Japan’s Middle East Security Policy: patterns since the millennium and implications for the coming period

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Determinants of Policy

1) Japan’s Middle East policy – shaped by two politico-strategic factors

Japan’s lop-sided strategic profile: security dependency on US; concern for North Korea & China’s expansionism

Oil dependency: 42.7% of energy on oil, 24.2% on gas; dependency on ME oil 83.6% from the Middle East (2013).

Dual dependency - Caught between often clashing US and Middle East demands.

Other factors: international prestige (incl. UN SC seat), Russia

2) In the process of policy-making, elite norms also clash with one another or public opinion.

e.g. US alliance vs political neutrality on the Arab-Israeli conflict; elites’ military activism vs national anti-militarist norm
Patterns of Policy: historical implications

- Historically Japan sought to balance and avoid offending either US or ME.
- Room for manoeuvre declined with the end of the Cold War – fear of abandonment by US, given East Asian security threats

I. Long-term Tendency:
- Constant shift away from pro-Arab/Islam towards pro-US tangent

Explaining the long-term shift:
- Shifts in the world balance of power toward US
- Shifts in Japan’s dependency/vulnerability (from energy insecurity to East Asia threats)
- Changes in Japanese elites’ goals: from a “liberal” trading state to desire to be a “normal” “realist” great power
Case of the Iraq war (2003)

Japan’s policy: Bandwagoning with US

- Clear political support for US war
- Sending GSDF to Iraq for post-war reconstruction
- Financial support for Iraqi reconstruction
- Policy coordinated with the US from an early stage

Q. Erosion of Japanese identity as an anti-militarist state?

- Government needed exceptionally strong political leadership in the Iraq war case.
- Government forced to scale down the SDF activities (wartime logistic support; post-war rear support; non-combat zone only).
Case of the Iranian nuclear issue:

- Was Japan’s 3rd largest oil supplier: Japan’s Azadegan oil concession to cover 6.3% of Japan’s oil imports

- US$ 2 billion contract despite US sanctions (under Iran-Libya Sanction Act). Japan was ready to take the case to the WTO.

- US demand for making Azadegan & Iran relations contingent on Iran’s compliance on the nuclear issue (Additional Protocol Jan 2004).

Issues:

North Korea

Middle East stability (i.e. oil flow to Japan)

anti-nuclear norm – Japan did not want Iranian nuclear weapons acquisition, but sought to avoid oil sanctions on Iran.

↩ A new opportunity in Iran needed to be seized.
Case of the Iranian nuclear issue:

Japan’s policy:

1) Softer tone, more patience than US.

2) Zig-zag between pro-US and pro-Iran - Seeking international buffer (e.g. EU) to avoid damage to either relations. Once buffer disappears (e.g. EU3’s policy hardening), Japan follows (except for Iran’s right for peaceful use).

3) Along with the US & EU3, gradual shift towards more pressure on Iran, but resisted oil sanctions. (until hardening of Iran \(\rightarrow\) then EU3)

- Interest in Azadegan oil declined, although long-term and general oil relationship with Iran is still highly valued – Balanced by bilateral contacts & non-political ties.
Obama-Abe Period

Continuation: balancing & inheriting agendas

1. US:
- Continuing US dependency in East Asia: China, North Korea.
- But less episodes of strong US pressure on Japan for policy cooperation in MENA.

2. Responses to Changes in the Middle East:
- US-Iran détente: Japan no longer caught between US and Iranian oil interest.
- Arab Uprising: Following the previous government’s position in support of democratisation & support for opposition in post-Qadafi Libya and against Asad regimes repression of people.
Obama-Abe Period

3. Russia factor:
The proposed US attack on Syria over poison gas (Sept 2013): Abe’s refusal to cooperate, desire not to jeopardize interests in Russia.

4. Combating Islamic terrorism (IS):
Japan political bandwagoning with the West (non-military means & indirect approaches e.g. sanctions, training ME officials for border control etc).

5. Regional power struggle:
Japan seeks to avoid damage to its energy interests in both Arab Gulf and Iran. (Deepening ties with both. e.g. politico-strategic dialogues, various business sectors, military exchanges etc)
Obama-Abe Period

6. New business interest in some states in the Middle East:
   e.g. Israel: R&D, high tech industry
   e.g. Turkey: nuclear power plant building in Sinop – May affect Japan’s approach in future if the relationship deepens.
Abe’s Policy and Internal Politics

Implication for military cooperation in the Middle East in the coming period:

- **Abe’s leadership equivalently strong** → Top-down policy-making possible.

- **Legislative change**: New security law enables a wider range of Japanese military participation under UN – UNSC resolution still required.

- However, **public normative constraints** still strong. Averse to accidental involvement in combat, handling ammunitions, causing casualties, becoming targets → Need for UN umbrella.

- **Scale down possible** – Will depend on the security condition on the ground & terms of UNSC res.

* National norm might change w. change of public perception of Islamists threat to the Japanese public itself.
Q. How is Japan’s policy determined?

- Japan’s basic policy orientation was determined by policy-makers’ perception of the international power balance and Japan’s national interests.
- Generally, Japan shifted according to the perceived relative influence of the US and that of ME states or oil interest involved (New factors e.g. Russia).
- Japan’s policies in ME were filtered through norms such as priority of the US alliance, anti-militarism, neutrality in Arab-Israel conflict (Change in anti-militarism more legislative than normative).
- When opportunity for gain at low risk was perceived, Japan was actively engaged; when risks increased it dis-engaged (UN framework & consensus promoted).
- When interests or norms clashed, the outcome was determined by the strength of different factions or offices within policy-making institutions (Strong leadership overcame it).