

## A Turning Point for Japan's Self-Defense Forces

Article IX of Japan's postwar constitution, ratified by Japan's Diet nearly 60 years ago, renounces war as a sovereign right and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. In contrast, Article 51 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter clearly states that Japan, as a member, has the right to individual or collective self-defense. Japan has struggled over the last 50 years to reconcile this contradiction between its constitution's pacifist principles and a desire to play a role in maintaining international peace and security. This also applies to the U.S.-Japanese alliance, in which Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) play a limited role in Japan's own defense but are prohibited from taking action to defend the United States. To address this imbalance, the two countries have taken incremental steps over the years to expand Japan's security role in response to changes in the international security environment.

Recent U.S.-Japanese joint statements envision the SDF playing a more visible role regionally and globally through participation in missile defense, maritime security operations, humanitarian relief operations, and other initiatives that would undoubtedly buttress Japan's security and burnish its reputation as a responsible member of the international community. Moreover, as the United States transforms its global military posture to face the challenges of the post-September 11 era, Japan is exploring ways to assume a greater defense burden and to accept new roles and missions as a U.S. alliance partner. These developments appear to indicate a strategic interest in elevating Japan's profile internationally by putting the SDF forward to confront new security challenges. Doing so would not only serve the U.S.-

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Nicholas Szechenyi is a fellow and assistant director of the Office of the Japan Chair at CSIS. The author would like to thank the participants of a spring 2006 CSIS Japan Chair study group for their contributions to his own thoughts.

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 29:4 pp. 139–150.

Japanese alliance in preserving peace and stability in Asia but also respond to international pressure for Japan to become a more “normal nation.” The two governments have agreed on a plan to restructure the deployment of U.S. forces in Japan and have pledged to integrate their countries’ military operations further.

These changes in Japan’s security policy in response to a shifting international security environment are nothing new. In 1960, in the midst of the

Cold War, the threat from the Soviet Union prompted Washington and Tokyo to update their 1952 bilateral security treaty. According to the terms of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, Japan assumed some responsibility for defending its territory while the United States was granted permission to maintain bases in Japan for defense of the Far East. Furthering the strategy of containment, the two countries concluded bilateral defense

**It is time for Tokyo to begin to shape its regional environment in a proactive manner.**

guidelines in 1978 that paved the way for Japan to play a greater role in defense of the sea lanes. In 1991 the Diet dispatched SDF forces overseas for the first time to conduct minesweeping activities after the Persian Gulf War. The SDF then participated in its first UN peacekeeping mission in Cambodia in 1992. Concerns about instability on the Korean peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait, as well as the need to recalibrate after the Cold War, led the United States and Japan to announce a joint declaration on security in 1996 and, a year later, to revise the 1978 defense guidelines to broaden the SDF’s role in regional security. Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, the Diet has passed two special measures laws authorizing the dispatch of SDF forces, the first to the Indian Ocean in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and the second to Iraq for reconstruction efforts in the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Japan’s security policy will continue to evolve; the question is whether future changes will be in response to pressure from the United States and other alliance partners or stem from a domestic consensus on the need to expand the global presence of the SDF.

Today, Japan’s leaders have begun to reason that “the national interest may sometimes lie far from home and that the constitutional taboo on sending Japanese troops abroad can in fact be broken.”<sup>1</sup> To break this taboo, they must convince skeptics of the strategic necessity of an expansive mandate for the SDF for Japan’s unilateral security, the credibility of its alliance with the United States, and its diplomatic agenda. Tokyo must also adapt its capabilities to assist in the war on terrorism if U.S. military transformation in Asia is to succeed and if the bilateral alliance is to remain the “indispensable foundation of Japan’s security and of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific

region.”<sup>2</sup> By expanding the geographic parameters of SDF operations, Japan can help prevent regional crises and affect the evolution of the international security environment, thereby gaining more respect from a broader community of nations.

How might this expansion be realized, and what are the challenges involved? To help answer this question, the Office of the Japan Chair at CSIS convened a study group in the spring of 2006 to analyze key issues for future U.S.-Japanese alliance cooperation and produce a set of policy recommendations for public debate. The group's discussions generated and improved ideas, for which this author is indebted, for potential areas of concentration for the SDF that could enhance Japan's global security role. Tokyo has reacted to changes in the security environment for long enough. It is time instead to shape that environment and to tackle regional and global challenges in a proactive manner.

### **Strategic Objectives**

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The National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) released in December 2004 are the most recent effort on the part of the Japanese Defense Agency (JDA) to clarify a vision for the SDF's future security and defense capabilities. The document cited various threats, such as ballistic missile and nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, and instability on the Korean peninsula, to demonstrate the need for new capabilities and justify the call for continued strategic dialogue with the United States.<sup>3</sup> In a February 2005 joint statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC), the two governments noted that Japan's efforts to respond to new threats in the context of the U.S. global defense posture review underscored the need to pursue common strategic objectives both regionally and globally to preserve a peaceful security environment. Central to this process was “the need to continue examining the roles, missions, and capabilities of Japan's Self Defense Forces and the U.S. Armed Forces required to respond effectively to diverse challenges in a well-coordinated manner.”<sup>4</sup> The joint statement also noted the importance of realigning the U.S. force posture in Japan to meet the demands of the post-September 11 security environment and to reduce the burden on local Japanese communities. Another evolution in the U.S.-Japanese alliance and Japan's security policy was underway.

The SCC issued a progress report in October 2005 with recommendations for realignment and the assignment of new roles and missions. The latter were divided into two categories: the defense of Japan along with responses to situations in areas surrounding Japan and the improvement of the international security environment, mainly through participation in international peace cooperation activities.<sup>5</sup> The report lists “examples of operations in

bilateral security and defense cooperation to be improved,” including ballistic missile defense; counterproliferation operations such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI); counterterrorism; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; humanitarian relief; reconstruction assistance; and peace-keeping.<sup>6</sup> These examples reflect the JDA’s interest in developing new SDF capabilities as described in the NDPG and present a wide range of potential roles and missions.

Yet, these ambitious objectives and the profound implications of their implementation were overshadowed by the second half of the report, which outlined a proposal for the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan. The proposal captured widespread media attention because some local communities, especially on the island of Okinawa, have increasingly voiced their opposition to U.S. military bases and called for a reduction of the U.S. force presence. The two governments pledged to agree on implementation schedules by March 2006. The SCC became consumed with the technical details of this realignment and announced an implementation plan in May 2006. At that time, they also returned to the subject of roles and missions, noting in yet another joint statement that improving SDF capabilities and the interoperability of U.S. and Japanese forces would “enhance the alliance’s capability to respond to diverse challenges in the evolving global security environment.”<sup>7</sup> Although these rhetorical joint statements are insufficient to establish the SDF’s new role, with the realignment piece of the puzzle at the very least schematically resolved, the SCC can now focus on how Japan might contribute more to the alliance and to security beyond the Asia-Pacific region.

## **Roles and Missions**

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What roles and missions should Japan perform as it seeks to contribute more to its own defense, strengthen the U.S.-Japanese alliance, and improve the international security environment? First and foremost is the development of a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system. The strategic significance of BMD cannot be overstated vis-à-vis North Korea, a point reinforced by that country’s missile tests in July 2006. Not to be overlooked, China’s arsenal of 800 missiles pointed at Taiwan could of course just as easily reach Japan.<sup>8</sup> Tokyo began studying BMD in the mid-1990s but took up the research agenda in earnest after North Korea test-fired a Taepo-dong missile over Japan’s northernmost main island Honshu in August 1998.<sup>9</sup> In 1999, Japan commenced joint research with the United States, and by the end of 2003, it had announced officially its intention to pursue a multitiered missile defense system combining the sea-based Aegis and land-based Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) systems.<sup>10</sup> Bilateral cooperation continues apace with an X-band radar system expected to have become operational by the summer of 2006

and additional PAC-3 capabilities soon to be deployed to Japan.<sup>11</sup> A broader strategic concept could ultimately put Japan in a position to destroy missiles aimed at the United States, but major hurdles would have to be cleared in the political arena for this to happen, given that Japan's arms exports principles limit technology transfers and that most interpret the constitution as prohibiting collective self-defense. Nonetheless, joint research on BMD serves to improve alliance coordination and enhance the SDF's capabilities to dissuade, deter, and largely defeat a major threat.

Japan also can play a large role in maintaining maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region. The Maritime SDF (MSDF) conducts patrol and surveillance operations in areas surrounding Japan and has demonstrated its commitment to defending Japanese territorial waters, most famously in 2001 when Japanese Coast Guard patrol ships sank a North Ko-

rean spy ship.<sup>12</sup> In a more recent operation in 2004, the MSDF detected a Chinese nuclear submarine off the coast of the Sakishima Islands and chased it into the East China Sea.<sup>13</sup> Amid grave concerns about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the clear potential for the use of maritime traffic for terrorist activities, the MSDF should be equally forward looking in extending its capabilities to enhancing sea lane security.

The dispatch of the MSDF to the Indian Ocean during Operation Enduring Freedom signified great progress in this regard, but the mission was limited to refueling U.S. and coalition vessels and did not allow for any MSDF participation in interdiction operations. One indication this may change over time was Japan's hosting of training exercises in October 2004 under the rubric of the PSI. Japan should not be shy about demonstrating its military capabilities to intervene in the potential nexus between terrorists and WMD. Doing so in the realm of maritime security would augment its leadership credentials in the eyes of the international community.

Tokyo can cement its status as a player in international security by continuing its peacekeeping operations, humanitarian relief missions, and post-conflict reconstruction roles. Since 1991, the SDF has participated in four UN peacekeeping operations and several humanitarian relief operations worldwide.<sup>14</sup> It has performed remarkably well in a variety of missions ranging from medical services and school construction to transportation and logistical support. It has displayed great flexibility, serving both under the auspices of the United Nations and in collaboration with select coalition partners, particularly since the September 11, 2001, attacks. The Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law of 2001, authorizing the Indian Ocean dispatch,

**The strategic significance of ballistic missile defense for Japan cannot be overstated.**

and the Iraq Humanitarian Reconstruction Support Special Measures Law of 2003 are particularly noteworthy in their application to “international peace cooperation activities” of humanitarian roles that were originally conceived for areas surrounding Japan.<sup>15</sup> Building on this legislative development and a solid record of achievement during the last 15 years, Japan can declare humanitarian relief, peacekeeping, and reconstruction operations as primary SDF missions and create a greater capacity to lead such initiatives in the future.

## **Obstacles and Challenges**

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Accompanying the great potential to expand SDF roles and missions are several obstacles and challenges that must be overcome: defense spending, alliance coordination, legal barriers, public acceptance, and regional perceptions of Japan. All of the roles and missions advocated above require substantial increases in defense spending. Japan unofficially caps defense spending at one percent of its gross domestic product because of political sensitivities related to the pacifist principles of the postwar constitution. It is safe to assume that research and infrastructure development for BMD will continue to consume a large portion of the defense budget and limit resources for training and capacity building in other areas. Tokyo’s recent pledge to provide approximately \$6 billion for the transfer of 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam further limits discretionary spending. The SDF cannot carry out any of its roles and missions adequately under such resource constraints.

With respect to U.S.-Japanese alliance coordination, the SDF should be provided more opportunities to train with U.S. forces. The two countries agreed during SCC consultations in October 2005 to expand training and conducted a variety of joint exercises in 2006, including a simulated response to an invasion of Japanese territory and a dogfight in the skies over Okinawa prefecture.<sup>16</sup> The SDF also improved efficiency within its ranks in the spring of 2006 by introducing an integrated command structure that placed all 260,000 SDF personnel under unified command, whereas earlier each of the three arms operated under separate channels and often failed to communicate.<sup>17</sup> Under this framework, a Joint Staff Office within the JDA will assemble task forces during emergencies to issue orders to the SDF in close collaboration with U.S. forces.<sup>18</sup> Perfecting this system will be no easy task, but any attempts at synchronization should be welcomed and encouraged.

The legal framework for SDF operations continues to take center stage in discussions of new roles and missions. The Defense White Paper of 2005 states that,

from the past, the government has interpreted that the use of armed force is permissible as a means to exercise the right of self-defense under Article IX of the constitution only when there is an imminent and illegitimate act of aggression against Japan; there is no appropriate means to deal with such an act of aggression other than by resorting to the right of self defense; and the use of armed strength is confined to the minimum necessary level.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, SDF missions are characterized by strict rules of engagement that inhibit independent action by SDF forces. This explains why the Japanese forces engaged in reconstruction efforts in Iraq had to be themselves protected by Australian forces, for example, adding one more logistical and budgetary challenge to an already extremely complex mission. In addition, the International Peace Cooperation Law enacted in 1992 stipulates five conditions that must be met in order for the SDF to participate in UN peacekeeping operations, most notably that a cease-fire be in place and that the use of weapons be strictly limited.<sup>20</sup> These conditions and strict rules of engagement place considerable burdens on Japan's partners and limit the SDF's capacity to expand the range of its operations.

Another legal issue with direct impact on SDF operations is the government's stance on Japan's right of collective self-defense, defined by the government in the White Paper as "the right to use actual force to stop an armed attack on a foreign country with which it has close relations, even when the state itself is not under direct attack."<sup>21</sup> Although conceding international law guarantees this right, the government argues that self-defense as authorized under Article IX of the constitution is "confined to the minimum necessary level for the defense of the country and the exercise of the right of collective self-defense exceeds that limit."<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to imagine the SDF taking on greater roles overseas absent support for the right of collective self-defense and a new constitutional framework.<sup>23</sup> The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has drafted an amendment to clarify the SDF's mandate, ensuring that "constitutional debate, including the possibility of rewriting the pacifist Article IX, is now on the political agenda, even if it is likely to be years before any constitutional change is agreed on."<sup>24</sup>

A clear public consensus on these controversial legal issues proves elusive. In a poll conducted by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in March 2006, 56 percent of respondents favored constitutional revision generally.<sup>25</sup> Of those in favor, more than 70 percent argued that the constitution should clarify the existence of the SDF; and 47 percent noted that the constitution cannot adequately ad-

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dress new issues, such as Japan's contributions to international society. As for the right of collective self-defense, 27 percent argued for explicit language supporting it (support is much higher among Diet members), 23 percent said that the existing language should be interpreted to allow collective self-defense, and 44 percent said government policy should not change. Majority support among legislators alone could conceivably facilitate such changes, but long-term sustainability could ultimately depend on whether the strategic rationale for new policy resonates with the public. Constitutional revision and an endorsement of the right of collective self-defense could clarify both the mission of the SDF and Japan's security policy in general, yielding transparency and additional opportunities for Japan to counter threats to global security. On the other hand, such bold changes to the legal framework could violate a pacifist tradition that has fundamentally guided Japan's foreign policy since World War II and further damage regional perceptions of Japan.

Proponents of expanded SDF roles and missions should be equally concerned about regional opposition to any effort by Japan to raise its defense profile. Suspicions concerning Japan's motives continue to complicate Japan's regional diplomacy more than 60 years after World War II. China and South Korea in particular have expressed outrage over Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan's war dead, including several Class A war criminals, are memorialized. Territorial disputes also complicate relations between Japan and those two nations. Any effort by Japan to increase defense spending would likely yield bombastic accusations of Japanese "remilitarization" and "aggression" from those opposed to a greater role for Japan in international affairs. Such rhetoric, although ostensibly false, could negate the numerous positive contributions of the SDF to international peacekeeping and humanitarian relief that have bolstered Japan's global leadership role. Japan's efforts to elevate its global diplomatic profile through SDF missions will likely succeed if complemented by sustained diplomacy close to home.

All of these challenges present complicated questions with no easy answers, necessitating great political leadership to guide Japan through this latest stage in the evolution of its security policy. Ultimately, the solution lies in a positive vision that the Japanese public and the international community can rally around.

## **A Strategic Vision**

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In the past 10 years, Japan has faced a variety of security threats, such as the sarin subway attack of 1995, the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996, and the North Korean missile tests of 1998 and 2006. Its responses to these crises have been ad hoc measures that reflect a desire to assume greater defense responsibilities but fail to encapsulate clear, long-term security objectives.



The two special measures laws passed since September 11, 2001, although critical to advancing the SDF's new roles and missions, are set to expire in October 2006 and August 2007, respectively, and will be subject to vigorous debate in the Diet, where support is not assured. While the country sorts out the implications of constitutional revision—a drawn-out process to be sure—the government should consider abandoning short-term special legislation in favor of a comprehensive law outlining the responsibilities of the SDF. The LDP introduced a draft permanent law in June 2006 that would allow SDF personnel to participate in public security operations overseas without a UN resolution, subject to parliamentary approval, and would lift some restrictions on the use of force.<sup>26</sup> This proposal could direct even greater attention to the constitutional questions at hand. A less-controversial approach might promote a permanent law based on the existing legal framework to expedite decisionmaking and SDF deployments in the short run but allow for subsequent revisions based on the outcome of the constitutional debate.

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Although the United States should not pressure Japan in its internal debate over security policy, it is appropriate for the United States “to identify specific areas of cooperation that, if pursued, would benefit the alliance.”<sup>27</sup> This is precisely what the SCC process seeks to accomplish by identifying SDF roles and missions that could strengthen bilateral security cooperation in the future. Given the opaque nature of China's military buildup, instability on the Korean peninsula, and the urgent need to combat terrorism and WMD proliferation, Washington will continue to rely on Tokyo to assist in increasing security cooperation throughout the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, joint training exercises, improved communication between forces, and new SDF responsibilities should be welcomed because they can increase U.S. confidence in Japan's ability to confront emerging threats. During times like these, when the United States is occupied with other pressing issues, such as the situation in Iraq or Iran's nuclear ambitions, Tokyo will also remind Washington of Asia's importance and keep the alliance focused on preserving stability and prosperity in the region. In light of these benefits, one can expect nothing but support from the United States as the process of security policy revision in Japan progresses.

From a Japanese national security perspective, the case for improving SDF capabilities is compelling. Japan must be able to defend against an immediate ballistic-missile threat, submarine incursions, and other plausible contingencies close to home. Less obvious perhaps, but nevertheless convincing, is the notion that, by participating in initiatives such as PSI that aim to stem

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proliferation and defeat terrorism, the SDF would support preventive diplomacy and drastically reduce the probability of catastrophe hitting home. Equally consequential is the diplomatic message inherent in a consistent SDF presence in global humanitarian operations and postconflict reconstruction projects. If the SDF can remain proactive and continue to “show the flag,” the states and people that benefit from their actions are more likely to associate Japan with compassion, leadership, and peace. Japan has already been defining what it means to be a global citizen, helping earthquake victims in Pakistan and Indonesia, building schools in Iraq, and repairing roads in East Timor. The international community has recognized these actions and will continue to expect Japan to seek such opportunities. In terms of national defense, deterrence against global threats, and diplomatic cachet, the strategic impact of the SDF’s activities abroad is remarkable. They offer a unique way for Japan to demonstrate that it is a legitimate contributor to international security, one that the SDF should be encouraged to pursue with even greater prominence in the years ahead.

### **Curing the ‘Allergy’**

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JDA director general Fukushima Nukaga noted in a June 2006 speech that prior to the Gulf War, the Japanese people had a strong “allergy” to the dispatch of troops overseas but that they had come to realize that Japan in the post–Cold War era could no longer achieve security by defending its territory alone. They had to promote “active participation in international cooperative efforts to improve the international security environment.”<sup>28</sup> Noting the recent history of SDF missions overseas while acknowledging the constitutional, legal, and political constraints that prevent a greater role for the SDF, he asserted that the government was using its “creative power in exploring the best way to secure international peace and stability.” Japan’s political leadership has indeed mustered creativity and leadership to establish and refine SDF roles and missions, and more will be required from Koizumi’s successor government to fulfill commitments to the United States and to the larger community of nations, both of which have come to appreciate and expect Japanese involvement in global security affairs in the future.

As much as Japan aspires to strengthen its own defensive capabilities, combat the scourge of terrorism, and provide humanitarian assistance, it must balance the desire to assume greater responsibilities with the need to honor its constitutionally embedded pacifist tradition. This complicated mat-

ter will no doubt stir intense debate and reflection within Japanese society. Japan will eventually find a way to cure its allergy, but the prescription may not be available for some time. In the interim, the next government in Japan can continue to articulate a progressive vision for the SDF and remind the Japanese people of the strategic impact of expanded roles and missions. In the future, this period will hopefully be remembered as a turning point when Japan made great strides in developing a security policy flexible to the challenges and needs of the times.

## Notes

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