

# Japan, An Ambiguous Power

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IN THE FACE of global concerns, regional contingencies, and precariousness in its diplomatic relations, there are expectations that Japan will undergo a significant, if not accelerated, transformation into a “normal state,” one with an international politico-security presence and armed force commensurate its economic prowess. Recent years have witnessed the examination of the possible implications of a “normal Japan” on international affairs, with the discussion of Japan’s trajectory reaching a level of frequency and intensity that the Japanese themselves may not have even experienced.

While “normal Japan” has taken some substantial attention in Japanese foreign relations discourse, it coexists with another significant concept: the decline of Japan. The Japanese economy, once referred to as a juggernaut, is by certain standards now a “laggard,” having conceded to China the position of the world’s second biggest economy. Aside from a prolonged period of economic sluggishness, its growing socioeconomic woes—not least of which is the aging of the population—seem to suggest a fast slide from Japan’s glory days without a good end in sight.

In light of these foregoing concepts, the current scrutiny of Japan presents a paradox in which diametric perspectives on the country exist at the same time. “Normal Japan” asserts national dynamism while the decline of Japan asserts stagnation and eventual national deterioration. Both concepts are ensconced in the idea of inevitability, which follows that in either context, Japan is unlikely to change course even with the occurrence of domestic and international developments that require extensive policy modification and other relevant adjustments. The paradox predictably leads to a confusing, inconsistent conclusion: Japan will become a formidable military power just as it is sure that it will fade into obscurity in the succeeding years. Japan, then, is a functioning contradiction.

Moreover, the auxiliary arguments found in the two concepts have provided experts, scholars, and media much to explore in often extreme, sensationalist terms: Japan's remilitarization and diminishing international relevance. On the one hand, although the possibility of Japan's transition into normal statehood fundamentally translates into the expansion of security capabilities through the revision of Article 9 of the Peace Constitution, normal statehood and the ensuing expansion unwittingly find synonymy with ultranationalism and resurgence of Pacific War militarism. When territorial tensions such as the East China Sea dispute intensify, the inevitable conclusion drawn by experts and scholars is that Japan would revert to belligerence. On the other hand, Japan's sluggish economic performance, as indicated by its "demotion" to third largest economy in the world, pushes an interpretation that the country's fall is nothing but nebulous. Hence, in Japan's case, less than full coffers are empty coffers, and empty coffers mean no advantage or influence by which to work with in international affairs. It would appear as if whenever Japan is concerned, hasty generalization is sure to follow.

Similar to the comments on the frequency and intensity of discussions on Japan's prospects for normal statehood, another question Japan-watchers ask perhaps more assiduously than the Japanese themselves is what kind of power and role the country will assume. The concurrent polarity in the perspectives on Japan resonates with Lind's (2012) observation that "no matter what Japan does, people view it through the lens of extremes."

The tendency to identify Japan through polarization and exaggeration compromises the opportunity for a more nuanced, constructive evaluation of the country's present and future situation. For instance, to equate "normal Japan" to an automatic reversion to Pacific War militarism would be to overlook not only the evolution of the international politico-security milieu but also Japanese national interests and concerns as influenced by the evolution of the milieu. In addition, to equate Japan's decline based on its present socioeconomic difficulties would be to discount its extensive economic presence around the world, the comparably high standard of living its people still enjoy, and the possibility of robust recovery.

Japan warrants examination bereft of ideas of deviation or exception. More often than not, the problem with analyzing Japan is that it is seen as an aberration—a country without requisite capabilities and resources and thus “abnormal.” If, for instance, Japan’s “abnormality” merely refers to the restricted scale, capacity, and mandate of its defense establishment, then it would be reasonable to assume that many countries are in fact abnormal because of their grounded capabilities and mandate. Is Japan truly less normal compared to the likes of Switzerland and the Vatican, states that are small and lightly armed, and neutral and theocratic, respectively? Is Japan, whose security capabilities are purportedly superior to all Southeast Asian armed forces combined, less normal than the Philippines, whose military is in need of modernization and unable to fulfill its mandate properly?

It could be stated that Japan’s possible remilitarization is a misnomer, for Japan has had an armed force since the beginning of the postwar era that goes by the designation “Self-Defense Forces” (SDF). Despite defense spending pegged at one percent of Japan’s annual GDP, the SDF has been consistently one of the most funded, highly trained, and technologically sophisticated armed forces in the world. Perhaps a crucial problem concerning the remilitarization debate is the equation or alternation, instead of connection, made between the SDF’s capabilities and mandate. For instance, the quality and quantity of Japanese defense spending, especially in recent years, have originated speculations of a more aggressive security posture eventually leading to militarism. However, careful study and contextualization would yield a different and more complex perspective on the trend.

First, the Peace Constitution underpins Japanese security; thus, spending and other security activities connect to the SDF’s defensive function and not to expanded functions based on anticipated constitutional revision. Second, although Japan is able to maintain one of the world’s well-funded and most competent armed forces, it is hardly one of the world’s biggest military spenders. The actual value of the one-percent spending cap depends on the rate of growth or decline of the Japanese economy.

If Japan has been experiencing economic slowdown for several years, then it means that its defense budget has consequently contracted. Third, the lack of preemptive, unilateral capabilities compels Japan to work within its limitations and be more resourceful when it comes to policy alternatives. With its entry into the United Nations (UN) in the 1950s, Japan shifted its focus towards the multilateral arena where it believes it could effectively contribute to the international community. Peacekeeping, disaster relief, humanitarian aid, and other related activities define not only the significance of the SDF in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also and more crucially, the appropriation of resources when it comes to matters of defense and security. It would be reasonable to suggest that a portion of Japan's defense spending goes to the improvement of SDF operations in UN-sanctioned missions abroad. Meanwhile, the Tohoku disaster of 11 March 2011 showed the need for prompt response along with the potential of the SDF as an institution assisting civilians.

Japan, like any other sovereign state, requires itself to build capabilities in the face of domestic and overseas exigencies. The pursuit of greater cooperation with the United States and of greater regional security presence is not so much an aggressive counter of a rising China as an attempt to assure its most important partner that Japan shares the same vision of and obligations to the international system. It is worth recalling that Japan received harsh reprimand for its delayed and passive participation in the Gulf War (1990–1991), and the aversion to repeating the experience has compelled the formulation of a proactive security policy that expands the scope and conditions of SDF operations. On matters of regional affairs, especially territory, Japan is at odds with its northern neighbors. Flanked by a nuclear threat from North Korea and territorial squabbles with China, South Korea, and Russia, it would be unsurprising to learn that Japan's insecurity has risen and that it is adjusting its capabilities in relation to the perceived precariousness of its immediate security environment.

With regard to Japan's economic condition, would it be logical to assume that the country is in a decline as drastic as portrayed by overseas

media for being the world's *third* largest economy? How, then, do we regard the fourth largest economy and the rest of the world's economies, if Japan is doing "very poorly?" The negative outlook on Japan overlooks the specificities crucial to understanding how countries and their economies work for them. It is no small feat for Japan to have become the world's second- and third-largest economy in a brief period, considering that their population and land size are far smaller than those of first- and second-ranked (respectively) United States and China. The proportion of output per person, among other things, is higher for Japan. Moreover, the negative outlook downplays the efforts and accomplishments of emerging economies. As Curtis (2012) asks, "...[I]s Japan's diminished stature as an economic superpower really a matter of decline or the consequences of the ability of other countries to grow richer?"

Volatility and stagnation are not exclusive to Japan, as other countries also have had to contend with such problems when it comes to their respective economies. An aging society and a decreasing birthrate are concerns, if not trends, prevalent in most postindustrial economies. Changes in the labor force (e.g., shrinking and aging, unemployment, and underemployment), which potentially affect productivity and consumption, are present in countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany. Unemployment is a pressing and enduring issue for many countries, the United States included. As exhibited by Greece and Spain, ballooning public debt is hardly a Japan-only problem.

In the discussion of a country's economic movement, it is crucial to examine how and to what extent growth translates into the quality of life for its people. Curtis (2012) poses a profound question relevant to the above-mentioned assertion: "...[W]ould you prefer to live in the number two economy China or the number three economy Japan?" China's massive population has translated into massive productivity, but it has also meant a broader, thinner distribution of wealth. While China has been and will likely continue to register a high rate of economic growth, it continues to struggle with bridging the structural and income gaps between the rural and urban sectors of society. In other words, everybody in China

has yet to partake of the country's newfound prosperity. It will take more time for China to achieve a widespread, significant rise in standards of living, as well as to rectify the unfavorable effects of industrialization. While Japan is unlikely to replicate the economic miracles of the last century, its decline does not completely correspond with the general pessimism aimed at its direction. Curtis (2012) and Vogel (2012) insist that life is still good in Japan, as the people retain access to dependable public services (e.g., transportation and health insurance) and consumer goods, live long where the environment is safe and clean, and are secure because of a low crime rate. Based on the reasoning of the two scholars, for all the talk of a dramatic decline, the obvious signs of a country's socioeconomic deterioration have yet to surface in Japan.

There has been much ballyhooing about the loosened market stronghold of Japanese corporate juggernauts, particularly Toyota and Sony. Product recalls, revenue decline because of increased competition, and production chain problems resulting from the Tohoku disaster, have affected the operations and global standing of Japanese companies. Moreover, observers cite that the creativity and innovation that transformed Japan into an economic powerhouse are now missing, with a Newsweek article claiming that in relation to the boom of the Apple iPod, Sony's "last truly big thing" was the Walkman.<sup>1</sup>

While the difficulties and the need to adjust models to the present times are a reality, the problem is that the tendency to view and discuss the Japanese economy in bleak, hyperbolic terms discounts other important considerations, such as continued global activity and presence, as well as diversity within the economic sector. If one were to enumerate Japanese corporations still competing in today's market, the list would still be substantial. In the automobile industry, brands include Honda, Isuzu, Lexus,<sup>2</sup> Mazda, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Subaru, Suzuki, and Bridgestone, a leading global manufacturer of vehicular parts. In the electronics industry, brands aside from Sony include Canon, Fujifilm, Fujitsu, Hitachi, Konica Minolta, Kyocera, Olympus, NEC, Nikon, Nintendo, Panasonic, Ricoh, Sanyo, Sharp, and Toshiba. In the retail industry, Comme de Garçons,

FamilyMart, and Uniqlo have embarked on overseas expansion to join the likes of Asics, Casio, Citizen, Mizuno, Seiko, Shiseido, and Shu Uemura as Japan's prominent global brands. It is worth stressing that many of these companies have existed for decades (in the case of Mitsubishi, over a century) and have diversified operations. For instance, Sony also manufactures cameras and handheld devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, and e-readers). It is also in the film, gaming, and music industries, a fact often neglected in the discussions of Sony's overall economic performance. Another example of an enduring and diversified corporation is Canon, which was founded in 1937. While widely recognized as a maker of cameras and printers, it is also a manufacturer of ophthalmic equipment and x-ray machines.

In discussions of the Japanese economy, there is a tendency to overlook or downplay the creative industry, a contradiction considering that Japan's public diplomacy and overseas revenues significantly stem from its popular culture. Japan's creative industry has expanded despite the downturn experienced by traditional industries, and is expected to thrive in the coming years with the growth of international merchandise and licensing agreements.

There are a number of examples illustrating the dynamism of Japan's creative industry. Sanrio Company specializes in character merchandise, and its most famous spokesperson, Hello Kitty, is worth over a billion dollars. Bandai, along with Hasbro and Mattel, is one of the world's leading toy makers. Nintendo—Pokémon's publisher and creator of the world's most famous plumbers, the Mario brothers—is a billion-dollar gaming company. The Pokémon and Mario Brothers properties are unto themselves worth billions of dollars. *Animé* and *manga*, although experiencing dips in the last few years, still manage to generate sizable revenues from its international distribution and merchandise in Europe, North America, and other key territories. Previously mentioned companies Comme de Garçons and Uniqlo have become key players in the global fashion retail industry. The works of renowned Japanese artists Yayoi

Kusama and Takashi Murakami have fetched millions in international art auction houses.

It merits emphasis that the creative industry not only generates revenues through retail but also contributes to the promotion of other sectors such as tourism. It also plays a complementary role in efforts to promote cultural diplomacy. Theme parks, museums, conventions, exhibitions, and festivals, among others, encourage the influx of international visitors that, by extension, is able to foster greater people-to-people exchange between Japan and other countries.

Amidst the debate on Japan's future course, crucial questions, hence, beg asking: Does the world want a Japan that is either militarily resurgent or socioeconomically declining? Is the world ready for a Japan that is radically different from what it is right now? Will the world gain more from relations with a resurgent or declining Japan? More importantly, what kind of power is Japan today? To which Lind (2012) responds by arguing that "Japan is not pacifist, but nor [sic] is it aggressive or militarist. It is a normal middle power."

Any country that values its part in the international community merits evaluation based on its actual and eventual contributions. It would seem more substantial to assess the ways by which Japan should be encouraged to maintain and expand its constructive contributions to the international community, rather than fixate on extreme scenarios that may or may not necessarily come into fruition. Lind (2012), with regard to Japan and dealing with regional security affairs, states that "recognizing Japan's potential – and viewing it as normal – should open our eyes to how useful Japan could be. Viewing Japan as pacifist leads us to overlook the normal role it can play in East Asia; viewing Japan as militarist makes us afraid to trust it as a true partner."

Particularly, it is in the interest of the Philippines to contemplate the previously mentioned questions if it is to preserve and deepen its relations with Japan. A grounded and more circumspect perspective on



Japan would help the Philippines not only explore other viable avenues for cooperation and exchange but also adjust its policy approach vis-à-vis the transitions or exigencies that bilateral partners experience. The maximization of partnership with Japan, as well as with other countries, requires prescience—prescience that comes from an insightful, balanced assessment of not only Philippine realities but also the realities of its bilateral partners.

*(This commentary reflects the personal views of the author and does not necessarily reflect any official position of the Department of Foreign Affairs—Editor)*

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The article by Christian Caryl, “Why Apple Isn’t Japanese,” appeared in the 1 December 2007 issue of Newsweek.
- <sup>2</sup> Lexus is a subsidiary of Toyota Motors specializing in luxury cars.

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