

Military and War in Modern Japan

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Introduction

When Japan gave up its policy of seclusion in 1854, this was, above all, a reaction to the superiority of Western military technology, which Japanese policy-makers had become aware of during the Opium War (1839–1842) in China and which they could witness at their own shores in 1854 in the form of the U.S. steamships – the Black Ships or *kurofune* – of Commodore Perry’s small flotilla. Although this flotilla was comprised only of four ships, two steamships and two sailing ships, the shock about the obvious superiority of Western technology among the samurai observing the black ships from the shore was an immense one. The word *kurofune* until today stands as a synonym for the shock waves the arrival of Perry caused in Japan. In the years following the “opening” of Japan and the conclusion of “unequal treaties” between Japan and Western powers, the xenophobic group of samurai that propagated the slogan “Revere the Emperor and Expel the Barbarians” (*sonnô jôï*) gradually came to see that military resistance against the West was hopeless, particularly after the two most belligerent feudal domains, Satsuma and Chôshû, were defeated by small Western forces in 1863 and 1864, respectively.

The Meiji revolution of 1867/68, which these samurai brought about, led to the foundation of a strongly centralized nation state, whose main objective was to become a “rich nation with a strong army” (*fukoku kyôhei*). This slogan, although used mostly in the Meiji era (1868–1912), became a policy guideline for modern Japan in general. Notwithstanding strong pacifist currents in postwar Japan, it is, in a sense, still a major objective today, at least for policy makers, as shall be shown in the following. Recently, the balance between the two notions of “rich country” and the “strong army”, which always were interrelated, again seems to shift. While in the postwar period, a strong economy and limited military expenditures (and activities) were a commonplace in Japanese politics, recently a reassertion of the role of the military sector can be observed.

Historical Background

Meiji Japan in several instances had learned that in the environment of an imperialist

world system, only “might makes right“, and that the basis for might is military power. Not only the forced “opening” of Japan, but again the Tripartite Intervention of 1895, the *démarche* by Russia, France and Germany against the Japanese annexation of the Liaodung peninsula after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894/95), were perceived as a national humiliation and had reasserted this perception of international relations. It was against this background that prewar Japan put much emphasis on the buildup of military forces and gradually expanded its army and navy. While the navy was mostly built with English assistance, in the army French advisors, which had been employed since the time of the Tokugawa Bakufu, played the major role. Only in the late 1870s and during the 1880s, the Prusso-German army gradually replaced France as a model.

The army, only a few thousand samurai troops called *Go-Shinpei* (Imperial Guard) in 1871, was expanded to 21 divisions during the years of World War I. The organizational basis for the expansion of the Japanese military was conscription, introduced in 1873/74. Conscription, however, at the same time also served as a major utensil to enforce national integration. Simultaneously with the expansion of the army as the main branch of the military, the Japanese navy should become one of the most powerful in the world by World War I. While during the first decade of the Meiji era the army was frequently utilized for the suppression of interior revolts as well, such as the Satsuma Rebellion (also Southwest War, *seinan sensô*, 1877/78), its basic *raison d'être* was the task of the defense of Japan's national sovereignty and independence.¹ Since this was also the major task of the nation as a whole, the army gradually also became an important force in Japanese politics, notwithstanding the regulation in the 1881 Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors that members of the imperial army and navy should not intermingle in political affairs.² However, army, and later navy officers increasingly intervened in political and social affairs and, at the same time, developed an “allergy” against control of the military by civilian politicians.³ The status of the military in Japanese society rose fast after victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05), which was ended with the Peace Treaty of Portsmouth. Japan's victory over Czarist Russia, a major player in the international arena during that period, had made Japan into a major imperialist and colonial power in East Asia. With its prestige rising, the military began more frequently

¹ During the late Meiji and the Taishô period (1912–26), the army several times was called upon to assist the police in suppressing uprisings such as the Rice Riots (*kome sôdô*) in 1918.

² Besides, the Rescript laid down the five basic virtues of soldiers and sailors: loyalty (to the Emperor as Supreme Commander), valor, faith, politeness, and purity.

³ Particularly, disarmament provisions, such as the ones decided upon at the Washington Conference of 1922/23 or the London Naval Conference of 1930, were seen with suspicion in the military. The Washington Conference had ended with several agreements, among others a five-powers treaty regulating the strength of the battleship fleets of the U.S., Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy, while the London Naval Treaty had limited the buildup of cruiser fleets.

to intervene in politics. It was already in the 1910s that the Imperial Army for the first time massively intermingled in politics, and, for example, brought down the second cabinet of Saionji Kinmochi in 1912. In the 1930s, the military became one of the strongest political actors overall, leading to a dominance of politics by the military, although not to a military dictatorship in the narrow definition. However, after 1932, most prime ministers came from the ranks of the military, while civilian politicians lost influence and political parties finally were dissolved in 1940.

The military defeat in the Asia-Pacific War (1931–45) fundamentally changed the situation of the military and its place in the Japanese polity. For almost a decade following the surrender of August 1945, Japan should not maintain military forces at all. The country was occupied by allied, mostly U.S., forces; it was completely disarmed, the military dissolved, and politics once again were taken over by civilian party politicians. The new Constitution, drafted under the guidance of U.S. occupation authorities, in Article 9 stipulated that Japan “forever renounces war” and for that end, “land, sea, and air forces [...] will never be maintained.” Accordingly, the main goal of postwar politics was to rebuild the economy and make Japan a “rich country.” Military security should be reached through a close alliance with the U.S., but Japanese military expenditures and forces should be kept to a minimum. Voices from the extreme left, arguing for a neutral Japan with more distance from the “imperialist” U.S., never could make inroads into mainstream politics. On the other hand, voices coming from the right spectrum of politics advocating an armed and “truly independent” Japan also were discerned due to their character as a remnant of prewar militarism.

The Self Defense Forces (SDF)

Due to U.S. pressure, however, Japan soon was to start a policy of rearmament and became the main strategic partner of the U.S. in the Far East. Already in 1950, in the year of the beginning of the Korean War, a “National Police Reserve”, comprising of 75,000 men was established. This force was the predecessor of the Self Defense Forces (SDF), which were founded in 1954 according to the Self Defense Forces Law. After Japan had experienced problems with a weak civilian control over the military in the prewar period, strict civilian control was established with the foundation of the SDF. The Supreme Command, in the prewar period in the hands of the military itself, under the umbrella of Imperial authority, today lies in the hands of the prime minister. The SDF is a professional army that enlists personnel between 18 and 25 years of age, the

officers are selected from the graduates of the National Defense Academy (*Bôei Daigakkô*) in Yokosuka. Presently (2004), the Ground SDF personnel numbers 148,200,⁴ Maritime SDF personnel numbers 44,000 and Air SDF 45,600. While the naval SDF has been much strengthened recently, introducing sophisticated AEGIS destroyers, apart from Japan only maintained by the U.S. and Spain, the Ground SDF in 2004 had to accept budget cuts and agree to a reduction in the number of its – costly – tanks and artillery from 900 to 600 each. The number of Ground SDF troops shall be reduced by 25% in five to ten years starting with the fiscal year 2005, to a low of possibly 100,000, according to government plans.

Although the existence of the SDF long had been considered a violation of Article 9 of the Constitution, since the 1990s opposition against maintaining military forces for self-defense has been weakening. In 1994, Murayama Tomiichi from the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ) acknowledged the existence of the SDF as in accord with the Constitution, when he became prime minister. Political but also societal opposition increasingly agrees with the interpretation of former cabinets, which had been mostly dominated by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), saying that although the Constitution forbids *war* as a means of resolving international disputes, it does not negate the right of a nation of *self-defense*. However, opposition to the use of the SDF for any other purpose than self-defense, such as for supporting U.S. military actions, remains strong, as, for example, an opinion poll of Asahi Shinbun, a major newspaper, in May 2004 revealed. This is a sign of a continuing pacifism among the Japanese population. Government politics of increasing involvement of Japan in the worldwide military activities of the U.S. seem to be in antagonism with these pacifist currents.

On the other hand, while the SDF in the postwar period mostly have been quite an isolated existence in Japanese society and have been plagued by shortage of personnel, the public image of Japan's military is recently improving. Young people are again considering the SDF as a career option. The ratio of applicants for officer candidate positions in the SDF in 2003 was 45 to 1, while in 1991 it was only 4.4 to 1. Where mostly high-school graduates filled the ranks of the SDF; now many college graduates are also amongst the recruited. The humanitarian SDF activities during the Great Hanshin Earthquake and after the Sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system, both in 1995, but also the missions abroad have contributed to a positive image of the SDF and brought more social recognition for SDF personnel by the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the organization, which was celebrated in summer 2004.

⁴ While the actual personnel numbers 148,200 (in 2004), the prescribed number (*teisû*) for the Ground SDF in military planning and jurisdiction is 160,000.

Japanese Security Policy

Besides the SDF, the Japan-US Security Treaty (*Nichibei anzen hoshô jôyaku*; or *Anpo jôyaku* for short) was the main pillar of Japanese security policy in the postwar period. The first treaty with the U.S. was concluded together with the peace treaty of San Francisco in 1952, and it was renewed by Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke in 1960, notwithstanding harsh opposition and mass demonstrations against the treaty (*anpo sôdô*) around the Diet in May. The next prolongation of the security treaty was reached through an agreement confirming the return of the most southern archipelago of Okinawa, administrated by the U.S. since 1945, to Japan at the end of 1969 (Sato-Nixon Communiqué). Okinawa, according this agreement, was returned to Japan in 1972.

Until the present day, the security treaty with the U.S. remains the basis of Japanese security policy. Currently (2004), Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirô is actively pursuing a course of further strengthening the partnership with the U.S. On the other hand, Japan therefore – not least due to U.S. pressure – has to reaffirm the alliance with the U.S. by a more active engagement in military terms, i.e. through support for U.S. military actions, such as during the Gulf Wars, the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War. While Japan participated in the 1991 Gulf War only by financial support and the postwar deployment of minesweepers; during the Afghanistan War it supported U.S. operations by supplying fuel and ammunitions; after the Iraq War, Japan dispatched a large contingent of about 800 personnel from the Ground and Air SDF to Iraq in order to be included in U.S. President Bush's "coalition of friends." These moves by many observers have been considered a watershed that might open a "new era" for Japan and Japanese security policies.

Recent Developments

Japan had prepared for an increase of military activities notwithstanding constitutional limitations during the last decade. Already in 1996, the "Japan-U.S. Common Declaration on Security" (*Nichibei anpo kyôdô sengen*) and in 1997 the "Japan-U.S. New Guidelines" (*Nichibei Shin-gaidorain*) had announced a new era in military cooperation between Japan and the U.S. Within Japan, the 1999 "Vicinity Emergency Law" (*Shûhen jitai-hô*), the 2000 "Anti-Terror Law" (*Tero Tokubetsu Sochi-hô*)⁵ and

⁵ The full name of this Law is an expression of the insecurity Japanese lawmakers felt when entering this completely

the 2003 “Emergency Laws” (*Yûji hôsei*)⁶ have increased Japan’s capabilities, in juristic terms, to utilize the SDF in an international context. This constitutional “revision by re-interpretation”, as Gavan McCormack has called it, has allowed increasing activities of the SDF in recent years, not only in the framework of UN missions, but also on the side of U.S.-led forces. Today, not only is the U.S. the most important security partner for Japan, Japan also is the major pillar of U.S. hegemony in East Asia, as Christopher Huges has put it.

The recent revision of the “National Defense Program Outline” (*Bôei Keikaku Taikô*) has confirmed this trend. The National Defense Program Outline, which was for the first time formulated in 1976 as the basic policy for national defense and only once revised in 1995 to adjust to the post-Cold War order, speaks of adjusting the SDF to better handle “new threats”. While the basic policy states the aim of further reducing the SDF in strength, as mentioned above, it shifts emphasis to national defense to provide greater flexibility and capabilities against new threats as terrorism, guerilla warfare of small landing command troops, and attacks by ballistic missiles. While North Korea has long been declared a threat to Japanese security, the new Outline adopted on 10 December 2004 explicitly mentions China as a key threat to Japan’s national security – a move seen with much suspicion in that country. At the same time, the midterm defense buildup plan (*Chûki bôeiryoku seibi keikaku*), approved by the Cabinet together with the outline, seeks a reduction of personnel and equipment of the Ground SDF and has initiated the first budget cut since 1985, only the second in the history of the SDF since its foundation in 1954 ever. However, the government also has embarked on loosening the three principles governing weapons exports, established in 1967 and by now being practiced virtually as a self-imposed ban on weapons exports. This restriction is seen by many in Japan as a provision with a symbolic meaning as strong as Article 9. The revision is, above all, proposed against the backdrop of cooperation with the U.S. in the field of ballistic missile defense, a policy which again causes suspicion in Japan’s neighboring states.⁷

Such moves are proving contentious domestically in the view of a continuing strong

new ground in Japanese defense policies: “Special Measures Law concerning Measures Taken by Japan in Support of the Activities of Foreign Countries Aiming to Achieve the Purposes of the Character of the United Nations in Response to the Terrorist Attacks Which Took Place on September 11, 2001, in the United States of America as Well as concerning Humanitarian Measures Based on Relevant Resolutions of the United Nations.”

⁶ This jurisdiction is comprised of seven laws including the “Law for the Situation of an Armed Attack [on Japan]” (*Buryoku kôgeki jitai-hô*), the “Revised Self Defense Forces Law” (*Kaisei Jieitai-hô*), the “Revised Law for the Establishment of a Security Council” (*Kaisei anzen hoshô kaigi secchi-hô*) from 2003, the “Law for the Protection of the People” (*Kokumin hogo-hô*) and the “Law for the Support of the U.S. Military” (*Beigun shien-hô*) from 2004.

⁷ According to an agreement reached by the Japanese and the U.S. governments in November 2004, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd. will begin manufacturing Patriot Advanced Capability-3 surface-to-air missiles under a licensing agreement in 2005.

pacifism, but they are also provoking suspicion in East Asian neighboring countries. However, the mainstream in the largest party, the LDP, seems to favor a more affirmative Japanese security policy in the future. The revision of the National Defense Program Outline indicates a departure into this direction. The next step would be the revision of the Constitution, particularly of Article 9, and the LDP is currently working on constitutional revision to be implemented in the next years. A revision of Article 9, however, would question postwar Japanese identity, of which pacifism is an integral part, and it would also further affect Japan's relations to neighboring countries. Although in Japan, criticism from China and Korea, North and South, that condemns Japanese military buildup and military activities as a legacy of prewar militarism, is easily discerned as "hysterical", "inappropriate" or as an "intervention in internal matters", we have to keep in mind that Japan is the largest military power in East Asia. The Japanese military budget in 2003 (41.4 bil. US\$) was surpassed only by the budgets of the U.S. and Russia, but larger than that of any other nation, including China, not to talk of North Korea, in Japan hysterically perceived as an imminent threat in recent years. Military budgets of major countries in 2003 (Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies: *The Military Balance 2003–2004*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

		Annual Defense budget (in billion US\$)
1	USA	382.6
2	Russia	50.8 (2002) ⁸
3	Japan	41.4
4	United Kingdom	41.3
5	France	34.9
6	Germany	27.4
7	China	22.4
8	Italy	22.3
9	Saudi-Arabia	18.4
10	India	16.2
	South Korea	14.8
	North Korea	1.6

⁸ *Military Balance* ignores the Russian official budget, which amounts to only US\$23 billion, but rather estimates "actual defence expenditure in Russia using purchasing power parity (PPP) rates", giving an estimate of "total military-related expenditure [...] [as] the equivalent of \$50.8bn." (International Institute for Strategic Studies: *The Military Balance 2003–2004*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 271)

In sum, Japan's prewar history of militarism is still a major determinant for the attitudes of the Japanese towards the military (or the SDF) and military affairs in general. While the SDF remains rather passive, sensitively worried about their image in society, the LDP is taking daring steps towards reasserting the role of the military in politics and society and towards a "free hand" of Japan with regards to the use of military for means other than self-defense. While during the 1990s, participation of SDF personnel in UN-led Peace-keeping operations (PKO) were founded on a quite broad consensus in politics and society, recent military activities alongside the U.S. are facing strong societal opposition. The envisioned legislation and constitutional revision is, above all, also planned as a means to further bolster the image of the SDF in society and through political means increase public support for SDF activities and Japanese military engagement.

These developments can be seen as part of a worldwide trend of so-called neoconservative politics in the "Western" world, which Japan considers itself a part of, to actively utilize military force for power projection and the protection of national interests. While this has led to a very close relationship of Japan to the U.S. in recent years, it seems to imply the possibility of growing isolation of Japan in East Asia, where such neoconservative politics are widely criticized. But the increasing utilization of military power also meets criticism in other, non-Asian countries, where politics and the public by now have acknowledged that it is impossible to contain terrorism by military means alone, as events since the September 11 attacks have shown. It might only be the continuing Japanese fiscal crises that might lead to a less military-oriented policy approach and increasing diplomatic initiatives in the future. The military budget cuts introduced in the 2004 midterm defense buildup plan might be a first step into this direction.

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Chronology

1839-42 Opium War

1854/55 „Opening“ of Japan

1867/68 Meiji Revolution

1871 Foundation of Imperial Guard (*Go-Shinpei*)

1873 Introduction of Conscription

1877/78 Satsuma Rebellion (*Southwest War*)

1882 Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors

1894/95 First Sino-Japanese War

1895 Tripartite Intervention

1904/05 Russo-Japanese War

1910 Annexation of Korea

1912 Imperial Army provokes downfall of Saionji cabinet (Taishō political crises)

1914 Japanese Entry into World War I

1918-22 Siberian Intervention

1922/23 Washington Conference

1930 London Naval Conference

1931 Manchurian Incident

1937-45 Second Sino-Japanese War

1940 Political parties dissolved

1941-45 Pacific War

August 1945 Japanese surrender

1950 Establishment of National Police Reserve

1952 Peace Treaty of San Francisco

1952 Japan-US Security Treaty

1954 Foundation of Self-Defense Forces (SDF)

1960 Renewal of Japan-US Security Treaty
1960 Opposition Movement against Security Treaty (*anpo sôdô*)
1967 Three Principles on Weapons Export (*Buki Yushutsu San-Gensoku*)
1969 Sato-Nixon Communiqué
1972 Return of Okinawa to Japan
1991 Japan dispatches minesweepers after the Gulf War
1994 Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi (Socialist Party) recognizes the conformity of SDF with the constitution
1996 Japan-US Common Declaration on Security
1999 Vicinity Emergency Law (*Shûhen Yûji-hô*)
2000 Anti-Terror Law (*Tero Tokubetsu Sochi-hô*)
2000 Japan dispatches Maritime SDF into the Indian Ocean to support U.S. warfare in Afghanistan
2003 Emergency Laws (*Yûji hôsei*)
2004 Japan dispatches Ground and Air SDF to Iraq
2004 Revision of National Defense Program Outline (*Bôei Keikaku Taikô*)
2004 Revision of Midterm Defense Buildup Plan (*Chûki Bôeiriyoku Seibi Keikaku*)