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Japan's Approaches to Defense Transparency: Perspectives from the Japanese and Chinese Defense Establishments

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Summary

Contemporary Japanese approaches to defense transparency are informed by history, relations with external states, the domestic political configuration of institutions, and state–society interactions. Analysts from the Japanese defense establishment agree that greater levels of transparency are inherently good, while their counterparts from China note the importance of political and diplomatic relations in increasing the credibility of defense transparency efforts. There is a consensus that expectations of defense transparency should be realistic, and the emphasis should be on bilateral efforts to promote defense transparency.

The Defense Transparency Project (DTP) is a project of the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. DTP Policy Briefs provide analysis and recommendations based on the work of project participants. Author's views are their own.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation's (IGCC) ongoing project assessing Northeast Asia Defense Transparency, IGCC and the Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS) co-sponsored a conference, *Japanese Approaches to Defense Transparency and the Lessons for Northeast Asia*, held March 29–31, 2012 in Tokyo. This policy brief outlines the course of the discussion and summarizes the most salient themes in the first session of the conference, entitled "The Attitudes and Approaches of the Japanese Defense Establishment towards Defense Transparency." Included in the policy brief are remarks from distinguished analysts: a former senior official from the Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, now currently a senior defense policy planner in the Ministry of Defense; a retired head of a prominent defense training academy; and a senior researcher from a Chinese government research institute. Remarks from the question and answer session are also folded into the policy brief.

BACKGROUND AND DETERMINANTS OF TRANSPARENCY

The current volatile security environment in Northeast Asia underscores the need for confidence-building measures. One cause of this uncertainty and mistrust is the lack of transparency about security intentions, defense expenditures, and military capabilities. A Japanese senior defense policy planner commented that the legacy of Imperial Japan's militarism casts a shadow over recent Japanese efforts to strengthen its defenses in order to deter and defeat external threats. Similarly, this official noted the Japanese public demands accountability and transparency from its government because the (former) Imperial Army's lack of accountability precipitated Japan's disastrous course down the path to World War II. Following Imperial Japan's defeat, Tokyo's legislature—the Diet—was tasked with oversight of the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF).

Features of the Japanese domestic polity contributed to keeping the defense community in

check and promoting defense transparency.¹ During the Cold War era, the Japanese domestic political system settled into an equilibrium where the bureaucracy, the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and business interests co-existed and forged an "iron triangle," wielding much influence in policy-making. Referred to as the "1955 System," this structural equilibrium functioned alongside the belief—known as the Yoshida Doctrine—held by the elites in power that Japan would be most secure if it focused mostly on economic growth, leaving security matters to be taken care of by its alliance with the United States.² An additional effect of the 1955 System was that policy decisions—especially those pertaining to defense and security—were not made decisively, ensuring a tradition of strong oversight by the Diet and the Cabinet Legislation Bureau.

While prior prime ministers had attempted to strengthen the decisiveness of the security policy-making apparatus in Japan, it took the charisma of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to effect change and sound a death-knell for the 1955 System. This occurred in parallel with the government's poor response to domestic disasters, such as the 1995 Great Hanshin earthquake and Sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system the same year, which fueled public demands for greater levels of transparency and government accountability. One consequence was the promulgation of Japan's landmark national Information Disclosure Law, the *Joho Kokai Ho*, in 2001.³

1. This and the following paragraph draw from Fei 2011, chap. 2.

2. The Yoshida Doctrine describes an amalgam of interpretations of Article 9 alongside other beliefs. The lasting interpretation of Article 9 was that Japan has a right to defensively appropriate force levels, and that the use of force was justified only under self-defense. This was held alongside the belief that Japan's national security interests would be best met by maintaining a minimal, strictly defensive military posture, leaving most security matters to be taken care of by the United States under the mutual defense treaty, and focusing on economic growth. These principles guided Japanese security and foreign policy for decades. For more on the Yoshida Doctrine, see Samuels 2007, 29–37; Katahara 1996, 214–5.

3. It does, however, carry exemptions for certain privacy and national security issues.

According to retired head of a prominent defense training academy, the need for Japan to reassure neighbors of its peaceful intentions was motivated by concerns which emerged during the 1970s, when other Asian nations began to criticize its growing military spending. While Japan's defense expenditures have never exceeded 1 percent of national GDP, a rapidly growing economy meant significant absolute growth in defense spending.⁴ Accordingly, Japan published its first defense white paper in 1970, and has been publishing them on an annual basis since 1976.

FEATURES OF JAPAN'S APPROACH TO TRANSPARENCY

Strengths of Japan's Approach

Japan remains the most transparent state in East Asia and arguably the world in terms of military budgeting, arms and weapons procurement and production, and utilizing a broad range of media to disseminate defense and security related information. According to the 2011 IGCC Northeast Asia Defense Transparency Index, on the areas of transparency reflected by the Defense Ministry website, annual reporting instruments to the United Nations, budgeting, auditing, and reconciliation of defense spending, press reporting, and exposure of international activities between the SDF and foreign militaries, Japan ranks first—above its peers studied by IGCC and arguably globally.

The Japan Ministry of Defense's leadership places the utmost emphasis on the substantive and procedural aspects of defense transparency. The Japanese senior defense policy planner noted the Ministry of Defense maintains a very active schedule when it comes to engaging the public and sharing information. For example, the Defense Minister holds two press conferences every week. Every evening, the Minister answers questions in informal press briefings. The same individual commented that this dedication to promote information sharing extends to the SDF. As part of an effort to improve defense transparency on

4. One exception occurred in 1986, when defense expenditures exceeded 1 percent of GDP, at 1.007 percent of GDP. Samuels 2007, 57.

all fronts, the Joint Chiefs of Staff also holds press conferences every week.

The Diet—Japan's bicameral legislature—has the legal authority to oversee defense policy and program decision-making. All defense related bills have to go through parliament, with new bills having to go through the parliamentary system twice—once through a defense committee, and once through the parliament as a whole. When special issues arise—such as the deployment of the SDF forces to Iraq or Maritime SDF to the Indian Ocean—an ad hoc committee is established to review the bill.

Participants in the session tend to agree with the statement that greater access to information leads to higher degrees of defense transparency. Transparency, in turn, is a reflection of the level of freedom and democracy in Japan. The Japanese media serves as a key instrument in preserving open access to the inner workings of the defense planning process, and forces the government to avoid misperceptions.

Challenges to Japan's Approach

According to the retired head of a prominent defense training academy, the weakest link in Tokyo's defense transparency regime is the lack of clarity on its stance on nuclear issues. This is both understandable, yet ironic, given memories of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan's firm opposition to nuclear weapons is grounded in two principles. The 1955 Atomic Energy Basic Law confines Japanese nuclear activities to peaceful ones (Chanlett-Avery and Nikitin 2009, 2). While not a formal law, Japan's "three non-nuclear principles" (*hikaku sagensoku*) serve as the primary compass in steering Japanese policy vis-à-vis nuclear issues, and prohibits Japan from manufacturing, possessing, or importing nuclear weapons (Hughes 2007, 85).

However, Japan has not always adhered to these principles. A secret agreement, inked during the 1960s, existed between the United States and Japan during the Cold War that would have allowed the introduction of nuclear weapons in Japan in case of an emergency. There have also been reports that U.S. naval vessels had been

home-ported in Japan while armed with nuclear weapons.⁵ While the LDP government consistently denied the existence of this secret, tacit agreement, the former head of the prominent defense training academy remarked that the (former) opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government pushed to expose such an agreement. In April 2010, Foreign Minister Okada Katsuya publicly apologized for past governments' policy of denying the existence of the secret agreement, and re-affirmed Japan's commitment to the three non-nuclear principles (Chanlett-Avery, Cooper, and Manyin 2011, 15). Nonetheless, this controversy has cast doubt on Japan's defense transparency mechanism.

The retired head of a prominent defense training academy used the nuclear issue to illustrate the importance of political changes in Japanese approach to defense transparency. He noted that while the LDP government had always denied deviation from the three non-nuclear principles, the DPJ government pushed to expose the shortcomings of previous Japanese governments, and has generally pushed for greater levels of defense transparency.

Debates on the Japanese Approach to Defense Transparency

The above discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Japanese defense transparency also shines a light on the views of differing types of defense transparency among analysts. According to the retired head of a prominent defense training academy, "good" transparency occurs when all information—with exceptions made for national secrets and private, personal information—are revealed. For information that cannot be revealed, transparency can occur by indicating the existence of such information without divulging its details. The same Japanese official noted that "bad" transparency occurs when a government reveals certain types of information in an attempt to distract the public from other hidden information.

There are some within the Japanese defense community that believe Japan is too transparent in terms of defense policy. The former head of a

5. Llewelyn Hughes notes this is technically not a violation of the "three non-nuclear principles," as the weapons were not on Japanese soil. Hughes 2007, 85.

prominent defense training academy noted that the Diet does not have closed defense briefing sessions—hindering the efficiency of the policy-making process when discretion is needed. Some analysts note that a high level of domestic pressure from the Japanese Communist Party prevents closed-door Diet sessions in Japan. This is due to the perception that any information disclosed in a closed session would be leaked by the Communists.

Policy analysts in the Northeast Asian defense community agree that even in Japan, there is no such thing as 100 percent defense transparency. A senior researcher from a Chinese government research institute remarked that secrecy is necessary for the normal operations of any country, especially with regard to intelligence and the development of new weapons systems. The secret development by the United States of the F-117 stealth fighter is but one example of the need for secrecy.

The Interplay Between Defense Transparency and International Diplomatic Relations

Defense transparency reduces the probability of misunderstanding between states. Absent political and diplomatic efforts, however, defense transparency is insufficient to foster levels of trust that are capable of mitigating the security dilemma. Put differently, defense transparency is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for mutual trust among states.

The senior researcher from a Chinese government research institute remarked that contemporary Northeast Asian regional dynamics serve as a prime example of how promotion of defense transparency alone does not necessarily lead to harmonious and trustful political relations among states. Accordingly, good political relations are a prerequisite for mutual trust. For example, while Japan and the Republic of Korea are the two top-ranked countries in terms of defense transparency in Northeast Asia, bilateral ties often suffer from mistrust caused by unresolved historical issues and clashes over rights to territory and exclusive economic zones. Similarly, Japan's promotion of defense transparency has done little to mitigate its tensions with China.

On the subject of political trust, the Japanese senior defense planning official commented that

Japan's diplomatic tensions with China highlight the need for inter-agency coordination to weave defense transparency—typically the domain of the Ministry of Defense—with diplomacy—normally the domain of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Sino-Japanese tensions arising from the 2010 skirmish near the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) islands is just one example of the need for greater involvement of MOFA and the Japanese leadership in bilateral confidence building.

Relative differences in power between states also lead to variation in perspectives and approaches to defense transparency. The Chinese analyst from the Chinese government research institute remarked that strong states will tend to use transparency as a tool to deter weak states, forcing the weaker ones to reveal information that will further expose their vulnerabilities. Consistent with this notion, many Chinese view international efforts to encourage greater defense transparency in China as manipulative.

During the discussion session, it was also noted that the concept of defense transparency relates to international relations at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. In concert with the right mix of diplomatic and political initiatives, efforts to promote defense transparency can often enhance bilateral security and trust. However, the Japanese senior defense planning official noted that promoting defense transparency at the multilateral level is more difficult because of the challenges related to integrating diplomatic and information sharing efforts.

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