

Video Transcript for “Contemporary Security Challenges to Japan”

Online at <http://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedial/contemporary-security-challenges-japan>

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So before we talk about the contemporary security environment, I think it's important, just to provide context, to take a step back in time and briefly discuss some of the ways in which Japan's security environment has evolved since the end of the Cold War. After all, it's the case that many aspects of Japan's security policy, and very importantly its relationship with the United States, were shaped in a Cold War context, particularly during the U.S. occupation from 1945 to 1952.

So when we come to the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union forced a lot of important debates within Japan about its role in the region and the world, its domestic political institutions, and its relationship with the United States. So the collapse of the Soviet Union really ended the bipolar international system. And so the alliance had been defined as an anticommunist alliance immediately after the end of World War II. And so it needed to adapt to this change. And it wasn't smooth sailing. Early on after the collapse there was a sense that the alliance was adrift, it was in search of a purpose. And Yoichi Funubashi, former Editor-in-Chief of *Asahi Shimbun* [one of Japan's biggest newspapers] coined this term “alliance adrift,” which I think really captures the search for a purpose in the early post-Cold War environment.

So from the perspective of Japan's security policy, the Cold War was in many ways a simpler time. There was a clear existential threat by what was perceived to be an expansionist and ideological adversary in the Soviet Union. So adapting to this new complexity without that new threat in the post-Cold War period is one of the major challenges that faces Japan today. And debates continue 25 years later about how best to do that.

So the 1991 Persian Gulf War, after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, provided a very early test. To many Japanese leaders then, but also now, Japan's response revealed how Japan's political system and institutions seem to be ill-equipped to respond to crises and in the eyes of many LDP leaders, the hit that Japan's international image took as a result of criticism of its primarily financial contributions, so-called “checkbook diplomacy.” This provided a significant impetus for major reforms. So this reform push, born after the end of the Cold War, but also in response to the Persian Gulf War, was a major driver of a lot of the changes in the 1990s to Japan's security policy and institutions as well as the alliance itself. And so that push that began a long time ago has continued under Prime Minister Abe [today], and is reflected in some of the new institutions like

Japan's new National Security Council, its first ever, which was established at the end of 2013, and also major revision to the U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation which were revised in April 2015, after an earlier revision in 1997.

What security challenges does Japan face today?

There are a lot of security challenges that Japan faces in the contemporary international environment. Ask different people, they may point to different numbers or even define them a little bit differently. Myself, I would point to four. Two of them are concrete, either concrete threats or concrete potential threats. And two are more abstract but still important. And all four of them interact in really interesting and important ways.

So, first and foremost is North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear missile programs. And so though the rise of China gets much of the press, it was actually revelations of North Korea's nuclear program that originally drive the U.S. and Japanese allies, drove those concerns about regional stability in the early and mid-1990s. And the potential threat to Japan of North Korea's missile program became abundantly clear on August 31, 1998, as you see in the map. This is when North Korea abruptly lobbed a two-stage intercontinental ballistic missile over the Japanese archipelago. And fast-forward to October 2006, when North Korea tests its first nuclear weapon, showing that it had this capability, and coupled with intermittent rhetorical threats from Pyongyang, North Korea has become a clear and present danger in the eyes of many defense planners in Japan and beyond, and certainly in Washington. And this has been one of the major drivers of some of these reforms that we've seen, as well as procurement decisions such as heavy investment in joint development of ballistic missile defense with Washington. But also more advanced intelligence collection capabilities, such as satellites.

Now that all said, second, the China factor's absolutely a big one. There's robust debate within Tokyo about the effect that China's rise has on Japan's security environment, and there's no clear consensus in this regard. But it's definitely a topic of debate. So most importantly in our view, most fundamentally is this objectively measurable shift in the military balance within the region over the past 20 or so years. And coupled with what's seen as China's relatively opaque decision-making process and relative lack of military transparency, that's ground for abstract concern. What does China's rise mean? Where is it headed, and what are its intentions? But particularly salient since roughly around 2010 or so is what Japanese leaders see as China's maritime advance but also its more increasingly assertive, both rhetorically and operationally, posture toward the Senkaku, or in Chinese, Diaoyu Islands, which Tokyo, of course, considers its own sovereign territory.

Now it's important to note, when we're thinking about things in a historical context, how rapidly the situation has changed. Eighteen years ago in 1997 neither China's military modernization nor its policies and rhetoric towards sovereign, de-sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas were major concerns, at least in Tokyo. China's

official defense budget in 1997 was \$10 billion. At that moment in time it was roughly the same as Taiwan and one-fourth that of Japan's. Now fast-forward to today in 2016, Beijing's official defense budget is \$146 billion. It's more than three times Japan's and 13 times that of Taiwan. So that's fundamentally changed the strategic environment in the region.

The third factor, and more abstract, is this uncertainty about where the region is headed. It's a very dynamic region. But that means rapidly changing. And so how things are going to play out economically, militarily, diplomatically—these are all open-ended questions that we can't know the answer to today. In this regard, one issue that hasn't been talked about too much, but maybe we should be talking about a little bit more, particularly in the current campaign context, the presidential campaign, is the fact that over a period of decades, U.S. basic fundamental strategy toward the region has been largely consistent and bi-partisan. But there have been in Tokyo intermittent surges of concern about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to Japan's defense. This manifests most recently in repeated requests from the Japanese side for President Obama to state clearly and explicitly that the 1960 Security Treaty, Article Five, applies to the Senkaku Islands. He ultimately did in April 2014. But more recently, comments by some influential voices, including presidential candidates, at least raise questions about how the U.S. role is likely to evolve in the future. And in the midst of all this uncertainty, one of the fundamental questions facing Japanese leaders is, what role should Japan play? How can it best assure its own security in this dynamic context? And so more conservative leaders like Shinzo Abe, the current Prime Minister, advocate a more assertive posture, what he refers to as "proactive pacifism." And this is basically the idea that to ensure the peace, to ensure Japan's peace, Japan can no longer be what he would consider relatively passive but must more actively, more assertively contribute to international peace and stability.

And, finally, in the background of all these other three issues that I've mentioned, is a fundamental dilemma that Japan's leaders have faced since 1947 when the Constitution was promulgated, but that continues to today. So from a realist standpoint Japan faces a number of seemingly obvious security challenges. But for a lot of complicated reasons, including the so-called Peace Clause of Japan's Constitution, which has never been revised, and also widespread popular opposition to the use of military force, there are limitations, at least so far, pretty significant ones, on what role it can play.

This fourth challenge is a bit abstract, but how Japanese leaders respond to it inevitably shapes Japan's response to those other challenges I was referring to. So over the past couple decades, Japan has adopted a number of significant reforms. But especially as it concerns, again, this use of military force, this fundamental question, major constraints still exist, even after those changes that have made global headlines, many of which have been pushed through by the current administration. So that's why I've argued that

many of these changes are best thought of as evolutionary as opposed to revolutionary because it's also important to note what hasn't changed.

Is there a risk of conflict between China and Japan over the East China Sea?

So as it concerns the issue of a possible conflict in the East China Sea, first I'd just like to stress the fact that we're even discussing this, or that policy makers have even started discussing this in the last couple of years, is pretty disturbing. At the end of the day we're talking about the world's second and third largest economies. And as the statement by President Barack Obama in April 2014 shows, the U.S., the first largest economy, would also be involved if, God forbid, a conflict were to occur. So conflict is unlikely but it's something that we do need to take seriously. And in this regard it seems pretty clear that neither Xi Jinping or Shinzo Abe or whoever their successors are seek a conflict. But my concern here is that some of China's policies, particularly since 2012, have effectively raised the risk that we'll see one even if we don't want to. It's still low, but it's something that we need to take seriously. So in this regard, the major concern is the possibility of a miscalculation or escalation as a result of a low-level incident. And in this regard, since September 2012, China's operations in the waters and airspace surrounding the islands leaves some grounds for concern. We've seen a historic and unprecedented rise in the frequency of Japanese air self-defense force scrambles in approaching Chinese planes. We've also seen, particularly since September 2012, an upsurge in the, from Japan's perspective, *de facto* territorial incursions into Japan's territorial waters by Chinese government vessels. Both the ships and planes are operating in relatively close proximity. There's always the risk of a possible clash.

Beyond that, there's also some concerns about reported incidents, such as the use in January 2013, by the Chinese side, of a PLA Navy destroyer, of what's called fire-controlled radar against a maritime self-defense force destroyer and a helicopter. And there have also been some relatively close encounters in the airspace by fighter jets. So that's something that we need to be paying attention to. And you want to make sure that the institutions and crisis management mechanisms are in place so that if something were to happen, even unintended, political leaders can respond rapidly and ensure that we don't see a war that no one wants to, no one wants to in the first place.

How has the U.S.-Japan alliance evolved in the face of a changing security environment?

There have been a lot of changes, some of them at the margins, some more significant, and many of them under the radar, metaphorically speaking. In response to North Korea's threat we've seen, as I mentioned earlier, a significant investment in joint development of ballistic missile defense, reflected in aegis capabilities in the water, the Maritime Self-Defense Forces, new intelligence satellites, but also PAC-3 and more – other aspects of ballistic missile defense. There's been other joint development and collaboration in military technology as well. We've seen closer interoperability, we've also seen the co-location of forces, U.S. and Japanese forces, on bases in Japan.

Perhaps the most famous recent development is the July 2014 so-called “reinterpretation” of Japan’s Constitution that was pushed through by the Abe Administration and Cabinet Resolution. And this allows Japan to exercise, a limited exercise of the U.N. Charter Sanction right of what’s called “collective self-defense.” And so what this means, in effect, is that under certain circumstances Japan might, for the first time, be able to come to the defense, using military force, of a U.S. or other allied naval vessel, or something else that comes under attack. And this is something that Japanese conservatives have been pushing for a relatively long time. And Abe was able to, with significant caveats, able to push through limited reinterpretation.

There’s also been, as I mentioned earlier, the April 2015 revision of the U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation. And there’s a lot of things we could talk about there—expansion and cooperation in a new domains such as cyber and space. But also there’s a new mechanism called the Alliance Coordination Mechanism. Now the meat needs to still be put on the bones of this—it’s unclear what exactly it will entail—but many of the folks I talk to in Washington and Tokyo show that in 1997, the last time the Guidelines were revised, they created a bi-lateral coordination mechanism designed to enhance the cooperation in a crisis between the U.S. and Japan. But it was never actually utilized, even in some pretty significant crises such as 3/11, the nuclear disaster – tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear disaster, March 11th, 2011, in which the so-called Operation Tomodachi, or Operation Friendship, was one of the most significant developments in U.S.-Japan operational cooperation since the Cold War, actually. But also was the largest mobilization of Japan’s self-defense forces in history. And so what they’re trying to do is develop more effective ways of cooperating. And that is relevant, not just in possible natural disaster responses, but also, hopefully won’t happen, but a possible military conflict.

Another thing that’s happening is that, in addition to bilateral tightening of the relationship, we also see Japan, with U.S encouragement, expanding its cooperation and interoperability with some other countries, most notably Australia. So this is definitely a trend line that we should keep an eye on in the future.