While East Asia has stood out in recent history for its exceptional 70-year period of peace, it would be wrong to assume that policymakers in the region aren’t worried about, or aren’t gearing up for, future conflict.

Numerous potential flash points exist, from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and South Asia. Those worries are fueling Asia’s push to modernize their military forces, thus risking an arms race.
Changing Threat Perceptions and Japan’s Evolving National Security Policy

By Noboru Yamaguchi

With its constitutional limitations on military development, Japan faces unique challenges in answering evolving security threats in the region. But under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the country has made great strides in enhancing its ability to respond to a wide range of potential and emerging threats, both on its own and in partnership with the United States and other countries, writes Noboru Yamaguchi.

Since coming to office in his second administration in 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has taken significant steps to enhance Japan’s national security and defense posture. With consistently high approval ratings, Abe has exercised strong leadership in upgrading Japan’s national-security policies by 1) issuing Japan’s first National Security Strategy in 2013; 2) re-interpreting Japan’s constitution in 2014 to allow limited exercise of the right of collective defense; and 3) establishing new legal provisions for the operations of the Japan Self Defense Forces (JSDF) in 2015. In addition, after more than two decades of gradual decreases, Japan’s defense spending started to increase under the current administration, reaching a record 5.19 trillion yen for the fiscal year 2018, representing a 1.3 percent increase in nominal terms from the previous year.

Evolving Threat Perceptions
Japan’s Ministry of Defense, through its various publications, has declared that the strategic environment surrounding Japan has become increasingly severe, with various challenges and destabilizing factors becoming more tangible and acute. So-called conventional security challenges posed by relatively traditional military-to-military confrontations can easily be found in the Taiwan Strait and the Demilitarized Zone on the Korean Peninsula, even as similar challenges elsewhere largely disappeared with the end of the Cold War three decades ago. On the Korean Peninsula alone, 1.2 million North Koreans, 600,000 South Koreans and a large contingent of US forces have dealt with periods of high tension since the 1950s.

Meanwhile, the conventional military activities of Russia and China have intensified in the region surrounding Japan. According to Japan’s Joint Staff, the Japan Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) conducted 1,168 scramble missions from April 2016 to March 2017, the highest annual total since it was founded in 1954. Among these missions, 851 were in response to Chinese aircraft, while 301 responded to Russian aircraft. As China’s military spending continues to grow as rapidly as its gross domestic product, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), particularly its navy and air forces, have modernized significantly. Accordingly, China’s naval and air force activities in the areas surrounding Japan have become much more intense and in some cases aggressive. For example, in early 2013, a Chinese Jiangwei-II class frigate illuminated its fire control radar against a Japanese destroyer in the East China Sea, prompting a strong Japanese government protest at what it saw as a dangerous military act.

North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs have caused extremely serious concerns, not only for its regional neighbors but also the rest of the world, because its missiles can now reach virtually every country (the few exceptions being in Latin America and Africa). North Korea has conducted six nuclear weapons tests since 2006 and demonstrated its capability to produce hydrogen bombs with its sixth nuclear detonation conducted in September 2017, with an estimated yield equivalent to 160 kilotons of TNT, 10 times larger than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in August 1945. On the one hand, there remain questions over whether such a weapon is small enough to be mounted on a long-range missile that could reach the US, and if the warhead would survive extremely high temperatures during the re-entry phase. On the other hand, it is evident that such warheads can be delivered by shorter-range missiles, bombers or ships to neighboring countries such as Japan. As a nation that suffered from two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan is sticking to the international community’s goal of seeing North Korea “abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner,” as stated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718, unanimously adopted in October 2006.

Since 1993, when North Korea launched a Nodong missile in the Sea of Japan, Tokyo has keenly tracked its ballistic missile program. This concern was reinforced in 1998 when a Taepodong missile was launched and overflew northeastern Japan and fell into the Pacific Ocean. Since then, North Korea’s ballistic missile program has continued to advance significantly, and it is now believed that the country can produce long-range missiles with a range greater than 10,000km, meaning they can reach the continental US. Among the numerous missile-flight tests necessary to achieve this level of progress, Japan has experienced multiple missile overflights of its territories, including the two missiles that flew over Hokkaido in August and September 2017, the first with a range of 2,700km and the second with a range of 3,700km.

In addition to these conventional military threats, the Japanese government is very concerned about so-called gray-zone situations — security challenges that are neither peacetime law enforcement nor military contingencies. In the area close to the Senkaku Islands, the coast guards of China and Japan are confronting each other under very tense conditions, although both the PLA Navy and the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) have been cautiously avoiding direct involvement in the region. Any event that requires a response higher than normal law enforcement but short of military conflict will invariably be extremely complex.
FASHIONING A FUTURE DEFENSE POSTURE

To address these severe challenges, Japan has undertaken various initiatives. As described by the National Defense Program Guidelines adopted in 2013, the JSDF’s current goal is to build up a Dynamic Joint Defense Force, emphasizing the concept of joint operations. This will enable the JSDF to respond swiftly to the increasingly severe security environment and carry out various missions, such as the achievement of maritime and air superiority in a seamless and flexible manner. More broadly, the National Security Strategy published in 2013 emphasizes Japan’s “Proactive Contribution to Peace,” departing from the purely passive approach that had been the case since 1945. The following section explains the major aspects of policies to implement these ideas that are key elements in my view, including archipelagic defense, ballistic missile defense, cyber security, partner capacity building and the evolution of the legal basis for defense activities.

Archipelagic Defense: Japan’s Southwestern Islands, centering on Okinawa, comprise 200 islands, of which about 60 are inhabited, and represent the strategically important divide between the East China Sea and the Western Pacific. Gaps between these islands such as the Miyako Strait are typically 100km to 300km wide. A modest but more robust posture for archipelagic defense on these islands is a must for Japan to protect its sovereignty and population. This effort, along with capabilities to achieve air and maritime superiority in the area surrounding the islands, will provide Japan with the potential to exercise influence over strategic choke points between the western Pacific and the East China Sea.

Recent efforts by the JSDF to enhance its archipelagic defense posture include: 1) planned activation of an amphibious rapid deployment brigade, with relevant systems such as AAV7 amphibious vehicles and V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft introduced; 2) recent deployment of a GSDF coastal observation unit on Yonaguni Island and scheduled activation of infantry, surface-to-ship missile (SSM) and surface-to-air missile (SAM) units on Amami-Oshima, Miyako Island, and Ishigaki Island; 3) activation of the 9th Air Wing in Okinawa, with a newly deployed fighter squadron in addition to an existing one; 4) additional maritime air-patrol capabilities with SH-60K patrol helicopters and domestically developed P-1 patrol fixed-wing aircraft; 5) improved transportation capabilities with additional equipment such as domestically developed C-2 cargo aircraft.

Newly introduced F-35s will further enhance the JSDF’s capabilities to achieve air superiority, which is a prerequisite for successful remote island defense. Accordingly, there is a proposal to convert JMSDF flat-top vessels such as the Izumo, which currently carries only helicopters, to accommodate F-35B short takeoff/vertical landing fighters. If realized, this will provide the JSDF a better opportunity to secure both air and maritime superiority when conducting archipelagic defense. In addition, long-range guided missiles, once carried by modern fighters such as the F-35, can provide ground and maritime units with accurate fire support from remote places. It is reported that the Ministry of Defense is now considering the introduction of air-to-surface cruise missiles with a range greater than 500km. For context, this would enable the JSDF to support the defense of Ishigaki Island with fire power employed from aircraft loitering over Okinawa.

Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD): Since the late 1990s, Japan has been working hard with the US to advance its BMD capabilities. As a result, the JMSDF is now pursuing a plan to equip all six Surface-to-Air Guided Missile Groups with BMD-capable Patriot PAC-3 equipment. The JMSDF is planning to increase the number of BMD-capable Aegis vessels from four to eight by 2020. The government of Japan is now considering the introduction of Aegis Ashore systems to add another layer to existing BMD capabilities that include the Aegis/SM-3 and PAC-3.

Japan is also making efforts to upgrade currently existing BMD-capable systems. Since 1999, Japan and the US have been working to upgrade the system with a program of SM-3 Block II A missiles, in addition to the currently deployed SM-3 Block I A. This joint research and development effort is now in the final stages, with a hope that the two countries could reach more robust BMD capability by expanding the coverage area and obtaining the capability to intercept incoming
missiles with a higher trajectory (lofted trajectory) and greater terminal velocity. In addition, the JSDF is planning to upgrade Patriot PAC-3 systems by introducing PAC-3 MSE (Missile Segment Enhancement) that will extend interception altitude from about 10km for the current PAC-3 to 20-30km, more than twice the current system.

Cyber Security: Security challenges in newly emerging domains such as space and cyberspace have come to the fore in Japanese security planning. In 2015 alone, the number of cases recognized as cyber threats involving Japanese government organizations topped 6 million. As Japan is now preparing to hold the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, cyber security is a particularly urgent issue. While Japan may be lagging in this compared to countries such as the US and some European countries, it has recently taken important steps toward more resilient information and communication infrastructure in both the public and private sectors. In order to drive a whole-of-government approach, the Cyber Security Basic Act was enacted in 2014. To implement the law and improve Japan’s defenses, the Cyber Security Strategic Headquarters was established within the cabinet and the National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cyber Security (NISC) was activated within the Cabinet Secretariat as the working arm. In 2015, the Cyber Security Strategy was formulated to ensure that relevant organizations share responsibilities for better cyber security. The Ministry of Defense, along with other major governmental actors such as the National Police Agency; the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications; and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, is tasked to carry out missions related to cyber security. Within the ministry, the SDF C4 System Command has continuously monitored Japan’s defense networks. In 2014, the Cyber Defense Group was activated under the command and is scheduled to be further strengthened in the five-year defense buildup plan set to be drafted by the end of 2018.

Partner Capacity-building: Capacity-building is a relatively new area for the Japanese government to promote the country’s security policy of “Proactive Contribution to Peace” described by the 2013 National Security Strategy. The JSDF has recently been deeply involved in capacity building programs designed to create stability within the region and improve the security environment by enhancing the capabilities of recipient countries through continuous human resource development and technical assistance in the fields of security and defense. Major areas for such assistance include humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), disposal of landmines and unexploded ordnance, military medicine and maritime security. Utilizing its capabilities and experiences, the JSDF is trying to assist partner militaries such as those of the member states of ASEAN.

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In addition to assisting military organizations, there have been various capacity-building programs for law enforcement organizations. For example, the Japan Coast Guard Academy and the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies have been hosting junior coast guard officers from Japan and neighboring countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam through its Maritime Safety and Security Policy Program since 2015. This one-year master’s degree program seeks to enhance maritime security capabilities of coastal countries along Japan’s Sea Lines of Communication through the East and South China Seas and the Indian Ocean.

Evolution of the Legal Basis for Defense Activities: The legal basis for JSDF operations has evolved over the last two decades, particularly under the Abe administration. The new security legislation approved by the Diet in 2015 expanded the scope of JSDF operations. First of all, the old constitutional interpretation prohibiting Japan from exercising the right of collective self-defense was amended to allow limited exercise of that authority in cases where failure to respond militarily would eventually lead to an existential crisis for Japan. Second, the JSDF is now mandated to protect foreign military assets such as naval vessels that might be utilized for the defense of Japan. This authority has been operationalized, with an example of such a mission taking place when JMSDF ships escorted US naval vessels deployed in the Sea of Japan in response to North Korea’s continued provocations. This unexpectedly high operational tempo, along with the aforementioned investments for future acquisition of new systems and activation of new units, will invariably increase demands for resources to areas not as visible as front-line weapons systems; namely, command and control with communication, maintenance, supply, ammunition stockpile, and training. Fancy weapons systems without proper investment in these lower visibility requirements will never perform as expected. Thus it seems to be time for the JSDF to closely look at logistics as well as its strategies and operations.

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CONCLUSION

Under Shinzo Abe’s highly stable political leadership, a gradually reviving economy and changing threat perceptions among the Japanese people, the government of Japan seems to have had the luxury of public support for its national defense and security strategy and policy. As a result, the JSDF is introducing new capabilities in the realm of BMD, amphibious landing, long-range strike, and large-scale maritime and air transportation, while activating new units such as the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, squadrons and battalions equipped with high-tech weapons such as F-35s and V-22s, and possibly units equipped with Aegis Ashore systems. These trends, however, inherently require greater resources for maintenance and supplies, as well as training to develop highly experienced professionals.

At the same time, the workload for the JSDF has expanded, with increased demands for various missions such as protracted deployment of Aegis vessels and PAC-3 units for the protection of Japanese nationals against ballistic missiles in response to North Korea’s continued provocations. This unexpectedly high operational tempo, along with the aforementioned investments for future acquisition of new systems and activation of new units, will invariably increase demands for resources to areas not as visible as front-line weapons systems; namely, command and control with communication, maintenance, supply, ammunition stockpile, and training. Fancy weapons systems without proper investment in these lower visibility requirements will never perform as expected. Thus it seems to be time for the JSDF to closely look at logistics as well as its strategies and operations.