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Japan's security and defence policy in flux

Japan needs to adopt a kind of realism that emphasises the complex problems in dealing with China and does not resort to military means alone

Japan's security and defence policy is in flux. On 16 December 2022, at a cabinet meeting, the Japanese government adopted the 'three new strategic documents' – the National Security Strategy, the National Defence Strategy and the Defence Forces Development Plan. It states that 'Japan's security situation in the post-war period has never been as difficult as it is today.' As a result, defence spending is to be increased to two per cent of GDP by the fiscal year 2027, and a decision was made to introduce weapon systems that would enable Japan to attack enemy bases. In the next five years, defence spending will total 43 trillion yen, or about 270 billion euros. The National Defence Strategy also states that it will 'further deepen discussion with the United States on their roles, missions and capabilities and further reinforce joint deterrence capabilities of both countries in an integrated manner.'

A reversed situation

The deterioration in the security situation in East Asia noted here is in fact also perceived by many Japanese citizens. Opinion polls show that a majority understand the need to strengthen defence capacities. The background to this development is the dramatic increase in Chinese defence spending. As recently as 2000, Japan's defence spending was twice that of China's, but the picture has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. China's defence budget, announced in March 2023, was 1.5 trillion yuan ($250 bn), which amounts to 7.2 per cent larger than one year earlier – a record figure – and 4.5 times larger than Japan's defence budget for the 2023 fiscal year.

The Japanese government's diplomatic efforts to prevent crises are

However, it must be borne in mind that the difference in economic growth rates of the two countries has played a crucial role in the reversal regarding defence spending. Even if Japan

insufficient.

increases defence spending to two per cent of its GDP, defence capabilities will not improve sufficiently without corresponding economic growth. In addition, the tax increase needed to increase the defence budget will make people's lives even harder at a time of economic stagnation – after all, incomes in Japan have been stagnant for three decades now. According to forecasts by the Japan Center for Economic Research, the country's GDP per capita, which is a measure of personal prosperity, has already been overtaken by Singapore (2007), Hong Kong (2014) and Taiwan (2022), and South Korea is expected to overtake Japan this year.

Not all threats to the security and livelihood of citizens can therefore be combatted with military means alone. In view of the limited resources, a drastic increase in defence spending means sacrificing resources that could normally be used for economic policy and the stabilisation of social security systems. Thus, there are reasonable doubts that increasing defence spending will really make Japan stronger and more secure – especially since the government's diplomatic efforts to prevent crises are insufficient.

The need for more sensitive diplomatic efforts

From 7 to 9 August 2023, Taro Aso, Japan's former prime minister and current vice chairman of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), visited Taiwan. It was the first official visit to the island by an incumbent LDP vice chairman since 1972, when Japan and Taiwan severed diplomatic relations. In his keynote speech at the Ketagalan Forum's 2023 Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue – a symposium organised by Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has attracted international attention – Aso said the situation in the Taiwan Strait is 'gradually tilting toward a time of emergency'. Japan, Taiwan, the US and other countries need to be ready to be 'determined to fight' to counter Chinese military pressure. Only this, he said, would be a realistic solution. Beijing reacted strongly to the statement, but Aso and his colleagues were unperturbed and reiterated that China's response was proof that their statements had been effective as a deterrent.

However, enhanced deterrence can prevent war only if it is combined with sensitive diplomatic efforts to ensure that wrong intentions are not

conveyed to the other side. Are Japan's diplomatic efforts sufficient? Even the major powers of the US and China are making efforts to engage in dialogue and diplomacy, despite difficult circumstances, to avoid the worst-case scenario of a crisis – or even a military conflict – over Taiwan. During his June meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken clearly expressed his concern about China's provocative actions in the Taiwan Strait. However, he did reiterate Washington's traditional position that the US does not support Taiwan's independence. Referring to America's restriction on semiconductor exports to China, he also stressed that his country was not trying to contain China economically.

Not least in view of Japan's geographical proximity to China, Tokyo should also strive to deepen the dialogue. A departure from Japan's traditional China policy to rearm militarily and prepare for military conflict, but neglect diplomatic efforts could have catastrophic consequences.

A threat that cannot be dealt with by military means alone must be brought under control through dialogue and other means.

Against this backdrop, the Okinawa Prefecture, in particular, is making intensive efforts to establish a dialogue with China. In April 2023, the prefecture set up a Regional Diplomacy Office to promote dialogue with China and other Southeast Asian countries. Some view these steps with scepticism and criticise that the hope for a dialogue with China is not based on a realistic assessment of the situation. In fact, these voices lack understanding of the situation in Okinawa. Located off the coast of the Chinese mainland, people here are well aware of the complexity of the situation. But the reality is that Okinawa's proximity to China and the large number of US military bases on the archipelago mean that it would be the first to be directly affected in the event of a Taiwan crisis. If the prefecture wants to protect the lives of its citizens, it cannot irresponsibly and one-sidedly promote the idea of a Chinese threat. Therefore, Okinawa is trying to distance itself from the government in Tokyo when it comes to security policy.

The government in Tokyo can learn much from the attitude of the Okinawa Prefecture. Not only on the Taiwan question where the problems in dealing with China are varied and complex, but also on the

unjustified detention of foreigners and the suppression of the Uyghur and Hong Kong pro-democracy movements. However, efforts to maintain dialogue must not be neglected simply because there are no apparent prospects of fundamental improvement. A threat that cannot be dealt with by military means alone must be brought under control through dialogue and other means. Only with this kind of realism can Japan master a security policy situation in the medium and long term that, as the three new strategic documents put it, 'has never been as difficult as it is today.'



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