Japan's Maritime Strategy

Summary

As an island nation, Japan is by necessity a maritime power. For the last half-century, its maritime strategy has been primarily mercantile in nature. But as both China and the United States expand their naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan will increasingly seek to reinforce its commercial, territorial and energy interests through a more proactive, open maritime military strategy.

Analysis
Japan comprises four major islands and roughly 6,800 minor ones. For as long as it has been a unified political entity, Japan has been a maritime nation, though it has not always been a maritime power.

The arrival of U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry in the second half of the 19th century catalyzed a group of forward-looking oligarchs under the Meiji emperor to radically reform Japanese military practices; only then did Japan emerge as a capable naval power. As a resource-impoverished island nation undergoing modernization, Japan possessed a vibrant maritime culture and a strong need to acquire the energy and raw materials it lacked at home. These qualities, along with Meiji leaders' insecurity and sense of purpose over Japan's changing position in Asian affairs, fueled the nation's drive toward empire.

In the power vacuum left by China's crumbling Qing dynasty, the Japanese Empire grew quickly. In 40 years starting in 1868, Japan built an industrial base and a fleet to rival those of most European empires. In 1905, the Imperial Japanese navy defeated the Russian navy, and by 1942 the Japanese Empire included nearly all of East and Southeast Asia. Japan's core imperative, to control the Asia-Pacific maritime sphere, began to clash with the United States' need for dominance in the Pacific Ocean. Conflict was inevitable unless one country or the other ceded its claim to control maritime flows in East Asia. World War II decided the balance of power in the Western Pacific, forcing Tokyo to relinquish the Japanese Empire's military maritime strategy and shift toward a post-war mercantilist maritime strategy.

**Japan's Post-War Strategy**

After World War II, Japanese leaders moved quickly to embed Tokyo firmly within the United States' emerging Cold War security framework in East Asia. In making itself crucial to the United States' Asia-Pacific strategy, Japan laid the foundation for an industrial resurgence.

Taking advantage of the U.S.-imposed constitutional ban on military activity, Japan instead relied on support from and favorable trade policies with the United States to rebuild itself as Asia's key economic buffer against Soviet and Chinese communism. On Washington's prodding, Japan gradually rebuilt its navy, with its new name — the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force — reflecting its ostensible defensive orientation. During the Cold War, these forces operated fully within America's security framework for the Asia-Pacific region. Japan remained a maritime power, but its influence was built on growing economic might and on its increasing importance as Asia's merchant power.

The fall of the Soviet Union triggered a massive shift in the geopolitical dynamics of East Asia and affected Japan profoundly. First, it removed Washington's incentive to maintain preferential trade conditions with Tokyo. Decreased attention from Washington was one factor that triggered Japan's "Lost Decade." Second, throughout the 1990s and especially after 2001, the United States dramatically reoriented its foreign policy focus toward the Middle East, withdrawing much of its military presence from East Asia. With its primary patron shifting its attention elsewhere, Japan gradually ceded influence in East and Southeast Asia to China, the rising regional power. This process
coincided with Tokyo's realization, especially after the 1996 Shining Path incident in Peru, that it could no longer rely on the U.S. Navy to protect its economic and political interests abroad.

Over the 15 years that followed, Japanese efforts to revive economic growth moved alongside a quiet but steady build-up of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force — not only as a key component in a U.S. maritime strategy increasingly focused on containing China, but also as an independent national security force. This process has proceeded apace despite some domestic criticism for its perceived noncompliance with Japan's "pacifist" constitution. For Japan, every step toward normalizing the Self-Defense Force reflects Tokyo's deeper need to secure and expand its sphere of influence and its access to resources in an increasingly competitive, crowded environment.

**Contemporary Japan's Maritime Strategy**

Today, Japan's maritime strategy is determined by its security and economic needs and their proximity to the core Japanese islands. Tokyo's geopolitical environment unfolds in concentric circles moving outward from these islands.

The first ring includes the East China Sea, the Sea of Japan, parts of the Yellow Sea and the North Pacific Ocean. This is Japan's immediate sphere of influence and historically has been the source of or gateway for existential threats to the islands. Tokyo's interests here are shaped primarily by two factors. One is the need to protect the islands themselves from any form of attack and to guarantee security for the immediate shipping lanes that carry resources and raw materials into the country. Another is Tokyo's growing desire to explore for undersea energy and mineral resources in its immediate territorial waters and the resulting need to provide security for those assets.

The East China Sea is at the core of Japan's maritime strategy. It brings Tokyo into contact with most of its major near- and long-term strategic threats, from North Korea to China, South Korea, Taiwan and even the United States. Japan is active in the other seas of the first ring, especially the Sea of Japan, where it faces North Korea, but its long-term strategic interests center on the East China Sea and on China. While North Korea does represent a threat to Tokyo, it is not an existential threat. China and to a lesser extent South Korea and Russia pose significant threats, especially to Japan's underwater energy and mineral assets in the region. The ongoing low-level tensions over the Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyu Islands in China) and the Takeshima islets (known as the Dokdo islets in Korea) are a manifestation of the underlying geopolitical dynamic that governs the East China Sea and Sea of Japan.
The next concentric ring centers on the South China Sea. About 88 percent of the goods that reach Japan pass through this sea first. Japan has significant bilateral trade relationships throughout the region, and much of its industrial base now sits in countries that border the South China Sea. Moreover, much of the sea is claimed by Tokyo's greatest strategic threat: China. Japan has a direct interest in making sure that China does not gain a naval and commercial monopoly in the region — either through overwhelming maritime power, energy exploration, trade or diplomatic influence. Tokyo has stepped up its naval relationships with countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, even as it works to maintain a cordial political and economic relationship with Beijing.

The third concentric ring includes the larger Pacific Rim, from Hokkaido to the Arabian Peninsula and south to Australia. These represent the real limits of Japan’s strategic environment. While Tokyo is actively working to enhance long-range naval capabilities, as seen most clearly in its participation in counterpiracy exercises off the Somali coast, it is not yet building the capacity to sustain significant, protracted global force projection. While the Maritime Self-Defense Force possesses highly sophisticated diesel-electric submarine, anti-submarine and ballistic-missile defense systems, it does not have a single fleet aircraft carrier, not to mention the vessels required to refuel and resupply its fleet when operating far from the home islands. For now, Japan's maritime expansion is focused on providing immediate territorial security, protecting proximate assets and supply lines and guarding against China's aggressive maritime push.

The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force eventually may prove to be less defensive in orientation than its name suggests. China's economic, political and naval expansion will probably continue to be a threat for at least a decade, but it also hinges on Beijing's ability to maintain internal stability. If China were to suffer a political crisis or economic collapse that derailed its rise, Japan would have an opportunity to reassert itself as the economic and military hegemon in the Asia-Pacific region. This could dramatically alter its place within the U.S. security framework and even bring it into conflict with the United States.

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