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Japan's National Security Policy: New Directions, Old Restrictions

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Yasuhiro Matsuda, Associate Professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo, explains that both of Japan's recent national security reports highlight "the perception of the global shift in the balance of power that is currently underway throughout the Asia-Pacific region."

In 2010, two important documents on Japan's security and national defense policies were released under the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government in Japan. One report is entitled "Japan's Vision for Future Security and Defense Capabilities in the New Era: Toward a Peace-Creating Nation." This report was issued in August by the Council on Security and Defense Capabilities in the New Era, the Prime Minister's private council on national security and defense capabilities which is chaired by Shigetaka Sato—hereafter the Sato Report. The other is the "National Defense Program Guidelines, FY 2011—" that was issued by the Japanese government in December—hereafter the 2010 NDPG. The former is a blueprint of Japan's national security and defense strategy, the latter addresses the formal Japanese defense program guidelines for the next ten years. While the Japanese government is not legally bound by the Sato Report, since it is not the Japanese version of a National Security Strategy, a formal document issued by the US government, the 2010 NDPG does contain actual guidelines for building the defense capability of Japan. The overlap between the two documents represents the new directions of the Japanese security and national defense policies, and the gap between them illustrates the old restrictions that remain.

New Directions: Selection and Concentration

The Sato Report analyses the changing security environment surrounding Japan and highlights the serious defense-budgetary restraints of the Japanese constitution, which the 2010 NDPG basically shares. One overwhelming theme in both reports is the perception of the global shift in the balance of power that is currently underway throughout the Asia-Pacific region. This includes the rise of emerging powers such as China, India, and Russia, along with the perceived relative decline of the overwhelming superiority of the United States, both economically and militarily. Under the existing paradigm of globalization, a full-scale invasion of Japan is unlikely, but the existential security challenges and destabilizing factors that Japan faces are diverse, complex and intertwined. These include cyberspace insecurity, international terrorism and piracy, North Korea's nuclear and missile program development, and China's military modernization.

Japan will not respond to these challenges with a Cold War arms race. Instead, in order to meet its defense needs, Japan will need to focus on a targeted "selection and concentration" of its defense resources. Therefore, both reports elaborate on the concepts of "Dynamic Deterrence" or a "Dynamic Defense Force." This is an effort to achieve more credible capabilities through building a defense force that achieves a high operational status superseding the idea of just a "Basic Defense Force Concept," which mainly focuses on the quantities of weapons and troops.

Both documents stress the importance of strengthening the joint capability of air and maritime defense around remote islands that have experienced a "vacuum" of a Self-



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Defense Forces presence for decades. In addition, the 2010 NDPG addresses the issue of force structure, recommending no increase in the number of combat jet aircraft, a slight increase in the number of destroyers and submarines, and a drastic reduction in the number of ground personnel, tanks and artillery. The objective is for the Ground Self-Defense Force to shift its focus from traditional heavy armaments to lightweight and maneuverable ground battle capabilities.

Both documents strongly endorse further cooperation with the United States and other major partner states. The Japan-US alliance should be enhanced, with the common strategic goals, operational roles, and missions of the two countries adjusted to meet the new international security environment. Furthermore, defense exchanges and cooperation with other security partners, both bilateral and multilateral, should be reinforced. While responsibility for Japan’s national security begins with Japan, budgetary restraints have prevented the country from increasing its quantitative defense capabilities, thus there is increased emphasis upon closer cooperation with foreign partners, when and where interests overlap.

Old Restrictions: Lack of Bipartisan Consensus and Political Leadership

However, there are a number of policy differences between the two documents. The Sato Report proposes that the current interpretation of the Japanese constitution, specifically Article Nine restrictions on collective defensive engagements, should be reviewed in order to increase the functional interoperability of Japan-US bilateral operations. Still, the tone is very subtle. The Sato Report also suggests reviewing the use of weapons during international peacekeeping operations in order to protect foreign personnel, which also relates to reviewing the current interpretation of Article Nine of the Constitution. On the other hand, the 2010 NDPG omits any direct reference to these politically sensitive issues. It is extremely difficult and politically hazardous to revise the interpretation of Article Nine; such an endeavor requires strong bipartisan support along with broad national consensus.

The Sato Report also criticizes the lengthy and time consuming special legislation that had to be passed each time in order for Japanese Self-Defense Forces personnel to partake in international peace cooperation activities other than UN peacekeeping operations. Hence, the report calls for an overall revision of the International Peace Cooperation Law to avoid this political bottleneck in the future. The 2010 NDPG only mentions the enhancement of capabilities for international peace cooperation. It does not refer to the possibility of any new legislation. Considering the difficulties of this legislation, it is clear that such a sensitive issue is not on the immediate agenda of the current cabinet.

Finally, the Sato Report urges the Japanese government to overturn its weapons export prohibition policy in order to give Japan the choice to take advantage of international defense development and production projects. The 2010 NDPG, however, does not clearly address this point. It is worth noting that to implement an overturn falls under the purview of the cabinet, no new actual legislation is required. It was widely reported that the Social Democratic Party, a former coalition partner of the DPJ, strongly opposed lifting the export prohibition due in part to its doctrine of Japanese pacifism.

In sum, the DPJ government, which has been perceived as a “liberal” party, could not but ironically release a proactive “Dynamic Defense Force” review. However, this review was drafted amid serious budget limitations, along with the *status quo* orientation on politically sensitive issues within the DPJ government and the Japanese public at large. In other words, the DPJ government did not devise this security and defense policy. Rather, it was the civil service bureaucracy that did so through a bottom-up approach. As a result, Japan’s goal of a strong national security strategy will continue to be without strong political leadership for the foreseeable future.