

NEW GEOPOLITICAL ORDER IN NORTHEAST ASIA: JAPAN'S THREAT PERCEPTION IN POST-COLD WAR ERA

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Abstract

The changing of geopolitical environment in Northeast Asia after the Cold War illustrates some fundamental shift in Japan's security environment. The post-Cold War era provide a new set of challenges and difficulties that must be diligently comprehend not only by Japanese policy maker but also her military echelon as well. With the receding of Soviet Union threat from the north comes a new and emerging volatile situation from her immediate neighbors; People's Republic of China and Democratic Republic of Korea. Aside from this, threats from Japan domestic security also did not demonstrate any indication of declination. This article explores each international actor that can be considered as security predicament to Japan and why each actor behaves in an aggressive manner towards Japan. By analyzing issues that occur both domestic and beyond her border, the author show how past threats that emerged will eventually be replace by a new and more volatile situations – instances where PRC challenging Japan sovereignty over Senkaku and DPRK nuclear and ballistic missile test. Variety of methodology tools has been used to provide an adequate data analysis to interpret every states action in Northeast Asia, ranging from the using of primary and secondary sources that seek to contribute to the argument of this article.

Keywords: Japan; China; North Korea; international relation; strategic study; security study.

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Introduction

Despite the end of the Cold War, Japan's security uncertainty still exist. This new period marshaled a new era in international progress. The underlying threat towards Japan's sovereignty and its core interest either in economics or politics have ensured Japan to take the necessary and precaution steps in its security structure. Some of the threats are substantially different from the others where different motivation play a role in solidifying those threats. This article will highlight and explain Japan's threat perception that is jeopardizing the existence of the Japanese way of life.

The ever increase in Japan's external and potential of domestic threat has undeniably shaped the understanding of policymakers in Tokyo. In recent years, Japan adequately believed that China is trying to accumulate as much power as possible, be it in military or economy, making it probable for Beijing to alter the balance of power in Northeast Asia to her favor and indirectly challenge the US dominance and hegemony in the region. China's growing economy and steady increase in arms spending put her in an odd position with Japan.

Then there is an issue with North Korea volatile regime who over the years signaling their desire to use their missile and nuclear arsenal as a bargaining chip in regional affair. The missile and nuclear testing by Pyongyang undoubtedly accelerate Japan's security and foreign policy. It also lead to steady increase of Japan's defense buildup.

The Rise of China's Military Power

Japan for most part acknowledges that any large-scale conventional war with foreign countries is extremely remote. Japan which could be categorized as one of the major powers in Northeast Asia

believes that the concept of interdependence among nations will make the idea of war disastrous not only to the belligerent state but also affecting the whole globe as well. However, this does not stop Japan from addressing their concern on China's development. Japan's National Defense Program Guideline (NDPG) for Fiscal Year 2011 (2010) indicated that the gradual shift of balance of power in the Asia-Pacific and rapid modernization of the armed forces in areas surrounding Japan has put Japan in a precarious position. The NDPG FY 2011 also highlighted China's increase in defense expenditure, rapid modernization and power projection which have caused a serious alarm for Japan.

China additionally feels that Japan's ability to track and shoot down ballistic missile plus technological transfer that enables Japan to indigenously build her own war machine is a situation where China cannot take lightly. To counter Japan without escalating to any international incident, China plays its nationalism card among her citizens. Besides this, in the event of any escalated conflict with Japan and the US, China has developed a military strategy to ensure US could not reinforce her allied in the Pacific. Immense attention has been directed to enhance China's navy to operate in open seas which is further away from China.

The vital aspects that need to be recognized are how China's so-called modernization shapes the fundamental thinking of China's behavior in the 21st century. The humiliation left a scar and gave a proportional impact on Chinese thinking and political landscape. The fear of repeated events in China continues to affect its foreign policy, strategic culture and how it views the world. China's past experience with greater powers led her to accumulate as much power as she can to maintain her own survival (Zheng, 1999).

China's rapid transformation and modernization was initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Deng's famous four modernizations serve as a basis of China's transformation with agriculture, industry, defense and technology. Nonetheless, Michael E. Marti (2002) in his book wrote that it is in the light of the first Gulf War; the People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers were amazed and astonished how quickly US wipe out the Iraqi Armed Force particularly the notorious battle hardened Saddam's Republican Guard. The modern warfare orchestrated by the US and it's allied in the gulf left a mark on many PLA generals and policy makers. This eventually accelerated the modernization program to the full speed. The steadily increase of defense funds, major restructuring in PLA and the consolidating of the defense industries for efficiency.

Japanese assessment on PLA leadership over the past years stressed that the PLA leaders, at some point in time, are defying the policy and authority of the party when it comes to national security and foreign affairs (Halloran, 2013). PLA leaders have shown that they yielded to some degree of autonomy from government control. These led to more vocal and nationalistic PLA compared to their civilian political or economic leaders when it comes to China's interest. Although the CMC General Secretary is China's President but the other eight members of CMC are all members of uniformed military officer.

To counter the US military might, China developed the A2AD strategy. According to Andrew F. Krepinevich, Barry D. Watts, and Robert O. Work (2003) A2AD is aimed to deny belligerent forces from entry into a theater of operations and at the same time prevent their freedom of action in the confines of the area under an enemy's direct control. A2AD operations include actions by an adversary in the air, on land, and on and under the sea to contest and preventing the enemies from getting a foothold.

A2AD requires a specific weapons system to make sure the strategy could be used to produce devastating results. At present, it is an open secret that PLA top leadership are crafting a better strategy of A2AD and stockpiling weapon systems that can optimize anti-access strategy to deny foreign power from interfering with China's affairs. In accordance with the logic of anti-access warfare, PLA has poured significant resources into developing the Second Artillery Corps. Ballistic and cruise missile offer an attractive means of delivering lethal warhead due to the nature of difficulties in shielding against them.

Threat Across the Sea, North Korea and its Unpredictable Attitude

The Korean peninsula still remains a trouble and potential threat to Japan's security and sovereignty. North Korea is ignoring international cries over its nuclear program illustrated that the problem is not only confined to Japan alone but also involves its immediate neighbors like South Korea, China, Russia and US. Pyongyang who fears its chance of survival will slowly diminished, continues to pursue the program despite outside powers has moved between engagement and coercion, negotiate or confront in dealing with the North, leading to inconsistency in policies and action.

Victor D. Cha (1997) in his writing highlight that North Korea's disposition could be bitterly described as a zero-sum game mindset. The general atmosphere of hostilities has made the cooperation and options of approach very limited. The reflection of this zero-sum could also be seen in the context where Pyongyang believed that peace in the peninsula could only be achieved with the overthrow of the system in the south. The animosity feelings are not narrowly a scope to South Korea but towards Japan as well. Even after the imposition of a sanction, North Korea still insists with its principle on nuclear and missile test.

The North Korea missile threat is real for Japan. North Korea's arsenal of a hundred Nodong ballistic missiles and two hundred Scud missiles are the greatest threat to Japan's security. These missiles which are capable of reaching any target of the Japanese home island could do catastrophic damages if armed with biological or chemical warhead, making more than 100 millions of Japanese populations at risk. The threat did not end there, as the new type of intermediate range ballistic missile known as the Taepodong-2 with even greater radius is capable to hit US soil, Japan knew the stake just got even higher.

Despite the fact that on the drawing board that Taepodong-2 missile should be able to reach Guam, Hawaii, Alaska and much of US western seaboard, it is relatively still under development. The missile was tested and failed several times when some of its debris later fell inside Japan's shore and Pacific Ocean. Nonetheless, Sheila A. Smith (2013) elaborate that the failed tests, however, never decrease the awareness of strategic planner both in Washington and Tokyo. The US, having to consider protecting its territory and population might be less willing to defend Japan. As a result, Japan has fundamentally altered its strategic thinking regarding the US commitment and its response capability against any future threat and provocation.

Hence, this misguided fear eventually leads DPRK to construct its own nuclear program under the pretext for its own survival. By tightening the sanctions and obsolete military assets it could never challenge US, South Korea and Japan's dominance through the means of conventional arms. It was generally known that Pyongyang's ambition is to obtain nuclear weapons as a mean of equalizer. DPRK's one million strong Korean People's Army (KPA) is mostly equipped with outdated weaponry, mostly supplied by its socialist benefactor, the Soviet Union, during the Cold War. To plug the hole in KPA, DPRK knew nuclear weapons could turn the tides.

Obtaining the nuclear weapons would mean that most of the major power including the US have willingly accepted that North Korea is a permanent member of nuclear 'elite' club. Pyongyang also believed in the assumption that its security could be bitterly enhanced by acquiring a relatively modest but secured nuclear arsenal (Sokolski, 2004). It was through this premise that small nuclear states can deter aggression through large nuclear states is still popular. This was further strengthen when DPRK saw what happened to Iraq should they have not any insurance to prevent any possible military invasion.

Stephanie Cooke (2009) further elaborated on how the US intelligence community strongly believed that both Pakistan and North Korea mutually benefitted from this proliferation. Islamabad will gain parts and a blueprint for a Nodong short-range missile, a know-how technology for Pakistan to create a delivery vehicle for its nuclear warhead. Pyongyang, on the other hand, will have Khan's centrifuge expertise. It did not take long before North Korea was able to begin manufacturing plutonium at a

nuclear complex some sixty miles north of its capital in Yongbyon. The Yongbyon nuclear facility will symbolize a modern time interpretation of Korea as a ‘dagger pointed at the heart of Japan’.

The Domestic Dimension of Threats

Terrorism was not something uncommon in the Land of the Rising Sun. The Japanese terrorism has centered on the “Sekigun” or notoriously known as Japanese Red Army (JRA). JRA emerged in Japan as part of the ‘new left’ movement and gained noteworthy international attention in its struggle against the US-Japan Security Treaty and its effort to forestall the then US President Dwight E. Eisenhower’s visit to Japan. The bloody showdown between the ‘new left’ students and the Japanese government began after the anti-American demonstration clashed with the police in October and November 1967 at Haneda International Airport near Tokyo and again in early 1968 near the US Naval and Air Force bases.

Besides JRA, another group of extremism took place in Japan using religion as a dogma for indoctrination and recruitment. Aum Shinrikyo was a dangerous cult who began to surge during the wave of New Religions in the 1950s and 1960s. The cult followers who comprised Japanese professionals like scientist and engineers who are compassionate with doctrines of Buddhism and Hinduism. Members of the Aum donated most of their assets to the cult and in return members are promised of spiritual exercise and extrasensory perception as a path to true happiness and salvation. Shoko Asahara, the leader of the cult, utilized the donation to purchase a variety of weapons from automatic rifles, Russian made Mil-17 helicopters, missiles and also planned to acquire tanks, uranium and nuclear technology (Metraux, 1995).

Apart from terrorism related issues, Japan’s domestic security was also associated with Japan’s frequent experience when it comes to natural disaster. The 1995 Kobe earthquake or sometimes referred to as the Great Hanshin earthquake which killed thousands of life demonstrate that Japan is indeed very vulnerable to mother nature. The recent Tohoku earthquake in 2011 which lead to nuclear contamination in the area further tested Japan in facing this type of threat.

Conclusion

Japan’s bilateral relations with her neighbors saw a rapid up and down over the past decade with swift changes over time. As the Chinese still believed in the Mao’s dictum that ‘political power grows out of the barrel of a gun’ the unprecedented modernization underwent by PLA is not just a political statement but surely an indication that Beijing is prepared to confront anyone that they seemed as aggressors.

Due to the historical background in Northeast Asia, Japan is still viewed with suspicion behavior by her neighbors even though Japan has renounced the use of war and adopted a more pacifist approach under the tutelage of US. The doubtful atmosphere, however, is still there as Japan is currently progressing towards a more ‘normal’ state than before. Based on the empirical analysis, it is safe to specify that the major threats for Japan’s security would come from the east, which is China and North Korea.

As both of the countries have under their arms ballistic missiles, nuclear weapons and massive infantry and amour under their command, Japan has a very solid reason to be concerned. North Korea although poses an incredible amount of army, it, however, didn’t have the capability to transport her army across the Sea of Japan to directly invade Japan. The qualities of her arsenal with the exception of ballistic missiles are also deteriorating, thanks to the strict sanctions by international community. Hence, the only way Pyongyang can make her threat seems credible are by threatening to launch her missiles on Japan or by dispatching small groups of special force on Japan’s shore.

Domestic securities also played crucial role in the Japanese security planning. Japan is no foreigner when it comes to terrorism issues. The fanatical JRA and religious extremism like Aum Shinrikyo proved that how a number of people could shake the foundation of Japanese society. The steady trend of domestic terrorism in Japan seems to decline although on the global scale terrorism threat is on the

rise especially after the 9 September attack. Yet, Japan's security forces especially JSDF is still vigilant to ensure the continuity of peace and stability.

Japan Ministry of Defense under the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has taken a proactive act by bolstering JSDF military capabilities correspond with the threats that has emerged. These include procurement of the latest military assets such as commissioning a new helicopter destroyer which some critique dubbed as an aircraft carrier in 'disguise'¹ and the new stealth fighter Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II. Japan also taken the opportunity of US pivot to Pacific to balance against China with strengthening political cooperation and exchanging military exercise. Abe political posture again is concur with security dilemma under the theory of realism whereby any action or decision of one state can lead to insecurity of another state. Japan is walking a precarious path as most of the world economics are concentrating in East Asia, any political tension can lead to mutual destruction on all sides.

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¹The Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) has taken delivery of the new helicopter destroyer, JS Izumo of the Izumo class in 2015. The 22DDH-Class Destroyer will be used to strengthen JMSDF anti-submarine warfare, monitoring Japan's maritime borders and also served as a transport ship during emergency. Chinese observer has argued Japan is indirectly 'operating' an aircraft carrier rather than destroyer. Article 9 of Japanese Constitution prohibits the use of any offensive weapon. See Keck, Z. (2013, August 7). Japan's Unveils "Aircraft Carrier in Disguise". *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2013/08/japans-unveils-aircraft-carrier-in-disguise/>