

Contemporary Japanese Defence Strategy: Towards Conflict or Resolution?

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The European Conference on Arts and Humanities 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Japanese defence policy under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is accelerating its post-Cold War shift in direction. From a Cold War strategy of anti-Soviet ‘Northern’ defence, Japanese strategy is increasingly towards a ‘southwest’ approach, to potentially deter China, particularly following the increase in tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Concerns also remain over a potential missile threat from North Korea.

This change was encapsulated in the LDP’s 2013 National Security Strategy. As well as an increase in defence spending, directed largely towards increasing maritime forces and amphibious strike capacity, a National Security Council has been established. Labelled ‘Proactive Pacifism’ by Abe, this policy shift has the general support of Japan’s key ally, the United States, as it supports the US ‘Pivot’ – a rebalancing of its maritime forces towards the Asia-Pacific region.

Japan’s recent defence policy also involves easing restrictions on defence equipment exports, and developing a higher level of security collaboration with the UK, Australia and India, as well as various countries in ASEAN, among others. Most controversially, the Abe LDP government plans to reinterpret the constitution, to allow Japan to participate in ‘collective self-defence’ with allied or friendly states. This could be the intermediary step towards eventually abolishing the pacifist Article 9 clause of the constitution. The LDP government claims this will allow Japan to make a greater contribution to international security; however, there are concerns this will only threaten to worsen geostrategic tensions in the region.

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Introduction

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Japan's recent defence policy also involves easing restrictions on defence equipment exports, and developing a higher level of security collaboration with the UK, Australia and India, as well as various countries in ASEAN, among others. Overseas Development Aid (ODA) to ASEAN has increased, including 'security' training and equipment. This is particularly directed towards Coast Guard forces, with patrol vessels to be supplied to Vietnam, having already been delivered to the Philippines and Indonesia. Most controversially, the Abe LDP government has reinterpreted Article 9 of the constitution, to allow Japan to participate in 'collective self-defence' with allied or friendly states. This shift has been firmly supported by US, Australia, and the Philippines, but has angered neighbours China and South Korea.

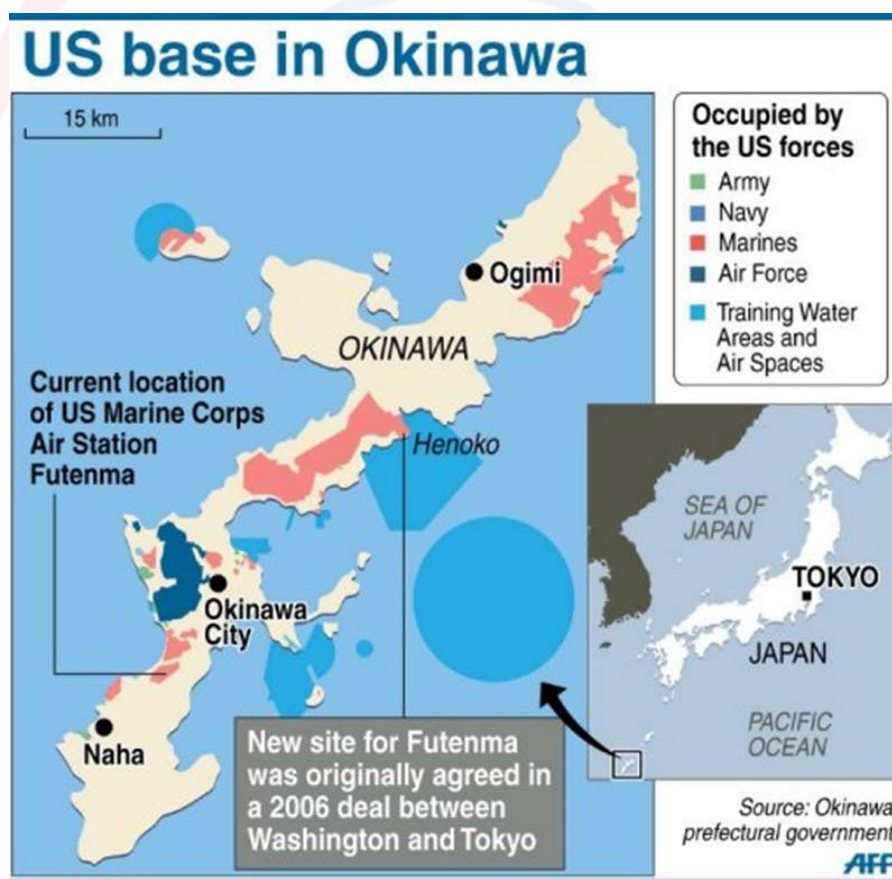
Historical Background – US Occupation and Development of the SDF

During the postwar US occupation of Japan, from 1945 to 1952, General Douglas MacArthur carried out the re-democratization of Japanese society, and its political system. The US-drafted 1947 Constitution included the pacifist clause Article 9, through which Japan renounced war forever, and forbade it from maintaining military forces (Hatakeyama, 2013a: 142-143). The Emperor was retained as a symbolic head of state, while other senior war criminals were tried, and some executed, including wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo. Controversially, these war criminals were later venerated at Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japan's war dead, a source of both domestic and international diplomatic rancor to this day (Sugiyama, 2013:185).

As part of their occupation, the US established military bases throughout Japan, some of which became permanent installations. The role of US forces soon altered with the onset of the Cold War, from occupation duties, to deterring the Soviet Union, then Communist China, following the Chinese civil war and revolution. Japan served as a logistics base for the US-led UN forces during the Korean War, from 1950 to 1953, and later on, for the US in the Vietnam War. The US military presence in Okinawa has been particularly extensive, a burden which has provided the basis for ongoing resentment among the Okinawan population, which suffered heavily during the US invasion in 1945. Okinawa remained under direct US occupation until 1972, when it was returned to Japanese sovereignty (Odagiri, 2013: 167, 174).

Map 1: US Bases in Okinawa

(Source: Okinawa Prefectural Government/AFP)



Postwar Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (1946-47, 1948-54) played a leading role in reshaping Japan's role in international society; his 'Yoshida Doctrine' sought to rebuild Japan economically, securing US economic aid, and US military guarantees for Japanese security. This cemented Japan's role as a core Cold War ally from the start, providing a strategic base for the projection of US power in the Pacific, a role

which continues into the present. The key diplomatic achievements of the Yoshida Doctrine was signing the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, and the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1952 (later updated in 1960 by LDP Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke – grandfather of current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe). With the onset of the Cold War, the US encouraged this reversal of the pacifist orientation of the Constitution it had originally designed for Japan, beginning a long pattern of effectively supporting a gradual ‘remilitarization’ of Japan (Hatakeyama, 2013b: 121-123).

In 1950, with the outbreak of the Korean War, a paramilitary Police Reserve was established in Japan, to support US occupation forces in maintaining internal security. These were transformed into the Self Defense Forces (SDF) in 1954. Interpreted by the Japanese government and the US as permissible under the Constitution, their mission was solely to defend Japanese territory, with solely defensive doctrine and equipment. As a core US ally in the Pacific, the effective purpose of the SDF during the Cold War was to deter any potential attack from the USSR. The SDF would be steadily upgraded, with US support, into the modern SDF. While ostensibly not a military, the SDF nevertheless acts as a *de facto* military force, having developed into one of the most powerful conventional armed forces in the Pacific (Odagiri, 2013:163-165).

The approximate strength of the SDF currently comprises: 247,150 active personnel; 151,050 in the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF), in 9 divisions, including 777 main battle tanks; 45,500 in the Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF), with 48 principal warships, including three helicopter carriers, 18 submarines, and 389 patrol vessels with the Coast Guard (at a strength of 12,650); and 47,100 in the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF), with 552 combat aircraft (3,500 are in the Central Command Staff). The approximate strength of US Pacific Command’s forces based in Japan is 36,700 active personnel, including a carrier battle group; 3 fighter wings, and a Marine division (IISS, 2013: 306-309)

Post-Cold War Developments in Japanese Defence Policy

The end of the Cold War greatly improved Japan’s strategic position, effectively removing the Soviet Union as a potential threat. The post-Cold War era immediately presented security challenges to Japan, which necessitated shifts in its foreign policy. During the 1990-91 Gulf War, Japan contributed up to US\$13 billion to the costs of the UN-authorized and US- led Operation Desert Storm, liberating Kuwait from Iraq’s invasion. However, due to Article 9’s restrictions, no SDF forces were deployed. In

response to international and domestic criticism of this relative inaction, in 1992, the Diet passed the Peacekeeping Cooperation Law, which allowed the SDF to participate in UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) mandated under Chapter 6 of the UN Charter. Beginning with the UNTAC PKO in Cambodia in 1993, over 8,000 SDF personnel have since participated in 14 PKOs, including in East Timor, Haiti, the Golan Heights, and South Sudan (Hatakeyama, 2013b: 131).

To offset both domestic and international accusations that Japan was back on the path of militarization with these measures, in 1993, LDP Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono issued an apology for the abuse of women as sex slaves by Imperial Japanese forces in the Second World War, which came to be known as the Kono Statement. This was followed by an official apology delivered in 1995 by Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, for Japan's aggressive role in WWII. Known as the Murayama Statement, it apologized for Japan launching a war of aggression, and for the atrocities committed by Japan's Imperial forces, including maltreatment of Allied Prisoners of War (POWs) (Sugiyama, 2013:189, 191-192).

Having made these reassurances, new security guidelines were secured with US in 1997, upgrading the level of defense cooperation between the SDF and US forces. This cooperation was forcefully enacted upon under the LDP Koizumi government from 2001 to 2006, as Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi sought closer defense ties with the Bush Administration. Following the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks on the US by Al-Qaeda, maritime SDF units were employed to deliver logistics support to ISAF/NATO operations in Afghanistan. A more controversial deployment of the SDF by the Koizumi government was that of a 'non-combat' reconstruction team in southern Iraq, from 2004 to 2006, largely under the protection of Australian forces (MoD, 2006).

Another stark example of Japan's more forceful approach came in 2001, when the Japanese Coast Guard sunk a North Korean spy ship in an armed confrontation off the Amami Islands (Matthews, 2003). Japan's Ballistic Missile Defences (BMD) have been also been regularly mobilized by the SDF in response to North Korea's series of long-range ballistic missile tests, from 1998 to 2012 (Rinehart et al, 2013: 5, 9). In another sign of Japan's increasing willingness and capacity to contribute to international security, after passage of the Anti-Piracy Measures Law in 2009 by the last DPJ government, since 2011 the SDF has contributed to the UN-authorized multinational antipiracy operations in the Indian Ocean. To support this deployment, the SDF established its first operational overseas base since WWII, in Djibouti (Kato,

2011).

In response to the March 2011 *Tohoku* earthquake and tsunami, and the resulting Fukushima nuclear disaster, the SDF conducted its largest ever deployment, in the subsequent domestic disaster relief operations, a frequent mission for the SDF. US forces based in Japan were also mobilised in support, in *Operation Tomodachi*. This role raised both the public prominence and prestige of the SDF, which has been capitalised upon by subsequent governments (Odagiri, 2013:176). The already close US-SDF ties are set to deepen yet further, with an increased tempo of joint training and military exercises being held both in Japan and the US, further developing interoperability capabilities. Defence cooperation guidelines between the US and Japan are due to be further reviewed and upgraded by the end of 2014 (MoF, 2014a).

Japan's Current Territorial Disputes

This increased level of defense activity by the Japan, and the deepening cooperation with the US, is greatly driven by a sense of worsening regional security within Japan, particularly the ongoing tensions over the territorial disputes Japan has with its neighbours. The most serious of these, is of course that over the Senkaku Islands (claimed as the Diaoyus by China and Taiwan). Claimed as its sovereign territory after the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, the islands were controlled as part of the US occupation of Okinawa, until the US returned their administration as part of the prefecture of Okinawa to Japan in 1972 (Sugiyama, 2013:193-194).

The underlying dispute escalated in April 2012, when the Governor of Tokyo, ultranationalist politician Shintaro Ishihara (later co-leader of the Japan Restoration Party, now head of the neo-conservative Party for Future Generations) pledged to buy the islands outright from their private owners. Under this political pressure, the Senkakus were fully nationalized by the Noda DPJ government in September 2012, sparking anti-Japanese riots in China, and a deterioration in trade and diplomatic relations that have yet to recover (Ryall, 2012).

Since this escalation of tensions, there have been near-daily confrontations between Chinese paramilitary vessels and aircraft making incursions into Japanese-claimed territory around the islands, and SDF and Coast Guard vessels and aircraft, including ASDF fighters being increasingly 'scrambled' for interceptions, demonstrating the incredibly dangerous potential for these incidents to escalate into an armed clash (MoD, 2014a). Despite these dangers, neither Japan nor China have so far established a code of conduct to prevent escalation of such incidents (as is being proposed for

similar territorial disputes China has with its ASEAN neighbours in the South China Sea). Any prospect of a diplomatic resolution on the final status of the islands is even more distant, with Japan refusing to even countenance any discussion of their status. The Senkakus therefore remain one of the most dangerous potential flashpoints in the Asia-Pacific region, with the US stating that the US-Japan Security Treaty would be invoked to defend them, being Japanese-controlled territory (while not making a final statement on their sovereign status), should they come under attack (Singh, 2014).

Map 2: Japan's Territorial Disputes

(Source: The Economist)



While having less potential for serious military confrontation, the dispute over the Dokdo Islands, held by South Korea (claimed as the Takeshima Islands by Japan), continues to sour relations between the two neighbours. Along with other long-running issues stemming from the legacy of Japanese colonial occupation of Korea, most prominently that of sex slaves (often referred to as the so-called ‘comfort women’, by nationalistic Japanese politicians) in the Second World War, the Dokdo Islands remains a major diplomatic impediment, with both sides also unwilling to engage in any discussion over their status, much to the frustration of the US, their mutual military ally (Sugiyama, 2013:192-193).

The other territorial dispute is that over the Kurile Islands, called the ‘Northern Territories’ by Japan, occupied by Russia since 1945. As in the Senkakus, the ASDF also regularly scrambles its fighters to intercept Russian military aircraft approaching Japanese airspace. There have been indications that Russian President Vladimir Putin was considering to begin negotiations to resolve their status, with Russia possibly willing to return the two islands nearest to Japan back to Japanese sovereignty. However, with Japan joining the US and EU in sanctions against Russia, following the Ukraine crisis, such negotiations now seem unlikely for the time being (Tweed & Ummelas, 2014).

Japan’s New National Security Strategy

The former DPJ government had already begun working towards new National Defence Program Guidelines in 2010, confirming the post-Cold War shift of Japan’s military posture from the Cold War era Soviet-detering deployment of the SDF concentrated in northern Japan, particularly Hokkaido, to a more southern and western-oriented approach. The escalation of the dispute of the Senkakus reinforced this reorientation, which has accelerated under the LDP Abe government. As well as securing the Senkakus, this ‘pivot’ of the SDF, has the strategic goal of securing the vital shipping lanes approaching Japan in the East and South China seas (Takahashi, 2012).

In 2013, the Abe cabinet approved its National Security Strategy, which demonstrated the LDP’s determination to strengthen a more assertive direction in Japanese defense policy. This included a 5% increase in military spending, to ¥24.7 trillion for FY2013/14, giving Japan the 7th largest defence budget in the world. This increase in spending includes the development of an amphibious brigade (the Western Army Infantry Regiment) with the specific mission of defending and recapturing islands; extra fighter aircraft, including the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (and potentially a domestically produced next-generation stealth fighter); submarines and other warships and coast guard vessels, and surveillance drones are also to be acquired (MoD, 2013). The National Security Strategy also led to the creation of a National Security Council, and passage of a controversial ‘state secrets’ law, aimed at securing intelligence sharing with allies, but criticised for targeting whistleblowers, reducing government accountability (McCurry, 2013).

Greater Japanese involvement in regional security under the Abe government is also being promoted, through increasing maritime security training with the Philippines and Vietnam, which have their own territorial disputes with China. SDF training has

also been delivered to East Timor, Cambodia, Mongolia, and Indonesia. Coast guard training, and the planned supply of coast guard vessels in particular, is being delivered under Japan's ODA program, circumventing restrictions on exports of military equipment (Nikkei, 2014). These restrictions have already been eased by the Abe government, overturning long-held limitations voluntarily imposed by postwar Japanese governments. While weapons systems still face prohibitions, Japan will now commence exports of other military-related systems, such as parts and materials for sensory equipment and communications. Defense equipment export and cooperation agreements have already been made with the UK, and Australia, which could potentially receive Japanese submarines in future. Building on a security agreement secured in 2006 in a previous LDP government, an upgraded defence cooperation pact is set to be secured with India in September 2014; this may result in India importing Japanese maritime patrol aircraft, and also increase the number of joint naval exercises held between India and Japan (Panda, 2014).

Collective Self-Defence

Following the launch of the 2013 National Security Strategy, Abe announced that Japan intended to pursue a policy of 'proactive pacifism', maintaining Article 9 of the constitution, but allowing Japan to make a greater contribution to global peace and stability. Abe also warned that Japan was not prepared to accept any challenge to the territorial status quo in the region by the use of forces, implicitly criticizing China's 'aggressive' activities in the East China Sea (IISS, 2014).

To confirm this direction, in July 2014, Abe's Cabinet announced a historic reinterpretation of the constitution, overturning a position held by Japanese governments since its introduction, that Japan *does* have the right to participate in collective self-defence with other allies or friendly states, as permitted by Article 51 of the UN Charter. This declaration, long claimed as part of the LDP's party platform, being necessary to secure Japan in a more unstable region, was finally achieved after extensive negotiations with the LDP's governing coalition partners, the New Komeito Party (NKP), who have traditionally strongly upheld the pacifism assumed to be inherent in Article 9 of the constitution (Asahi Shimbun, 2014).

Following these negotiations, various restrictions were imposed on the reinterpretation, as the insistence of the NKP; the right of collective self-defence will only be exercised if the country's existence is threatened, and there are clear dangers that the 'people's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' would be overturned, due to an armed attack on Japan, or on countries with which Japan has

close ties. Also, collective self-defence will only be exercised if there is a ‘lack of other appropriate means’, and the use of the SDF will be limited to ‘the minimum required’, in order to guarantee Japan’s security. It will also require the consent of the other country (or countries) involved in the collective self-defense operations, plus approval of the Cabinet and Diet for each instance (MoF, 2014b).

The range of scenarios proposed by the Abe government that could potentially be covered by the right to collective self-defense, as well as coming to the assistance of other states, include wider rules of engagement for the SDF in UN peacekeeping operations, potentially allowing participation in more robust Chapter 7 UN military interventions; and so-called ‘grey zone’ scenarios, short of open armed conflict. In particular, occupation of islands by covert ‘non-military’ forces has been referred to, an implicit reference to the potential occupation of the Senkakus by Chinese paramilitary forces. Taking action against hostile submarines infiltrating Japanese waters, and minesweeping operations, could be another scenarios (Japan Times, 2014a).

To confirm this Cabinet decision into law, up to 18 bills may be required to be passed in the Diet, in order to meet all the legal and constitutional requirements to allow the right of collective self-defence to be exercised. Abe is expected to complete his first Cabinet reshuffle in September 2014, which is likely to include the creation of a new ministerial position dedicated to securing the passage of this package of security-related bills through the Diet, ideally by April 2015, in the next spring session of the Diet. While the LDP is likely to be easily able to secure enough support for such bills in the Diet, with its comfortable majority in the lower house, backed up by support from the NKP, and the nationalistic Japan Restoration Party and the Party for Future Generations, public opinion remains strongly divided (Japan News, 2014).

Opinion polls have consistently shown that a majority of the public (ranging up to 58-67%) remain opposed to the constitutional reinterpretation, and that the Abe cabinet has not sufficiently explained or justified the changes, despite suspicions over the recent activities and potential future hegemonic aims of China (Haggard & Stahler, 2014). In the wake of the reinterpretation, the Abe cabinet’s approval ratings have fallen to 43.5%, the lowest level since coming to office in 2012 (an economic slump following an increase in the consumption tax rate has also had an impact). However, the most recent opinion poll support rates for the LDP of 23.9%, and 3.8% for its ruling partner the NKP, continue to far outstrip those of the opposition minor parties: 5.3% for the DPJ, 1.5% for the Japanese Communist Party, 1.2% for the Japan Restoration Party, 0.4% for the Social Democratic Party, 0.4 for Your Party, 0.2% for

the People's Life Party, 0.2% for the Party for Future Generations, 0.1% for the Unity Party, and 0.1% for the New Renaissance Party; 61.6% of Japanese do not express support for *any* political party (Japan Times, 2014b).

Reflecting this lack of public support, critics claim the reinterpretation is unnecessary, given the well-equipped and highly trained SDF is highly capable of defending Japan's territorial integrity, further backed up by the US alliance, not least by the powerful US forces permanently based in Japan itself. The nationalistic revisionism occasionally displayed by LDP and other politicians also concerns critics of the changes, not least Abe's visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine in December 2013, and revisionist statements by nationalistic politicians and commentators seeming to undermine the Kono and Murayama Statements. Such rhetoric accompanying the constitutional reinterpretation not only has caused public doubt and suspicion within Japan, but has inflamed regional tensions, principally with China and Korea, reinforcing aggressive nationalistic rhetoric stemming from opportunistic political figures in those countries (Cai, 2014).

Opponents of the reinterpretation also fear it could be the intermediary step towards eventually abolishing the pacifist Article 9 clause of the constitution altogether. Concerns have also arisen among lawyers and academics about the potential effect of re-interpreting the constitution on weakening Japanese democracy. The precedent of the Cabinet reinterpreting the constitution, against the majority will of the public, could potentially be applied to eroding the integrity of other areas of the constitution, including broader protections for civil and political rights, such as freedoms of speech and assembly. While the reinterpretation is expected to gain Diet approval, the question remains about whether the subsequent laws will be constitutionally valid, and may face challenges in the Supreme Court, although the traditionally conservative-leaning Court would probably uphold the new interpretation (Sieg, 2014).

With only limited diplomatic mechanisms in the region aimed at reducing such tensions between the neighbouring states of Northeast Asia, any shifts in defence policy need to be carefully managed, in order to reassure against rising tensions. So far, this has not successfully eventuated, although there are signs that low-level efforts to improve Sino-Japanese relations are gradually making limited progress, and the upcoming October APEC and East Asia Summit leaders' meetings (in China and Myanmar respectively), and the G20 leader's summit in November in Australia provides an opportunity for the potential diplomatic breakthrough of the first leaders'

meeting between Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping (Mark, 2014).

Conclusions

The latest Japanese Defence White Paper recently released by the Cabinet focused on the 'increasingly severe' security environment, due to China's 'dangerous acts' in the East China Sea, fearing 'unintended consequences', of a potential clash. This situation thus justifies the next 2.2% increase in the defence budget, and the expansion in defence exports. Warnings also remain over North Korea, as a 'destabilizing factor', despite some recent moves towards improving diplomatic relations, including easing sanctions, in the hope of resolving the long-running issue of Japanese abducted by the DPRK in the past. The Dokdo and Kurile Islands were only given a perfunctory mention (MoD, 2014b).

The Abe LDP government thus claims exercising the right of collective self-defence will allow Japan to make a greater contribution to international security; however, there are concerns this will only threaten to worsen geostrategic tensions in the region. Some strategic analysts consider that Abe and the Japanese defence establishment ultimately have doubts about the US alliance, particularly whether the US would actually use military force to help Japan defend the Senkaku Islands, if they were to be seized by China. Such underlying doubts may be the ultimate motivation for the recent changes to Japanese defence policy. However, this hypothesis is countered by the enthusiasm with which the US has welcomed the changes (which should encourage Japan to take up a greater share of the defence burden), is also firmly backed by Australia (which has steadily been increasing defence cooperation with Japan, including joint military exercises, since the formation of the Trilateral Security Dialogue with the US in 2002), and also by the Philippines (White, 2014).

China has quite predictably responded negatively to Abe's defence policies, attempting a strategic alienation of Japan within the Asia-Pacific region. One of the long-term ideal geopolitical objectives of China is to weaken the US-Japan alliance, fearing that Japan's potential use of collective self-defence reinforces the US 'pivot' in the Pacific, as part of an encroaching containment of China. As China continues its pursuit of economic, and potentially military hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, this seems certain to drive the classic realist 'security dilemma', where Japan feels its relative strategic situation is deteriorating, necessitating a military build-up in response (Schreer, 2014). These unfolding developments are thus likely to continue to encourage Japan's more assertive defence policy, beyond the Abe government.

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