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HAS JAPAN LOST ITS RELEVANCE?

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There seems to be a widespread perception that Japan is losing its relevance in the international arena. Ten years ago when Japan was mired in recession and the government was unable to face up to the financial and economic problems, a British journal *The Economist* lamented the situation with a headline, “Japan’s amazing ability to disappoint”. Ten years later, in February this year, a headline in *The Economist* was “Japain” suggesting that Japan still suffers from the incompetence of its politicians and bureaucrats, thereby threatening Japan’s long-term growth prospects¹. Indeed, those of us who have not forgotten Japan, including myself are painfully aware of Japan’s declining international stature: In terms of per capita nominal GDP in 2006, Japan placed 18th among the 30 member countries of the OECD². In 2007, Japan’s official development assistance plunged by 30.1 percent from previous year to \$7.69 billion, falling to 5th place among foreign aid donors, leaving Japan behind the United States, Germany, France and Britain³. Prospects for long-term economic growth are clouded by its huge government debt, which currently totals about 180% of GDP, and its demographics, the population is not just aging but declining fast.

On the international security policy front, Japan’s performance appears to remain far from satisfactory; its defense budget has been declining for five consecutive years and less than one percent of GDP. In April 2008, the number of Japanese military personnel contributing to UN operations is only 36, which ranks 83rd among UN member states⁴. The prevailing perception seems to be that Japan is becoming marginalized, whereas China is increasing its power and influence in the region.

My central argument today is not that Japan has lost its relevance. On the contrary, I would argue that Japan’s relevance is increasing in terms of regional and global security roles. I have a couple of reasons to say so.

¹ *The Economist*, February 23 2008, p. 13 and pp. 28-30.

² <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200712270380.html>

³ <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200804040077.html>

⁴ http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/2008/apr08_2.pdf

First, Japan is a strong democracy and a major economic and technological power in the world. There are a host of global and regional security issues to which Japan can positively contribute. According to a BBC world service poll, released in April 2008, “Japan remains one of the countries with the most positive ratings, though this year it comes a close second to Germany.”⁵ In the Asia Pacific region in particular, Japan’s participation in peace keeping in Cambodia and East Timor, humanitarian and relief operations in the India Ocean Tsunami, were much appreciated both at home and in the region. There are sources of regional conflicts on the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Straits, and territorial disputes, Japan would be front and center of all these potential conflicts, in which Japan would be directly or indirectly involved, along with the United States. To put it another way, prevention of regional conflicts and if conflicts occur resolution of conflicts would require Japan’s active participation and involvement.

Second, Japan’s security policy has been transformed since the 1990s. Consequently, Japan’s security roles and missions have been expanded and its defense capabilities enhanced so that Japan will likely become more relevant and effective in tacking international peace cooperation activities.

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent the Gulf crisis and war of 1990-91 proved to be a watershed in Japan’s security policy, culminating in the enactment of the International Peace Cooperation Law’ and the Disaster Relief Law in June 1992.

In the 1990s Tokyo also adopted a series of new security policies, including the revised National Defense Program Outline (1995 NDPO) in November 1995 and the new Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation (US-Japan Guidelines) in September 1997. The 1995 NDPO substantially expanded the roles and missions of the SDF, to include response to large-scale disasters, terrorist attacks and ‘various other situations that could seriously affect Japan’s peace and security’, as well as participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations. The 1997 US-Japan Guidelines provide a comprehensive framework for defense policy consultation and coordination between Tokyo and Washington, both in peacetime and during contingencies that affect Japan’s security.

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Tokyo strongly supported and assisted the U.S.-led coalition forces in the war on terror. With the passage in October 2001 of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, the operational scope of Japan’s SDF has been expanded: SDF vessels were sent to the Indian Ocean to provide supply of fuel to U.S. and U.K. naval ships in the Indian Ocean; and SDF aircraft were engaged in transportation support for U.S. forces. In July 2003,

⁵http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/views_on_countriesregions_bt/463.php?lb=btvoc&pnt=463&nid=&id=

the Japanese government passed the Special Measures Law on Iraq, thereby allowing SDF troops to be dispatched to 'non-combat zones' in Iraq. A total of about 5,600 Ground Self-Defense Force members participated in humanitarian and reconstruction activities, which lasted for two and a half years until September 2006⁶. Since December 2003, the Air Self-Defense Force's squadrons, each consisting of three C-130H transport planes and about 200 personnel, have been engaged in Iraqi reconstruction activities, providing support to the UN and multinational force even today.

The December 2004 'National Defense Program Guidelines, FY 2005-' (the new NDPG), which replaces the 1995 NDPO articulates Japan's security policy objectives and new measures in response to the changing strategic environment, including new security threats such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles, as well as that of international terrorism⁷. The new NDPG stipulates Japan's future defense capability as being 'a multi-functional, flexible, and effective force with high level of readiness, mobility, adaptability and multi-purpose capability', equipped with state-of-the art technologies and intelligence capabilities⁸. While maintaining an exclusively 'defense-oriented' defense posture, the new NDPG calls for a proactive role for Japan in international peace cooperation activities.

In January 2007, the Japan Defense Agency was upgraded into the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the SDF's primary mission was expanded to include international peace cooperation activities. What is required now is a "general law" which is on the Fukuda government's policy agenda. Therefore, I would argue that Japan's relevance to international security matters will substantially increase.

Third, Japan's commitment to the Japan-U.S. alliance ensures a robust U.S. military presence in the region, thus contributing to peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region. What has been taking place in recent years on this front is a gradual transformation of the Japan-U.S. alliance in the sense that the roles and missions and capabilities of the alliance are expanding so that we can meet new security threats and diverse contingencies of the 21st century, including the so-called non-conventional security challenges including international terrorism, spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction, natural disasters, pandemic diseases, and so on.

Significantly, there has been a convergence of strategic interests between Japan and the United States. In December 2002, Japan and the United States embarked on the Defense Policy Review Initiative (DPRI) in which the two governments work together to determine how roles, missions and capabilities

⁶ See, Japan Defense Agency, *Defense of Japan 2007* (Tokyo: Inter Group, 2007), Chapter 3.

⁷ See, Japan Defense Agency, 'National Defense Program Guidelines, FY 2005-', in *Defense of Japan 2005*, (Tokyo: Inter Group, 2005), pp. 451-458.

⁸ Ibid.

should be shared between the SDF and the U.S. forces, and how best to facilitate realignment of U.S. forces and military facilities and areas in Japan. The outcome of the DPRI process resulted in a series of important policy documents beginning with the February 2005 “2 + 2” document which for the first time in the history of the Japan-U.S. alliance articulated ‘common strategic objectives’ shared by Japan and the United States both at the regional and global levels.

In October 2005, the “2 + 2” meeting launched a follow-up document titled “U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future.” The document specifies 15 areas of cooperation that require improvement in terms of roles, missions and capabilities, including ballistic missile defense; counter-proliferation operations, Counter-terrorism; search and rescue operations; humanitarian relief operations; reconstruction assistance operations; Peacekeeping operations and capacity building for other nations’ peacekeeping efforts. It should be noted here that many of these activities are conducted in a multilateral context in which many countries work together for common purposes, such as PSI or relief operations. Japan-U.S. realignment initiatives were finalized in the May 2006 “2 + 2” meeting document titled “U.S.-Japan Roadmap for Realignment Implementation.” The challenge for the Japan-U.S. alliance today is to implement policy measures articulated in these 2+2 documents. The strengthening of Japan-U.S. alliance, if properly managed, can be a vital factor contributing to regional and global security.

Fourth, Japan has been strategically and concretely enhancing its foreign and security policy horizon, making Japan an extremely relevant international security policy player. I want to raise six examples briefly.

The first example is the new Fukuda doctrine. Last month, Prime Minister Fukuda gave a speech at a Tokyo symposium on Asia’s future which has since been called a new Fukuda doctrine, thus updating his father’s doctrine of Japan’s foreign policy approaches to Southeast Asia. In the new Fukuda doctrine, the Prime Minister announced five promises regarding concrete actions that his government would take. One, Japan will support ASEAN’s efforts to realize the ASEAN Community by 2015. Two, Japan will reinforce its alliance with the U.S. as a form of public goods of the Asia-Pacific region, creating a “synergy” between the strengthening of the Japan-U.S. alliance and the promotion of Asian diplomacy. Three, “Japan will forge itself into a ‘Peace Fostering Nation,’ sparing no efforts to work for the realization of peace in Asia, the Pacific and the world.” Prime Minister Fukuda would like to pursue “diplomacy for disaster management cooperation,” calling for establishing a “disaster management and infectious disease control network in Asia, which I think is a laudable idea. Four, Tokyo will expand youth exchange programs. Five, the Fukuda government will tackle climate change⁹.

⁹ http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hukudaspeech/2008/05/22speech_e.html

The second example of Japan's enhancing strategic policy horizon relates to Prime Minister Fukuda's commitment to consolidate Tokyo's relations with China and South Korea. It is fair to say now the Japan-China relationship has entered a new phase, as the two countries are determined to comprehensively promote a "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests, exemplified by in the Joint Statement issued in May 2008 when President Hu Jintao visited Japan"¹⁰. To implement the Joint Statement, Japan and China announced as many as 70 concrete items to promote exchange and cooperation between the two countries in the Joint Press Statement¹¹. Another notable development in this regard is trilateral cooperation among Japan, China and the ROK. The trilateral summit meeting and Foreign Ministers meeting are now held on a regular basis and there is momentum to further strengthen tripartite cooperation. Japan-China-ROK tripartite framework can serve as an instrument for enhancing not only economic and technical cooperation but also security cooperation strategically focused on Northeast Asia.

The third example of Japan's new foreign and security policy horizon relates to its growing strategic relationships with Australia and India. In March 2007, Japan and Australia launched the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, pledging cooperation in such areas as counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery, maritime and aviation security, disaster relief and peace operations¹². Since the Japan-India Global Partnership in the 21st Century, a bilateral agreement signed in August 2000, Japan and India have been enhancing cooperation in a comprehensive manner, culminating in the 2007 Joint Statement on the Roadmap for New Dimensions to the Strategic and Global Partnership between Japan and India, in which the partnership is depicted as "an essential pillar for the future architecture of the entire region."¹³

The fourth example is Japan's new policy toward Africa and Afghanistan. Recently, Japan hosted the Fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV) with delegations of 51 African countries, together with the representatives of 34 other countries, 75 international and regional organizations, and representatives of the private sector, academic institutions and civil society organizations from both Africa and Asia. At this historic meeting, Prime Minister Fukuda pledged that by 2012 Japan would double its ODA to Africa, providing Japanese ODA loans of up to 4 billion US dollars to Africa to improve African infrastructure. In addition, he promised that Japan would double its grant aid and technical cooperation for Africa over the next five years¹⁴. ODA, however, is only a

¹⁰ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/joint0805.html>

¹¹ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/pv0805/press.html>

¹² <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0703.html>

¹³ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/joint-2.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/africa/ticad/ticad4/pm/address.html>

part of Japan's African policy initiative. "Yokohama Declaration" titled "Toward a Vibrant Africa" presents a comprehensive set of policy measures including "human security" policy recommendation¹⁵. Africa and Afghanistan for that matter are increasingly looming large on Japan's security policy agenda.

Finally, Japan's space policy may also be taken as an example of Japan's expanding strategic policy horizon, which has relevance to regional and global security. Last month, the Japanese Diet enacted Japan's basic law on the use of space, which would allow the Japanese government to station equipment in space such as early warning satellites that can detect signs of a ballistic missile and advanced reconnaissance satellites. Satellite pictures can provide vital information in times of natural disasters such as the devastating earthquake in Sichuan, China.

In sum, Japan, the world's second largest economy, robustly allied with the United States, is transforming itself into a regional and global security policy player. Japan is strengthening its partnerships with ASEAN, Australia and India, consolidating stable relationships with China and South Korea, and extending its strategic policy horizon to Africa and Afghanistan and to space. Hence, Japan will play a major part in forging a new security order in Asia and the Pacific of the 21st century. So my answer to the question, "Has Japan lost its relevance?" is emphatically "No! The fact of the matter is Japan's relevance to regional and global security challenges is increasing, and Japan's role is more important than before.

¹⁵ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/africa/ticad/ticad4/doc/declaration.html>