile, the Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson expressed strong reservations against the latest White Paper

as it hypes China military threat in order 'to find an excuse to revise its peace constitution and resume military expansion.'²⁴ The Ministry proclaimed China's rights on Diaoyu Island and argued that its actions as 'proper, legitimate and indisputable'. This is in keeping with China's long held assertions that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has manufactured a China threat theory to gain support from the Japanese electorate for his definitive goal of revising the post-war Peace Constitution.

Besides China, South Korea too has expressed strong reservations against Japan's claims over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands in its annual Defence White Paper and articulated that such 'unjust and preposterous claims'²⁵ is not favourable for instituting a future-oriented bilateral relationship. Starting from the Koizumi era, this is the fourteenth successive year when the annual defence policy paper made claims over Dokdo Islands. North Korea has also expressed a strong protest. The state news agency, KCNA, stressed that as developments in the Peninsula are progressing towards a positive climate of dialogue, Japan is making desperate attempts to dilute the peace process by intensifying tensions. It further argues that Tokyo is investing in building capabilities under the pretext of North Korea 'for reinvasion' and 'militarism' at a time when favourable environment of detente has been created on the Korean Peninsula.²⁶

THE WAY AHEAD

Japan is navigating a complex and changing regional security environment. East Asia hosts nuclear powers, three out of the top 10 nations in terms of military expenditure, contested territorial claims and active geo-political hotspots, Cold War structures, emotive history, intensifying nationalism, and differing political systems. Moreover, as the region is witnessing a shifting balance of power, Japan is revisiting its policy options and adapting accordingly against the backdrop of dramatic changes unfolding in the regional security, economic, and technological environments. Tokyo is investing more than ever in the decades-old alliance with the US that has endured several geopolitical transitions since its inception and, simultaneously, upgrading its own defence preparedness. Under Prime Minister Abe, Japan has undoubtedly marked a departure in its post-war security policy. Abe's continuing determination to reinforce Japan's deterrent capabilities is certain to raise concerns in the neighbourhood that suffered from the aggressive historical baggage of Imperial Japan. As President Trump expects Japan to assume larger responsibilities within

the alliance framework, the fundamental challenge before Abe is to define in clear terms the scope and limits of his concept of *Proactive Contribution to Peace*. This would entail preserving the balance between greater burden sharing as part of the decades-old alliance with the US in safeguarding regional security, and managing regional sensitivities along with its own domestic constituencies.

NOTES

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 10. Sheila A Smith, 'Can Tokyo Survive Trump?', *East Asia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3, July–September 2018, pp. 3–5.
 11. The resolution of the abduction issue is one of the top domestic political agendas for Shinzo Abe. This refers to the kidnapping of Japanese citizens by the North Koreans in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2002, during the first Japan–North Korea Summit, following decades of denial, Kim Jong-Il admitted for the first time that North Korea had abducted Japanese citizens; and later that year returned five out of the 17 Japanese victims. In subsequent years, even as Japan pursued the return of the rest, the North Korean regime officially maintained that the issue has already been resolved. For more, see 'Abduction of Japanese Citizens by North Korea', Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 16 December 2015, available at https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kp/page1we_000069.html, accessed on 27 September 2018.
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