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Japanese-American Relations in Challenging Times

Andrzej Dąbrowski

Japan is seeking to change its security strategy, limiting the possibility of using military instruments. Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's announcement that he seeks to alter the constitution and defence policy also results from the growing uncertainty about the future of Japan's alliance with the U.S., dictated by the attitude of the Donald Trump administration towards American allies in the region and in Europe. A growing concern of Abe's government is also the increase in U.S. protectionism in foreign trade, which may hinder Japan's economic growth and cause it to seek closer cooperation with the EU.

Abe's Meiji. In introducing deep economic and social reforms since 2012, Abe refers to the Meiji period of Japanese history, when the country began rapidly modernising. The country opened itself to international relations and started its expansion in the region (2018 marks the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Meiji period). Shinzo Abe is one of the longest-serving prime ministers in Japanese post-war history. He manages to maintain support despite crises including a recent corruption scandal related to his family, and the political environment. This is possible mainly because of his effective economic policy (known as *Abenomics*), the strong base he's built up for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the state apparatus, and the fight against a demographic crisis that threatens economic growth.

The escalations of North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes increased support for Abe, who went to early parliamentary elections in October 2017 hoping to strengthen his mandate. The victory of the LDP and the conservative Komeito coalition resulted in a constitutional majority in both chambers of the National Diet (parliament). This allowed Abe to continue his efforts to change the fundamentals of the country's security policy. Abe called for a discussion on altering Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which established the pacifist character of the state's foreign policy, including the prohibition on offensive armed forces.

Abe's plan to alter Article 9, reintroduced in 2018, assumes the constitutional legitimisation of the existing Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF), which goes hand in hand with a law passed in 2015 allowing, for the first time in Japan's post-war history, the use of these forces not only to defend Japanese territory but also in out-of-area operations. Abe emphasizes the legitimacy of Japan's defensive doctrine but also stresses the need to specify what military actions, including possible advance attacks, Japan could take to protect its citizens effectively. The Abe government also wants to abolish the spending principle in force since 1970 of not exceeding 1% of GDP on defence expenditures and aims to increase cyberspace and space security. The majority obtained in the election allows Abe to make changes to the constitution. However, a nationwide referendum would also be required; according to opinion polls, that would end with rejection of Abe's proposal.

Changes in Security Strategy—the American Factor. Abe's attempt to change Japan's security strategy has so far been motivated mainly by the rapid development of China's military capabilities and growing influence in the region, as well as North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes. The catalyst for change

was the attitude of Trump, who first pledged to Abe he would take into account Japan's proposals regarding North Korea's missile programme (several test missiles had been fired over Japan) and the issue of kidnapped Japanese citizens, but in the preparations for the meeting in Singapore with Kim Jong Un, Trump ignored them. The Japanese government is concerned also with the reduction of some of U.S. military exercises with South Korea, important elements for deterring the North. Abe interpreted all these activities as a decline in Japan's importance for U.S. policy in East Asia.

Trump also has used similar rhetoric towards Japan about increasing defence spending as he has used towards NATO members. In his election campaign, Trump called on Japan and South Korea to increase military expenditures and suggested they should obtain nuclear weapons, describing it as a better solution than maintaining the presence of U.S. forces on their soil (currently, about 50,000 American soldiers are stationed in Japan and about 23,000 in South Korea). After taking office, Trump said that Japan should achieve its own ability to defend itself against North Korea by continuing to buy U.S. arms. Japan consistently arms the JSDF with armaments acquired from the U.S. and is a top-10 importer of American weapons. At the end of 2017, Japan announced it would buy two batteries of the U.S.-made Aegis Ashore anti-missile system. There are plans to equip JSDF aviation units with long-range manoeuvring missiles. In January 2018, the JSDF air force started using the new, advanced F-35 fighter, having ordered 42 planes.

Economic Dimension. Japan remains the fourth-largest trading partner of the U.S., which in turn is Japan's largest export market, taking in 19% of all goods sent abroad. Trump's announcement to impose higher tariffs on cars (from 2.5% to 25%) and other goods have caused concern in Japan about the future of this important branch of industry in the Japanese economy. The American tariff declarations seemed unaffected by the fact that Japanese companies produce about 4 million cars a year in American factories, obviously strengthening the local economy and paying taxes. Although the entry into force of the proposed duties may affect the Japanese economy, Abe's government has not retaliated with similar tariffs (unlike the EU and Canada), seemingly hoping to reach an agreement with the Trump administration. The U.S. is signalling the possibility of compromise provided that Japan imports more agricultural and food commodities produced in the U.S.

Japan actively participates in negotiating the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTTP) economic agreement, which is to replace the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) signed in 2016. The U.S. withdrew before ratification from an earlier version of the TPPA (then, just TPP). Japan and the EU have also signed a free-trade agreement and are negotiating an investment-protection agreement. For Japan, this should lead to a reduction of dependence on the U.S. market and as a result of a diversion of trade flows from the U.S. to Europe and an increase in the trade balance with Pacific partners. The Japanese authorities also have expressed their willingness to coordinate action with the EU against protectionist practices.

Conclusions. Abe's government will remain consistent in seeking to change Japan's security strategy. It will not try to wait out Trump's tenure in office, opting to try for increased independence from U.S. security guarantees more quickly. Japan will seek to legitimise the possibility of involving its forces and a wide range of military capabilities in operations outside its territory. It then will be able to support U.S. military operations not directly related to the defence of Japanese territory, potentially increasing its significance for the U.S., which in its latest security strategy recognised China as a military rival. The possible reform of the Japanese constitution and the continuation of changes in security strategy could therefore be beneficial for the U.S. because Japan, America's main ally in the region, would then be able to use force projection as a tool of foreign and security policy, thereby supporting the U.S. It may also force the U.S. to pursue a more partner-oriented policy towards Japan, which, by gaining greater independence in the area of security, will probably set new conditions on the presence of American forces in Japan.

At the same time, Japan will try to minimise the negative effects of Trump's decisions in trade policy. The U.S., using higher tariffs, will try to persuade the Japanese to conclude a new trade agreement beneficial to American exporters. For Poland, deepening economic cooperation between the EU and Japan is beneficial. Poland should also analyse the changes in U.S. policy towards Japan, which remains the key American ally in East Asia, because they may indicate the direction of the U.S. approach to bilateral alliances.