

Djibouti: Japan's first post-war overseas base

Abstract

Having passed successive legislation in the past two decades to expand its use of the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF), Japan has emerged from its post-war 'pacifist' shackles to assume a range of security roles that are typically associated with so-called 'normal nations'. This article addresses how these have been crystallised in the form of an indefinitely-termed overseas base on the Horn of Africa, in Djibouti. Careful examination of pertaining Diet minutes, media discourse and government ministry papers suggests that the risks identified with this facility's realization and status have been fundamentally recalibrated, allowing its presence and operational diversification to go largely unnoticed and unopposed – both domestically and overseas – despite representing a seemingly radical departure from common sense interpretations of Japan's antimilitarist constitution.

Key words: *Djibouti, institutional change, JSDF, risk recalibration, security policy*

Djibouti and the development of Japanese foreign policy

In light of China's rise and fluctuations in US security strategy, particularly under the administration of Donald Trump, Japan's shifting foreign policy trajectory has been characterised as pivotal to the contemporary dynamics of international security in East Asia.¹ In this context, the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF)'s expanding overseas roles have drawn extensive attention from within Japan, across East Asia and throughout the wider international community – primarily as part of concerns over geostrategic competition between Beijing and Tokyo.² A central feature of recent Japanese endeavours in this area has been the consistent and increasing state-led circumvention and reinterpretation of Japan's nominally pacifist constitution³, which prohibits the establishment of an army and the use of warfare as a means of conflict resolution.⁴

The acceleration of this process began by actively promoting multi-state UN-led peace keeping operations (PKO) during the 1990s, partly in response to accusations of 'cheque-book diplomacy'⁵, following Japan's commitment of cash rather than manpower to the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq. Thereafter, maverick Prime Minister, Koizumi Junichirō, instrumentalized the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks of 2001 to pass special measure laws, **resulting** in the sending of troops to (non-combat zones in) post-2003 Iraq and the refuelling of US warships conducting strikes in Afghanistan. The current right-of-centre administration led by Prime Minister Abe Shinzō has now built on these precedents, passing a series of laws, culminating in the so called *war bill*, or *anzenhoshokanrenhō*, of September 2015. This controversial legislation for the first time officially legalizes certain conditions for collective self-defence, allowing potential engagement in live-combat overseas. Lying in close proximity to war-torn Somalia and South Sudan, where JSDF troops have already been dispatched, therefore, makes the diversifying role of the military facility in Djibouti of heightened significance. And yet, while previous special measures and the *war bill* itself received widespread publicity and in-depth academic analysis⁶, Japan's establishment of a de facto overseas military base on the Horn of Africa has been offered comparatively scant coverage in any form.

This article, therefore, seeks to address the dearth of literature dedicated to Tokyo's activities involving this facility. By assessing parliamentary and media discourses which have addressed the base, in addition to documenting the size and scope of Japan's operations in Djibouti, the article explains the base's relevance in terms of representing a case study of how institutional changes, supported by the recalibration of related risks, have allowed Japan to develop a globally active security agenda. In the case of Djibouti, this has been given elevated significance by the multiple military forces now stationed in the tiny African state, located in

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a pivotal position adjacent to vital global shipping lanes.⁷ The gravity of Japan's base in Djibouti diversifying its operational capabilities is made all the more evident when considering that China, as one of Japan's principal security rivals, has also established a new military base in the same country, linked to its One Belt One Road (OBOR) development project through central Asia.⁸ In this context, the Djibouti base can also be expected to become a key site of strategic competition as the US-Japan alliance challenges Chinese interests seeking to invest further in African infrastructure and gain political leverage to exploit natural resources in volatile regions.⁹

In the Japanese case, the conception and construction of an indefinitely scheduled mid-term military base which accommodates JSDF air, sea and ground forces – as well as the heavily armed Japan Coast Guard (JCG) – in order to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden, was realized in Djibouti in 2011. Initially labelled as an 'activities hub', or *katsudō kyoten*, by the Japanese Government¹⁰, the mission of this facility is ostensibly to work closely with other foreign forces in the region to provide protection against piracy for Japan's international shipping lanes and other commercial interests. However, under the Abe-led Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coalition, moves to further bolster Japan's geo-military power have, as many anticipated¹¹, been forthcoming. Aside from the above-stated *war bill*, these changes have thus far been relatively modest and pragmatic in nature, but politicians, bureaucrats and security experts are now developing the potential for Japan to create and legalise more advanced capabilities.¹² And, despite US Defense Secretary, James Mattis', reassurances over upholding protection of Japanese territories under the US-Japan alliance¹³, rumbustious rhetoric from President Trump – demanding greater burden sharing in the international security roles played by its allies – has already seen Japan respond proactively, dispatching its largest war ship to accompany massing US forces off the coast of North Korea.¹⁴

In light of these developments, this article elucidates how the JSDF base in Djibouti, in tandem with the promotion of an enhanced military capability, represents a recalibration of risk that has facilitated extensive institutional change in Tokyo's security apparatus. Its original contribution, therefore, lies primarily in terms of providing an analysis of how complex security risks have been mediated via discourse in order to legitimise policy changes, as made tangible in the Djibouti base case. These include risks often not conceptualized within the same framework of analysis, such as the risks identified with Japan being attacked by pirates or rogue states versus the risks manifest in Japan alienating itself regionally, or globally, by antagonizing China and other East Asian neighbours through rearmament and military reassertion. The Djibouti base is, therein, examined as an empirically unique case study, which supports the argument that Japan is significantly redefining its security strategy and diversifying its military capabilities.

Risk (recalibration) is defined here in line with Beck, Adam and van Loon's definition¹⁵, which posits that the amelioration of one set of risks results, inevitably, in the intensification of others, as subsidiary risks are created. This is applied to the present study in terms of internalizing threats to create a given set of options¹⁶, as part of a process of securitization.¹⁷ Recalibration, in this sense, refers not only to the raising or lowering of the perceived level of a given risk, but also to the form in which it is reframed and contextualized – in distinction from its previous calibration. Typically, this decouples the risk's framing from the actual probabilities of incurring harm. This process is readily illustrated by juxtaposing risks that are rarely compared directly, but which highlight the inaccuracy of their (public) framing. For example, Nassim Taleb compares the portrayal of risks posed by venomous plants and terrorists (terrorists posing a far lower risk in terms of the probability of inflicting actual harm, despite their exaggerated

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influence in justifying security policy formation).¹⁸ Concordantly, former UK government advisor on narcotics, David Nutt, proposed that Ecstasy was only considered a higher risk than horse riding because of its (public) framing and subsequent calibration.¹⁹ In the Djibouti case, similarly diverse risks are examined in terms of how they are articulated through Tokyo's multi-layered state institutions, including the National Diet houses and government ministries, as well as via combinations of other state, market and societal actors, in order to effect policy change.²⁰

Following a brief assessment of related literature and justification of data sources, three intersecting sub-spheres of empirical discussion are explored. First, the form in which Japan's mechanisms of state security are undergoing fundamental institutional change as a function of recalibrated risks, and why this matters in the Djibouti case, is addressed. The objective here is to examine how institutions such as parliamentary committees, the Ministry of Defense (MOD), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and *kantei* (prime minister's office), in addition to other influential actors, including Japan's mainstream media corporations, are both driving and responding to shifting (re)calibrations of risk effected at the state level. The article then moves on to document how the operation of the JSDF facility on Djibouti explains the extent of this institutional change. The aim here is to examine the creation, operation and remit (rationale) of the Djibouti base as a case study illustrative of how Japan has recalibrated risks in order to substantively change the role of its overseas security functions. Finally, this is linked to how the potential realization of enhanced military capabilities further illuminates the direction of travel and potential impact of these institutional changes. The goal here is to analyse the current status and roles of Japan's security forces, as operationalized from Djibouti, in order to explain what the possible implications are of enhanced weapons capabilities being deployed in the future.

Extending extant understandings of Japan's expanding military role

Thus far, coverage of the Djibouti base has been limited mainly to low-profile news articles covering the stationing of forces and details of their operational tasks.²¹ In this context, investigation into the relationship between establishment of the Djibouti facility and discussion of enhanced military capabilities is required. Not least, because it is an area with evident ramifications for Japan's emerging *global* security policy and associated great power rivalries – such as vis-à-vis China.²² Moreover, despite the gravity of nascent institutional changes in this regard, the base on Djibouti is yet to be thoroughly examined in terms of the development of enhanced and interoperable (with US forces) military capabilities and legislation facilitating increased JSDF proactivity, particularly in terms of its cumulative relationship. These aspects are sparsely documented within the extant academic literature, and across popular media and professional data base sources – as evidenced, for example, by the limited references listed on Japan's comprehensive national news database, NikkeiTelecom21.²³

Contrastingly, in regard to more effective military capabilities, scholarly attention has mostly been focused towards a potential pre-emptive strike capability for Japan to counter risks supposedly posed by North Korea and, less directly, by China. Japanese scholarship on this issue is, thereby, driven primarily by a combination of journalists, defence specialists and politicians covering Korean, Chinese or Asia-Pacific affairs.²⁴ In order, then, to productively incorporate Japan's activities in Djibouti into the discussion from this narrow context, the focus on institutional changes allows us to draw more eclectically on a wider range of literature covering Japan's supposedly "reluctant realism"²⁵, "resentful realism"²⁶, and the on-going process of re-militarization itself.²⁷ In addition, counter arguments which view the normalization of Japanese military capabilities and facilities as being precisely that, *normal*,

rather than representing any wholesale move to recapture former Japanese imperial power or expand its global military footprint can also be accounted for.²⁸ Therein, by combining an institutionally-focused critique of these approaches with a critical analysis of the risks being recalibrated in response to external pressures, or *gaiatsu*²⁹, as well as their interactive relationship with the formation of security policy, the substantive nature of change can be more effectively traced. Literature sources are thereby accessed intermittently throughout the text, as an aid to the interpretation of primary, discourse-based, data. The risk-focused approach in this regard builds upon extant scholarship driven by the Securitization literature³⁰, which integrates a synthesis of established International Relations theories with sociological conceptions of risk.³¹

Assessing the data

In line with the approach outlined above, the research for this article has primarily been carried out through qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA). Discourse here refers to language-in-use, which is publically (partially only in Japanese) accessible and has an identifiable political *value*. In other words, targeted sources of public discourse that are deemed, directly or otherwise, relevant to the political process form the corpus of evidence. This facilitates examination of how changes in language usage determine the identification and framing of specific actors and entities, such as pirates, rogue states or terrorists, for instance. These are then articulated via definitions and iterations (both explicit and implicit) of risks which, depending on internal (e.g. Japan's energy security crisis) and external (e.g. pirates and terrorists) referent objects³², are recalibrated at the governmental level to justify agenda setting and, contingently, policy innovation and implementation.³³

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In the Djibouti case, the pertaining discourse on security is analysed by qualitatively examining a sample drawn from a selected range of parliamentary speakers, government ministries, commercial media sources and public figures. These focus specifically on National Diet minutes, which provide a data-source broadly representative of various governmental institutions and their critics that can be differentiated between over a designated time period. In the present article this is initiated from the Djibouti base's proposal in 2010. This fixed time period also allows limited, complementary, quantitative analysis of the data sample to be undertaken, which generates additional interpretive results reflecting temporal change. The selected sampling of media and other literary discourse excerpts provides a further illustrative qualitative data set. Data is then contextualized with reference to concrete policy outcomes in order to demonstrate how greater explanatory power has been gained.

Here, the data on Japan's role in Djibouti is discussed in the postwar context of Japan's tenuous position within the regional structure of states in East Asia, having been at loggerheads with its neighbours in recent decades despite increased economic inter-reliance (with China, South Korea etc.) and untapped potential (in North Korea). Amid this, the capacity to mitigate disputes on grounds of mutual gain and cooperation has in one sense been subordinated to a reframing of national identity and reassertion of geostrategic national interest.³⁴ This necessitates adopting an interpretation of the data that bridges constructivist and (neo)realist-informed approaches. The coupling of an analytical focus on risk with an essentially constructivist framework, applied here to data typically associated with measuring processes of securitization³⁵, provides a methodology which moves beyond the false conceptual dichotomy of international relations and domestic politics. The focus on diverse risks thereby offers a means to elucidate empirically how the specific case study of the Djibouti base can be utilized to illustrate the impact of contested normative ideas on policy innovation and execution.

This also takes the discussion of Japan's security beyond the well-trodden path of individual threat perceptions, and into an area that emphasizes the decision making process – i.e. the choices involved in taking a particular set of risks, as well as the more commonly identified risks of incurring resulting harms. The following section initiates application of this discourse-based approach by arguing that the substantive changes witnessed within Japan's security institutions in recent decades have been effected through a process of recalibrating risks. These are highlighted concretely with reference to various legislative and budgetary innovations, including the inception and approval of the base facility in Djibouti itself.

Institutional change as a function of recalibrated risks

In the post-Cold War era, the upgrading of Japan's Defence Agency (JDA) to the status of full Ministry of Defence (MOD) in 2007 represents a powerful symbolic illustration of Japan's aspirations to become a globally recognized, *normal* (in terms of security roles and capabilities), international power. The upgrade came on the back of a series of special laws and provisions, mostly enacted by the Junichirō Koizumi-led government (2001-2006), which provided a platform for extensive new proactivity in the JSDF's operational roles overseas.³⁶ This shift was realised primarily by the executive, partly as a response to the newly identified threat of terrorism post-9/11, and took advantage of structural changes within Japan's bureaucracy, which allowed the Prime Minister's Office to increase its relative power.³⁷ Laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law (ATSMML) also set an early precedent in institutionalizing extra-constitutional use of Japan's military and reinterpretation of the constitution, cased in rhetoric that repeatedly referred to increasingly diverse risks posed to Japan's security.³⁸ Amid this context, it should be noted that it was the first Shinzō Abe-led administration, following Koizumi, who oversaw the upgrading of the JDA to ministerial status,

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and it is the current Abe government that continues to push for extensive institutional changes in the security sphere.³⁹

Indeed, although the facility on Djibouti has only recently been recognized and termed officially as an overseas military base, it has been realized as a result of incremental alterations to Japan's executive and bureaucracy, and in tandem with the extensive curtailment of press freedoms under Abe's leadership.⁴⁰ These cumulative factors have allowed other activities to overshadow its relevance as Japan's first long-term post-war military installation on foreign soil. In particular, as the Japanese public, press and political elite have witnessed overseas peace-keeping missions, logistical participation in the War in Iraq and refuelling assistance to US forces in Afghanistan in recent years, the striking nature – or shock-factor – of the Djibouti facility's diverse military activities appears to have had minimal impact by comparison. Despite such public apathy (or lack of knowledge) a number of important stakeholders have sought to critically engage **with** these institutional changes relating to the establishment and operation of the facility in Djibouti – and, by extension, Japan's anti-piracy operations more generally – though few have directly opposed the base on grounds of constitutional violation or broader concerns of expanding military operations. Vocal opposition Diet member, Yamauchi Kōichi, for example, cites concerns over the costing of JSDF anti-piracy missions as a rationale for either pulling out of the base, or at least shifting the impetus onto the JCG to defend Japan's shipping lanes, concluding succinctly in one statement to the Diet that “Coast Guard ships are something like a whole digit's worth cheaper [than JSDF vessels]”.⁴¹ Yamauchi has also put forward a detailed explanation of why personnel on the base should be withdrawn on the grounds that, having effectively eliminated piracy in the adjacent waters, the Japanese military's mission is complete.⁴²

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Yet, mainstream disinterest and misrepresentation of the significance of the JSDF's Djibouti base, both symbolically and logistically, has persisted since its inception. Something that is made all the more notable when considering that the Japanese government is also investing substantial sums of public funds in and around the base, including, for example, the construction of a four million US dollar regional centre for maritime training at Djibouti's Doraleh Port.⁴³ Such indifference can be seen as the result of how related security risks had already been recalibrated prior to the leasing of the base, and its expansion thereafter – effectively reducing its comparative level of controversy among media, the public and NGOs (peace promotion groups etc.) who might have been expected to oppose its establishment and diversification more vigorously. It also highlights how such risks as piracy, global terrorism, China's rise and neighbouring military conflict continue to be mediated by Japanese state authorities and mainstream media sources in a form which accepts that risks will be incurred by JSDF personnel in their line of duty. This is now widely accepted as an *unavoidable* function of mitigating the supposedly exponentially growing risks attached to the defence of Japan's national security, despite doubts about these JSDF missions adhering to the Japanese constitution.⁴⁴

Since the ending of the Cold War, these security concerns have been directed firstly at North Korea (DPRK)⁴⁵, and more recently at China.⁴⁶ The dual threats of immediate military contingency stemming from the Korean Peninsula⁴⁷ and an increasing geo-strategic challenge posed by Beijing's perceived expansion⁴⁸ has thereby been identified as presenting a highly significant and intensifying combination of risks for Japan, which necessitates greater proactivity from Tokyo more generally in the international security sphere.⁴⁹ Building upon this momentum, in recent years the focus has been subtly expanded and diversified. Concretely, a shift has been made from essentially framing the two-prong military security threat alluded

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to above, to include an expanded range of issues – though often implicitly or explicitly still linked to the DPRK and China – in order to portray an exponentially risky regional and global security environment. These have included global issues such as terrorism and environmental security, extending to areas pinpointed as particularly relevant to Japan's national security, such as the issues of energy security and piracy used in the Djibouti case.

In this regard, Japan's low energy self-sufficiency has been highlighted in reference to its need for large-scale importation of fossil fuels and other materials via lengthy and exposed shipping lanes, thereby expanding the definition of self-defence at state and societal levels to include the securing of these vital supply arteries.⁵⁰ This understanding has crystalized within political institutions such as the National Diet and pertaining ministries, and faced only very limited opposition from media and other mainstream societal actors, particularly in the face of energy procurement difficulties created by the March 2011 Fukushima disaster.⁵¹ For example, in the five years of Diet sessions since the establishment of the Djibouti base, only Satoshi Ueno (Japan Communist Party) raised, in 2013, direct concerns over the legality of ensuring energy security via a dubious interpretation of self-defence effectively enacted in the Gulf of Aden. Ueno posed the question to the prime minister: "Is it your intention to turn the JSDF into an army that possesses bases overseas, and in so doing greatly exceeds the objective of defending Japan?"⁵² With the legislative changes which followed in effect making the JSDF in Djibouti exactly that, as discussed further below, it would seem that Ueno's question has now all but been answered in the affirmative.

Amidst this, while the identification of increased external threats by successive Japanese administrations is in itself well-documented in the extant literature⁵³, the complex and cumulative internalization process through which it occurs is far less comprehensively

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addressed. In particular, the recalibration of risks in this context has become central in disseminating what is by and large an agenda of threat inflation⁵⁴, but which changes its target and expression depending upon the political needs of the time. This often-times appears to go largely unnoticed or unchallenged by both the wider public and rival political entities. Rather than being the result of active government concealment, however, this process mostly manifests itself in the subtle (re)framing of issues, and can be identified concretely through examination of the pertaining National Diet minutes, as well as in official (governmental) publications, statements and press releases.⁵⁵

Early Diet exchanges regarding Djibouti, for instance, though few in number, were focused primarily not on discussions of Japan's diversifying security role, but rather within the framing of emergency measures taken as part of an international coalition to protect commercial ships against piracy.⁵⁶ As the years since the Djibouti facility's opening have passed – and particularly since the Abe-led government has returned to power – this dialogue has shifted substantially in the direction of a narrative that propounds a necessity to protect Japan's national security at home via proactive use of the JSDF abroad. As Abe stated in 2016, priming his message with the claim that the region remained dangerous despite piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden being reduced from over 200 to zero, “Going forward under the rubric of proactive peace... and from the perspective that missions are being carried out effectively in lands far from Japan, we intend to consider now how best to make the most of increased JSDF activities from their base in Djibouti”.⁵⁷ This effectively opens the way for the Djibouti base to play a leading role in Abe's initiatives to reinterpret Japan's antimilitarist constitution under the banner of ‘proactive peace’ (*sekkyokuteki heiwashugi*).⁵⁸

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Diet records are also illustrative of how this process has been articulated more broadly via mainstream political discourse. A year after the facility's opening, and with typically scant media attention⁵⁹, a one-year extension of the Djibouti base's operation was agreed via a Cabinet decision, and triumphed by then Defense Secretary, Satoshi Morimoto, as "playing an extremely important role not only for shipping concerning Japan, but also in the safe passage of foreign ships".⁶⁰ This was applauded in the same Diet committee by Japan Coast Guard Chief, Sato Yuji, who also went on to claim that in terms of countering international piracy in the area, the JCG was now at the forefront of "active planning".⁶¹ Sixteen months on, Morimoto's replacement, Onodera Itsunori, continued to express how security activities in Djibouti are being used as a fulcrum to propel the expansion and diversification of JSDF roles. Onodera articulated this with reference to increasing risks and protection against regional insecurity in strategic areas, asserting that "[JSDF] activities in far-off locations such as Africa are expected to increase" and that, as such, "in order to conduct cooperative activities for World peace, the status of existing facilities such as in Djibouti will need to be considered going forward".⁶² In other words, via the recalibration of multiple security risks, within the first three years of the base's establishment its usage was already on the cusp of being transformed from an emergency stop-gap measure designed to counter piracy across Japan's primary shipping lanes, to an indefinitely stationed multi-function military base with a remit that included the far broader role of contributing to international peace and security.

It should also be noted that government Diet speakers have mostly been reticent when it comes to publicizing the structure of the military facility itself. Indeed, while the threats that the base is claimed to respond to have been far from played down, and its role in anti-piracy has been framed as a necessary counter to changing risks, increases in references to the actual details of the Djibouti base have largely been made only when seemingly unavoidable, rather than

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actively promoted or government-initiated. For example, LDP lawmaker, Ono Yasutada praised the Japan Self Defense Force and Japan Coast Guard's "great achievements" in Djibouti in relation to antipiracy, but notably omitted reference to how their activities have actually been operationalized.⁶³ In contrast, only opposition members traditionally opposed to increasing Japanese military activity overseas, such as from within the Japan Communist Party and other left-leaning parties, have been quick to identify the facility in Djibouti as a de facto base. These few-in-number sources have objected to the Djibouti facility's potential for aiding US anti-terrorism efforts and other military activities, as well as the lack of transparency provided by the ruling LDP with regards operational and hardware specifics.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, the concrete fruits of substantive institutional change have been borne. And in recent years this has been further justified in the context of China's increased power projection.⁶⁵ It has also been pointed out by leading Diet lawmakers, for example with regards to Djibouti, that China could ultimately replace the US as the primary indefinite military presence in the country.⁶⁶ This obviously complicates Japan's antipiracy activities in the region, but can also be used to justify the reevaluation of policy agendas. These are deemed to require a means to ameliorate not only risks posed to energy security by piracy, but also those emanating from an aggressively posturing (and now 'risen') China – a source of concern repeatedly raised in combination by both leading government ministers and mainstream media.⁶⁷ In this regard, broad convergence of LDP rhetoric and media coverage is not coincidental, with a combination of legal restrictions being imposed upon all news items deemed controversial coming in tandem with the government-backed appointment of pro-Abe heads of Japan's public broadcaster, NHK⁶⁸, as well as the purging of more liberal media outlets.⁶⁹

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Recalibrations of risk have thereby included a diversifying set of international actors, and facilitated the blurring of the original supposed threat of maritime piracy identified specifically around the Gulf of Aden. This can also be exposed quantitatively, in terms of the number and scope of Diet references to Djibouti. Direct discussion of the facility across all chambers and committees almost doubled from 2012-2016, for example, and the issue of the Japanese military facility on Djibouti has now been debated in one form or another within six separate Diet bodies, including the Upper and Lower House Main Sessions, Budget Committee and Finance Committee, as well as committees relating to foreign policy and security, but has yet to face sustained opposition, other than from the far-left.⁷⁰ In this sense, despite the government's apparent awkwardness in openly explaining the status of an overseas military base that appears dubious in constitutional terms⁷¹, the significance of its increasingly diverse functions is transforming the low profile of the facility into an unavoidable topic of high-level political debate. In light of this, the following section details both the actual operations of the Djibouti base and the lack of transparency, or at least clarity, surrounding them – exposing the poorly documented nature of key changes, and highlighting the growing importance of Japan's first post-war overseas military hub.

Redefining the JSDF facility in Djibouti

Following the initial dispatch in 2009 of a small number of JSDF officers for the purposes of liaison and communications coordination⁷², an indefinite Japanese military presence was established in Djibouti in 2011.⁷³ Although early deployments were to temporary facilities operating cooperatively with US and French forces, in 2010 the Japanese government approved the leasing of approximately 12 hectares of land northwest of Djibouti International Airport, at a cost of approximately 4.7 billion yen⁷⁴; upon which, hangars, barracks and equipment have now been constructed, supporting approximately 300 JSDF troops as part of Japan's new

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activities hub (*shinkatsudōkyoten*). The stark absence of scholarly, political and media attention focused upon this far-away facility is, then, made all the more remarkable given its multi-fold usage by ground, air and maritime JSDF forces, in addition to armed JCG personnel – apparently all exempt from the constitutional constraints which forbid Japan's possession of an army, air-force or navy. This is put into perspective when one considers the Djibouti facility's unique status as Japan's first postwar overseas military base, making it comparable to, for example, US bases hosting troops on Okinawa and elsewhere in Japan, which have, by comparison, faced vociferous public and political opposition throughout the Japanese archipelago.⁷⁵

Some of the dearth in coverage can be attributed to the base's establishment having coincided approximately with the Great East Japan Earthquake and *triple disaster* of March 2011. Nevertheless, the lack of publicity afforded to this facility by successive administrations, despite diversifying its roles and activities, suggests a deliberate degree of caution being exercised by Japanese authorities. Therein, the government seeks to promote a more active security role – under the guise of Abe's 'proactive pacifism' – through legislation such as the 2015 *war bill*⁷⁶, but at the same time maintains a relatively low-profile with regards to the actual operations that such legal changes potentially allow to be expanded.⁷⁷ This reflects a recalibration of the contingent security risks. The external threat of international piracy, for example, has been projected in contradistinction from the government's own internalized risks, such as those posed to its political capital by closer scrutiny of facilities or activities associated with militarization – as attributable to the base in Djibouti. This effectively avoids them being deemed unconstitutional by societal and media groups, and circumvents an area of potential political controversy.

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To this end, the relatively opaque workings and disproportionately limited public coverage of the Djibouti base are not only visible in its lack of public exposure, but also within the administration's own publications and internal systems of dissemination. For example, though covered briefly, very little explanation or details of the base are provided via official homepages or press releases of the pertaining ministries (MOD, MOFA, JCG). Unsolicited Diet references by ruling-party members that actively promote the facility in Djibouti are, as noted above, also extremely rare, despite the overall increase in its discussion. Only 20 of 79 Diet statements referring to anti-piracy and the Gulf of Aden, for instance, included reference to Djibouti.⁷⁸ In this sense, it can only be assumed that a raising of public awareness towards anti-piracy operations taking place – for the supposed primary purpose of defending commercial shipping lanes that sustain Japan's energy security⁷⁹ – has been juxtaposed with an under-emphasising of what form that protection is actually manifest in, i.e. a fully operational overseas military base. The understated depiction of the Djibouti facility in those terms⁸⁰, even within the JSDF and other internal committees, appears to reinforce this point.

Indeed, it is predominantly the non-military sections of government that appear most forthright in their exposition of diversified security activities in Djibouti. The increase and upgrading of military hardware, such as the facility's (2016) proposed expansion to incorporate Bushmaster armored vehicles, C-130 transport aircraft and additional personnel – presumably to rival China's in-country capability and aid readiness for (re)dispatches to South Sudan and beyond⁸¹ – has been combined with greater integration of civil and military spheres in Japan's engagement in Africa. The JCG, for instance, has made use of the Act on Special Measures Concerning the Guarding of Japanese Ships in Pirate-Infested Waters to deploy armed Coast Guard officers onto MSDF ships off the coast of Djibouti, thereby setting a precedent for close JCG-JSDF cooperation outside of Japan's immediate sphere of regional influence.⁸²

Concomitantly, as an organization with long-standing institutionalized links across Africa, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has also increased and diversified its activities in Djibouti in recent years – having first established an indefinite presence in 2000 with the opening of its office there. Of particular interest here is that while JICA's mission has traditionally been one of providing funds for investment projects in core infrastructure – such as schools, roads and basic services – in Djibouti relations have been built with the incoming JSDF and JCG.⁸³ In contrast, despite proactive efforts and engagement with over 150 members of Japan's business community by the Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority⁸⁴, the JICA budget for non-military related projects in Djibouti leaves it outside of Japan's top twenty recipient countries on the continent and there is a conspicuous absence of any mention of Djibouti in the most recent JICA Annual Report on Africa.⁸⁵ This is particularly striking given that, through JICA, the Japanese government provided funding for the 2015 Tripartite Cooperation Agreement for Training of the Coast Guard Crew of the Republic of Djibouti. Concluded with Moroccan and Djiboutian authorities, this initiative is aimed at educating and training the Djibouti Coast Guard in order to enhance effective defence of its internationally pivotal coastal waters, but also serves to more broadly build relations between these states in security-related spheres.⁸⁶

Here too, then, the blurring of civil and military activities led by Tokyo in Djibouti could be seen to compete with those conducted by China, which indicate a move towards augmenting country-specific commercial investment in Africa with the ability to support it through the deployment of well-equipped armed forces.⁸⁷ Yet, Japan's leading business organizations and investors appear to have been primarily concerned with assuring safe passage of goods through the Gulf of Aden, and only in this sense explicitly support the increased and diversified JSDF

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role, rather than viewing Djibouti as a priority destination for wider strategic investment.⁸⁸ As such, although Japan's base in Djibouti may allow geostrategic competition with its larger East Asian rival – particularly as JSDF forces are increasingly able to operate seamlessly with allies such as the US – Japan's broader in-country investment pales in comparison to China's dominant economic partnership with this tiny state, now hailed as the “gateway to Africa.”⁸⁹ In this sense, without an increase in private Japanese investment, it may become more politically problematic to publicly justify the stationing of an expensive multi-bodied military presence, particularly as local off-shore piracy has now effectively been eliminated.

The lack of awareness towards JICA, JCG and JSDF activities in Djibouti, meanwhile, is further reflected in the public's responses to and reported understandings of the base, whereby a decoupling of actual JSDF activities in Djibouti, from the mostly publically accepted construction of risks attached to anti-piracy operations in the Middle East, appears to have been achieved. In other words, the on-the-ground reality in Djibouti, to the extent that it is expressed publically by the current administration and its bureaucratic arms in the MOD and MOFA, has been miscast in a way that effectively distorts the precise nature of Japan's substantial international security role. For example, according to government opinion polls, up to 63 per cent of respondents reported having a positive view of Japan's anti-piracy operations, with only 29 per cent in the negative.⁹⁰ Yet, without access to further operational details, the majority of those polled are evidently not well-informed regarding how the Djibouti base operates or who is stationed there, and the facility is not explicitly included in poll questions. Indeed, a number of Asia and security specialists approached for this article, including in Japan, were unaware of the base's existence! In this regard, leading members of the LDP-coalition are surely aware that precise knowledge of the facility in Djibouti, including the deployment of multiple JSDF and Coast Guard forces, is something that requires careful public relations management. Given

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the current public embattlement of the LDP's foreign policymakers, particularly following the railroading of the 2015 *war bill*, which was deemed unconstitutional even by the government's own appointed *independent expert*⁹¹, it seems unlikely that Japan's ruling administration have accidentally underexposed this constitutionally controversial issue.

The capabilities and remit of the Djibouti facility, in the context of Japan's expanding readiness to use force overseas, however, remain somewhat unclear, not least due to interoperability with other anti-piracy missions in the region, including US military personnel stationed immediately adjacent at Camp Lemonnier. Thanks to the signing of a revised exchange treaty between Foreign Minister, Fumio Kishida, and outgoing US Ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy, the potential for supplying and receiving military parts in the case of serious security contingencies, for example, has been substantially increased.⁹² Furthermore, despite Japanese commanders making it clear that MSDF troops engaged in anti-piracy missions are acting legally in effective defence of Japan, this means that Japanese military personnel have the authority to open fire on suspected vessels in open water and shoot-to-kill on foreign soil if deemed to be in self-defence.⁹³ In addition, outgoing Defence Minister, Gen Nakatani, conceded as recently as January 2016 that the expansion and diversification of missions and roles from the Djibouti base, including those outside of antipiracy and related to war zones such as South Sudan, would be implemented.⁹⁴

Furthermore, based on the Abe administration's current rhetoric, it is hard to imagine that any meaningful efforts will be made to scale back or bring an end to the JSDF troops' stationing in Djibouti, despite no piracy incidents being reported since May 2012.⁹⁵ Indeed, incoming Defense Minister, **Tomomi Inada**, made Djibouti her primary destination after being appointed. This in itself perhaps demonstrates a further recalibration of risk, based on the tacit

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understanding that the reality of the base has been framed in a form that keeps it under the public radar of many otherwise fiercely antimilitarist stakeholders in Japan and overseas. In this respect, known for her revisionist views on Japan's chequered political history, Inada would appear to have chosen Djibouti as her initial overseas visit in order to avoid risking further straining relations with, amongst others, China and South Korea by ceremonially commemorating the anniversary of Japan's wartime defeat at the historically sensitive Yasukuni Shrine.⁹⁶ Ultimately, despite Inada's meeting with Djibouti's heads of state⁹⁷, which might have cast a concerted spotlight upon the issue of Japan's first overseas post-war military base, once again minimal attention was given in both domestic and international media to the minister's time spent on the Horn of Africa.

This continuing indifference towards the status of the Djibouti facility would, then, appear to reflect at least two concrete changes: Firstly, this is in terms of the increasingly active role that has become expected of Japan's military and political representatives overseas. Secondly, it has seen the government successfully construct a framing of possible Japanese use of force and long-term stationing abroad in a form that is presented as acceptable, something which would surely have encountered far broader and more fervent media criticism, political resistance and public concern in preceding post-war decades.

The above once again highlights how institutional change appears to have been effected through a process of risk recalibration. This has involved state-based (government, military etc.) actors recalibrating risks identified with Japan's vulnerability, in terms of Japan's exposure to a lack of energy security in tandem with China's perceived (global) *rise* and *expansion*. This contrasts with the down-grading of risks associated with the previously sensitive issue of Japanese military personnel facing the danger of being caught up in conflict

zones, and therefore being killed in combat overseas. In Djibouti and elsewhere, where there was previously a distinct dividing line (even in the context of, for instance, Japan's various PKO operations) between external and internal risks, these concepts of security have subtly converged. The result is effectively a framing of domestic and international risks as being part of a seamless continuum which extends well beyond Japan's national borders and immediate maritime concerns. This institutionalized recalibration of risk also coincides with moves towards a significant enhancement of Japan's military capabilities, as examined below.

The Djibouti base and enhanced military capabilities

As noted above, Japan's remilitarisation has been discussed extensively in the contemporary literature⁹⁸, and with renewed vigour since the end of the Cold War and bursting of Japan's economic bubble in 1991, particularly in light of China's rise.⁹⁹ In this sense, direct geostrategic competition with China in Djibouti reinforces the view of many leading commentators who depict the incremental ending of an era, in terms of Japan's supposedly now obsolete post-war foreign policy of separating politics and economics, or *seikei bunri*.¹⁰⁰ The return to power of an Abe-led administration has further expedited this process, albeit sometimes without detailed specifications regarding *how* Japan's military is to be upgraded and streamlined – the obvious dismantling of Japan's ban on weapons exports and encouragement of advanced technological research via the MOD's newly created Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Agency notwithstanding. These initiatives have given rise to further joint inter-state projects in the security sphere, as part of Abe's recent review of the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology.¹⁰¹

In Djibouti, personnel stop-overs to and from operations in South Sudan, for example, suggest that the base may be being primed to support enhanced offensive logistics capabilities

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developed in-line with these institutional changes, but it is not yet clear in exactly what form. Indeed, at present, the base itself acts as little more than a transit hub in this regard.¹⁰² Nevertheless, an unprecedented level of operational integration with US forces¹⁰³, including in antipiracy missions around the Gulf of Aden, combined with record high defence expenditure¹⁰⁴, has resulted in the intensification of rival powers' perceptions of Japan as a remilitarizing state seeking increased geo-strategic power projection through advanced military capabilities.¹⁰⁵ From Tokyo's perspective, conversely, an ongoing process of risk recalibration enacted in response to a portrayed diversification of security threats has been pivotal in justifying a shift towards developing more potent military firepower. This can now be projected not only from areas surrounding Japan, but also from as far away as the Horn of Africa. The significance of institutional changes within Japan's security and foreign policymaking elites is once more, therefore, shown to be instrumental in the resulting shifts in policy trajectory. These are now materializing in outlying locations such as Djibouti, which might previously have been considered too high a risk for JSDF forces to incur.

Both military technological enhancements and the political (re)interpretations of security risks that facilitate them are particularly salient with respect to the Djibouti case in so far as they illustrate the tangible extent of policy change and the potential it has to increase Japan's global security role. The development of enhanced military capabilities also further emphasises the importance of Japan's operational diversification on the Djibouti facility.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, the base is not representative merely of a façade of greater proactivity in the international security sphere. For instance, Japan does now have the potential to carry out – albeit in a delegated role for the UN or defending the US and its allies – military operations in conflict zones, including nearby South Sudan and Somalia.¹⁰⁷

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In this context, the MOD has not only invested heavily in new weapons and logistics technology which can be utilized at great distances from Japan¹⁰⁸, but has also begun an internal process of 'structural transformation'.¹⁰⁹ This includes, with direct reference to the "security consequences including further heightening of tension with neighbouring countries as well as increasing risks"¹¹⁰ caused by China's actions in the South China Sea, strategically relocating state-of-the-art fighter aircraft throughout Japan in readiness to be scrambled into action from Hokkaido to Okinawa. In other words, despite its geographical distance, the establishment of the base in Djibouti has been incorporated seamlessly – and without drawing the attention often warranted by controversial changes to security policy – into a broader shift in national defence strategies and procurements. The American military's controversial Osprey (MV-22) helicopters, previously deployed and shot down by pistol fire in South Sudan, for example, have also been procured, in addition to amphibious assault vehicles designed for the recovery of outlying islands. All of these acquisitions and deployments can be seen as symptomatic of the MOD's institutional changes, as enshrined in Japan's National Defense Programme Guidelines (NDPG) and Mid-term Reports¹¹¹, brought under the jurisdiction of the National Security Council. These documents have been forthright in showcasing how Japan's military continues to move towards 'seamless' integration with US forces. Moreover, the tacit acceptance of this de facto modus operandi creates the potential for further collaborative offensive capabilities to be developed and operationalized via the Djibouti base, without causing the kind of political controversy that might be expected from equivalent unilateral initiatives undertaken solely by Japan.

Even through the realization of existing enhanced capabilities alone, making use of US logistical support for instance, the current administration and its associated bureaucracies have effectively devised a means by which to transfer recalibrated risks initially attached only to

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China and North Korea to global maritime security activities – as manifest concretely in the establishment of the base in Djibouti. The instrumentalization of antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden has, in effect, thereby been utilized to enact substantive changes to the structuring of JSDF operations and the hardware it can operate. And, where previously the Government of Japan struggled to openly increase weapons capabilities for fear of a domestic and regional backlash, by integrating extensively with US military operations it is gradually circumventing constitutional controls in order to realize the long-held agenda of operationalizing “shared use of facilities [and enhanced intelligence and tracking information] by US forces and the JSDF”.¹¹² This now includes expanding use of military equipment and personnel overseas, and at the same time reframes a set of globally extending risks in a form that consolidates Tokyo’s ability to justify increased spending on defence equipment and further redefine the JSDF’s international security role.

As observed in the explicit (re)framing of piracy off the coast of Djibouti, the process by which this shift has been justified against a backdrop of supposedly increased security risks can be evinced via scrutiny of the pertaining political discourse. For example, as opposed to openly supporting the development of an enhanced independent offensive weapons capability, LDP lawmakers have increasingly focused upon the concept of heightened interoperability in the face of diversifying security risks. In the Diet, for instance, when asked by opposition parliamentarians to explain changes to JSDF operations capabilities, former Defence Minister, Gen Nakatani, repeatedly focused on the technical, logistical, *necessity* of Japan being able to seamlessly operate weapons systems and other military technology in integration with the US – in order to ameliorate a range of potential risks posed by hypothetical external military threats. This included Nakatani stating, in reference to the US-Japan Defence Guidelines agreed in 2015, that,

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“Here too, for these guidelines, I think that it can be considered as necessary that at all times we are able to cooperate to defend American military installations, which are themselves necessary for the defence of our country. As strategic action, this includes coping with armed attacks against Japan, such as cooperation in tactics against aerial and ballistic missile strikes”¹¹³

Of particular note here is the assumption by Nakatani (and others in his administration) that the seamless interoperability of defence systems with the US has become an essential common sense norm in order to guard against security risks which are unknown in their extent, but purportedly tangible nonetheless. In this sense, although a more specific norm of endorsing enhanced military interoperability has been created, the rhetoric serves to illustrate how the risk recalibration process has led to the erosion of Japan's antimilitarist norms and strengthened norms associated with bilateralism between Washington and Tokyo. This is in contrast to many previous post-war administrations, which in particular viewed closer military cooperation and interoperability of weapons systems with the US cautiously, or as nominally optional, if at times unavoidable. Such has now been reframed as an essential component of a mutually proactive international security policy.¹¹⁴ The risk that Japan could be drawn into US-led conflicts as a consequence of military cooperation also appears to have lost traction as a result. Not least, where the risks of entanglement were formerly forcefully asserted by prominent actors at state, market (commercial media etc.) and societal levels¹¹⁵, they are now mostly only voiced by a marginalised, typically left-leaning, few.

Indeed, among other opposition members, even following the widely unpopular election victory of Donald Trump, which has heightened attention on security discourse, Diet debates have focused more upon the risks posed by Japan being seen to move too close to Trump as a potentially toxic and unpredictable individual leader, rather than those of embroilment in

existing US military operations per se. For example, former Vice Foreign Minister and current Democratic Party (*minshintō*) representative, Kira Shūji, having reinforced the “extreme significance” of cementing a strong and close US-Japan alliance, remarkably then went on to warn the ruling coalition of potential risks attached to the President himself, asserting that:

“At the same time, we must carry those kinds of risks, thinking in the short term.. ..we must build a close relationship with President Trump too.. ..in that sense.. ..as Japan too we must be extremely sensitive. As such, I hope that the MOF can carry out opinion polls in the US properly and ensure a public relations campaign that builds positive feelings towards Japan”¹¹⁶

In other words, Kira appeared to represent the concerns of many Japanese Diet members in effective advocacy of further integration with the US in the security sphere, but at the same time identifying Donald Trump as an individual risk (or liability) that requires careful management.

Moreover, Diet minutes are suggestive of broader political convergence behind wider institutional change. Under the current LDP-led administration this leans in the direction of security risks being identified and acted upon globally and is observable across many of Japan's governmental and advisory bodies. Furthermore, there are increasingly few lawmakers who (openly) oppose a flexible international role supported by more robust hardware and in closer cooperation with the US, as deemed essential to Japan's security interests. At the highest levels, too, Foreign Minister, Fumio Kishida, for example, echoed Nakatani's earlier argument when addressing a subsequent session of the Diet's Security Committee; Kishida asserting simply that, “A strong US-Japan alliance is essential for the peace and prosperity of Japan and the region”¹¹⁷, before going on to outline how the new guidelines would further strengthen Tokyo-Washington security ties.

This political rhetoric – framed as the identification of uncertain but expanding security risks – is now being acted upon extensively through practical acquisitions and military expenditure, informed by the concept of necessity for greater US-Japan interoperability. Japan's expanded international role and risk-identification process has, therein, been coupled to its alliance with the US. This has included the development and acquisition of a range of new weapons, including, amongst others: amphibious assault vehicles, anti-submarine warfare helicopters, Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft (a hybrid between a conventional helicopter and turboprop plane), Global Hawk drones, fighter planes and moves towards the establishment of an Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade.¹¹⁸ These moves are in addition to Tokyo's expansion, again in close cooperation with the US, into the fields of enhanced cyber-security capabilities, a possible Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) capability and the securitization of space¹¹⁹ – a zone, like the Gulf of Aden, traditionally viewed outside of Japan's immediate defense sphere! All of these issue-areas are also consistently tied into the broader identification of China as a primary source of security risks, even including in Djibouti itself. Indeed, the pronouncement of Japanese military power projection in Africa **was** overseen by Defence Minister, Inada, in open and direct competition with China.¹²⁰ This marks a further institutional shift in the sense that the Japanese MOD at least now appears willing not only to promote its base in Djibouti without fear of a major public backlash, but also to trumpet its expansion as a response to increased Chinese military activity. The MOD is thereby leading the conflation of risks identified in areas surrounding Japan with those as far-a-field as the Horn of Africa.¹²¹

Conclusion

In sum, by examining how Japan's political leaders and state institutions have recalibrated security risks related to the creation and operation of the military base on Djibouti, we can

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observe the role of discourse-based framing in enacting a fundamental reshaping of Japan's defence policies. Further, by reviewing the substantive legal changes enacted within core institutions, such as the presiding ministries, it becomes clear that these are working in alignment with shifts in mainstream political rhetoric. Under the current LDP-led administration this has reframed the normative expectations and understandings of Japan's leading foreign policy organs, such as MOFA and the relatively recently empowered MOD. Subsequently, this has led in turn not only to the realization of well-documented legislative changes to Japan's security policies, as embodied in the 2015 *war bill*, but also to the broader tacit acceptance of, or indifference towards, controversial overseas military installations, such as the base in Djibouti. In the case of this facility, policy appears to have moved from the construction of diverse risks to the implementation of exceptional measures without the linkage between them being clearly explicated to a wider audience.

Examination of the base's status and operational capabilities reveals that it is, in effect, now an indefinitely-termed, independently functioning facility, which operates as a hub for Japan's de facto overseas armed forces, as well as a point-of-call for the highly armoured JCG. Given the potentially unconstitutional nature of these activities, the article has highlighted how – via a diversified risk narrative intersecting Japan's state, market and society – activities on the Djibouti base have drawn markedly less attention, or opposition, than might have been expected. This is particularly salient when cognizant of the fact that they appear to have been framed by the government in a form that does not necessarily accurately reflect the base's actual status and capabilities going forward. Its contentiousness is also further underlined by the facility's official expansion and explicit linkage to Japan's international rivalry with China, as well as the active promotion of interoperability with US forces – as Tokyo's sole security

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alliance partner – despite relatively low levels of in-country commercial investment from Japan's business sector.

In this regard, the recalibration of risks associated with various forms of international security (terrorism, piracy, energy security etc.) at the state level in Japan has been articulated through a discourse that either explicitly (*proactive pacifism*) or implicitly (*bilateralism*) promotes a shifting range of national norms. These serve to make possible a contingent set of previously politically problematic policy options, and include the ongoing erosion of Japan's antimilitarist and isolationist social norms, in tandem with intensified US-Japanese security cooperation. As illustrated by the Djibouti case, this is allowing Tokyo to expand JSDF missions, diversify military roles and invest more in advanced hardware. Having recalibrated the risks, this can now be achieved without drawing the kind of intense domestic opposition witnessed in previous decades.¹²²

With US politics entering a seemingly altogether new phase under the presidency of Donald Trump, Japan can expect increased demands from Washington for greater burden-sharing and proactivity in the security sphere, which appear likely to increase the probability of armed combat. In conjunction with an Abe-led administration carrying Japan towards a more muscular global security role in the name of **proactive pacifism**, it would seem that Japan's recalibration of (international) security risks might soon allow for the greater active use of its increasingly enhanced military capabilities. Therein, as the expansion of Japan's base in Djibouti is coupled to these wider institutional changes, it appears that despite the lingering legal caveats ostensibly preventing embroilment in (US-led) warfare, it may only be a matter of time before the risk recalibration process carries Japan into a position where live shots are fired by Japanese **armed** forces overseas.

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