Japan: Eternal Geography, Varied Responses

by Mathew Preston
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POLICY UPDATE

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ETERNAL GEOGRAPHY, VARIED RESPONSES

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The Korean Peninsula has dominated the news out of Asia as of late. From assassinations reminiscent of James Bond villains and ballistic missiles aimed at U.S. bases in Japan, to Chinese anger over advanced missile defence systems, and harsher than ever sanctions by China on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), there is no shortage of headlines. But below the radar, some more important events have been taking place across the Tsushima Strait.

On March 4, Japan’s Liberal Democrat Party approved a rule change that would allow the party’s president to continue for a third term. This means that should the LDP win another election, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe could serve until 2021, making him the longest-serving Japanese prime minister in the postwar era. Upon the rule’s approval, Abe announced: “It’s the historic mission of the LDP, which has held up the backbone of Japan throughout the postwar period, to lead a specific debate toward a proposal to amend the constitution.” To Abe and the conservative faction he heads within the LDP, that largely means repealing Article 9 — the ‘no war’ clause. Simultaneously, controversy has arisen over a potential conflict of interest story regarding the sale of land far below market value to a nationalistic primary school that originally named Abe’s wife, Akie, as honorary principal.

Meanwhile, Emperor Akihito was in Vietnam, “expressing sympathy” and meeting with Vietnamese women abandoned by Japanese soldier-husbands when they left at the end of the Second World War. It was the Emperor’s first trip to Vietnam. Akihito will be abdicating as soon as a government panel determines how he will be able to do so constitutionally.

Then, on March 13, Japan announced it would send its largest warship, an Izumo-class helicopter carrier (which is speculated to be able to potentially carry the VTOL F-35B), on a three-month deployment to the South China Sea in what some sources are calling Japan’s “biggest show of naval force” since the Second World War.

All this stands in stark contrast to the view the West generally has of Japan as a nation of pacifists who shy away from high politics. It is clear, then, that Japan is changing. While the country has had essentially two lost decades economically and is threatened by dire demographic realities (a situation it so far refuses to solve as other Western countries have through immigration), Japan only changes dramatically when faced by externalities. And it is Japan, perhaps more than any other nation, that has shown on multiple occasions the ability to enact dramatic changes in a small amount of time. It appears Japan is once again on the cusp of perhaps dramatic change.

Japan faces distinct geographic challenges. It is a small island nation made even smaller than it appears due to a mountain chain that runs through the middle of the main island, Honshu, where the economic and demographic core is located. It also has very limited natural resources. Both situations make maritime lines of communication essential to its survival. Japan’s chief strategic imperative, therefore, is to maintain access to maritime trade so that it can receive the resources needed to sustain its large industrial economy.
Japan is also nestled off the coast of a large and resource-rich continent. In many ways, this mirrors Great Britain’s geographic experience. However, at its closest point Japan is 170 km farther away from Korea than England is from France (33.3 km vs. 200 km). While Britain responded to continental powers by seeking a balance of power to prevent invasion, Japan has responded by alternating between aggressive expansion and iron-clad isolationism. In both nations’ cases, the postwar world altered this calculus. While Britain has yet to develop a post-Brexit policy towards Europe, Japan is already responding to changes on its own continental periphery.

Japan’s cycle of isolation and invasion was broken following the U.S. occupation. Like Germany’s ability to ‘conquer’ Europe through trade after multiple failed military attempts, by the 1980s Japan was able to achieve through commerce what it failed to do through war: create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. With a superpower as a security guarantor, Japan could secure its economic prosperity without shouldering the costs of keeping its sea lines of communication open. Despite some challenge from the U.S. when it appeared that Japanese companies were completely out-competing their American counterparts, there was little movement in changing the overarching security arrangement, even following the fall of the Soviet Union.

However, Japan now faces some external realities that threaten to challenge the postwar status quo in its geopolitical responses:

- A surging China challenging almost all maritime boundaries on its own periphery;
- An increasingly isolationist United States, embodied by the election of Donald Trump;
- Global trends that are isolationist in general, and moving towards more regionally based security structures;
- An increasingly threatening, and more importantly, capable North Korea; and
- A revanchist Russia, with which Japan still does not have a peace treaty ending the Second World War.

In addition to these, Japan faces two major internal threats:

- An increasingly aging population, threatening its economic and security future; and
- A persistently stagnant economy.

It is apparent, then, that if Japan’s history can serve as an indicator, it is very likely that Japan is ripe for another massive change. But what will it look like?

Japan will still need to respond to the challenges its unique geography presents: it must secure resources, prevent invasion, and ensure prosperity. These issues are not unique to Japan; they challenge almost all nations. However, they are especially acute for Japan due to its natural geography and geostrategic position in the world. For an island nation such as Japan to meet these challenges, only one lone geostrategic imperative matters: to guarantee that its sea lines of communication remain open. Japan’s two previous responses to external threats — invasion or
self-imposed isolation — both require this level of maritime control, or at a minimum, total control over its littorals. Until now, Japan has relied upon the U.S. Navy to achieve this.

The Philippines, at least under the current Duterte administration, has responded to shifting geopolitical orientations by moving closer to China. On March 6, President Rodrigo Duterte rejected plans to build facilities at Antonio Bautista Air Base, although two other expansions will continue.9 Japan, though, appears to be working to bring the U.S. back around to the idea that it is important to be engaged in Asia. Prime Minister Abe epitomized this attitude by rushing to visit a newly elected President Trump, with Japanese manufacturing and investment deals in hand.10 Meanwhile, Japan is hedging its bets in another, more self-reliant way.11

While much can and has been said about Japan’s military build-up as of late,12 there’s more to reasserting power than ships and planes. It appears — at least in the abstract and if events are seen as a growing trend — that there is an attempt to shift Japanese public opinion to accept the adoption of a more martial standing in its own backyard. While the battle over what is and is not written in textbooks has a long history in Japan, “nationalist” primary schools are a recent phenomenon.13 Reinterpretation of Article 9 is not new at all, however, and while conservative circles always hoped and dreamed about its repeal, never has it been pushed so openly.14 With the Emperor at least moving towards perhaps apologizing to formerly conquered Asian states, there is likely an attempt to move toward friendlier relations, not only between governments but between people. Increasing ties with regional allies again shows that Japan is preparing for an era in which it acts more like a traditional nation, where it uses military power in conjunction with diplomacy to look after its national interests.

There are two issues in regards to Japan’s ability to secure its lines of communication. The first is to eliminate or at least mitigate the possibility of a hostile power cutting the country off from energy supplies, most of which pass through the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. Without the U.S. Navy, Japan will need allies, but as the third largest economy in the world with a very powerful “navy”, it will be able to move in order to secure sea lanes itself. Japan is driven by its geography and history. It will not invade others to secure resources and access to them (international norms have changed too much since its first invasion of Korea in the 16th century), but neither will it shrink into itself.

Much, however, depends on turning the country’s demographic decline around. It is hard to imagine an explosion in births, but it has happened before, and Japan does have many structural issues that prevent child-bearing.15 That being said, many of these are regulatory or policy-based, meaning the trend could be overcome. While increasing immigration would help, there are also deep legal structural issues at play, not to mention socio-cultural attitudes in Japan, regardless of regulations or policies. How Japan manages to deal with this issue will largely determine whether the other changes mentioned above have any chance at long-term success. But if attitudes toward militarization can be changed, so too can those surrounding immigration and child-rearing. Abe is showing that humans matter as much as geography in geopolitics — both their numbers and their attitudes.
Military change and build-up are coming to Japan. These are being matched with attitudinal and possibly cultural changes as well. While it is unlikely that there were explicit political motivations or that he was prescient enough to see massive change coming, it is somewhat symbolic that the Emperor has chosen now to abdicate. Japan is defined by its eras, which in the turn has been defined by the Emperor. Meiji and Hirohito both came to represent massively different times in Japan’s history. Perhaps a new Emperor will see the same.


7 China is also asserting itself as being the security guarantor in the region — on March 8, it offered the deal that if the U.S. and South Korea stopped joint military exercises, North Korea should stop its nuclear and missile testing.


10 In the words of one academic who has written extensively on the relationship and lived in Japan for a time: “Based on my extensive discussions with U.S. and Japanese policy-makers and experts, it is clear that the alliance is strong, but is likely to be tested over the coming years.” Michael Auslin, “Trumpeting the Alliance: How Much will the United States and Japan Lean on Each Other?” War on the Rocks, March 8, 2017 http://bit.ly/2mOFdql. (Accessed March 15, 2017).

11 In trade, this would include continuing with the Trans-Pacific Partnership, without the U.S. Peter Mazereeuw, “A TPP by any Other Name: Japan Fighting to Keep ‘Elements‘ of the Zombie Trade Deal, in one Form or Another,” The Hill Times, March 8, 2017, http://bit.ly/2lFwx27 (Accessed March 8, 2017). Diplomatic staff in Ottawa have also discussed openly the desire for the TPP to be signed, as well as speaking out for a more robust Canadian presence in Asia (author notes from CDA Institute Conference, 2017).


14 Ibid.

15 Prestowitz, 93-4.

16 There are even rumours, communicated to the CNN Global Briefing on March 8 by Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Virginia. From the same e-mail sent to the editors at CNN: “Meanwhile, both Japan and China are planning to open up massive reprocessing plants that could make one to 2,000 nuclear weapons worth of plutonium a year, even though there is no economic justification for opening such plants — they’re enormous money losers.” — Speculation, to be sure, but likely based on conversations with officials.
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