

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1471  
May 23, 2007

## Transforming the U.S.–Japanese Alliance

*Bruce Klingner*

A resurgent Japan assuming a broader security role in Asia is a metamorphosis that should be welcomed, not feared. Tokyo is a trusted ally that shares America's democratic values and, unlike China, has already proven itself a "responsible stakeholder" in the global community. It is in Washington's and Asia's interest to encourage Japan to assume a greater security role in the region and engage in global humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. Japan must realize, however, that its new role comes with new responsibilities. Tokyo must more fully redress its colonial occupation of the Korean Peninsula and wartime actions to placate its neighbors and facilitate its new security role. Washington should be directly involved in managing Tokyo's ascension to help reassure the region and build confidence in the new security configuration.

**The Evolving Asian Chessboard.** Nationalist themes have emerged as an increasingly strong undercurrent in Japanese, Chinese, and South Korean policymaking in recent years. Although this phenomenon is not new, it is potentially more volatile now because it occurs amidst growing competition for economic resources and the mantle of regional leadership. The inevitable clash of competing national interests will be aggravated by unresolved historical animosities, sovereignty disputes, and heightened national pride brought on by China's and Japan's rising economic and military statures and South Korea's increasingly independent foreign policy. Although the globalized and intertwined Asian economies are a constrain-

ing factor, if not managed effectively, nationalist emotions could trump financial logic and precipitate a crisis.

**Japan's Sun on the Rise Again.** Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is pushing a more assertive foreign policy in response to North Korea's belligerent actions and China's expanding military capability. Abe envisions Japan assuming a greater regional role and has called for a bold review of Japan's postwar stance and revision of the U.S.-imposed 1947 constitution to enable a "new Japan."

To achieve these goals, Tokyo elevated the Japanese Defense Agency to become the Ministry of Defense earlier this year. On May 14, the House of Councilors approved legislation to initiate a three-year national debate on revising the constitution to allow expanded military responsibilities. A constitutional revision would require approval by two-third majorities in both houses of the national legislature and a majority of Japanese voters.

At issue is altering Article 9 of the 1947 constitution, the so-called "peace clause," which precludes Japanese use of military force to resolve conflicts. This clause has also been interpreted as precluding the right to collective self-defense,

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1471.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1471.cfm)

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

such as defending U.S. military forces in Japan against North Korean missile attacks.<sup>1</sup> In addition to a formal revision of the constitution, the Prime Minister advocates a reinterpretation of Article 9 to allow for an expanded role for Japanese military forces and the removal of self-imposed constraints, such as the “three principles” of arms exports. These restrictions, designed to preclude Japanese arms exports to communist countries and those subject to U.N. arms embargos, constrain Tokyo’s involvement with the U.S. in developing a joint ballistic missile defense.

**A Bedrock of Asian Stability.** The U.S.–Japanese alliance has been a critical foundation of peace and stability in Asia and has helped further U.S. strategic interests worldwide. North Korea is a good example. Pyongyang’s launch of multiple missiles in July 2006 and its October 2006 nuclear weapons test underscored North Korea’s continuing threat to Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. Tokyo’s imposition of sanctions and support for punitive U.N. actions were instrumental in bringing North Korea back to the Six-Party Talks. Also in line with U.S. interests, Japan publicly identified China as a military threat for the first time in its December 2004 defense guidelines and declared in a 2005 white paper that its military must adapt to defend against it.

Tokyo has worked closely with the U.S. to deploy a ballistic missile defense system to defend Japan against North Korean missiles. Pyongyang’s overflight of Japan by a Taepo Dong-1 missile in 1998 spurred greater public support for a missile defense system, and North Korea’s 2006 launches led Tokyo to accelerate its plans. Tokyo has deployed Patriot Advanced Capability 3 land-based missiles to Kadena Air Base and the ship-borne Standard Missile 2 (SM-2) air defense system and has accelerated modification of four Aegis destroyers to accept improved SM-3 missiles and constructed an X-band radar at Shariki air base.

Japan has provided logistical support as part of its global alliance with the U.S. in the global war on terrorism. Japanese naval self-defense forces deployed to the Indian Ocean in November 2001 to conduct refueling and interdiction operations as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Japanese ground self-defense forces were sent to Iraq to assist in coalition reconstruction efforts. Japanese forces also participated in humanitarian relief operations following the Asian tsunami in December 2005. Japanese units could in fact do more, particularly in support of NATO in Afghanistan in the areas of mine-clearing technology and stability operations.

**Complications to Success.** Although Prime Minister Abe has identified military transformation and constitutional revision as his administration’s primary objectives, he faces formidable obstacles, including visceral objection from the region, lukewarm domestic support, and budgetary constraints. South Korea and China are fearful that any change to Japanese military authorities or capabilities risks a resurgence of the nationalist militarism that characterized the Japanese polity in the first half of the 20th century. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s repeated visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine exacerbated Chinese and Korean nationalist emotions, leading to violent demonstrations and Beijing’s five-year refusal to conduct a summit.

Prime Minister Abe’s summit with China and South Korea shortly after assuming office defused some of the tensions and generated hopes for improvements in bilateral relations. However, Abe’s remarks appearing to downplay Tokyo’s wartime role in imposing forced prostitution in the occupied countries (euphemistically referred to as “comfort women”) consumed the goodwill he had acquired. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s subsequent trip to Tokyo and the relatively muted South Korean response to Abe’s comments indicated a desire by Japan’s neighbors to downplay, at least for the moment, divisive issues.

---

1. Article 9 specifies that “aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

Although official and public Japanese sentiment reflects a belief that the country has atoned for its wartime actions, its apologies have not accomplished their purpose. As such, Tokyo must engage in an apology process sufficiently unambiguous and sincere that it effectively removes the issue from dispute. Failure to do this will undermine Japan's ability to accomplish its strategic goals. Although some in the region will continue to play this issue for political gain no matter what Japan does, a comprehensive Japanese initiative will separate the truly aggrieved from those engaged in political posturing.

Abe will also be hampered by lukewarm public support. Although approval for revising the constitution has risen during the past several years, recent polls show a relative decline, perhaps as the likelihood of changing Article 9 increased. Support is now below majority levels.<sup>2</sup>

Even if Abe is able to move forward on Article 9, the Japanese Ministry of Defense will be hampered by budgetary constraints. With defense spending capped at 1 percent of GDP and ballistic missile defense consuming an increasing portion of the military's budget, Japanese conventional military capabilities will decrease. The Japanese defense budget for the fiscal year starting on April 1 will cut overall defense spending for the fifth consecutive year by 0.3 percent while outlays for missile defense will increase 30 percent.

And despite the tone of recent reports, the U.S. sale of F-22 fighter aircraft to Japan is not assured. U.S. officials indicated that Washington is positively disposed to selling future generation fighter aircraft to Japan but did not specify the F-22. Without a Japanese defense budget increase, purchasing the F-22, at potentially more than \$200 million per plane, would be prohibitively expensive. Lieutenant General Jeffrey Kohler, head of the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, stated that the U.S. instead intends to offer the F-35 next-generation Joint Strike Fighter to Japan. The F-35 is cheaper and less technologically sensitive.

**Recommendations.** The U.S. should express its support for an expanded Japanese security role in Asia, jointly determine additional roles for Japan's military in global humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, and affirm a consolidated firm response to North Korean and Chinese military threats. Specifically, the Bush Administration should:

- Engage in joint planning to identify expanded responsibilities for Japanese military forces and more closely integrate Japanese efforts with U.S. force plans, particularly on ballistic missile defense.
- Press Tokyo to increase its defense spending above the 1 percent of GDP cap to prevent accelerated missile defense expenditures from crowding out spending on conventional forces.
- Privately press Japan to address historical issues to allay regional concerns. Washington should play a more active but still behind-the-scenes role in urging all parties to resolve historical animosities that risk triggering detrimental nationalism. Public chastisements, such as congressional legislation concerning "comfort women," would be counterproductive.
- Emphasize that removal of North Korea from the state sponsors of terrorist list and U.S. formalization of diplomatic relations with Pyongyang are contingent on resolving the Japanese abductee issue. Tokyo remains wary that the U.S. policy reversal in the Six-Party Talks and overeager attempts to resolve the Banco Delta Asia dispute will undermine Japanese objectives. This concern must be put to rest.

**Conclusion.** Northeast Asia's inability to create a permanent multilateral security forum reflects the deep-rooted, historic animosities between its powers. U.S. reluctance to intervene in disputes between Japan and its neighbors has reinforced perceptions of Washington's indifference and growing irrelevance to Asia, but these impressions are at odds with the major resources the U.S. has committed to the region. Washington must adopt a more

---

2. A *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll in May 2007 showed 46 percent support for constitutional revision, down 9 percentage points from a year ago, while a Kyodo news agency survey showed a drop from 61 percent to 57 percent support during the past two years. Separate polls by NHK and *Asahi Shimbun* showed only 28 percent to 33 percent of respondents support changing Article 9.

active strategy to help Japan take a larger role in deterring military threats and to counter the increasingly prevalent notion that U.S. interest in the region is in decline in the face of China's rise.

—Bruce Klingner is Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.