

*"You can pay a lot of money for very little defense"*

# Japan and the Fear of Fighting

BY HERBERT PASSIN

There is much talk lately about the rising level of defense interest in Japan. So far as I know, there is no country in the world over the size of 200,000 that does not have something in the nature of an armed force. At the extreme we have the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, and perhaps China. The range is from wide-scale, virtually all-spectrum military capacity to extremely limited capacity. Japan lies very much at the lower end of the scale: very limited in terms of possible missions, in terms of its own security doctrine, in terms of what domestic public opinion would permit, and in terms of Japan's perception of its position in the world.

The Japanese conception of its military role has been essentially one of being prepared to play a small part in repelling a limited and small-scale invasion. Since it is hard to conceive where such an invasion might come from, many Japanese have the feeling that it is useless to try to do anything. It does not seem likely that China would launch small-scale, limited aggression against Japan, and it seems even less conceivable that countries in Southeast Asia would. Some suggest that, if there were trouble between North and South Korea or if the United States used Japan as a base, North Korea might attack Japan. But to get Japan involved, in addition to the United States, seems very foolish from the standpoint of North Korea's own interests. So the question is whether the Soviet Union would engage in limited, small-scale aggression against Japan. Again, unlikely.

Japan could see for itself a very small military role under the American nuclear umbrella. The problem is, of course, that the American nuclear umbrella is becoming very tattered. The questions arising from the reduction of the credibility of the American nuclear deterrent, particularly since Vietnam, have set the stage for the current defense discussion in Japan. Although people talk about "everything" having changed now, I believe that what changes there are are incremental and very small.

For example, *New York Times* correspondent Henry Scott Stokes cites figures indicating that between 1970 and 1979 Japan's military expenditure has gone up sev-

en times. That sounds very impressive: in a nine-year period a sevenfold increase. But almost all of that is accounted for by three factors. First, the growth rate of the Japanese economy. The general rule of thumb has been that defense expenditures in Japan remain just under 1 per cent of GNP; if the GNP goes up, then, naturally, the 1 per cent goes up. Japan does a little better than the United States and European countries in growth, and so the figure goes up a little higher. The second factor is inflation. The figure Stokes gives is a dollar figure, from \$1.58 billion to \$10 billion. Inflation wipes out much of that. The third factor is the drop in the value of the dollar. In the last year it looks like a 44 per cent increase in military expenditures, but if you leave it in yen, it turns out to be 10.2 per cent. About 7 per cent of that is inflation, so actually the proportion of the national budget that it represents is smaller this year than it was last.

Also, Japanese self-defense forces pay a higher proportion of the total budget for manpower expenses than any army in the world. In 1979 the figure was 55 per cent. A private in the American army gets an average \$419 per month, while his Japanese counterpart gets over \$600. The real problem is not the abstract dollar figure but what it buys, and it is not at all clear that it buys a great deal more now than before.

Recently there have been moves by the Japanese Government to improve the quality of its armaments. The result has been a greater commitment to buying higher quality military hardware: the F-15, the PC3 antisubmarine, the Air Early Warning, and various other systems. There are indications that Japanese heavy industry would like to share in the production of some of these items, to develop a capacity of its own. However, the development of a Japanese military manufacturing capacity is essentially supplementary to rather than in competition with the American one. It would be highly significant if it became competitive, because that would say something about the Japanese perception of American capacity and about the future of the U.S.-Japan relationship. But so long as the Japanese feel that the basis of their security is that relationship, they have no reason to try to compete with the United States in the same items of hardware. Remember too that part of the Japanese defense posture is a rigid proscription of export of weaponry.

One of the problems with the notion that Japan should be limited to defense of its own island is the

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question of where the island starts— how far offshore. A three-mile limit? A two hundred-mile limit? This has been an area of great ambiguity, and one might argue that there has been a slight extension of the realms in which the Japanese self-defense forces are willing to carry on some kind of patrolling activities. But the central question for Japan is, of course, the reliability of the U.S.-Japan relationship. All assumptions regarding Japanese defense have been based upon the relative reliability of this relationship, even allowing for some erosion. If it seriously comes into question, there obviously will be some differences. At the present time I think there has been a great loss of confidence in the United States, not only in its nuclear deterrent capacity but more generally in its military capability and determination. But the game is not yet lost.

**Q.** *How do the Japanese view SALT II negotiations, and do they think the American will to exert a military presence in the Western Pacific may run down?*

**H.P.** With regard to SALT, my own reading is that the Japanese are quite pessimistic. This makes them more anxious; it erodes some of the basic pillars of their present defense posture. The perception of American determination and reliability goes down slightly, and the perception of the Soviet threat goes up. It's the old problem of the glass being half-full or half-empty...but it's still half. Although there has been an enormous amount of erosion, it doesn't just drop in an instant. The process takes a long time. If anything, there may have been a slight improvement over the last year or so, maybe over the last half-year. For a while many Japanese were saying the United States is hopeless; morale is completely shot; they are never going to be able to do anything again. Lately they have been saying, Well, no, it's not quite that bad; the Americans seem to be shaping up a little bit. It's a very dynamic and fast-moving situation, but my impression is that there is still a considerable reserve of confidence in the U.S., a certain amount of wishful thinking.

There is one problem: the Middle East. No one knows what the Iranian Government might demand for maintaining a reasonable flow of oil to Japan. Alternative sources for Japan, such as the Chinese oil, are not developing that rapidly.

In the U.S. we have people far to the right of the defense establishment and others very far to the left. The same is true in Japan. The real question is where the mainstream falls— both in terms of the decision-making centers of the country and the majority that is required to support any actions they take. Many Americans mistakenly think that Japanese authorities can make decisions in disregard of public opinion. This is utterly impossible. Public opinion in Japan is very strong, and, while it is not as opposed to military expansion as it used to be, it still constitutes one of the most important constraints. If the American relationship should come seriously into question, there might be enormous changes in public opinion.

Until recently the Japanese public did not feel any clear sense of threat from any country. While many of

the élites and military thinkers may have conceived of potential threats, the public did not share the concern. In the last two years this has been changing, chiefly because of the behavior of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, in my judgment very foolishly, put itself in the bad books of most Japanese by focusing attention on its military power as never before.

This tendency has been encouraged by China's new position. Throughout the postwar period and until very recently China's position has been that Japan and the United States were its enemies and that the U.S.-Japan mutual security treaty was a threat. In the last several years China has altered that position, which has made it much easier for those Japanese who are friendly to China to be more supportive of the U.S.-Japan relationship and to alter somewhat their attitudes on defense.

Another factor has altered somewhat. Until two or three years ago any significant rearming by Japan would have appeared very threatening to Southeast Asia. Today the opposite appears to be the case; the ASEAN countries in particular seem to be asking Japan to increase its defense commitment to Southeast Asia. The prime minister of Singapore has argued for a Japanese naval capacity to take an active role in Southeast Asian waters. This does not mean that just because Southeast Asians would not oppose rearmament the Japanese are going to do it.

**Q.** *If Japan moved away from the United States nuclear umbrella, could it be a great power on its own?*

**H.P.** It's hard to say. The implied question is, What are the probabilities that it will leave the U.S. nuclear umbrella? I don't think this will happen for a long time. Should this happen, I think Japan would try to remain as uninvolved as possible, that it would try to avoid a large political and military role, and that it would try to avoid being forced to deal with issues of this kind. Whether it would succeed is a different question.

There is the notion that the Japanese would love to rearm if only people would let them. That notion is badly mistaken. Apart from moral considerations, there are good practical reasons for not rearming. You can pay a lot of money for very little defense. If your real anxiety is, let us say, Soviet nuclear warfare, there is no point in building up a large conventional force. The notion that because Japan is a great economic power it must protect itself politically and militarily is in error. While it may be true historically that most great economic powers have had a corresponding degree of military power, it does not follow that they have to in the future. There is a doctrine that has been very important in Japan and provides a least common denominator for different points of view: Buy your way out; don't try to fight your way out.

In sum, I think Japan has no military role today and is unlikely to have one in the future. And that is the way it should be. Of course massive changes in the geopolitical situation could alter the picture, but that means a truly world-threatening situation between the Soviet Union and China. Changes short of this will not have much effect on Japan's military posture. **WV**