

Japan - Towards 'Pro-active Collective Self-defence'

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

In June 2011, Japan opened its first military base outside Japan since World War II, in Djibouti. The military mission's major purpose is anti-piracy and the protection of major shipping lanes. For Japan, however, the question of overseas deployment of its Self-Defence Force is one of the most controversial in its foreign policy debate, as such deployment would require a change in the Japanese constitution's Article 9, which renounces the use of force as a foreign policy instrument. A discussion of revising the contested paragraph has been underway for the past decade and continues today.

PROTECTING MAJOR SHIPPING LANES

Japan depends on maritime transportation for 99.6 per cent of its trade volume. The Gulf of Aden is one of Japan's most important shipping lanes, connecting Asia with Europe through the Suez Canal. Approximately 1,300 vessels with ties to Japan passed through the Gulf of Aden in 2017. The safety of merchant vessels is crucial not only for Japan's economy, but also for its energy security. Japan is the third-largest net importer of oil in the world; about 86 per cent of its crude oil comes from the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are its most important suppliers. In comparison with other member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Japan is not especially self-sufficient in energy (7.4 per cent in 2015); its dependency on imported fossil fuels increased after the 2011 earthquake, when all of its nuclear power plants were shut down, some of them permanently.

The establishment of the military base in Djibouti should be seen in the light of Japan's growing economic

interest in Africa during the past twenty years, as expressed in the organisation of regular Japanese-African summits, intensified political contacts, and steadily growing development assistance coupled with greater efforts to promote Japanese investment and trade. Through its strategic position, Djibouti is not only a focal point for trade with Europe and the Middle East, but also a central port for access to Ethiopia and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

Anti-piracy activities

Japan's military engagement in Djibouti started as a consequence of a rapidly increasing number of piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, and in response to several United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for international cooperation in deterring piracy. Until 2008, Japan had only deployed the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in UN peacekeeping operations, minesweeping, and humanitarian and reconstruction missions. In 2009, Japan joined the multilateral counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia, the first long-term mission involving Japanese military forces abroad since 1945.

Today, the Japanese base accommodates about 390 persons from both the JSDF – including air, sea, and ground forces – and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG). A major purpose of the military mission in Djibouti is to conduct anti-piracy operations and protect major shipping lanes. Although the number of reported attacks and hijackings in the affected areas decreased in 2012, the Government of Japan estimates that the underlying causes of piracy remain and that the current decline could be reversed.

BALANCING CHINA

Historical rivalry between China and Japan plays a role in Djibouti and elsewhere on the African continent, where both powers are increasingly present, seeking to establish new international roles. The opening of Japan’s military base in Djibouti in 2011 was perceived with suspicion by China (which opened its own military base in Djibouti in 2017). Japan is competing with China to be the leading financial sponsor and builder of new infrastructure in Africa. A primary goal of the recently launched Indo-Japanese initiative, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, is to offer African states an alternative to economic reliance on China.

PARTICIPATION IN MULTILATERAL OPERATIONS

The opening of the military base illustrates Japan’s policy shift from ‘chequebook diplomacy’ towards active involvement in multilateral security cooperation. During the 1990s, in response to criticism of its commitment of cash, rather than manpower, to the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq, Japan actively promoted UN-led peacekeeping operations.

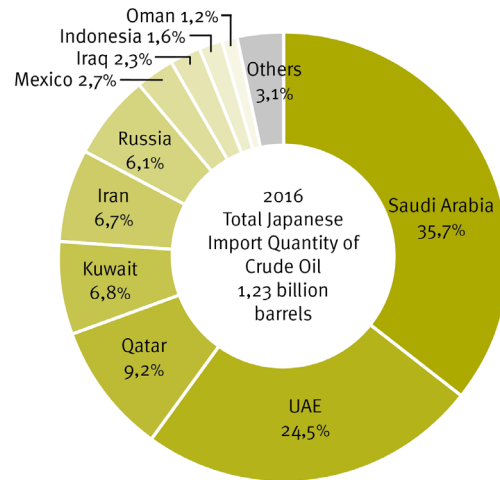
Since the opening of the Djibouti military base, the policy has changed, towards a narrative that emphasises the necessity of protecting Japan’s national security at home via proactive use of the JSDF abroad. In November 2017, the Japanese and Djibouti governments agreed on a new lease of three additional hectares next to the base. A possible use of the additional land is to develop facilities for the evacuation of Japanese nationals.

The significance of the Djibouti base is not only to facilitate Japan’s participation in the counter-piracy mission, but also to serve as a first major outpost for other missions in Africa and the Middle East. The military base is used as a transfer hub for personnel and supplies to the UN mission in South Sudan, where Japan has contributed over 350 personnel since 2012.

WILL THE CONSTITUTION CHANGE?

The question of overseas deployment of the JSDF is one of the most controversial issues for Japan’s foreign policy. The government is caught between the ambition to contribute to international peace and security and the need to respect the Japanese constitution, which

2016 Japanese import Counterparts of Fossil Fuels



Source: Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (2017). “Japan’s energy: 20 questions to understand the current energy situation”.

renounces the use of force as a foreign policy instrument and as a means of settling international disputes. The interpretation and revision of Article 9 has been and still is one of Japan’s most hotly-debated political issues throughout the post-war years.

The process is complicated and the exact wording of the constitutional change is currently being discussed. The incumbent prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is headed for a third three-year term as leader of the ruling party, and has expressed his commitment to constitutional reform. As Abe said in a televised debate with his only competitor, former defence minister, Shigeru Ishiba, ‘I will take on the task of revising the constitution, a post-war challenge that has never been achieved, in order to open a new era’. Revising the 1947 constitution is a decades-old struggle of the Liberal Democratic Party, one that none of Abe’s predecessors has been able to resolve.

Carina Gunnarson