

April 24, 2013

Usa: No more a “security consumer”

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The American pivot to Asia, the increasing military capabilities of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the growing threat posed by the nuclear and ballistic program of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), have accelerated the evolution of the US-Japan alliance that had started after the end of the Cold War.

Since the late 1990s, the alliance has experienced two distinct moments of 'deepening', marked by the approval of the new Guidelines for the alliance and the "Transformation initiatives" in 1997 and 2005, respectively.

Both moments highlighted a progressive increase in the importance of Article Six of the Mutual Security Treaty that emphasizes collaboration between Washington and Tokyo in the promotion of peace and stability in the region. This evolution has accelerated as a consequence of the 'pivot to Asia', transforming Japan's role from a mere supplier of bases into an active member of the US-led security architecture in the Asia-Pacific.

Even if Japan remains the cornerstone of the US engagement in the region, its bargaining power vis à vis the United States has diminished within the evolving security environment. This has forced Tokyo to rethink the main tenets of its security strategy.

Firstly, the increased Chinese military capabilities, and particularly the acquirement of Anti Access-Area Denial (A2AD) capacities, render the main US bases in Japan and Okinawa vulnerable to a possible first strike. Whilst this does not imply that American forces are likely to abandon such bases altogether, it does mean that they will seek to share their power projection hub role with other facilities located outside the First Island Chain.

Secondly, the pivot entails a process of 'alliance diversification', namely the enhancement of pre-existing alliances – such as those with South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines – and the opening of new diplomatic channels with former adversaries such as Vietnam and Myanmar.

These two trends increasingly force Japan to reconsider its role and enlarge its duties in the provision of security and deterrence in the area. Tokyo is no longer able to behave as a 'security consumer', whose mere alignment with the US and provision of bases guarantees security and stability. It is rather compelled to turn itself into an active security provider.

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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The most immediate consequence is the acceleration of the ongoing process of “normalization” of the Japanese security identity, namely the abandonment of post war pacifism for a more active military role in the area.

Apart from Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution, the vast majority of the institutional self-binding prescriptions that underpinned Japan’s postwar pacifism and impeded a major military role in the Asia-Pacific region have been abolished or loosened. Japan has indeed recently exported military technology, deployed troops abroad, acquired power projection capabilities and cooperated in military initiatives, such as the joint “West Pac” Missile Defense system, which entails a military use of space.

The other fundamental trend regards the evolution of Japanese military capabilities and the changing role of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). The deepening of the alliance and the challenges posed by the growth in Chinese power did not lead to a quantitative increase in Japanese military capabilities. On the contrary, the Japanese military budget declined for 11 consecutive years between 2001 and 2012. This trend has been reversed only in 2013 with the conservative government led by Abe Shinzo proposing a small increase in the military budget of 0.8%.

Permanent budget constraints notwithstanding, Japan has redefined its military posture and adapted its military capabilities to the new exigencies created by the growing Chinese threat and by the “burden shifting” in the alliance.

The interoperability with the US forces has been increased. The most evident signs of these progresses are the active Japanese participation to the joint Missile Defense System and the frequent joint military exercises promoted by the US forces and the JSDF.

Moreover, since the release of the 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), the JSDF included “dynamic deterrence”, alongside the defense of Japan’s national territory, as one of the defined basic roles of the Japanese forces. The new NDPG also foresees an extra-regional role for Japanese forces in the provision of maritime security in the Indian Ocean and in the Western Pacific, as part of a “multilayered security network” including the US, South Korea and Australia.

Ultimately these trends highlight the main dilemma the Japanese policy makers are facing. On the one hand, the deepening of the alliance and the expansion of the role of the JSDF are aimed at securing the country and enhancing the stability of the region. This process fulfils American interests, namely turning a former “reluctant ally”, such as Tokyo, into an active security provider.

On the other hand, the expansion of the role of the JSDF, the increased interoperability and the abandonment of pacifism tends to decrease the Japanese capacity to deflect American requests and to avoid entanglements in major security disputes.

Ultimately the rise of China and the deepening of the alliance seem to have undermined the Japanese capacity to isolate itself from the dangerous game of security competition in the region that had constituted the cornerstone of the Japanese security strategy during the post war era.

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Le pubblicazioni online dell’ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

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