PICTURE: ISSEI KATO / REUTERS

Modern ninja: a soldier of the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade in camouflage.

An agenda for Japanese military reform

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CHINESE military power has expanded dramatically in the past decade, a period that also witnessed the emergence of North Korea as a bona fide nuclear power. These developments, coming inevitably at the expense of the United States' relative power in the region, have raised the stakes for Japan

Japan's military planners face a number of major challenges on the near horizon. Potential conflict on the Korean peninsula, skirmishes in the East China Sea, debilitating cyberattacks, and the forced repatriation of Taiwan by Beijing each need—and are likely to receive—their immediate attention. While planners have benefitted from the support and stable leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, much work remains to be done if they are to balance effectively against palpable threats.

Internally, there have been a great many changes during the Abe years. While today's Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) remain more constrained than the prime minister would prefer, they operate at further distance and with a greater degree of freedom than at any time since they were established in 1954. In 2013, the Abe government created a National Security Council with centralised policy responsibilities and passed a Designated State Secrets Law with guidelines for the first postwar security classification system. Two years later it passed legislation providing guidelines for the SDF to engage in collective defence. It also established a new Cyber Command and eliminated restrictions on the

export of weapons in the hope of stimulating an internationally competitive defence industrial base.

Yet Tokyo will need to undertake additional measures to improve defence capabilities going forward. Some of these would require dramatic changes to current approaches, but turbulent times call for adaptation. Intensifying security challenges in Japan's immediate environment have combined with the considerable uncertainty wrought by US President Donald Trump to make change urgent.

The first is an increased defence budget, which in 2018 remains just 6 per cent larger in nominal terms than it was in 1997 and is now less than one-third of China's. Tokyo still punches well below its weight militarily at a time when Washington expects greater burden sharing and Chinese military improvements place a premium on combined effort. With only a fraction of US forces forward deployed to areas around Japan, the alliance will increasingly rely on Japanese capabilities for deterrence and initial warfighting.

Another priority area should be reform of defence requirements and the budgeting process. Japan lacks effective institutional mechanisms to translate specified objectives into force structure requirements or to compete different options against one another. Without such mechanisms, it is impossible to evaluate whether, for example, cruise missile defence is best served by fighter aircraft conducting combat air patrols, point defence by short range surface-to-air missiles, or attacks against adversary launchers. As one veteran Japanese operations research (OR) analyst put the case, OR is too often used in the Japanese case to justify budget figures, employing numbers to 'turn doves into hawks'.

The SDF is also hobbled by the lack of a standing joint command system. The Japanese Joint Staff, established in 2006, is not a command authority. The chief of each service directs the activities of elements from that service alone. Periodic joint exercises are held, but the lack of a standing joint command system inhibits commanders from gaining adequate knowledge about the capabilities and practices of sister services.

PICTURE: DROP OF LIGHT / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Prime Minister Abe: busy on the diplomatic front.

Closer integration of the services and strengthening central analytic functions could, and almost certainly should, produce major changes in the roles of Japan's three military services. The Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) continues to enjoy budgets that are 50 per cent larger than either the Maritime or Air Self-Defense Forces, despite the overwhelmingly air and maritime nature of threats facing Japan. Rather than reapportion budget shares, the Ministry of Defense has instead given the GSDF responsibilities that should go to the other services.

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Prime Minister Abe has been as busy on the diplomatic front as he has been on the military one. In particular, he has begun to pivot to the rest of the region—from Australia to India—to improve technology, trade and general economic ties. He has even tried to mend fences with Russia. But regional military cooperation lags.

One issue likely to be on Japan's agenda for the next decade is improving relations with South Korea. History and politics keep Japan and South Korea at arm's length despite sharing a common vital ally and overlapping security challenges.

Tokyo and Seoul may opt to prioritise three areas. The first is intelligence-sharing. Seoul and Tokyo signed a bilateral intelligence accord (GSOMIA) in November 2016, but the deal was limited to just one year and did not allow the exchange of information about China's regional activities.

The second is logistical cooperation. Japan and South Korea have signed Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSA) with several third-party countries but not with one another.

The third is the institutionalisation and expansion of trilateral training exercises between the United States, South Korea and Japan. Improved

PICTURE: TORU HANAI / REUTERS

Crew of the *Kaga* take position for the handover of the new helicopter carrier. Despite such acquisitions, Japan 'still punches well below its weight' militarily.

ROK–Japan cooperation might help buttress the US commitment to peninsular defence when developments in North Korea and the US–DPRK relationship are calling that commitment into question.

Japan may also seek a formal defence treaty with Australia. Japan has concluded ACSA agreements with five countries and is seeking to establish more meaningful military–industrial ties with a variety of European and Asian states. It also conducts expanded security dialogues with a widening set of regional states. A logical next step would be a formal defensive alliance with Australia, with which it shares overlapping areas of geographic interest and significant interoperability.

The islands of the southwest Pacific and southern Southeast Asia are regarded by Australian strategists as its vital 'northern approaches' and by Japanese planners as critical but vulnerable sea lines of communication. A formal defence treaty would stimulate contentious debate in both countries but would signify the maturation of mutual strategic confidence.

Another likely agenda item for Japan is alliance coordination. There is currently no combined US–Japan command like that between the United States and South Korea. In a conflict, coordination would occur at the military and service levels, at a suboptimal geographic and procedural remove from actual command decisions. Creating a combined command would entail as many risks as benefits, but further efforts should be made to integrate coordination into the command processes on both sides.

Nothing is more certain for Japan's military planners than the fact that the security environment in East Asia will continue its rapid transformation. Prime Minister Abe has demonstrated that Japan can adapt incrementally. Ensuring that Japanese and alliance deterrence capabilities remain robust will require further policy changes that may be even more dramatic than those witnessed to date. With the United States facing inwards and now making as many waves internationally as it calms, Japanese leaders may need to become regional leaders and take greater responsibility for Japan's own security. EAFQ

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