

Japan's Security Environment

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When appraising Japan's security, attention tends to focus on developments in East Asia, such as tension on the Korean Peninsula or in the Taiwan straits, or at the Soviet military build-up in the Far East during the Cold War. Yet three critical events, which have had a defining impact on the Japanese national psyche regarding national security, have all taken place outside East Asia.

The first was the oil crisis triggered by the Yom Kippur War in 1973, as a result of which the Japanese public started to feel an acute sense of vulnerability. The second is the Gulf War of 1990-91 because Japan's legal framework was unprepared to deal with international crisis of that magnitude. Except for mine sweepers, dispatched after hostilities ended, the Japanese government could not dispatch personnel to the Middle East. Although Tokyo made a substantial financial contribution in support of the war effort by coalition forces, in the aftermath of the war Tokyo continued to feel a strong sense of humiliation that, despite constitutional constraints, active participation by Japanese personnel in non-combative activities should have been attempted. After all it was in the Gulf War that the vanquished side of the WWII, namely Japan and Germany had no options other than to provide financial assistance.

Third, are the events of September 11, 2002. It became very clear to people in Japan that these terrorists were ready and willing to detonate weapons of mass destruction. It is horrifying that the notion of deterrence may mean nothing to these

terrorists who have been displaying disgusting self-righteousness in aspiring to martyrdom. Thus, in Japan that the terrorist acts that took place on September 11th evidently are not only perceived as an outrageous attack against the United States, Japan's ally, but also as a serious threat to all mankind.

Less than two weeks after the attack, the Japanese Diet took legislative action and passed the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, which authorizes the government to engage Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in logistical and other activities in support of American operations in the fight against terrorism. In January 2002, six naval ships were deployed to the Indian Ocean. Just six months ago, this scenario would be utterly unimaginable. However, it should be noted that due to constitutional constraints --to the effect that the use of force is allowed only for self-defense-- these Japanese naval ships are not allowed to engage in combat. Still, as we look back at the heated debate in Japan about the constitutional limits on the role and mission of the JSDF, which has persisted for almost half a century, there is a commonly shared feeling that we have come a long way.

Throughout the post-WWII era, national security has been the most divisive issue in Japanese domestic politics. Because of its devastating defeat in WWII, the majority of people in Japan have a strong aversion to war. However there have been clashing viewpoints between those who believe that the JSDF and the U.S.-Japan alliance serve as a deterrence and are essential for Japan's security, and those who believed that the very notion of deterrence is a dangerous ploy to entangle Japan in another war. Especially during the Cold War era the fear that Japan might inadvertently be entangled into hostilities was widely expressed. Perhaps the hidden assumption of non-believers of

deterrence is that unless Japan initiates war and avoids entanglement, the country will be able to enjoy long lasting peace, since history shows that Japan has started most of the wars that it has been in.

One interesting contrast with Europe can be pointed out in this regard. In Europe, the credibility of the U.S. defense commitment, in the context of nuclear strategy, was repeatedly debated in terms of the coupling and the decoupling notions. In Japan, this coupling and decoupling issue has never become a subject of nationwide debate. The explanation for this contrast is that in Japan fear of entanglement has become such a dominant issue that the debate over U.S. credibility and defense commitment has not attracted much attention. Another unique feature of the national security debate in Japan is that it focuses less on policy options than on the interpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution. From the opposition's standpoint, it makes more sense to launch legal battles rather than to engage in a debate on options, because in the former opponents can denounce the governments actions as illegal, whereas in the latter they are sure to lose if it comes to a vote.

Japan in the International and Regional Context

It is evident that for sometime Japan has benefited immensely, both in terms of security and economic well-being, from the existing international system. It is clearly in Japan's interest, as well as responsibility in light of its huge economic capability, to actively maintain and improve the system's performance. And as the Afghan case demonstrates, any security challenge, even in the most remote areas, can have a global impact. However, Japan's activities were originally confined to humanitarian relief and

economic reconstruction during both crisis and post-conflict phases because of domestic constraints (see above). These types of activities constitute very important pillars of Japan's contribution to international security endeavors. For example Japan is expected to play a significant role in assisting Afghanistan's economic reconstruction, without which long-term stabilization can hardly be achieved.

Also, although it was not always well recognized, throughout the 1990s Japan provided ten billion U.S. dollars in humanitarian relief for economic reconstruction and development assistance to the Balkans (which for the average Japanese is one of the most remote regions of the world). This was done partly because of awareness that the way the international community addresses conflicts is bound to have the impact on other regions in strategic, moralistic and norm making terms. In those days the issues surrounding the Balkans were on the top of the G-8's agenda in which various joint endeavors attempted to address the tragic events that took place there.

Still as far as the possibility of the JSDF's engagement in various international endeavors is concerned, it was only in the early 1990s that a law was passed --after an extremely lengthy and emotionally charged debate in the Diet-- to enable the Japanese government to send a JSDF contingent for peace-keeping operations (PKO). And in the late 1990s another law was passed enabling the government to engage the JSDF in various logistical and support activities for U.S. forces that operate in the vicinity of Japan. Some foreigners described this legislative action as a clear-cut case of Japan's own security interest. Still, because of the legacy of domestic schism regarding defense issues as described above, the elaboration of constitutional interpretation and other legal issues in the Diet was very arduous. With the passage of the Anti-Terrorism laws, as referred to

above, the roles and missions of JSDF have been much more clearly defined. Although engaging in combat action is not allowed, except for self-defense, Japan is in a position to play a more active role in international security. It is noteworthy that Japanese public opinion throughout this process increasingly accepts and supports a more active role for the JSDF. And we can speculate that with the end of the Cold War, the fear of being entangled into war might be slightly attenuated.

It is evident that the situation in East Asia is the dominant focus of Japan's security concerns. Although there remain serious flashpoints such as 38th Parallel in the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait, which will be discussed below, and although we remain worried about secessionist movements in various parts of Indonesia, or Al Qaeda's attempts to penetrate into Southeast Asia, on the whole the security environment in East Asia is in far better shape than in the 1960s and 1970s. This is because practically every country, with the exception of North Korea, attaches a high priority to the pursuit of economic well being, and for that purpose is ready to connect their national economy to the international economic system. First was the so-called "East Asian dragons" namely the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong started their dynamic economic growth relatively earlier than other East Asian nations, followed by other ASEAN countries in the late 1980s. And then we started to witness China's robust economic growth throughout the 1990s. The success of economic development has become the major, and in some cases the only, source of political legitimacy for some governments. It is noteworthy that on the first official visit by the Japanese Prime Minister to Vietnam, the elderly Vietnamese leader told the Japanese Prime Minister "We have a lot of experts for war fighting. But we do not have many experts for nation

building, and we badly need them. We want to emulate the achievement of Japan who so successfully carried out the reconstruction after 1945.”

With increased economic interaction, it no longer makes sense for these countries to resort to the use of force to deal with each other, because it will only disrupt the existing external economic environment. Marxist’s views of the historical inevitability of war maintain that fierce economic competition will inevitably provoke war among imperial powers, which would in turn trigger a revolution by the proletariat. In a sense, the history of the 20th century was a test for this hypothesis. Hopefully, we may have reached the stage that the deepening of economic interdependence, the essence of which is not the “zero-sum game” but a “positive-sum game”, is expected to function as an effective deterrence to military conflict in the region.

Furthermore another important emerging trend in East Asia is democratization. Back in the late 1970s, when President Carter advocated a new human rights policy, the rigorous application of human rights policy toward Japan’s neighbors disrupted relationships, because in those days many countries in the region were under authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, and this policy perplexed the Japanese people. However, successful economic development in many countries has resulted in the emergence of a new middle class, who eventually began to actively pursue democratization. Thus since the beginning of the 1990s, we started to witness a number of success stories of democratization in the region: South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan to name a few. And of course everyone wishes Indonesia the very best for the success of her nascent democracy.

In watching the process of regional integration in Europe, it is clear that both shared interest and shared values among member countries are the fundamental driving force for the deepening and widening of regional integration. In contrast with Europe, East Asia is beginning to reach the stage of shared interest among the countries in the region as discussed above. However, they have yet to reach a stage of shared value. Still, if the political dynamism we have witnessed thus far, namely that economic success produces a middle class that becomes the standard bearer of democratization, continues to work in this region, eventually shared values can also become a defining parameter for greater stability, as well as wider and deeper working relationships among the countries in the region.

Of course this is not meant to press the laissez-faire view that a market economy will take care of everything including maintenance of peace and security. On the contrary, if the pursuit of economic development is unsuccessful, then devastating political upheaval can erupt and destabilize the regional security environment. The classic case-in-point is Indonesia in the late 1990s. Had it not been for the economic crisis in East Asia that started in 1997 and quickly engulfed many countries in the region, Suharto's reign may have continued a little longer. It should be noted that economic success alone may not sufficiently unify a country, and that nationalism may inevitably become a key variable in some countries, the clash of which can disrupt the security.

Therefore conscious and careful endeavors are necessary to prevent the deterioration of the security environment as well as to contain the risk of instability in flashpoint areas such as the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. And therein comes the crucial importance of Japan's alliance with the U.S. In early the 1990s, immediately

after the end of the Cold War, there was debate within Japan that perhaps it was becoming more difficult to rationalize its alliance with the U.S. since --with the exception of its deterrence role in the Korean Peninsula-- there was not a particularly conspicuous adversary in the region. However the predominant view in Japan was that the U.S. presence in East Asia is essential for preventing the emergence of adversarial powers in the foreseeable future, and, therefore would remain an indispensable stabilizer in the region. Also it is also believed that U.S. naval presence would continue to be the only effective guarantor for safety and freedom of navigation, something Japan, an insular country, has a vital interest.

It was memorable that on the occasion of the state visit in 1996, President Clinton in his keynote speech stated “In the US some people believe that our alliance serves only the interest of Japan. In Japan some people believe that our alliance only serves the interest of the U.S. They are both wrong. Our alliance serves the interest of both countries.” Thus he succinctly and eloquently describes the rationale of the US-Japan alliance. Of course it is very important for us to work closely together to deal with various operational issues such as those concerning military bases, especially those in Okinawa, in such a way to alleviate the burden on the local people while maintaining the effectiveness of the alliance. It is heartening that presently both sides share a solid understanding and determination about this issue.

Japan and Its Neighbors: Korea and China

In assessing East Asia's security environment, two additional issues --i.e. the future scenarios in the Korean Peninsula and the future impact that China is bound to have on the entire region-- have to be addressed.

A year and a half after the historic summit between North and South Korea, a sense of stalemate is again prevailing in the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is carefully assessing the Bush administration's posture toward the peninsula, and gauging the strength of support in the domestic political game in the ROK. Furthermore the aftermath of September 11th focused renewed attention on the DPRK's weapons of mass destruction capacity. Since this is the last remnant of Cold War era military confrontation, in terms of the intensity of arms concentration there is no parallel in the present day world. It is therefore absolutely essential that the parties concerned pursue all possible avenues in the quest for relaxation of tensions and the establishment of a positive working relationship between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea (ROK) so that eventually the path toward reunification can be explored. As discussed above, all other countries in the region have shifted their focus to economic development by way of opening up their economies. The DPRK remains the only country to persist in allocating resources to its military while its economy languishes. It seems obvious that unless the DPRK decides to change its pattern of resource allocation so that productive sectors --be they industry, agriculture or transport-- are rehabilitated, and then open the economy to the rest of the world in the way all other countries have done, a truly substantial breakthrough in relations can hardly be expected.

But it is clear that such a change in priorities is the very thing that DPRK cannot swallow because of fears over the possible disruptive impact on the political regime. This dilemma for the North Korea has hampered progress on the Peninsula over the past decade.

Meanwhile, the close, intensive and productive consultations conducted between the ROK, Japan and the U.S. in their joint efforts to manage possible crises and to search for the possible solutions to difficult problems and challenges should be viewed as a major success in the 1990s. For Japan, relations with the DPRK have a unique aspect in that normalization of relations remains the last unfinished task in its post-war settlement. It is assumed that one important element of normalization is to make a considerable amount of economic assistance to the DPRK available in order to settle claims related the period of Japanese colonization. So, Japan must continue to actively engage in tripartite consultations and to work with other key players such as China and Russia so that a path toward relaxation of the tension can eventually be paved. And in the course of such joint endeavors, Japan should engage in normalization negotiations with the DPRK in a way that the process itself contributes substantially to shared objectives of like-minded countries and results in concrete solutions to existing issues between Japan and DPRK, notably the abduction issue.

Regarding China, throughout the 1990s two starkly contrasting so-called “China threat” theories were discussed in various forums when discussing the future of the East Asia. The first is that China will eventually face full-scale domestic crisis that may be triggered from rising internal pressure to seek democratization, or from social tensions arising out of the ever-widening disparity between prosperous coastal areas and backward inland areas, or simply because of the convergence of various social changes. This theory

stresses that such a scenario is bound to have huge destabilizing impact on the security environment of the whole East Asia.

The second type of “China threat” assumes that China will manage to continue a linear, successful economic development. Some argue that the eventual emergence of China as the manufacturing center in the global economy means structural change in international trade and finance, which will force drastic and sometimes painful adjustment in the economies of advanced countries. It may be counter-argued that the emergence of a new economic power as such does not necessarily constitutes a threat to the security environment, but the second school stresses that in the course of successful economic development China can increasingly afford to devote a substantial portion of its resources to strengthen its military capability, the process of which has already begun. In recent years the second line of thinking has been getting more attention. In any event, the question is whether one considers China’s failure or success to be a threat. However, the common denominator between the two seems to be the shared obsession with China’s size, not so much the vastness of its territory as its huge population. And it is clear that whether one is inclined one theory or another, the way China pursues modernization is destined to have huge impact not only on East Asia but the entire world. It is also worth noting that countries in the region may start to worry, if China begins to channel a considerable amount of its economic resources --made available as a result of its recent economic growth-- into the military in such away its military capability experiences a quantum leap.

The Taiwan Straits is likely to remain a worrisome flashpoint. It is argued that increasing Taiwanese confidence in its democratization has further complicated the

prospect for a political solution for cross-Straits relations. On the other hand it is encouraging to note the recent dynamism in cross-Straits economic transactions, which might further promote a sense of pragmatism between the two sides. It is obvious that the eruption of military hostility in the Straits would have a devastating impact on the regional security environment. The bottom line is that the careful and patient maintenance of the status quo, during which both sides are expected to continue efforts in search of peaceful resolution of the problem, is imperative.

As far as Japan's relationship with China is concerned it is absolutely essential that both China and Japan recognize that both countries have come to have many common interests in various matters, such as economic transactions, the maintenance of the peace and security in the region, and the management of environmental challenges to name a few. And since this shared interest is likely to deepen and widen, careful management by both sides is required. It should be stressed that candid dialogues between the two nations, involving people from all walks of life should, be robustly promoted, because this might be the most effective guarantor against nationalistic outbursts in either country, which could disrupt or derail the bilateral relationship.