Japan’s Transnational Security Agenda

David Fouse

Key Findings

- Japan’s top national security priorities lie in the area of traditional security concerns related to North Korea and China. Transnational challenges are visible in Japan’s overall security thinking but are clearly secondary concerns. Japan views cooperation with the United States on global or transnational issues in relation to US support for its top priorities of North Korea and China.

- Japan’s top transnational security priorities have been nonproliferation and maritime security, because they are so closely intertwined with concerns related to North Korea and China. Disaster relief and peace cooperation activities are also deemed significant government priorities, although Japan’s participation in peace cooperation activities has actually declined in recent years. Disaster relief was emphasized as an area for greater US-Japan cooperation at the recent Defense Ministers Joint Defense Conference by Japan’s new defense minister, Toshimi Kitazawa.

- Japan has offered support to US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, cooperated with efforts aimed at undermining financial support for terrorism, and contributed to capacity-building in South Asia and Southeast Asia. However, the Japanese public does not feel that international terrorism strongly affects them, and many in the Japanese security community do not seem to make a firm connection between issues such as transnational organized crime and the illicit networks that can aid terrorists and undermine states.

- Given its available resources, Japan could do more to confront transnational organized crime both domestically and internationally. Japan could strengthen these efforts by passing anti-conspiracy legislation that would allow it to ratify the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNCTOC), fully implement Financial Action Task Force ( FATF) recommendations on money laundering, and take more proactive steps toward dealing with human trafficking.

- Japanese security policy is currently undergoing review following the victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the August 2009 elections. The new Hatoyama administration has already indicated its desire to see Japan regain leadership in dealing with climate change. Increased US-Japan cooperation in this and other nontraditional, transnational security areas is most likely to be successful, as the DPJ will be unlikely to stretch the limits of the legal restrictions placed on the Japan’s Self-Defense Forces.

Policy Background

During the early 1980s Japan adopted a “comprehensive security policy” that ostensibly placed less emphasis on military than on economic and diplomatic means for ensuring the country’s security. The comprehensive security concept developed as a natural outgrowth of Japan’s successful postwar experience, in which Japan devoted itself to economic development while relying on its alliance with the United States to provide external deterrence and limit its military expenditures. Within the alliance structure, Japan’s actual military planning in the postwar period focused primarily on defense of the homeland through the end of the Cold War.

In the early 1990s Japan confronted a number of challenges that led to a reconsideration of its overall security strategy. Japan faced strident international criticism of its so-called “checkbook diplomacy” in the first Gulf War of 1991. Shortly thereafter Japan was unprepared to offer assistance to the United States in contingency planning for the first North Korean nuclear crisis, causing what some have called a “minicrisis” in the alliance. As Japan began to grapple with the issue of how to make an international contribution to security proportionate to its economic clout, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) released a report introducing the new concept of human security and the need to expand security strategies beyond traditional territorial-based thinking to confront a plethora of growing transnational security challenges.

The first serious review of Japan’s Cold War security strategy was carried out in 1994 by Japan’s Advisory Group on Defense Issues (commonly referred to as the Higuchi commission). The report issued by the Higuchi commission indicated that military dangers now differed considerably from when the first National Defense Program Outline (NDPO) had been issued in 1976, pointing toward nontraditional threats...
arising from an “opaque and uncertain situation.” The Higuchi report emphasized that new multilateral approaches to dealing with security threats would be necessary, and that Japan would need to create capabilities to aid in preventing unstable situations from developing into large-scale conflicts. The gist of this report was then incorporated into a new NDPO that was released in 1995, which included “areas surrounding Japan” and contributions to international peacekeeping as valid concerns of Japanese security policy. Throughout the latter half of the 1990s, support for the idea of human security grew within Japan, culminating in 1999 when Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi indicated that the concept of human security would be embodied concretely in Japan’s foreign policy. A 2003 amendment of Japan’s Official Development Assistance Charter included a stipulation that the concept of human security would underlie the implementation of Japanese aid programs in the future.

The 2004 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) augmented Japan’s incorporation of transnational and nontraditional security challenges into its overall security planning. Citing “new threats and diverse situations” in the evolving security environment—such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism—the 2004 NDPG placed international peacekeeping operations on par with the defense of Japan for the first time. Another first in the 2004 NDPG, however, was the direct listing of North Korea and China as growing security concerns. Thus, while Japan aimed to broaden the scope of its security policy in the early part of the new century, it also became increasingly committed to traditional security concerns and whether or not it could afford to spread its limited resources across a wider array of international threats while keeping pace with threats perceived closer to home. Interviews carried out with Japanese government officials and subject matter experts during July 2009 indicate that present concerns about China and North Korea far outweigh a desire to confront so-called “global issues.” Likewise, many Japanese security analysts do not see these issues as priorities in terms of national security.

The rise of the DPJ to power in August 2009 has put renewed emphasis on some parts of Japan’s transnational security agenda, such as reviving its leadership on climate change. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent Japanese priorities will shift under the new administration.

Nonproliferation and Maritime Security

Not all transnational security challenges can be easily classified as traditional or nontraditional threats. Some of these issues are deeply intertwined with traditional security concerns, such as nuclear weapons proliferation, which crosses over these boundaries and garners greater attention from Japanese security planners focused on North Korea and China. Japan has for some time been a leader in the area of nonproliferation, and North Korean nuclear weapons development programs have brought even greater attention to this issue. Japan has been an active participant in discussions aimed at promoting better implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), early enforcement of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and strengthening International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.

The emphasis that Japan places on nonproliferation was highlighted by former Minister of Defense Yasukazu Hamada at the Asian Security Summit (Shangri-la Dialogue) in May 2009. In his summit speech Hamada identified complex and stratified global security threats such as piracy, natural disasters, infectious diseases and climate change as one of three major trends affecting the region (the two other trends were rapid military modernization and North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests). Hamada’s emphasis in dealing with global challenges focused specifically on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, and he suggested Japan was ready to play a more significant role in this area, including promoting greater understanding of the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

Maritime security is another priority often mentioned by government officials during interviews and discussed in Japan’s 2009 defense white paper. Here, one can see close linkages with Japanese concerns about Chinese naval expansion as a driving force in policymaking. Incursions into Japanese territorial waters by Chinese survey ships have been an ongoing source of tension between the two countries for some time. Both countries share aspirations to play a greater role in the protection of the sea lines of communication (SLOC) as well as a territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands that will make cooperation in this area very difficult to achieve. Not surprisingly, the Chinese government’s December 2008 announcement that it would be sending naval vessels to support the antipiracy coalition in the Gulf of Aden was quickly followed by a similar decision by the Japanese government to support that operation. Tokyo first sent the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) ships that were limited to the protection of maritime vessels under the Japanese flag and
could only use their weapons in self-defense. After the Diet passed a new antipiracy law in June 2009, the JMSDF was allowed to escort foreign commercial ships and fire upon pirate ships if they do not respond to warnings. This meant that, at least in theory, the JMSDF could be involved in escorting Chinese merchant ships while the Chinese navy similarly protected Japanese commercial vessels. The type of loose multilateral naval cooperation evident in the Gulf of Aden antipiracy operations will be much harder to achieve, however, as the focus moves closer to home in terms of disputed territories, territorial waters and claims regarding exclusive economic zones. Some Japanese analysts have expressed a desire to see the Sino-US Maritime Military Consultative Agreement (MMCA) expand to include Japan in a trilateral format to facilitate greater cooperation and incident prevention in this area.

Peacekeeping, Disaster Relief and Pandemic Disease

In recognition of a new and changing security paradigm, the 2004 NDPG signaled that Japan would look beyond its borders and make efforts to ensure a stable international environment to prevent security threats from reaching Japan. The 2004 document stated, “Japan will, on its own initiative, actively participate in international peace cooperation activities as an integral part of its diplomatic efforts.” Under the 2004 NDPG Japan has created a new Central Readiness Force Regiment intended for quick dispatch to international peace cooperation activities. Japan also plans to establish a new International Peace Cooperation Center under the Joint Staff College to train Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) personnel, officials, and other related staff and to conduct publicity on the behalf of JSDF international peace cooperation activities.

Despite these positive steps and the new emphasis on proactive international peace cooperation, Japan’s contributions in this area have actually been on the decline in recent years. Japan’s National Institute for Defense Studies annual publication, East Asian Strategic Review 2009, acknowledges this point and attributes this decline to several factors, including a recent shift to more UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) being carried out as “Chapter VII” operations, in which the use of force is authorized. While Japan’s constitution allows for SDF participation in Chapter VII operations in the areas of humanitarian assistance, airlift support, and similar duties in noncombat zones, the Japanese government has had to walk a fine line in adhering to the limitations imposed by the constitution and the 1992 International Peace Cooperation Law. The report also indicates that the 2004 NDPG’s emphasis on Japan utilizing its PKO involvement to serve Japan’s national interests has, paradoxically, become something of an impediment to further participation in UN PKO activities. For example, situations in neighboring areas, such as the North Korean nuclear issue and the rise of China, are clearly recognized as being directly relevant to national security, while the growing number of UN PKOs in distant places, such as Africa, is not.

Meanwhile, Japan has continued to offer support in the area of international disaster relief. Because disaster relief and humanitarian assistance efforts are for the most part noncontroversial topics in Japan, this is an area where Japan is looking to expand its cooperation. The limitations on Japan’s military derived from its unique postwar constitution have led it to develop capabilities that can be of great value in responding to natural disasters internationally. SDF capabilities in international disaster relief operations encompass (1) medical services such as first aid and epidemic prevention, (2) transport of goods, patients, and disaster relief personnel by helicopter, and (3) ensuring water supplies using water-purifying devices. In addition Japan is a major contributor to financial assistance packages for disaster relief in countries all over the world. Japan also supplies twenty-seven member states with disaster-related information at the Asian Disaster Reduction Center in Kobe city, Hyogo prefecture. Disaster relief was emphasized as an area for greater US-Japan cooperation at the recent Defense Ministers Joint Defense Conference by Japan’s new defense minister Toshimi Kitazawa.

In the area of pandemic disease, Japan has been a major contributor to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria as part of its focus on human security. Japan also has contributed to the fight against avian flu in Asia, contributing funds to assist Asian countries with the stockpiling of five hundred thousand courses of antiviral drugs and training personnel from Asian countries to respond to outbreaks of this disease. In 2005 Japan developed its own domestic “Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Action Plan” in compliance with the global plan of the World Health Organization (WHO) to facilitate countermeasures in the event of an outbreak. In September 2009 Japan contributed approximately US$10.8 million of emergency grant aid through the WHO to help extend vaccinations in developing countries in light of the worldwide H1N1 influenza pandemic.
Terrorism

Japan has been one of the United States’ most vocal supporters in fighting the battle against terrorism since the September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. In addition to diplomatic support, Japan has made precedent-setting contributions through its dispatch of the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) and Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF) to Iraq for humanitarian aid and reconstruction as well as its deployment of the JMSDF to the Indian Ocean for refueling operations in assistance of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Japan also has played an important role in fundraising activities for reconstruction in Afghanistan and contributed substantial financial resources of its own to this cause. Less publicized contributions include Japan’s support for capacity-building in Southeast Asian countries. Japan’s focus in this area has been to enhance Southeast Asian countries’ basic governance capacities in areas such as law enforcement, export control, money laundering, antipiracy, air and sea port security, immigration control, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Japan has ratified the thirteen UN counterterrorism conventions and protocols and has held training seminars for other Asian countries aimed at facilitating their adoption and implementation of the UN conventions and protocols. Japan has taken on significant risk in supporting US-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In November of 2003 Al-Qaeda issued a warning to Japan not to send troops to Iraq or it would face terrorist attacks. During the same week, an Al-Qaeda operative identified as Abu Mohamed al-Ablaj sent an email to the Arab language weekly Al-Majallah, in which he claimed that Tokyo would be “the easiest place to destroy.” The next event that brought the issue of terrorism closer to home for Japan was the discovery that Lionel Dumont, a Frenchman believed to have ties to Al-Qaeda, had made numerous deposits and withdrawals from a postal savings account after entering Japan on a fake passport several times in 2002 and 2003 and was suspected of attempting to create a terrorist cell inside Japan. This revelation contributed to Japan’s adopting the Action Plan for Prevention of Terrorism in late 2004. The action plan covers sixteen items related to border control, prevention of domestic activities (through identification of foreign guests at hotels and inns), bomb material control, the suppression of terrorist financing, infrastructure prevention and intelligence gathering.

However, Naofumi Miyasaka, a counterterrorism expert at Japan’s National Defense Academy, notes that while most of these measures have been at least partially implemented, Japan still lacks a coherent national strategy for combating terrorism both domestically and internationally. In a similar vein, a policy recommendation by a group of Japan’s top security analysts affiliated with the Tokyo Foundation recently indicated that Japan lacks the necessary legal arrangements and crisis management systems to deal with a terrorist attack on Japanese soil. The policy recommendation suggests there is a need for Japan to send a clear message demonstrating that it has the national will to fight against terrorism by all means. These analysts argue that, “Despite the actual acts of terror in Southeast Asia and Europe and the conspicuous drug transactions that can be financial sources for terrorists, citizens of Japan do not regard the deteriorating situation of Afghanistan as a security issue that affects them.”

Interviews conducted in July 2009 with officials from the Japanese Ministry of Defense and foreign affairs indicate that the above statement also could be applied to the policymaking level. Ministry of Defense officials clearly do not see transnational issues such as drug and human trafficking within the parameters of their national security strategy, despite the often-reported links between these types of transnational crimes and terrorist financing and support networks. One candid government official intimated that while the battle against international terrorism is given rhetorical support, the reality is that the issue does not get high priority within the Japanese government, and that most Japanese initiatives in this area are seen internally in terms of alliance management.

Transnational Organized Crime

While contributing to the UNDP’s Afghan Counter Narcotics Trust Fund and sharing US concerns over North Korea’s reported drug trafficking, Japan could do significantly more when it comes to dealing with transnational organized crime, both internationally and domestically. The Japanese Diet has failed to agree on an anticonspiracy bill for the fifth consecutive year. As a result, Japan remains unable to ratify the UNCTOC, although it has signed the UNCTOC and its three protocols. Japan is also not yet a party to the UN Convention against Corruption.

In the area of drug trafficking, where Japanese organized crime groups (known collectively as the Yakuza) play a significant role in Asia, Japanese law enforcement is faced with legal constraints that both prevent the passing of timely and useful information to foreign nations in
international drug investigations and make it very difficult for Japanese police authorities to proactively investigate members of international drug cartels that operate inside Japan. Most investigations conducted in Japan only disrupt drug operations at the lower levels of couriers and street dealers. In 1992 Japan passed the Anti-Drug Special Law to deal with drug-related money laundering; however, its narrow scope—and the burden of requiring law enforcement to prove a direct link between money and assets to specific drug activity—has limited the law’s effectiveness. In 2008 Japan underwent its third comprehensive mutual evaluation by the FATF on its implementation of the 40 + 9 Recommendations for countering money laundering. The FATF review concluded that Japan was fully compliant with only four recommendations, with notable deficiencies in areas specific to financial institutions.xiv

Proactive measures by Japanese law enforcement also are needed to address human trafficking, which is another reported source of income for the Japanese Yakuza. While Japan has contributed funds to antitrafficking projects around the world, it has not yet ratified the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol. Japan is a destination and transit point for men, women and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation. Women and children from East Asia, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, Russia, and South America are trafficked to Japan for commercial sex exploitation. Men and women from China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other Asian countries are sometimes subject to forced labor.xv Japanese authorities’ attitudes toward human trafficking, considering the resources at their disposal, have often been described as lax. In 2004 the US State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report listed Japan on the “Tier 2 Watch List” along with countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines known to have serious human trafficking problems.xvi Japan has since taken efforts to demonstrate its seriousness in dealing with human trafficking, including the adoption in December 2004 of a Comprehensive National Action Plan of measures to combat trafficking of persons. The new action plan amended the penal code to directly criminalize the conduct of buying and selling persons and designated human trafficking as a predicate offence for money laundering. It also increased scrutiny of immigration practices related to Japan’s “amusement businesses” (otherwise known as the sex industry).

In recognition of these efforts, Japan has been removed from the Tier 2 Watch List, but the 2009 TIP Report indicates that the government of Japan still does not fully comply with minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, noting that while there was an increase in the number of sex trafficking prosecutions in 2008, most convicted offenders were given suspended sentences. The report also noted that the Japanese government had not yet effectively addressed the problem of trafficking for labor exploitation. One of the report’s key recommendations was for the Japanese government to expand collaboration with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as “one the most effective tools the government has available to its efforts to combat trafficking.”xvii

Climate Change

Japan’s stewardship of the development of the Kyoto Protocols in the 1990s was symbolic of its efforts to stake out a leadership position on newly emerging transnational threats during this period. Japan first developed its own Action Plan to Prevent Global Warming in October 1990 and brought these proposals to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted in May 1992. Japan’s action plan accepted separate roles for developed and developing countries, stating that major developed countries should take common efforts to limit emissions. In the summer of 1997, Japan domestically formed the Joint Conference on Relevant Advisory Councils to establish its approach toward climate change. In December 1997 Japan hosted the UNFCCC’s Third Conference of the Parties (COP), playing a key role in attempting to moderate and facilitate negotiations between the European Union and the United States, which led to the Kyoto Protocol.xviii

In the years following the development of the Kyoto Protocol, Japan has continued to attempt to influence the international debate on climate change, though its own position within that debate has slowly shifted away from its earlier emphasis on the role of developed nations. Japan’s “Cool Earth 50” proposal at the UNFCCC’s COP-13 meeting held in Bali in December 2007, which calls for a halving of global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, was accompanied by a speech by then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who argued that global warming must be addressed by the whole world, given the reality that some of the developing countries are emitting substantial amounts of greenhouse gases.xix Abe’s proposal was followed by Prime Minister Fukuda’s “Cool Earth Promotion Program,” which emphasized once again that fair and equitable emissions targets were essential, while adding that Japan could play a greater role in the
transfer of high-quality environmental technology in an attempt to raise global energy efficiency by 30 percent by the year 2020. The shift in Japan’s policy on climate change can be attributed at least in part to domestic industry’s concerns about Japan taking on an unfair burden vis-à-vis China and India as economic competition in the region heats up.

Japan has made very little progress in meeting its own Kyoto Protocol obligation to achieve a 6 percent emissions reduction from a 1990 baseline, with emissions being reported as 14 percent higher in 2009 than in 1990 by the Japanese Ministry of Environment. Japan’s commitment to combating climate change became an issue in the August 2009 election, where one poll indicated that 62 percent of the Japanese public felt that the Aso government was not doing enough in this effort, and a solid 63 percent majority favored the DPJ’s call for a 25 percent emissions reduction by 2020 (versus the 15 percent reduction from 2005 levels proposed by Aso’s Liberal Democratic Party). The DPJ’s platform called for implementing a purchase system that would require power companies to buy the entire power output of renewable energy and not simply the surplus power. The DPJ also proposed increasing renewable energy to 10 percent of Japan’s total primary supply by 2020. It also has called for a cap-and-trade system that would bind polluters to mandatory emission limits.

With the support of popular opinion, Japan’s newly elected Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama made the announcement of Japan’s commitment to a 25 percent reduction in emissions at the UN Summit on Climate Change in September 2009. Hatoyama also has pledged that Japan will provide both technology and funding to developing countries attempting to fight global warming. Following his announcement of Japan’s 25 percent cut in September, Prime Minister Hatoyama took his message to the second trilateral summit between the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea held in Beijing in October 2009. The three leaders pledged to work closely together to find a successful approach to climate change once the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2013. Climate change was also a major agenda item when US President Barack Obama visited Tokyo in November 2009. Hatoyama and Obama pledged to make the Copenhagen summit on climate change (the UNFCCC’s COP-15) in December 2009 a success and to have their two countries work together through expanding their research and development cooperation to provide solutions to the challenges of global energy security and climate change.

Implications for the US-Japan Alliance

Increasing efforts to deal with transnational security challenges worldwide holds both the potential for greater US-Japan security cooperation as well as for increasing frustration regarding differences in country priorities. If Japan can truly develop a leadership position in dealing with disaster relief, climate change and other transnational issues, it will help to offset the limitations placed on Japan’s contributions in traditional security areas by its postwar constitution. On the other hand, if Tokyo sees the United States as overly preoccupied with the Middle East and international terrorism, Japan is likely to focus its energy and resources on security concerns dealing with China and North Korea at the risk of drawing criticism from Washington. In this sense, the broadening security paradigm only heightens the ever-present need for closer consultation and coordination between the two governments.

US concern with defeating international terrorism and its enabling illicit activities is not likely to abate any time soon. Just as the United States will need to reassure its ally on external deterrence, Japan will need to more proactively deal with transnational organized crime flowing across its own borders. While Japan will naturally reserve its greatest resources for its highest-threat priorities, increasing cooperation in peacekeeping and disaster relief activities—in line with Japan’s own previously stated policy—will also enhance its diplomatic capital in Washington.

Japan’s new leadership is in the process of reviewing security policy and, based on the DPJ’s established platform, will most likely focus the international efforts of its Self-Defense Forces on noncombat, UN-sanctioned activities that do not stretch the limitations of the postwar constitution. This does not mean, however, that Japan’s international contribution to security will not necessarily decline if it applies its wealth of technological and diplomatic resources toward resolving the many nontraditional, transnational security challenges the world faces today.

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*The emphasis on multilateralism was toned down significantly in the 1995 NDPO due to US concerns that the bilateral alliance was being overshadowed.

The Central Readiness Force Regiment was established in March 2008.


Dumont was arrested in Germany in December 2003 and extradited to France for crimes he was convicted of committing there in the 1990s while a member of a radical Islamist group known as the Roubaix gang.


Ibid., p.15. Miyasaka confirmed these reservations during a personal interview with the author in July 2009.


Ibid., p. 16.


US State Department, 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report available online at: http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2009/.


See US State Department, 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report.


