



SIGUR CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES

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Japan as a Global Power: Contending Views from Japan

Japan confronts an ever-changing security environment abroad and economic turmoil at home as it looks to maintain a role as a global power. Japanese and U.S. experts discussed how Tokyo should respond to these challenges at a recent conference that presented a wide array of domestic views in each country on the future of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, Japanese history and society, and domestic policy priorities.

Assessing Today's U.S.-Japan Alliance

The speakers from Japan touched on several national security topics, most prominently the U.S.-Japan security alliance. All four Japanese speakers – Tomoko Abe, Kan Ito, Yukio Okamoto, and Kyoji Yanagisawa – raised questions on the current purpose of the alliance and the limits of how far each side would go to defend the other. Yanagisawa, Chief Director at the International Geopolitics Institute and a Japanese defense official, suggested that because the alliance today lacks a “clear target” of shared concern, the individual strategic priorities of its members were perhaps no longer in sync.

To understand why this debate matters, the panelists conferred at length on the Senkaku Islands, a chain of islands controlled by Japan in the East China Sea but whose sovereignty

is disputed by China, and Taiwan. Some speakers from Japan doubted whether the United States would aid their defense should the conflict escalate to war. Okamoto, Senior Fellow at the MIT Center for International Studies, former diplomat and advisor to several prime ministers, said that it was “utterly important for Japan to maintain a very healthy and robust relationship with the United States” since perceptions by Asian powers on U.S. willingness and capability to defend Japan were vital to deterring conflict. He felt that allowing China to gain control of the islands would be a significant blow to the alliance and Japanese security.

The U.S. participants, however, were divided on the island dispute. Some expressed hesitations about the strategic importance of the island chain. Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow at the libertarian leaning CATO Institute, sensed U.S. budgetary pressures could lead Americans to resent a seemingly one-sided alliance that might entangle its military into an escalating conflict outside its core interests. German Marshall Fund scholar Daniel Kliman, on the other hand, said that the alliance provides the United States with significant security benefits. His colleague, Daniel Twining, recommended the alliance draw a clear line in the Senkaku dispute to avoid appeasing “geopolitical

The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia and America's role.

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This Policy Brief is based on the discussions at the conference on “Japan as a Global Power: Contending Views from Japan,” co-organized by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations Japan Program, and MIT’s Center for International Studies on June 18, 2013.

The event featured the following Japanese panelists:

- **Tomoko Abe**, Member of Parliament
- **Kan Ito**, Foreign Policy Analyst
- **Yukio Okamoto**, Center for International Studies
- **Kyoji Yanagisawa**, International Geopolitics Institute

“aggressors” whose “appetite grows with the eating.” Anxiety over how much Japan could actually contribute to the alliance—due to its own economic and constitutional constraints—was ever present throughout these discussions.

In terms of the external threat environment, the panelists from Japan saw China growing more aggressive in the region even as economic ties deepened among these nations. Abe, a progressive Member of Parliament (MP), noted that China and America were “the most important partners for Japan, but these days the threatening power of China has a more significant meaning for Japan.” Ito, a conservative foreign policy analyst, questioned whether the alliance could peacefully co-exist with China since Beijing was a “revisionist power” looking to change the status quo balance. He pushed Tokyo to adopt a more realist foreign policy strategy that boosted military spending and closely coordinated with allies to balance against China. Yanagisawa, however, felt that the alliance had time to counter China’s military modernization. This window of opportunity, he argued, should be used to update the alliance’s core strategy because Sino-U.S.-Japanese economic interdependence – what he termed “economic mutually assured destruction” – now trumped any Cold War-era approach that relied on nuclear deterrence. U.S. speakers offered differing reactions: Twining declared China an aggressive and revisionist rising power while Swaine believed Beijing simply aims to reduce its genuine insecurities in the region. Fundamentally, the Japanese panelists worried the United States might “abandon” Japan as Washington and Beijing expand their economic and diplomatic ties.

The Role of Identity and History in Japan

To a greater degree than other countries in the *Worldviews* project, speakers from Japan revealed an important role for history and identity in its decision making. In terms of history, for example, this dynamic played out in the debate over revising Japan’s Constitution to allow greater military flexibility and uniquely Japanese values. MP Abe expressed strong opposition to proposed revisions that she felt could offend countries with historical grievances toward Japan stemming from WWII. Although part of Japan’s defense establishment, Yanagisawa also opposed revision by asserting that much remained to be done before reform should be considered. Okamoto, voicing a moderate approach to reform, advocated revising Article IX to ensure Japan’s right to collective self-defense, but also insisted that this revision follow efforts to “reinterpret” the existing document and achieve general consensus within Japan on its future. Ito, on the other hand, denounced Japan’s Constitution as “illegitimate” and imposed by a foreign power. He called for the creation of a new constitution that faithfully reflects both Japan’s postwar democratic ideals and traditional values.

Yanagisawa characterized Japan’s present territorial disputes with China, Korea, and Russia as legacies of unresolved questions from WWII. As long as nationalism grows within Japan, he argued, reconciliation with Japan’s neighbors would remain difficult. Okamoto criticized Prime Minister Abe’s “revisionist” and “hawkish views” of Japanese history. More sympathetic to Abe, Ito embraced Japan’s traditions and deep-seated values but admonished Japanese conservatives who revere prewar Japanese nationalism and deny its atrocities in WWII that they risked being seen as “irrational” and “illogical.” Ito advocated the creation of a new constitution that faithfully reflects Japan’s postwar democratic ideals, but also allows for Japan to maintain regular military and nuclear forces for self-defense.

Several of the Japanese panelists saw an emerging identity within Japanese youth that eschewed international affairs, evidenced by the declining numbers of Japanese studying abroad. In response to this, MP Abe called for increased exchange programs between Japan, China, and Korea. Ito spoke of the dangers of Japan’s youth’s increasing disconnect from world affairs. Okamoto, criticizing Japanese corporate culture, hoped Japanese companies would reward students who studied abroad. Yanagisawa called on Japan to become a more open society that is willing to accept immigrants and create more opportunities for employing Japan’s female workforce.

Domestic Priorities: Obstacles and Narratives

In his keynote address, Fred Hiatt, Editorial Page Editor of *The Washington Post*, identified a strong relationship between Japan’s national narrative and the struggles it faces as a nation. He saw Japan’s national narrative consistently adapting over history to meet the scale of its present obstacles. The uncertain security environment in Japan’s backyard and its rapidly aging and shrinking population, Hiatt predicts, would now shape Japan’s narrative to one of “pulling together” and shared sacrifice.

In terms of economics, Okamoto maintained that public perceptions on economic health matter greatly within Japan. He believed Prime Minister Abe’s reform policies and optimist narrative – coined “Abenomics” – were positive boosts to public confidence in Japan’s future. Energy security and economic growth were concerns shared by several panelists, though in different ways. MP Abe, leader of the Diet’s anti-nuclear caucus, argued that Abenomics would stumble without strong investments in domestic renewable energy sources, such as wind, solar, and hydroelectric sources. Okamoto, however, voiced reservations on renewables meeting Japan’s energy demands and urged leaders to restart the nuclear reactors.

The economic discussion continued with debate on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free trade agreement under negotiation between several Pacific nations. Japan's prime minister recently expressed interest in joining this U.S. priority initiative expressed, but several panelists questioned this decision. Despite occupying opposite ends of Japan's ideological spectrum, Ito and Abe both urged caution with TPP. Abe's concern centered on labor rights and the trade deal's benefits for Japanese citizens while Ito worried about giving the United States such a dominant role in both Japan's financial and economic markets. Abe hoped for a China-Japan-Korea free trade deal first before moving forward on TPP. Panelists and audience members from the United States, on the other hand, encouraged Japan to join TPP negotiations as they felt the deal would be beneficial to all parties.

Panelists exchanged views on a number of other topics, including the U.S. bases on Okinawa, Japan-Korea relations, and health care policy. As internal pressures and external challenges continue to shape Japanese thinking, it will be increasingly important to pay attention to these debates to assess Japanese ongoing evolution as an aspiring power.

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1. For further analysis of the Japanese domestic debates, see Narushige Michishita and Richard J. Samuels, "Hugging and Hedging: Japanese Grand Strategy in the Twenty-First Century" in Henry Nau and Deepa Ollapally, eds., *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
2. For more on the *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers* project, including Policy Briefs, video, and analysis from past conferences, visit: <http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/projects/worldviews/>

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