

# EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

## TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

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## Defining Normalcy: The Future Course of Japan's Foreign Policy

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It has become increasingly popular in recent years to speak of Japan becoming a “normal” country, yet the actual meaning of the term remains ambiguous. Originally intended to refer to the weakening of the normative and legal constraints preventing Japanese leaders from adopting a more proactive role in international security affairs, widespread misconceptions of what is “normal” for Japan have led some pundits to exaggerate its definition and create misleading expectations—or even fears—about Japan’s future course.

The argument that Japan’s foreign policy has until recently been anything but normal is inherently flawed. Like any other state, it has pursued its strategic objectives in the manner policymakers have deemed most expedient in light of domestic and international circumstances at the time. Although the form and style of its foreign policy are admittedly undergoing a remarkable transformation, so too is the global order. Recent changes in security policy have been driven more by calculations of national interest and a determination to review self-inflicted taboos in the process of adapting to the changing domestic and international strategic environment than any particular desire to be thought of as “normal.”

What follows is a vision for the future course of Japanese foreign policy that aims to reconcile the

need for leaders to actively pursue the national interest in a rapidly transforming global context with a recognition of and sensitivity to remaining normative and legal constraints.

### Global Trends: A Rapidly Transforming International System

There is no denying that the post–Cold War era of US unipolar dominance is nearing its end and multipolarity and multilateralism increasingly define the geopolitical landscape. In no part of the world is this development more apparent than Japan’s own backyard, where the entire region, spearheaded by the remarkable rise of China, has succeeded the United States as the primary driver of global growth and—through institutions such as ASEAN+3 and the three-year-old East Asia Summit—shown that community building and regionalism are global, not only European, trends.

### The United States

There is no denying that the United States, despite a gradual decline in its relative global influence, will remain the world’s dominant power for the foreseeable future. In an attempt to salvage its foreign policy legacy after seven years of less-than-remarkable

results, the administration of President Bush will likely concentrate on a very fixed agenda in its final year: aiming to restore stability to the Middle East and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

While it is premature to attempt to predict the exact course of future US foreign policy so far in advance of the November elections, there are already signs of an emerging supra-partisan consensus on the need for the United States to reengage the international community and expand its support of multilateralism. Widespread discussions are currently taking place in US foreign policy circles about how best to restructure international institutions. No matter what conclusions are reached, it is clear that 21st century threats to global peace and stability such as energy security and the environment will require innovative and *inclusive* multilateral solutions.

## Europe

Europe is in the midst of its own political transformation, and recent years have seen relatively conservative governments come to power in Germany, France, and several other nations. The region continues to wrestle with how to most effectively address growing nationalism and further strengthen the European Union. Recent developments suggest transatlantic relations are likely to continue to improve. European leaders are also actively working to formulate an Asia strategy that will put the region in a better position to reap the benefits of Asia's economic rise, yet exactly how Europe-Asia relations will evolve in the future remains to be seen.

## China

China increasingly seeks a level of political influence concomitant with its status as a rising economic superpower. Although soaring defense expenditures and a growing confidence in its ability to take on a more assertive role internationally have been met with a certain degree of suspicion overseas, current circumstances suggest that, at least for the time being, Beijing has calculated that a benevolent international environment is essential for continued economic growth. Consequently, China is unlikely to engage in any behavior that will dramatically upset global stability.

## India

In recent years, India's massive population, rapid economic growth, and status as an established democracy have combined to turn it into a nation of immense strategic importance to the rest of the world. Leaders in New Delhi find themselves in an enviable position as the United States, Japan, and Europe seek to improve ties with India and balance China's rise.

## Russia

Throughout the 1990s, in an attempt to fix the many weaknesses inherent in Russia's centrally planned economy and put its country on the path to recovery, Moscow pursued widespread political reform. Unfortunately, however, social and economic conditions prevented Russia from quickly developing into a mature democracy and, in the eyes of many leaders in Moscow, continued economic malaise led some outsiders to look at it as a "second-class nation." In recent years, the administration of President Vladimir Putin has embarked on a campaign to restore Russia to its former glory, capitalizing on rising global energy prices to toe an increasingly confrontational foreign policy line and utilizing popular domestic support to consolidate its autocratic rule. How Russia's foreign policy will evolve in the coming years remains an open question.

## Japan's Future Course

The ongoing transformation of the regional and geopolitical landscape has made it abundantly clear that Japan must restructure its foreign policy to better suit its new environment. In recent years, Japanese foreign policy has been plagued by overdependence on the United States, insufficient attention to China's emergence as a challenger for regional leadership, an excessively confrontational North Korea policy that risks diplomatic isolation, and a foreign policy line increasingly characterized by rhetorical flourish and devoid of substantive policy prescriptions. Since coming to power last fall, the administration of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda has gradually shifted Japan toward a more "realist" foreign policy but has yet to fully articulate its vision. The recent legislative

deadlock resulting from the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) loss of its upper house majority has made it abundantly clear that a political accommodation between the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan will be necessary if Japan is to set a clear course for its foreign policy. What follows below are several of the possible areas for compromise. While simultaneously maintaining its alliance with the United States as the central pillar of its foreign policy, it is incumbent upon Japan to expand its participation in multilateral security operations and become a more active player in East Asia.

### Multilateral Security Operations

No discussion of Japan's security policy can avoid addressing the issue of the constitution. While constitutional revision should remain a long-term objective in order to provide policymakers with the strategic flexibility necessary to cope with exigent circumstances, the more pressing issue at the moment is achieving a more open interpretation of Article 9 to allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to play a role in multilateral security operations that transcends humanitarian aid and logistical support.

The most recent controversy surrounding the dispatch of the JSDF to the Indian Ocean, which resulted in several months of legislative gridlock,<sup>1</sup> made it abundantly clear that Japan is in need of a new—and permanent—legal foundation for JSDF dispatch. Policymakers should base decisions on whether or not to dispatch the JSDF overseas on the *legitimacy of the operation in question* rather than be held hostage to excessively legalistic interpretations of existing laws.

While “legitimacy” is by its very nature subjective, the UN Charter provides an effective framework for determining what missions are appropriate for Japanese participation. Chapters 7 and 8 of the charter allow for such UN Security Council-backed operations as the current International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, peacekeeping

operations, and other multilateral initiatives under the auspices of regional organizations “provided that such arrangements or agencies and their activities are consistent with the purposes and principles of the United Nations.”<sup>2</sup>

An obvious prerequisite for a permanent law on JSDF dispatch is a candid and earnest national debate about why a proactive contribution to international security is in the interests of the Japanese people. Once a compromise is reached concerning the upper limits of Japan's contribution, a “general law” should provide legal backing for the JSDF's future participation overseas. Once they have clarified Japan's willingness to play an active role in international security, leaders should renew their efforts to acquire a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Any attempt to reform the Security Council will require extensive consultations with world powers, in particular the United States and China, as well as a substantial amount of patience and resolve.

### Regional Focus

While there is no doubt that a shifting balance of power in East Asia poses a number of novel challenges for policymakers, the region's recent evolution has also provided a substantial number of strategic opportunities. In order to ensure continuing peace, stability, and prosperity in the region, policymakers should center Japan's Asia policy on five primary objectives: 1) achieving a “grand bargain” with China; 2) institutionalizing a trilateral security dialogue among Japan, China, and the United States; 3) maintaining the Six-Party Talks as a mechanism for subregional consultations on security issues; 4) establishing an East Asia Security Forum; and 5) creating a regionwide rules-based economic community.

An increasingly close economic relationship, together with lessons learned from the recent deterioration in Japan-China relations, has finally set the stage for Tokyo and Beijing to conclude a “grand bargain” and enter into a new era of mutually

1 On January 11, 2008, Prime Minister Fukuda pushed an extension of the JSDF mission through the Diet, overriding opposition in the upper house.

2 See article 52 of the UN Charter for the full text. An example of an appropriate regional institution is the East Asia Security Forum, discussed below.

beneficial and forward-looking bilateral ties. This grand bargain would require both sides to work to restructure relations through joint efforts to address questions of history, various confidence-building measures in the field of security, cooperation to ensure that China achieves sustainable economic development, and collaboration to strengthen nascent community-building efforts in the region.

Japan must continue to advocate trilateral strategic dialogue with China and the United States. Regular talks among these three powers would go far toward eliminating mutual suspicions and consolidating an environment of trust in the region. Increased transparency would minimize US and Japanese concerns about China's strategic intentions and alleviate China's fear that the purpose of the US-Japan alliance is to contain its rise.

In addition to maintaining the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a venue for regionwide dialogue on security issues, the Six-Party Talks format has emerged as an effective subregional security forum to address the North Korean nuclear issue. This forum, which has succeeded in bringing together the five most powerful states in the region to openly discuss and cooperate in resolving a security issue of common concern, should remain active even after the nuclear issue is settled and be used to address remaining issues on the Korean Peninsula such as the normalization of relations between North Korea and the United States and Japan, the establishment of a permanent peace regime, and North Korea's continued economic development.

Although both the ARF and the Six-Party Talks will continue to contribute to regional peace and stability as forums for multilateral dialogue, Japan must also actively campaign for the creation of an East Asia Security Forum to proactively tackle non-traditional or cooperative security issues in the

region. This East Asia Security Forum would be tasked with addressing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, maritime piracy, and human security issues through cooperative action similar to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

Lastly, Japan must actively work with other nations in the region to see that the current proliferation of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) throughout East Asia ultimately evolves into a regionwide rules-based economic community. One important step in this direction would be a trilateral FTA among Japan, China, and South Korea.

## Conclusion

While recent developments in Japan's foreign policy do characterize a significant transformation, expectations that Japan will "remilitarize" and develop into a military superpower reveal a mistaken understanding of Japanese values and objectives. Although recent support for US-led security operations does suggest that a fundamental change is taking place in the nature and scope of Japan's global role, declining aid budgets, coupled with a public not quite convinced that an assertive role overseas is in the national interest, run counter to such developments. In short, what many pundits fail to realize when concluding that Japan is "normalizing" is that the future course of Japan's foreign policy has yet to be determined. Whatever its ultimate evolution, Japan is sure to pursue a foreign policy that is consistent with evolving global norms, embracing multilateralism and allowing the use of military force only in self-defense or with the explicit sanction of the international community.

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## East Asia Insights

*East Asia Insights* is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia community building from the Japanese perspective.

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