

EU and Japan: stepping up the game

by Eva Pejsova

At the end of March, Japan's two ruling parties – the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Komeito – reached a formal agreement on the outlines of new security legislation which allows the country to exercise its right of collective self-defence and to deploy the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) overseas. The decision is the latest addition to a number of legal and practical arrangements put in place by Prime Minister Abe's government designed to achieve Tokyo's goals of becoming a 'normal' security actor and fostering deterrence in Northeast Asia.

Given the simmering tensions in the region, especially over China's growing maritime assertiveness, Japan's desire to reinforce its security posture is understandable. However, while a more proactive Japan could make a valuable contribution to regional stability, concerns in Beijing – and also Seoul – about Japan's militaristic past need to be acknowledged and dealt with in an appropriate manner.

The EU has a strong interest in maintaining stability in Asia. When crafting its new strategy for Asia, the reassessment of existing Strategic Partnerships, especially with long-standing like-minded partners such as Tokyo, will be a key priority. Although Japan is one of EU's largest trading partners and the

two sides enjoy a long history of good diplomatic relations, levels of cooperation in the security domain remain low. What are the obstacles to deepening cooperation between Tokyo and Brussels in this field? What are the current, as well as most promising areas of cooperation? And what would be the benefits of greater bilateral security cooperation? As the 23rd EU-Japan summit approaches, it is high time the two partners addressed these questions and stepped up their engagement.

Japan's 'proactive contribution to peace'

Since 2013, Japan has embarked on major reforms of its security sector. The drafting of a new National Security Strategy and the establishment of a National Security Council (NSC) reflect the need to bolster the defence of national territory and surrounding waters in light of heightened tensions in the region. At the same time, Tokyo's plan to make a 'proactive contribution to peace' in theory allows it to raise its international security profile while maintaining its peaceful image.

While Japan's pacifist constitution has long excluded the possibility of involvement in military operations outside of its territory, domestic political shifts mean that the country is now more open

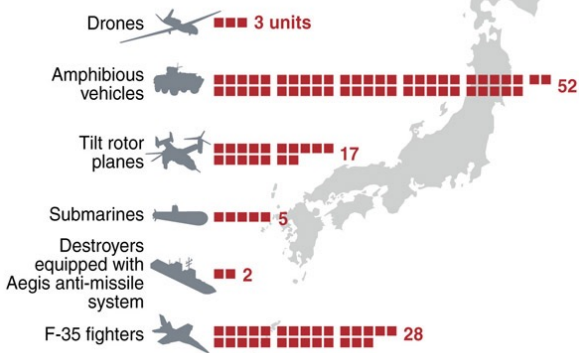
Japan's military shopping list

Five percent spending boost over next five years



► 24.7 trillion yen (\$240 billion) to be spent 2014 - 2019

New hardware To include



Source: AFP

to legislative changes, including possible constitutional revisions. A change in the constitution will be the next hurdle if Japan wants to stay its course and fulfil its promises to allies. This is especially so given the new bilateral Defence Guidelines agreed with the US at the end of April, which commit Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defence within the alliance, including participating in joint operations in third countries.

New legislation is being accompanied by practical steps. In January 2015, Japan announced its highest defence budget to date – of ¥4,980 billion (\$42 billion) – marking a 2% increase in nominal terms when compared to the previous year. The resulting new capabilities aim to fulfil the objectives outlined in the National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG) 2014-2018, which focus on being able to effectively respond to ‘attacks on remote islands’, ballistic missiles, outer and cyber space threats, and large-scale (man-made and natural) disasters.

Understandably, maritime security, including the protection of territorial sovereignty at sea, freedom of navigation and the safeguarding of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), is of utmost importance for the island nation. This is reflected in the new defence guidelines, as well as in the type of capabilities being acquired.

At the end of March, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) deployed its largest destroyer since the Second World War: the new Izumo-class helicopter-carrier. Although officially designed for peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, the warship can carry up to 28 aircraft and is *de facto* a power-projection capability.

Since 2013, the JSDF has also created amphibious units and conducted a number of exercises on how to reclaim occupied islands. Finally, the inhabitants of Yonaguni (an island 150km south of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu archipelago) recently chose in a referendum to establish a JSDF base there with a radar system to monitor Chinese activities in the East China Sea.

What is at stake?

There is currently a wide spectrum of threats to Japan's territory and sovereignty. The erratic behaviour of the North Korean regime, including test-firing ballistic missiles over Japanese territory, represents an enduring security threat. Russian military activities in its far east have also been intensifying, and may also become a source of concern, especially given the unresolved historical issues and the protracted bilateral dispute over the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories.

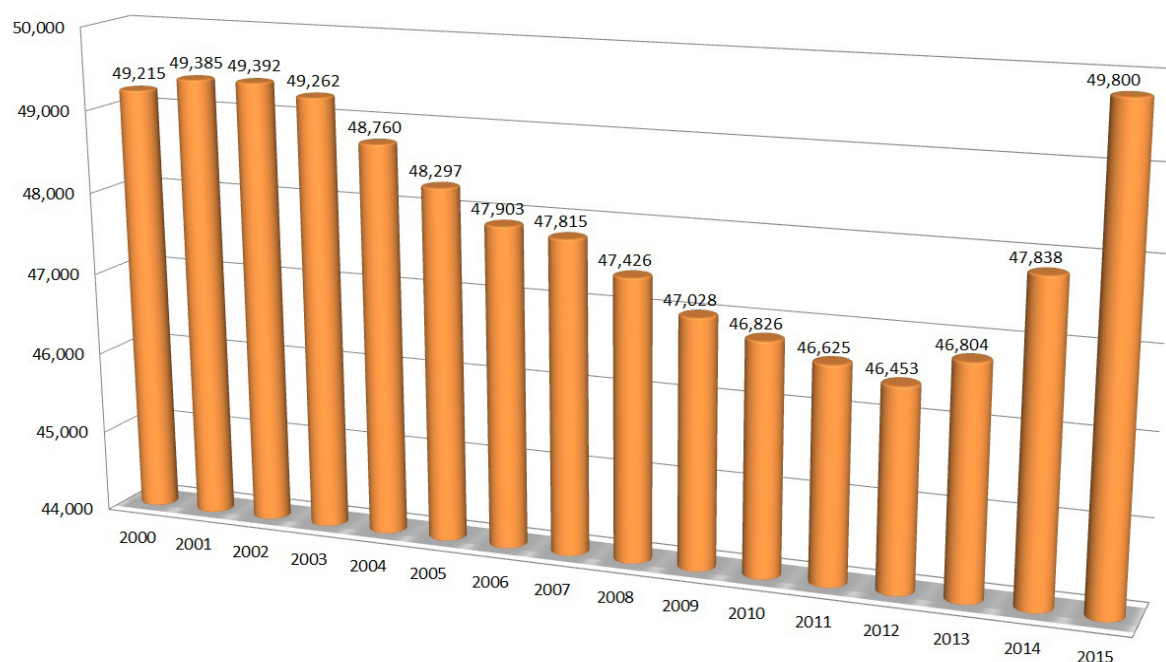
China's military rise, accompanied by its increasingly belligerent behaviour in the East and South China Seas, is thought to pose the greatest challenge. The number of Chinese incursions into the waters and airspace around the Japan-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has increased exponentially since 2012, raising the risk of accidental clashes. The sovereignty dispute weighs heavily on Sino-Japanese relations, fuelling nationalist sentiments on both sides of the East China Sea and hampering any possibility of constructive dialogue or finding a peaceful cooperative solution – at least for now.

However, perhaps the most important battle for Japanese policymakers remains in the sphere of public diplomacy – at both a domestic and an international level. Should Tokyo wish to continue its current policy shift, it will have to deploy substantive means to persuade its own public to depart from the cherished ‘pacifist’ past. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, it will need to reassure its neighbours of the truly peaceful intentions behind its new security policy. If the ‘battle’ on the second front is not conducted carefully, the new posture might not only fail to contribute to greater stability, but further exacerbate regional tensions.

The like-minded partner

Europe has been trying to develop a more robust common foreign and security strategy towards East Asia since 2012. Partnering with like-minded countries which share similar interests and values

Trend in Japan's defence-related expenditure (100 million Yen)



Source: Japanese Ministry of Defence

is essential in any attempt by the Union to prove its relevance and added value for regional security.

Democracy, the rule of law and human rights are often the keywords used to emphasise the special bond between Tokyo and Brussels. However, much as Japan has been an EU Strategic Partner since 2003, the exact contours of that partnership remain vague.

Tokyo still views the EU potential as a security actor with some degree of scepticism. While bilateral relations with the UK, France and Germany are cherished and growing, Brussels remains on the periphery of Japan's strategic thinking. Nevertheless, the two partners share the same common values and positions on a number of global and regional security issues. It is worth noting that Tokyo aligned itself with the US and the EU in adopting economic sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the turmoil in the Donbas – despite its long-standing reluctance to resort to such policy tools.

More importantly perhaps, the two partners also share a similar understanding of the concept of security. Japan's 'human security' approach shifts the focus from the protection of states to the well-being of individuals, addressing issues such as human empowerment, economic development and health, food and environmental security. The EU's 'comprehensive approach' also diverges from traditional notions of security, emphasising the need

to address the roots of critical problems, not just their symptoms. Both interpretations focus on the protection of people and, by definition, on sustainable development policies, civilian crisis management missions and capacity-building activities – which also constitute the most likely grounds for bilateral cooperation.

Negotiations on establishing a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), which would deepen cooperation on a broad set of issues including security, started in March 2013. This process subsequently opened the debate on finalising a Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA), an EU instrument designed to facilitate the deployment of JSDF troops within the framework of CSDP missions. But as the FPA would institutionalise security cooperation which already exists on an *ad hoc* basis, its ratification is not perceived to be an immediate priority by Japanese policymakers.

The EU's role as a security actor in the region is also strikingly different from the US – in both approach and capabilities. While the US-Japan alliance is designed to guarantee Tokyo's security in the traditional sense, it also limits its leeway when dealing with China or other countries which oppose the US military presence in the region.

In that respect, the Union's 'soft' image – with no major great power interest in the region, and instead focused on capacity building, multilateralism and the rule of law – is perceived by some as less threatening and less controversial.



Current and future cooperation

Albeit scarce, examples of security cooperation between the EU and Japan do exist. The first areas, agreed through the 2001 Joint Action Plan, addressed the support for the role of the UN, the elimination of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), and the protection of human rights. Security cooperation remained mostly limited to joint peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations within the framework of the UN or various non-governmental mechanisms. The partners' paths have crossed in conflict prevention initiatives on the Korean peninsula and post-conflict reconstruction in the Western Balkans. Since 2003, Japan also contributed to CSDP missions through its Official Development Assistance (ODA), notably in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The most concrete example of operational cooperation to date is the counter-piracy effort in the Gulf of Aden. The first joint operation between the JMSDF and EUNAVFOR Atalanta took place in January 2014, and resulted in the successful rescue of a captured commercial vessel. Since then, the two parties have conducted three joint exercises between October and November 2014, mainly focused on communication, tactical manoeuvring and helicopter take-off and landing. The willingness to strengthen bilateral cooperation was reiterated during the last EU-Japan summit in Brussels in May 2014, which tried to elaborate on the modalities for Tokyo's participation in CSDP missions. This has since materialised in the EU mission in Niger and Mali, where Japan provided substantial financial and technical assistance (mainly on wireless communication equipment) to EUCAP Sahel.

The agenda for the forthcoming EU-Japan Summit, to be held in Tokyo on 29 May, will address wartime reconciliation (in view of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War), maritime security in East Asia, and climate change. While these are certainly important issues for both parties, the summit's final document should also seek to lay the ground for more concrete initiatives. In that sense, the ratification of the Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) would be an additional symbolic milestone which could also provide a basis for more regular, institutionalised security cooperation, including in Search and Rescue (SAR), HADR and other crisis management situations.

Getting history right

Conflicting historical narratives and mutual suspicion also lie at the source of security tensions in

East Asia. More than any other actor, the EU realises the importance of historical reconciliation for good neighbourly relations, as well as for fostering a shared memory and for identity-building.

The Union and several of its member states – with Germany at the forefront – are also among the most vocal critics of Japan's revisionist tendencies, as strongly expressed by Chancellor Merkel during her recent visit to Tokyo. In order to transform itself into a 'normal' security player and to contribute to regional stability, Japan must also come to terms with its history.

Expectations are running high for Abe's upcoming speech to commemorate the end of the Second World War in August. But while the victims of Japan's wartime aggression believe that the only way to a shared peaceful future is through more soul-searching and apologies, Tokyo holds the opposite view: the past must be forgotten in order to focus on the future.

Considering the current levels of mistrust in the region, a simple reiteration of past apologetic statements made by Prime Ministers Kono (1993) and Murayama (1995) – who both acknowledged that Japan inflicted 'tremendous damage and suffering' during its colonial rule – may not be sufficient.

In recognition of the sensitivity of the issue, a special advisory panel of sixteen experts has been created to advise Abe on the content of the planned statement. However, his recent address to the US Congress – in which he stopped short of fully apologising for his country's wartime actions – shows how much work still needs to be done.

Should there be one lesson which Europe could convey to improve stability in East Asia, it is that successfully dealing with the past is crucial for establishing cordial relations in the future.

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