



Asian Security

ISSN: 1479-9855 (Print) 1555-2764 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fasi20>

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To cite this article: Bjørn Elias Mikalsen Grønning (2014) Japan's Shifting Military Priorities: Counterbalancing China's Rise, *Asian Security*, 10:1, 1-21, DOI: [10.1080/14799855.2013.870157](https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2013.870157)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2013.870157>



Published online: 11 Mar 2014.



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Japan's Shifting Military Priorities: Counterbalancing China's Rise

BJØRN ELIAS MIKALSEN GRØNNING

Abstract: *This article analyzes the most recent phase of Japan's security policy reform, focusing on its shifting priorities towards the Japan Self-Defense Forces and the Japan–US alliance since mid-2010. From a realist perspective, it argues that these shifting military priorities first and foremost represent a traditional counterbalancing response to China's rise. Conforming to the logic inherent in balance of threat theory, it moreover argues that this balancing behavior is explained by a confluence of two primary factors, namely Japanese perceptions of aggressive Chinese behavior in the maritime domain and concerns relating to the changing distribution of capabilities in China's favor.*

Introduction

Japan's post-Cold War security policy can be divided into distinct phases of reform. In the mid-1990s, these reforms focused on reconfirming or redefining the Japan–US alliance and regionalization of Japan's defense efforts. In the 2000s, Japan went beyond the region, contributing to the US-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. All along, the Japan Self Defense Forces (JSDF) were evolving from a Cold War-style counter invasion force into a leaner, more effective, and qualitatively strengthened military apparatus.¹ Since mid-2010, Japan has moved into the most recent and arguably most comprehensive phase of its security policy reform, seeking to improve the readiness of its armed forces while strengthening its air, naval, and amphibious capabilities. It has involved a revision of its defense doctrine and force disposition, and a strengthening of its defense relations with the United States. What explains this most recent shift in Japan's military priorities?

International relations scholars have examined Japan's evolving security policy from a variety of empirical and theoretical perspectives. Domestic factor-oriented studies have examined Japan's developing post-Cold War security policy from the perspective of evolving intra- and inter-party dynamics,² institutional changes of the executive branch,³ and changes in media and public opinion.⁴ More generally, Katzenstein, focusing on anti-militarist norms and culture, predicts that Japan's security policy “will continue to be shaped by the domestic rather than the international balance of power,” arguing that “there exists no observable relation between Japan's relative position and its security policy.”⁵ Others are convinced that Japan's security policy is responsive to changes in the international security environment. Midford, for instance, interprets an increasingly benign Asian response to the overseas dispatch of JSDF personnel as

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the most important factor in explaining Japan's global defense efforts in the 2000s.⁶ Hughes emphasizes the role of North Korea's evolving nuclear and ballistic missile programs.⁷ Many analyses treat Japan's security policy reforms as efforts aimed at least in part at resisting, containing, or balancing the rise of China.⁸ Ross, for instance, argues that Japan is balancing "the rise of Chinese power,"⁹ while Hughes maintains that that "[Japan's] concerns focus not on China's military modernization *per se*, but upon signs that China is now willing to project military power beyond its borders."¹⁰ Fouse characterizes Japan's efforts to improve its defense forces and reinforce the Japan-US alliance vis-à-vis China as a "soft hedge,"¹¹ while McDougall characterizes Japan's China-policy as a strategy of "soft balancing."¹² Others yet dismiss altogether the idea that Japan is balancing China. For instance, in one recent and noteworthy analysis, Jerdén and Hagström argue that "proof of . . . balancing is overall lacking" and that Japan has rather and "to a significant degree been conducive in accommodating China's rise . . . by facilitating the successful implementation of China's grand strategy."¹³

In examining Japan's defense policies since 2010, this article challenges the notion that Japan is not balancing China. On the contrary, it argues that Japan's evolving national and alliance defense posture represent traditional or hard balancing behavior as a response to a confluence of two factors.¹⁴ These are Japanese perceptions of Chinese aggressive behavior, in particular in the maritime domain, and the shifting distribution of military and economic capabilities in China's favor. In confluence, these determinant factors are both necessary and sufficient in terms of explaining Japan's counterbalancing response.

The remainder of this article is organized in three sections. The first discusses key theoretical approaches to the concept of *balancing* and considers how these approaches can be applied empirically to the present case study. The second section examines the characteristics of Japan's shifting military priorities since 2010, focusing on its two principal mechanisms, namely Japan's national defense policies and policies toward the Japan-US alliance. The third section examines the rationale for Japan's shifting military priorities as outlined in the preceding section. The final section offers some concluding remarks on the analysis presented in this article and briefly discusses some policy implications based upon its findings.

The *Whats* and *Whys* of Balancing

This analysis draws on the standard definition of balancing as a state strategy of "opposing the stronger or more threatening side."¹⁵ The purpose of state balancing is to "reduce or match the capabilities of a powerful state or threatening actor."¹⁶ The balancing literature commonly distinguishes between *internal balancing* and *external balancing*. The former refers to a buildup of military capabilities, whereas the latter refers to the formation, maintenance, and development of formal alliances.¹⁷

There are two main theoretical perspectives that seek to explain why states engage in balancing behavior. At the core of balance of power theory lies the conviction that states invoke balancing as a strategy to prevent other states from growing too powerful. As Kenneth Waltz asserts in his formative neorealist study, "states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger side that threatens them."¹⁸

Midford notes that the reasoning underlying this balance of power logic is that “the more powerful the state, the greater its potential to deprive others of their autonomy.”¹⁹

However, notwithstanding its merits, balance of power theory's reliance on the assumption that states are concerned about and balance against power alone tempts analysts to disregard other variables that might influence state balancing behavior. As Ikenberry et al. note, “the distribution of capabilities may be a place to begin explanation, but it is rarely enough to complete one.”²⁰ In demonstrating that the distribution of capabilities is only part of the equation, Stephen Walt has shown that it is not necessarily the most powerful state that finds itself as the focus of the balancing efforts of others. Rather, the central proposition of his balance of threat theory posits that states tend to balance the most *threatening* state, essentially adding perceived aggressiveness to the determinant variables of state balancing behavior.²¹

From the *whats* and *whys* of state balancing outlined above, we can venture a clear empirical standard for what Japanese China-balancing should look like.²² Most importantly, Japan's evolving defense policies should provide evidence that Japan seeks to strengthen its military power vis-à-vis China in key areas. The ultimate yardstick of Japanese balancing would be the acquisition of such capabilities as nuclear weapons, strategic bombers, long-range strike capabilities, and aircraft carriers (i.e., internal balancing) and the formation of counterbalancing alliances with other regional great powers (i.e., external balancing). Balancing, however, whether internal or external, is not a binary state of affairs but rather a scale of varying intensity.²³ Thus, even less dramatic changes in Japan's defense budget, order of battle, and training and in Japan's policies on the Japan–US alliance framework aimed at boosting Japan's military capabilities vis-à-vis China in key areas are in this analysis interpreted as evidence of balancing behavior, provided they are not altogether insignificant (e.g., symbolic) in military terms.

Empirical data should also be able to furnish evidence that can help explain why Japan would balance China. From a balance of power perspective, it must be assumed that Japan would counterbalance shifts in the relative balance of power in China's favor. While Waltz and others have derived predictions of this nature in the past,²⁴ balance of power theory has difficulties explaining why Japan would balance China in the first place. This is because US power arguably far exceeds China's in the East Asian theater, and balance of power theory treats balancing as a strategy of aligning *against* the stronger or more powerful state rather than *with* it.²⁵ Inferring from this logic, Jerdén and Hagström note that, “it would make little sense to claim that Japan is balancing against China together with the US.”²⁶ If Japan is balancing China, one would thus have to expect this behavior to be motivated to a significant extent by perceived Chinese aggressiveness in line with balance of threat logic.

Japan's Shifting Military Priorities

Japan's Evolving Defense Policy, Doctrine, and Posture

Japan's shifting military priorities are clearly indicated by the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) released in December 2010. The NDPG, prepared and released by the Japanese government, is the capstone document of Japan's defense

policy and outlines Japanese defense strategy on a ten year basis. It analyzes Japan's security environment and lays out the appropriate roles and fundamental structure of the JSDF.

The 2010 NDPG is clearly designed as a fundamental framework to strengthen Japan's defensive capabilities vis-à-vis the Chinese military, in particular in Japan's maritime southwestern region. Most importantly, the 2010 NDPG revised Japan's official defense doctrine in formally abandoning the Basic Defense Force (BDF) concept in favor of a Dynamic Defense Force (DDF) concept as a means to counter what Takahashi refers to as Chinese "opportunistic creeping expansion" on EEZ borderline and territorial issues in the East China Sea.²⁷ The NDPG refers to these issues as "gray-zone disputes," explained as "confrontations over territory, sovereignty and economic interest that are not to escalate into wars."²⁸

The BDF concept had underpinned Japan's defense policy since its introduction in the 1976 defense guidelines. It focused on how to build the JSDF in order to achieve a level of military capability sufficient to deter and repel limited and small-scale aggression against Japan.²⁹ In contrast, the new defense concept focuses on *how to operate* the JSDF to achieve a DDF characterized by "readiness, mobility, flexibility, sustainability, and versatility."³⁰ It seeks to demonstrate and strengthen Japan's deterrence against Chinese "opportunistic creeping expansion" by displaying the forces in action. As the NDPG notes, "clear demonstration of national will and strong defense capabilities . . . not just maintaining a certain level of defense force, is a critical element for ensuring credible deterrence."³¹ To achieve such *dynamic deterrence*, the NDPG calls for the JSDF to increase its operational activity "through such timely and tailored military operations as regular intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities (ISR)." Japan's FY2013 defense budget is set to increase for the first time in 11 years as a consequence of the JSDFs increasing operational activity under the Dynamic Defense Concept, although the modest increase in defense spending appears largely symbolic of nature.³² The Dynamic Defense Concept coincides closely with air-sea battle (ASB), a US conceptual strategy clearly designed to stay ahead of China's emerging anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities.³³

The DDF concept also breaks with the traditional force posture characterized by heavy counter-invasion land forces stationed in the northern parts of the country. Instead, the concept aims at shifting Japan's military weight toward the southwestern maritime region in an obvious attempt to counterbalance Chinese military power in that area. Specifically, the NDPG notes, "the SDF will enhance its defense posture by placing priority on strengthening such functions as ISR, maritime patrol, air defense, response to ballistic missile attacks, transportation, and command communications, including in the southwestern region."³⁴ In FY2013, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) set aside a supplementary budget of ¥180.5 billion (approximately USD \$1.83 billion) to strengthen Japan's defense posture in the East China Sea.³⁵

Specific measures to implement these shifting military priorities were outlined in and have subsequently been acted upon under the Mid-Term Defense Program (MTDP), the five-year defense procurement and budget plan prepared by the MOD that seeks to bring the capabilities and structure of the JSDF into line with the priorities set forth in the NDPG.

Notably, the MTDP signals a significant maritime buildup to counter the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) growing naval capabilities.³⁶ The MTDP instructs Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to strengthen its submarine and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities. Japan's submarine fleet is most notably set to expand from 16 to 22, and the JSDF is acquiring upgraded P-1 long-range patrol aircraft and upgraded Hyuga-class destroyers while prolonging the service lives of existing ASW assets.³⁷ Some analysts classify the upgraded flat-top Hyuga-class destroyer as a *de facto* aircraft carrier that could potentially be used to launch short takeoff fighter aircraft,³⁸ although no such plans have been publically entertained by Japanese defense planners to date. The MTDP furthermore instructs the MSDF to reorganize its destroyer units for a more "flexible and mobile deployment," allowing more of these assets to be deployed to the East China Sea.

Another highly significant sign that Japan is balancing China is the apparent moves to strengthen JSDF's amphibious warfare capabilities. Most notably, Japan appears to be in the process of establishing a dedicated amphibious assault unit, in effect a small Marine Corps-style force, within the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) in order to strengthen its ability to deal with the Chinese challenge to disputed islands under Japanese administration in the East China Sea.³⁹ The JSDF has already started the process of strengthening its amphibious warfare capabilities by introducing new and upgraded military capabilities. The MTDP, for instance, instructs the GSDF to beef up its amphibious warfare capabilities by establishing coastal surveillance and first-response units in the southwestern islands, plans that appear to be moving forward inasmuch as ¥6.2 billion was set aside for the relocation of the assets in the FY2013 defense budget.⁴⁰ The upgraded Hyuga-class helicopter destroyer fleet will strengthen Japan's ship-to-shore combat capabilities. Japan has further set aside funds in its FY2013 defense budget for an initial four AAV-7A1S amphibious landing vehicles.⁴¹ The FY2013 defense budget has set aside ¥8 billion to study the introduction of the V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft currently used by the US Marine Corps as a measure to strengthen the JSDF's capability for rapidly airlifting ground forces into amphibious contingencies in remote island locations.⁴² Meanwhile, SDF has acquired operational experience using the V-22 Osprey for amphibious operations in joint exercises alongside the US Marine Corps stationed in Okinawa,⁴³ and the GSDF conducted its first ever dedicated island defense exercise during an annual live-fire drill in August 2012.⁴⁴ In September 2012, in their first ever joint drill devoted to defending and retaking remote islands, 40 GSDF soldiers trained amphibious tactics and operations alongside US Marine Corps forces on the Pacific island of Guam in an exercise primarily aimed at strengthening the Japanese forces' amphibious capabilities.⁴⁵ Japanese and US forces scheduled a similar exercise for later that year in Japan's Iriomote Island in the East China Sea, in relative proximity to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, although a decision was later reached to abandon the drill following fierce opposition from China.⁴⁶ Most recently, Japan sent troops, warships, and Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF) personnel to train in amphibious operations alongside the US Marine Corps and the US Navy in a month-long exercise on the US West Coast.⁴⁷ According to the MOD, one of the main purposes of Japan's participation in the exercise was to "enhance the JSDF's joint operational capability necessary to respond to attacks on offshore Islands areas."⁴⁸

The MTDP also instructs the SDF to strengthen its ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability. While Japanese authorities maintain that its BMD efforts are developed to defend against North Korean missiles, the very same system has the potential to defend against Chinese missiles,⁴⁹ including People's Liberation Army (PLA) Second Artillery Corps' large and rapidly modernizing inventories of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), and anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) capable of targeting most of Japan's territory.⁵⁰ After assuming office in September 2012, Prime Minister Abe ordered a revision of the MTDP to acquire US-made Global Hawk drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs); in the FY2013 defense budget, the MOD earmarked an initial ¥1 billion for studying indigenous development of UAVs for BMD purposes.⁵¹ High-altitude drones carrying missile-detecting infrared sensor technology would significantly strengthen Japan's BMD system by tracking low-altitude incoming missiles otherwise out of sight of Japan's ground- and sea-based BMD radars, a weakness meticulously demonstrated by the system's failure to detect North Korea's failed low-flying ballistic missile in April 2012.⁵² While pursuing deterrence by denial through its investments in BMD, Japan also appears to be contemplating offensive missile capabilities to serve the purpose of deterrence by punishment in a new set of defense guidelines (i.e., NDPG) currently in the works by the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP).⁵³ In addition, the MOD has established a 100-member special cyber defense branch of the SDF in FY2013, an effort aimed not least at fighting off the surge in cyber-attacks believed to originate in China.⁵⁴

The MTDP instructs the ASDF to double its F-15 fighter presence at the Naha Air Base in Okinawa, strengthen the fleet's self-protection and electronic warfare capabilities, and upgrade the Patriot surface to air missile (SAM) system in order to strengthen the SDF's air defense and rapid response capability in the southwestern region against the PLAA's rapidly growing fourth-generation fighter capabilities.⁵⁵ Japanese media reported in early 2013 that the ASDF had further strengthened its ISR capabilities in the southwestern islands by deploying additional airborne warning and control system (AWACS) and E-2C early warning aircraft, and that the MOD considers deploying additional F-15 fighters to several islands in the East China Sea in order to shorten its response time to the remote southwestern islands.⁵⁶ Japan is also modernizing its fighter fleet with the introduction of the F-35 fifth generation fighter to replace its outdated F-4 fighter fleet. While the decision to replace the F-4 was first stipulated in the FY2005–FY2009 MTDP, the selection of the F-35 was not officially made until December 2011.⁵⁷ The selection of the F-35 has since been linked to Chinese air force advancements by Satoshi Morimoto, former defense minister in charge of the selection process, noting that “the problem is whether we can catch up with the competition for air superiority with Russia and China.”⁵⁸ The MOD set aside funds for Japan's first four F-35s, scheduled for delivery by FY2017, in its FY2013 defense budget.⁵⁹

Japan's Evolving Policy Toward the Japan–US Alliance

Japan's internal counterbalancing efforts have been coupled with significant external balancing through shifting policies and efforts toward strengthening the Japan–US alliance framework. In the 2010 NDPG, Japan notes its intentions to “further deepen and develop the Alliance.”⁶⁰ While similar wording was also present in the

2004 NDPG,⁶¹ the 2010 NDPG now relates those intentions to the “evolving security environment,” the most fundamental concern in which is certainly the rise of China.

Measures outlined in the MTDP to strengthen the Japan–US alliance have subsequently been acted upon. Strategic dialogue has been strengthened by holding annual meetings between Japan’s defense and foreign ministers and their US counterparts under the “2+2” Japan–US Security Consultative Committee (SCC). During the June 2011 SCC process, Japan and the United States drafted and updated the alliance’s “common strategic objectives,” inserting for the first time specific language on China.⁶² Specifically, Japan and the United States agreed on encouraging China to act responsibly and constructively in promoting stability and prosperity in the region and to be more open and transparent in its military modernization and activities. Japanese defense analysts note that from the language and priorities set forth in the updated common strategic objectives, “it is apparent that . . . the United States and Japan have a common awareness of the challenge of how to respond to China as it rises through expanding military power and rapid modernization, particularly regarding its pursuit of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.”⁶³

The MTDP goes on to note Japan’s intentions to strengthen Japan–US military cooperation in intelligence gathering, contingency planning, operational cooperation, joint exercises and training, and shared use of facilities. In a joint press conference with his US counterpart in October 2011, Japan’s Defense Minister Ichikawa linked these initiatives to the implementation of Japan’s DDF concept, as previously mentioned a key element in Japan’s internal China-balancing strategy, noting that “between Secretary Panetta and me, we have come to be united to further promote this dynamic Japan–US defense cooperation.”⁶⁴ The concept of bilateral dynamic defense cooperation has since appeared in the joint statement of the 2012 SCC and in the MODs 2012 Defense White Paper.⁶⁵

Japan has taken concrete policy measures to strengthen Japan–US defense cooperation and bilateral defense relations more generally. For instance, setting aside its principle ban on arms exports, Japan has allowed the SM-3 Block IIA anti-ballistic missile (ABM), cooperatively developed by Japanese and US defense contractors, to be exported to third countries upon US urgings and allowed Japanese contractors to contribute to the development of the F-35.⁶⁶ Indeed, Japan’s selection of the F-35 over the other F-X candidates (i.e., F/A-18E/F, Eurofighter Typhoon, and Dassault Rafale) was most likely highly influenced by alliance politics and motivated by a Japanese desire to strengthen bilateral defense relations. As analysts have previously pointed out, the F-35, notwithstanding its notional capabilities, is not the ideal selection in terms of replacing the F-4 as an interceptor aircraft, and its introduction is likely to become vastly more expensive and provide fewer benefits for Japanese defense contractors than the other F-X alternatives.⁶⁷ Japan’s MOD, however, maintains that the F-35 was selected after comprehensive comparison of the candidates’ score on performance, overall cost, opportunities for Japanese industrial participation, and logistical support considerations.⁶⁸

Japan is seeking closer military cooperation with the United States by upgrading the 1997 Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation. While the 1997 revision

aimed primarily at preparing Japan–US defense cooperation in a Korean peninsula contingency, the discussions initiated in January 2013 are clearly intended to shift the alliance guidelines toward dealing with China in the maritime domain. As Defense Minister Morimoto noted on their agreement to review the Guidelines in November 2012, “the present guidelines were produced when the Korean Peninsula was in a tense situation. [. . .] But the East Asian situation is not limited to the Korean Peninsula and there is also the issue of China going to the ocean.”⁶⁹ In the ongoing guideline revision process, Japan is also seeking to insert specific bilateral defense cooperation in defense of its Nansei (i.e., Southwestern) Islands, among them the Japan-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, which are fiercely challenged by China.⁷⁰ The United States, for its part, while maintaining that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are under Japanese administration and thus encompassed by the Japan–US alliance, is likely to oppose the inclusion of specific guidelines on the defense of the islands in order to evade entrapment concerns and to gain leverage over Japanese actions in dealing with the territorial issue.

Another development apparently aimed at strengthening the alliance is Prime Minister Abe’s policies on collective self-defense. In their notable critique of the balancing argument, Jerdén and Hagström note that, “realists would have to expect Japan to use the alliance much more enthusiastically to contain China.”⁷¹ One issue about which Japan has certainly demonstrated mounting enthusiasm vis-à-vis the alliance is the issue of collective self-defense. During his 2012 election campaign, Abe advocated forging stronger bilateral defense ties by dropping the ban on collective self-defense,⁷² a policy change strongly encouraged by the United States in recent years, most notably within the context of BMD. For instance, in a 2007 defense ministerial meeting, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates urged Japan to lift its ban on collective self-defense and commit its BMD system to the defense of US territory. Also present at the meeting was US Ambassador to Japan Thomas Schieffer, who admonished that Japanese non-compliance could have negative implications for the alliance.⁷³ Dropping the ban on collective self-defense would strengthen the alliance not only politically but also militarily by raising the power-aggregation value of the alliance,⁷⁴ at least in *de jure* terms, as the massed or aggregated military capabilities available for alliance purposes would be greater than with the ban in place. Specifically, lifting the ban would enable Japanese forces to fight alongside and support US forces engaged in military contingencies beyond the defense of Japanese territory, thereby raising the combined military power of the alliance. Upon assuming office, Prime Minister Abe made an initial move to scrap the ban, noting his intention to discuss the issue at his first summit with President Obama in February 2013. However, in an interesting dual display of Japan’s growing enthusiasm for the alliance with the United States and, more generally, the evolving dynamics of the alliance, the United States took the issue off the table, suggesting that it might consider Japan’s evolving defense policies as too zealous for US national interest.⁷⁵

Japan has boosted its joint military exercises with the United States. In December 2010, Japan and the United States held their largest ever bilateral war games during the biennial Keen Sword exercise, fielding more than 44,000 military personnel, 60 naval vessels, 400 aircraft, and BMD assets from both countries’ armed forces.⁷⁶ According

to the US Navy, the comprehensive exercise drilled maritime operations and base security operations, as well as integrated air and missile defense, search and rescue, close air support, live-fire training, and maritime defense and interdiction.⁷⁷ In addition to strengthening Japanese unilateral amphibious capabilities, Japan and the United States have also engaged in exercises aimed at boosting their joint amphibious capabilities. Most notably, the second main purpose of the recent amphibious Dawn Blitz exercise, in which Japanese ground troops, warships, and air force liaison officers trained alongside the US Marine Corps and Navy, was according to the Japanese defense ministry “to strengthen the US–Japan bilateral operational capabilities.”⁷⁸

Finally, since mid-2010, Japan has supported and indeed worked with its ally to strengthen its military presence in the region under the much-debated, US-declared strategy to “rebalance” or “pivot” toward the Asia-Pacific region.⁷⁹ Testament to Japan’s growing enthusiasm for its alliance with the United States, Prime Minister Kan struck a deal with the United States in 2011 to maintain Japan’s host-nation support (HNS) at existing levels despite growing fiscal constraints. The last time Japan’s HNS was up for renewal, Kan’s Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), then in opposition, voted down the HNS bill in the Lower House arguing that Japan’s financial support for US forces was too generous, although the bill was ultimately ratified by an Upper House pre-emptive arrangement for HNS laws.⁸⁰ In a press conference on the signing of the 2011 HNS agreement, Japan’s minister of foreign affairs linked the HNS budget to “the strategic environment surrounding Japan,” an oblique reference not least to China, and noted that “from this perspective, it was decided that the total amount (of the cost of stationing of the USFJ) would be maintained (at the current level) for five years, even though we face a severe fiscal situation” (parentheses in original).⁸¹ Moreover, on base issues, Japan has supported the deployment of a second US BMD radar to Japan and V-22 Osprey tilt rotor aircraft to the US Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma in Okinawa, the latter notwithstanding vociferous national and local opposition.⁸² During the 2010 SCC process, Japan formally reverted to the original hard-negotiated plans to relocate the controversial Futenma facility within Okinawa prefecture.⁸³ The move brought the alliance back on a good footing following the diplomatic turmoil caused by Prime Minister Hatoyama’s determination to relocate the base out of the prefecture or preferably out of the country altogether.⁸⁴ While progress has been slow, the Futenma relocation process inched forward in March 2013 as the Government of Japan (GOJ) filed a formal request to the prefectural authorities in Okinawa reclaiming the piece of land intended for the relocated Marine Corps facility.⁸⁵

Explaining Japan’s China-Balancing

The preceding section provides considerable evidence of Japan’s shifting military priorities with a view to boosting its military power vis-à-vis or to counterbalance China. This section seeks to further our understanding of this phenomenon by explaining why Japan is balancing China. In the tradition of balance of threat theory, this section argues that, while important, the distribution of capabilities alone cannot fully explain Japan’s recent China-balancing efforts. Rather, it argues, the confluence of Chinese behavior on maritime and territorial issues in Japan’s neighboring seas and the shifting distribution

of economic and military capabilities in China's favor are both necessary and sufficient factors in explaining Japan's shifting military priorities.

Perceived Chinese Aggressiveness

In recent years, China has increased its maritime presence and intensified its territorial claims in Japan's neighboring seas. In Japan, it is perceived as aggressive Chinese behavior; it is also a necessary condition in explaining Japan's balancing behavior since 2010.

Japan has demonstrated clear sensitivity toward Chinese displays of its emerging power-projection capabilities and ambitions, in particular toward PLAN vessels passing sensitive locations near Japanese territory en route to military exercises in the Pacific Ocean. Notable examples are various PLAN vessels such as Kilo-class submarines, Sovremenny- and Luzhou-class destroyers, and Jiangkai II-class frigates, advancing into the Pacific through the narrow Tsugaru Strait (i.e., between Japan's northernmost islands of Hokkaido and the main island of Honshu) and between the Okinawa and Miyako Islands (both in Japan's southernmost prefecture of Okinawa) on seven separate occasions in the November 2008 to June 2011 timeframe.⁸⁶ On several occasions, the ships went on to circle the Japanese archipelago. In 2004, Japan Defense Agency (now MOD) officials speculated that a submerged PLAN submarine caught navigating in Japan's territorial waters by the JSDF was an attempt by China to display its mounting military power. Officials characterized China's acts as highly provocative and "[obviously] challenging the MSDF's capabilities."⁸⁷ Since then, Japan has similarly interpreted various incidents involving PLAN warships and patrol vessels from China's various coast guard-like agencies as aggressive and as potentially challenging behavior vis-à-vis Japanese and US military forces. Most notably, a PLAN Song-class submarine surfaced undetected within firing range of the US aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk off Okinawa in 2006 in what was characterized by the MOD as a "militarily noteworthy incident."⁸⁸ In April 2010, Japan issued a diplomatic protest following an incident in which Chinese military helicopters buzzed Japanese destroyers that were tracking ten PLAN vessels en route to the Pacific via the Miyako Strait in the East China Sea.⁸⁹ More recently, Japan has accused PLAN vessels of having aimed and locked fire-control or weapons-guidance radars on JMSDF vessels in the East China Sea on two separate occasions.⁹⁰ Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) characterized the incident as "extremely regrettable," noting that "Japan is deeply concerned about China's acts."⁹¹

Japan's concerns about China's behavior and ambitions relate above all to the disputed island territory in the East China Sea known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. With great unease, Japan has watched and interpreted the increasing frequency of PLAN and Chinese government patrol ships operating in or near its EEZ and territorial waters and its increasingly hard line stance on territorial claims, in particular vis-à-vis the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as a challenge to the territorial status quo. Japan's MOD considers the islands, which have been under Japanese administration since Okinawa was handed back to Japan in the early 1970s, as "an inherent part of the Japanese territory."⁹² While Japan has made cautionary references to China's territorial claims also in the past, Japan's threat perceptions were particularly

heightened following the collision between a Chinese fisheries trawler and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) vessel in territorial waters under Japanese administration off the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2010. The JCG arrested and indicted the Chinese captain, igniting a major diplomatic standoff between Tokyo and Beijing. As a result, high-level diplomatic meetings were disrupted, and Japan accused China of engaging in economic warfare by embargoing rare earths exports to Japan.⁹³ A similar diplomatic confrontation erupted in September 2012 when the GOJ effectively nationalized the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by purchasing them from private ownership, allegedly to prevent them from falling into the hands of Tokyo's nationalist Governor Shintaro Ishihara who had declared his intentions of purchasing and developing the islands in a manner the GOJ suspected would strain Japan-China relations.⁹⁴ In response, Chinese government vessels initiated frequent maritime patrols into the islands' territorial waters, while PLA warships and warplanes intensified their patrol operations in the near vicinity of the islands.⁹⁵

Opinion polls reveal the importance of the Senkaku issue to the Japanese and their sensitivity to what in Japan is perceived as aggressive Chinese behavior. Following the 2010 incident, 87% responded in a Yomiuri Shimbun poll that China "could not be trusted."⁹⁶ Opinion polls conducted by the GOJ paint a similar picture. Respondents lacking affinity toward China spiked following the 2010 (77.8%) and 2012 incidents (80.6%), the highest numbers since the annual poll was launched in 2000.⁹⁷ In a Yomiuri Shimbun poll conducted in January 2013, 80% of the respondents characterized Japan-China relations as either "poor" or "very poor" (up from 61% in the previous poll); the poll also revealed that China, for the first time, had surpassed North Korea as the most severe perceived military threat to Japan.⁹⁸

The centrality of China's increasing activity in Japan's neighboring seas and Japanese perceptions of maligned Chinese behavior vis-à-vis the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue in Japan's evolving defense policy is clearly demonstrated by various statements made by Japanese defense planners and analysts in recent years. Japanese defense planners criticize China for its increasingly assertive behavior on these issues and express "concern over its future direction."⁹⁹ Japanese defense analysts similarly characterize China's increasing activities in the East China Sea as "provocative," "dangerous," and "belligerent."¹⁰⁰ In a joint press conference with President Obama in November 2010, Prime Minister Kan linked rising Sino-Japanese tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue to Japan's evolving policies towards the United States, noting that "the presence of the U.S. and . . . the U.S. military I believe is becoming increasingly important [for the peace and security of the countries in the region]."¹⁰¹ Following the 2010 fishing trawler incident near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and its wake of diplomatic debacle, Japan vigorously sought US assurances that the islands were covered by Article 5 of the Japan-US alliance,¹⁰² ultimately securing US security guarantees, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that "with respect to the Senkaku Islands, the United States has never taken a position on sovereignty, but we have made it very clear that the islands are part of our mutual treaty obligations, and the obligation to defend Japan."¹⁰³ According to US diplomatic sources, Japanese officials attach great importance to the territorial issue in their bilateral talks and consistently encourage the United States to restate its commitment to defend the islands under Article 5 in public statements touching upon

the issue.¹⁰⁴ Explicitly linking the issue to Japan's efforts to forge stronger bilateral defense ties following the September 2012 debacle, an MOD official similarly stated that "Japan is seeking to strengthen the alliance with the US amidst the current tension with China over the Senkaku Islands."¹⁰⁵ Likewise, citing the PLAN activities in Japan's neighboring seas, Defense Minister Kitazawa and Defense Secretary Gates agreed in May 2010 to strengthen cooperation on and monitoring of Chinese activities in the region.¹⁰⁶ Most importantly, in his remarks on the release of the 2010 NDPG, Kitazawa linked Japan's doctrinal revision and the dynamic defense force concept to China's increasing activities in the areas surrounding Japan, noting that Japan's dynamic defense activities "will contribute to preventing the environment surrounding Japan from changing against us."¹⁰⁷

Japanese counterbalancing, as discussed in this article, as a response to such incidents, has, however, not been clear cut. Rather, Japan has coupled its recent balancing with efforts to promote confidence building measures. In particular, Japan has been eager to establish what it refers to as "crisis management" mechanisms, with particular emphasis on a hotline between the countries' respective naval and maritime law enforcement forces. According to a MOD press release following an October 2010 meeting of Japanese Defense Minister Kitazawa with his Chinese counterpart in Hanoi, the ministers "reaffirmed that there is a need to establish a communication mechanism at sea between the defense authorities of China and Japan as soon as practical."¹⁰⁸ Since then, Japanese foreign ministers have called repeatedly for the establishment of a maritime "crisis management" mechanism, to "prevent the occurrence of misunderstandings between Japan and China," in the words of Foreign Minister Gamba.¹⁰⁹ In an April 2013 press conference, Japanese Defense Minister Onodera told reporters that Japanese and Chinese defense officials were consulting on a maritime contact mechanism and regional security.¹¹⁰

On balance, Japan has clearly been sensitive to Chinese behavior, not least China's maritime activities and policies on disputed island territory in its neighboring South and East China Seas, which Japan perceives as aggressive Chinese behavior. However, to explain sufficiently Japan's counterbalancing response, it is necessary to understand the backdrop against which Japan interprets Chinese behavior, namely the rapidly shifting balance of power in China's favor.

Shifting Distribution of Capabilities

China's rise has had a profound impact on the global distribution of power, both in economic and military terms. According to IMF figures on gross domestic product (GDP) measured at market exchange rates (MER),¹¹¹ the United States accounted for 27% of global GDP in 1990. China, by comparison, accounted for 2% of global and 7% of the US share. By 2012, the US share of the global GDP output had dropped to 22%. China's, by comparison, had risen to 11% of global and 52% of the US share. In other words, the United States enjoyed more than 13 times China's economic strength in 1990. By 2012, US economic strength was merely double that of China. This trend is even more telling using GDP power purchasing parity (PPP) estimates, which adjust for varying domestic production prices (e.g., the lower cost of producing goods and services in China vis-à-vis the United States) and underestimation of the

Chinese economy due to the undervalued Chinese currency.¹¹² In 1990, the United States accounted for a 25% share of global economic output. China, by comparison, accounted for a 16% share of US and a 4% share of global economic output. By 2012, the US share of global economic output had dropped to 19%. China's, by comparison, had risen to an 84% share of US and 15% of global economic output.

What's more, China is not only on course to rapidly catch up with the United States in terms of economic strength, but it is doing so considerably faster than initial projections suggested. In 2003, Goldman Sachs forecast China's GDP to surpass that of the United States in 2041.¹¹³ In 2007, Goldman Sachs revised its projection downwards to 2027, while BNP Paribas and *The Economist* the same year projected 2020 and 2018 respectively.¹¹⁴ PPP projections tell the same story. IMF calculates that China will surpass the United States by 2017, while according to the OECD, "the United States is expected to cede its place as the world's largest economy to China, as early as 2016."¹¹⁵ Some argue that China in GDP PPP terms has already surpassed the United States.¹¹⁶

Perhaps more importantly, China has made noteworthy efforts to narrow the gap to Japan and the United States respectively in terms of military strength. While military power is notoriously difficult to measure accurately, analysts commonly refer to defense spending as one measure of a state's military strength.

Throughout the post-Cold War era, China has been narrowing the gap to the United States in terms of defense spending at an increasing pace. China's defense budget grew at an average annual rate of more 10% in the 1990–2012 timeframe. SIPRI estimates suggest that China's defense spending in 1990 was a mere 3.5% of that of the United States and 36% of Japan's. According to the same figures, China surpassed Japan in the mid-2000s, and by 2010 had grown to more than 17% of US and 237% of Japanese defense spending, respectively. The most recent SIPRI estimate suggests that China's defense budget had grown to about a quarter of the US budget by 2012. While China is still far from matching the United States in terms of defense spending, these figures nonetheless also indicate a significant shift in the military balance of power since the United States emerged as the sole superpower at the end of the Cold War.

Another, and perhaps better, measure of military power is actual military capabilities that make up the armed forces of a state. China is investing in military capabilities, which potentially could complicate things for or even outright challenge both Japan and the United States militarily in certain domains. China's military modernization efforts are dominated by Taiwan contingency planning. In particular, the PLA is believed to be in the process of acquiring so-called counter intervention or A2/AD capabilities in order to deter, delay, or deny third-party intervention in a Taiwan Straits contingency.¹¹⁷ Key elements of China's emerging A2/AD capabilities include submarines, anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), ASCMs, LACMs, and associated Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) support systems.¹¹⁸ In Western policy and academic circles, China's ASBM has received particular attention as a potential challenge to US and Japanese naval presence in the region,¹¹⁹ and helps explain why Japan is moving to strengthen its subsurface fighting power (i.e., submarine fleet).¹²⁰

Japan's evolving security policy has clearly been both sensitive and responsive to this shifting systemic distribution of power, which has generated considerable anxiety

in Japan. In 2010, the Sato Commission, established by Prime Minister Kan to analyze Japan's security environment and provide security policy recommendations in preparation for the 2010 NDPG revision, touched upon the issue, noting that, "in light of the global and regional changes in the balance of power brought about by the rise of emerging powers . . . the security environment surrounding Japan is clearly undergoing an important transition." The report goes on to warn that "the overwhelming military and economy superiority of the US appears to be in decline."¹²¹ In the 2010 NDPG, these concerns were somewhat euphemistically expressed by characterizing China's "steadily increasing" defense budget, "widely and rapidly modernizing" armed forces, and growing power projection capabilities as "of concern for the regional and global community."¹²²

In terms of specific military capabilities, expanding Chinese A2/AD capabilities appears to generate particular anxiety in Japan. The perimeter of China's emerging A2/AD capabilities, the argument goes, while primarily aimed at deterring Taiwanese independence efforts, encompasses Japanese territory. If successfully developed and integrated, Chinese A2/AD capabilities could raise the cost or even prevent the United States altogether from successfully intervening in the event of a Sino-Japanese contingency.¹²³ Sugio Takahashi, NIDS scholar on secondment to the MOD, notes that from a Japanese perspective, "a rising China is clearly transforming the strategic balance in East Asia. [. . .] Even in the absence of a clear 'power shift' [in China's favor], enhanced A2/AD capabilities can transform the regional strategic balance."¹²⁴ Former MSDF Vice Admiral Yoji Koda, an authority on Japan's military strategy, similarly notes that "a key challenge for Japan is to protect itself and US Forces Japan against Chinese A2/AD capabilities," referring specifically to China's development of ASBMs, submarines, and electromagnetic pulse (EMP) weapons.¹²⁵

In sum, as China continues to rapidly improve its economic and military strength while the United States is perceived to decline, Japan sees the balance of power shifting in its disfavor. Against this backdrop, Japan interprets China's increasing maritime presence in Japan's neighboring seas and its increasingly assertive claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea as particularly aggressive. Altogether, this motivates a significant Japanese counterbalancing response aimed primarily at maintaining a regional distribution of power perceived as favorable to its interests, or at the very least, to slow its rapid shift in its disfavor. To that end, Japan is taking greater responsibility for its own security in beefing up its defenses. This, in turn, contributes to the power-aggregation of the Japan-US alliance along with Japan's strengthening of its defense cooperation with the United States and its facilitation of US regional military presence through its base policies.¹²⁶ These balancing efforts will likely leave Japan more capable of defending its interests. However, whether this balancing behavior has the intended consequence of making Japan more secure is more questionable. The balancing-security nexus has been known to be weakened by security dilemma dynamics, referring to the spiral of interstate tension and conflict that may arise from state's efforts to seek security by way of military capability.¹²⁷ Further deliberation on the net security effect of Japan's balancing is beyond the grasp of the present analysis of Japan's shifting military priorities but is a timely question that should be addressed in detail in future studies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence presented in this analysis clearly suggests that Japan's shifting military priorities represent a traditional or hard counterbalancing response to perceived Chinese aggressiveness in the maritime domain and the shifting distribution of capabilities in China's favor. Japan's balancing has manifested itself both internally through a comprehensive revision of the JSDF's force posture and military capabilities and externally through efforts to strengthen the Japan–US alliance framework and more generally the US military presence in the region. Japan's efforts to balance China are even challenging some of its deep rooted self-imposed principle restrictions as a military power. The ban on export of arms has already been set aside on an ad hoc basis, and the government seemingly contemplates extricating Japan from the bans on the possession of offensive military capabilities and on the right to collective self-defense, although it remains to be seen whether it will actually go through with these reforms.

These findings have clear implications for the literature debating Japan's post-Cold War security policy and response to China's rise. As noted in the introduction, the literature provides a wide variety of perspectives. First, on the primary determinant of Japan's post-Cold War security policy evolution, perspectives in the literature range from studies highlighting domestic circumstances such as party dynamics and the opinions of the media and the public to analyses emphasizing Japan's international environment, including regional perceptions of Japan as a military power and military developments in neighboring countries. This study accords with previous studies stressing the role of Japan's international environment, in general, and China's rise, in particular, by finding the confluence of Japanese perceptions of Chinese aggressiveness and the changing distribution of capabilities in China's favor as both necessary and sufficient in terms of explaining Japan's shifting military priorities. Second, on Japan's response to the rise of China, the literature ranges from depictions of an "arms race" with China and characterizations as "soft hedging" and "soft balancing" to those arguing that Japan is "accommodating" China. The present study argues, however, that as far as security policy is concerned, the most fitting characterization is one of a moderate form of traditional or hard balancing.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to extend particular gratitude to professors Robert Ross, Stephen Walt, and Paul Midford and to fellow researchers at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, Centre for Asian Security Studies for providing valuable comments on draft versions of this article.

NOTES

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