

Japan's Security Discourse

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Japanese security is once again the object of considerable debate. By my count, this is the fourth such moment in a 150 year-long historical arc of alternating debates and consensuses. Japanese grand strategy has followed a fairly straightforward arc. Vigorous-- indeed, sometimes debilitating-- debate over Japanese security has been punctuated by three moments of consensus about the Japan's international role since 1868. And a fourth is now under construction. Out of each has come a reaffirmation of core values, autonomy and prestige above all.

A widespread belief in the efficacy of "catching up and surpassing" the West helped elites forge the Meiji consensus on borrowing foreign institutions, learning Western rules, and mastering Western practice. This "Rich Nation, Strong Army" model was a great success, but by the end of WWI, when it was clear that the West now viewed Japanese ambitions with suspicion, and treated Japan with rank hypocrisy, the consensus had become tattered. After a period of domestic violence and intimidation a new consensus was forged on finding a less conciliatory response to world affairs. Prince Konoye Fumimaro's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" attracted support from across a wide swath of Japan's ideological spectrum. Now Japan would be a great power, the leader of Asia. The disaster this effected is well known, and from its ashes-- again, after considerable debate and creative reinvention-- Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru forged a pragmatic path that would provide security cheaply.

But it would not be free. It would cost Japan its autonomy, an expenditure that today increasingly is seen by some as more than Japan should pay. Thus, the Yoshida Doctrine that has joined Japan at the U.S. hip is being questioned-- both by those who support the alliance and by those who oppose it. A fourth (possible) consensus has yet to reveal itself, though its contending political and intellectual constituents are clearly

identifiable.

Between these moments of consensus, there has always been a wide array of contending security preferences. “Asianists” and “nationalists” have long argued with “liberals” and “internationalists.” Whether from militarists in the 1920s or from *nihonjinron* intellectuals in the 1980s, “nativism” has always attracted a following. Japanese “liberals” have been debating the merits of economic security for generations. Likewise, the enemies of liberalism-- both on the left and the right-- were connected across the 1930s to the 1960s. The ideas of liberal internationalists who first argued that Japan would be safest as a small maritime trading nation in the early 20th century, inspired the Yoshida Doctrine that governed Japan’s security choices during the Cold War. This economics-first national security strategy was modelled on the one that prevailed in the 1920s-- but abandoned in the 1930s-40s. Although there have always been Japanese intellectuals who distrust markets, liberal internationalism has been an important security option for generations.

But, even if ideas are connected across time, changes in world order often skew their applications. For example, 19th and 20th century Asianism (to the extent that one can even identify it in the singular) shares less with 21st century Asianism than the label suggests. During the Meiji period Asianism was often an expression of opposition to the state. By the 1920s it had taken on a racist tone. Today’s Asianism is a strategy for balancing against excessive U.S. power. Likewise, nationalism. In the pre-war period, liberal and nativist variants took turns dominating the national security agenda. After the war, anti-American nationalists and anti-Soviet nationalists found common ground in arguing for Japanese leadership of Asia, and today, these disparate groups hold common views of how the U.S alliance deprives Japan of its national sovereignty. In short, Japanese security thinking remains rife with variety and with values that have grown out of this historical arc.

At the end of the Pacific War, four groups emerged: 1) Pacifists who argued for a doctrine of unarmed neutralism, 2) Neo-militarists who never got much traction, but who found some succour within the revisionist right of the LDP, 3) Revisionists, like Kishi Nobusuke and Hatoyama Ichiro, who had a checkered past, but who came to hug (and be hugged by) the United States, and 4) Pragmatists, particularly Yoshida Shigeru, who were the heirs of the small Japanists and formed the ruling mainstream of Japan’s cheap riding realism.

The battle between these last two groups—over defense spending, over Constitutional Revision, and over the institutions of national security policy-making— particularly the JDA and the SDF— was in my view the dominant domestic dynamic driving Japanese security policy during the Cold War. This battle—resolved in favor of Yoshida after Kishi’s 1960 meltdown—never really disappeared. It continues to form the core of battles today about defense and constitutional revision.

Yoshida’s was a strategic genius. He steered Japan brilliantly between Article Nine and the U.S. alliance-- “squeezing it between” pacifism and traditional nationalism. He kept constitutional revision off the agenda and socialists out of power. After he left the scene and the revisionists mishandled the tumultuous Security Treaty Revision Crisis in 1960, his mainstream returned and prospered by crafting “comprehensive security” and “defensive defense” as Japan’s central doctrines. Yoshida’s mainstream successors expelled the ultranationalists, pacified the revisionists, and watched as the pacifists revised their own position. The left learned to live with the alliance and the right with Article Nine. A new consensus would be achieved around a Japan that would be a “non-nuclear, lightly armed, economic superpower.” The Yoshida Doctrine borrowed considerably—but selectively—from the past. Its mercantile realism was focused on generating wealth and technological independence per the “rich nation, strong army” doctrine, but it eschewed the military component. It would safeguard Japan through commerce.

But Japan’s entry into great power diplomacy through the merchants’ entrance merely delayed the inevitable. The Yoshida Doctrine was not built for the post-Cold War world. It provided some prestige but too little muscle and too little autonomy-- and this imbalance has begun to drive a new debate over Japan’s national security. At first, this debate was joined by champions of each side in the old debate between revisionism and pacifism. But they were soon overtaken by new positions, as realists have now split from neoconservatives and as the small Japanists seemed to lose their way altogether. A new generation of autonomists has emerged. No matter how rich Japan becomes, they argue, it will have no influence without independent military power. The mainstream and anti-mainstream would trade places, so that by the early 2000s, the grandkids of Kishi would have a full grip on power and those of Yoshida would be marginalized. The neo-autonomists would be in the wings.

If a new consensus has not yet taken shape by 2007, a new discourse certainly has. These preferences can be sorted along two axes. The first is a measure of the value placed on the alliance with the United States. At one extreme there is the view

that the United States is Japan's most important source of security, and must be hugged closely. On this account, the extent of U.S. power and the limits of Japanese capabilities are central and the strategic importance of the alliance for Japan's security is paramount. U.S. bases in Japan are critical elements of any coherent national security strategy. At the other extreme is the view that in a uni-polar world, the United States is a particularly dangerous bully that must be kept at some distance, for fear that Japan would become entangled in American adventures. And entanglement is made all the more likely by the presence of U.S. bases. Located in the middle of this axis are those who call upon Japan to rebalance its Asian and American relationships more effectively. They are attracted to the idea of regional institution building, but are not yet prepared to release America from Japan's embrace.

This first axis, then, is a surrogate measure of the relative value one places on the dangers of abandonment and entanglement. Those with a high tolerance for the former are willing to keep a greater distance from the United States than are those with a higher tolerance for the latter. Those with a high tolerance for entanglement are not all status quo-oriented, however. They are divided by the second axis-- the willingness to use force in international affairs. Critics maintain that, stripped to its essence, the idea of a "normal nation" simply means "a nation that can go to war."

Some of those who support the U.S. alliance, then, are more willing to deploy the SDF to "share alliance burdens" than are others who prefer that Japan continue to limit itself to rear area support. Some of the former wish Japan to become a great power again, and are associated with the idea that Japan should become "normal." In the view of these "**Normal Nation-alists**," the statute of limitations for Japan's mid-20th century aggression expired long ago; it is time for Japan to step onto the international stage as an equal of the United States. The latter, "**Middle Power Internationalists**," believe that Japan must remain a small power with self-imposed limits to its right to belligerency. Japan's contributions to world affairs should remain predominantly non-military. They believe that prosperity is the way to prestige and security. Among those who prefer Japan to keep a greater distance from the United States, are "**Neo-Autonomists**" who would build an independent, full spectrum Japanese military that could use force and "**Pacifists**" who eschew the military institution altogether. The former believe that strength is the way to autonomy and security, while the latter, believe that prosperity is the best way to achieve it. If the preferences of the "Normal Nation-alists" prevail, Japan's post-Yoshida Doctrine consensus would be forged out of the "globalization of the alliance." Over time, the "unsinkable aircraft carrier" would be configured to launch

Japanese war fighters alongside American ones. Joint military operations far afield, formal commitments to policing SLOCs out to the Arabian Sea, collective self-defense, and the joint use of force would each be fully legitimated. Japan would acquire even more modern military capabilities, many of which would be interoperable with U.S. systems. Japan would cease pretending to be following religiously the Yoshida script. This was Japan's path-- until Abe Shinzō went down in flames earlier this week.

A second alternative would be to achieve national strength to achieve autonomy, the preferred path of Japan's neo-autonomists. They, too, would build a better military shield, but theirs would be nuclear and operationally independent of the United States. In addition to a credible, independent nuclear deterrent, Japan would acquire a full spectrum military configured not merely to support and supply U.S. forces or to defend against terrorists and missile attacks, but one that could "reach out and touch" adversaries. Armed in this way with an improved shield and a sharpened sword, Japan would seek to maintain a military advantage over peer competitors. The neo-autonomists would shift Japanese doctrine from what has been a tethered defensive realism to an untethered offensive realism, one in which strategists would be ever alert to exploit opportunities to expand Japan's power. Japan would then truly be "normal." It would join the other great powers engaged in a permanent struggle to maximize national strength and influence—and would not be averse to revising the status quo in the process. Such a program would certainly generate pressure for the elimination of U.S. bases in Japan and would enhance the prospect of abandonment by Washington. It would also significantly accelerate the security dilemma already underway in Northeast Asia.

A third choice, the one preferred by the middle power internationalists, would require turning back the clock and reversing some of the revisionists more ambitious assaults on the Yoshida Doctrine. Japan would once again eschew the military shield in favor of the mercantile sword. It would bulk up Japan's considerable soft power in a concerted effort to knit East Asia together without generating new threats or becoming excessively vulnerable. The Asianists in this group would aggressively embrace exclusive regional economic institutions to reduce Japan's reliance on the U.S. market. They would not abrogate the military alliance, but would resist U.S. exhortations for Japan to expand its roles and missions. Textbook mercantile realists would support the establishment of more open regional economic institutions as a means to reduce the likelihood of abandonment by the United States and would seek to maintain America's protective embrace as cheaply and for as long as possible.

The final, least likely, choice would be to achieve autonomy through prosperity. This is the choice of pacifists, many of whom today are active in civil society through NGOs that are not affiliated with traditional political parties. They too would reduce Japan's military posture—possibly even eliminate it. But unlike the mercantile realists, they would reject the alliance as dangerously entangling. They would eschew hard power for soft power, and campaign to establish Northeast Asia as a nuclear free zone, expand the “defensive defense” concept to the region as a whole, negotiate a region-wide missile control regime, and rely upon the Asian Regional Forum of ASEAN for security. Their manifest problem is that the Japanese public is unmoved by their prescriptions.

My guess is that none of these will prevail on its own. If the past is any guide, a new consensus will emerge. I am guessing that it will be one in which Japan will consolidate the significant security gains it has accumulated during the past decade, but one that will recognize that hedging makes better sense than balancing or bandwagoning. The result would be a security posture that is not too strong and not too weak, not too close to the US and not too far. One that has insured Japan against both abandonment and entrapment, as well as against predation and protectionism. I call this the “Goldilocks Consensus.”

One might imagine that the revisionists who came to power in the early 2000s will consolidate their preferences as national policy, and continue to slice the pacifist loaf until nothing is left of the Yoshida consensus at all. But, since they have already demonstrated their commitment to the pacifist ideals of the 1947 Constitution, and since they do not advocate an autonomous defense build-up, it is not likely that the Yoshida consensus will be displaced entirely. There are advocates of the normal nation view who seek greater autonomy, just as there are autonomists, pacifists, and some of middle power internationalists who are not yet ready to sever all ties to the United States.

Likewise, there is no significant party to the Japanese security discourse that refuses to accept the legitimacy of the SDF. All agree, moreover, that China, with all its great power ambitions, needs to be integrated peacefully and that a non-democratic China is inimical to Japanese interests. Thus, it seems at least plausible that a pragmatic “middle power” road-- amended to allow a fuller military hedge against Chinese power and American decline-- will be an attractive successor to the Yoshida consensus. There is some evidence that leaders of each quadrant—including Ozawa Ichiro and Abe Shinzo—are moving in this direction—albeit at different paces and on different paths. This possible new consensus is likely to resemble Goldilock's

preferences: Japan's relationships with the United States and China will be neither too hot nor too cold, and its posture in the region will be neither too big, nor too small.

CONCLUSION:

We have seen how more than a century of changes in international politics have affected domestic political discourse in Japan-- and vice versa. Mainstreams shifted repeatedly, as strategies came and went. Over the course of the past century, two substantial national security consensuses-- the first militarist and the second pacifist-- were established. Each was built on a paradigm within which the sharp edges of ideological division were shaved to accommodate a coherent national strategy. In the process, once marginal views were embraced and broadly shared values splintered. Japanese grand strategy was buffeted by shifts in the domestic civil-military relationship from political leadership to military leadership in the 1930s, from military leadership to bureaucratic leadership in the 1950s, and from bureaucratic to political leadership today.

Today we are witness to an active debate about the value of the strategic doctrine that contributed so much to postwar Japanese prosperity and stability. The Yoshida Doctrine has not yet been replaced, but by making Japan more muscular and by incrementally eliminating some of the constraints on the use of force, revisionists have made sure that its contours are forever changed. No one has a crystal ball. But, barring a collapse of China and a reversal in its "rise", it seems most likely that Japan will never again be as central to world affairs as it was in the 1930s. But neither will it be as marginal to world affairs as it was during the Cold War and still is today. I am guessing that once revisionism has run its course and once accommodations are made in its economic diplomacy, Japan will have constructed for itself a policy space in which it can be selectively pivotal in world affairs.

It will have done so by creating new security options for itself. In short, it looks a new, fourth grand strategy is under construction in which Japan will be more muscular than the mercantilists would prefer, but less so than the autonomists would prefer and that Tokyo will continue to balance its military and economic security-- albeit both at higher levels with greater degrees of freedom-- within the embrace of the US-Japan alliance.