Japan Debates Preparing for Future Preemptive Strikes against North Korea

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Abstract

North Korea’s ballistic missile tests in July 2006 and its subsequent nuclear test in October have heightened Japan’s threat perceptions of North Korea. Tokyo has sought to address the threat through the nuclear nonproliferation regime and international arms control law. However, inadequate solutions from Tokyo’s perspective have led to Japanese discussions of acquiring a military strike capability that potentially could preempt a North Korean missile attack. We review the North Korean missile and nuclear tests, as well as the international response before turning to the domestic legal and political constraints to Japan’s acquisition of offensive strike capabilities. Finally, we explore some of the practical difficulties for Japan in conducting such a military application, as well as the implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance.
Introduction

During the summer of 2006, discussions emerged in Japan regarding the possibility of preemptive military strikes against Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) missile facilities. The discussions materialized after North Korea’s July 5 ballistic missile exercise, which in conjunction with Pyongyang’s October 9 nuclear test have heightened Japan’s threat perceptions of North Korea. As North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile threats to Japan have become more evident, Japanese scholars, policymakers, media, and citizens have been discussing practical methods of preventing a catastrophic attack by North Korea. This debate includes the possibility of preemptive strikes, which introduces a number of complexities in the realms of international security and politics, international and domestic law, and Japanese domestic politics.

Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter requires member states to “refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.” However, Article 51 extends “the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs.” The use of force is not justified in cases where an attack is only theoretically possible or when states are developing weapons that could hypothetically be used in an attack.1

While the use of force is considered legitimate when an attack is imminent, a state is required to demonstrate “necessity” and “proportionality,” as established under the Caroline Case of 1837.2 However, some scholars argue that previous customs and practices, as well as the UN Charter are impractical or ineffective against the threats of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and international terrorism, and therefore, international law is either “dead” or does not apply to these cases.3 In other words, if a state is restricted from responding to a threat until an

attack occurs, it might not be able to survive an attack to launch a reprisal.

Japan can seek to address the North Korean nuclear missile threat through international law, which was included in the “Pyongyang Declaration” of September 2002. Four bodies of law regulate WMD: arms control treaties, international law on the use of force, and international humanitarian law. As David P. Fidler points out, arms control treaties historically have been most prominent in controlling WMD threats, but international law has been inadequate in dealing with highly motivated proliferators and terrorist groups, leading Fidler and others to conclude that the arms control approach to WMD proliferation is “dead.”

If international law for dealing with WMD threats is “dead” or ineffective, states now must seek alternative remedies. For example, the George W. Bush administration has sought to expand the concept of “necessity” and “imminence” to justify the use of force in Iraq; however, the policy remains controversial and many are now questioning its effectiveness, especially since the U.S. intelligence regarding Iraq’s WMD capabilities was flawed. And now Japan is viewing the increasing North Korean threat with suspicions about the effectiveness of international law and the reliability of the U.S.-Japan alliance in the case of a WMD attack. Japanese discussions of pre-emption are not new, but recent statements by senior Japanese policymakers arguably have heightened tensions and refocused thinking on the likelihood and the strategic implications of preemptive strikes.

Effective preemption requires robust intelligence and targeting, as well as the military capabilities to conduct offensive strike operations. In Japan’s case, these capabilities are either nonexistent, lacking credi-

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bility, or dependant upon close coordination with the United States. Furthermore, any decision over preemption is complicated by the possibility of escalation and the adversary’s capabilities to retaliate. We argue that Japanese threats to conduct preemptive strikes against North Korea are not credible, but are more likely targeted at a domestic audience to shore up conservative political support.

This paper will first review the DPRK ballistic missile exercise on July 5, 2006, followed by the DPRK nuclear test on October 9, 2006. Secondly, we will examine Japan’s legal and political constraints that limit the possibility of preemption. Thirdly, we will assess Japan’s military strike capabilities before briefly outlining Japan’s domestic debate on this issue. Finally, the article concludes with some thoughts on the current security situation and the implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance.

North Korea’s Ballistic Missile Exercise

In the early morning of July 5, 2006, North Korea began a ballistic missile exercise that included flight tests of seven ballistic missiles.6 The flight tests, which the North Korean Foreign Ministry called “routine military exercises,”7 included short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles, as well as a long-range ballistic missile that could potentially strike the United States. The long-range Paekdusan-2 [Taepodong-2] failed, but the seventh missile appears to have been a Scud-ER with an extended range of about 850km, which would put southern Japan, including Osaka, within range.8 The four Scud variants and Nodong

missiles were fired from Kitaeryong, Anbyon-kun, Kangwon Province, about 40 kilometers south of Wonsan, a port city on North Korea’s the east coast. It appears that North Korea did not test a new intermediate-range ballistic missile under development based upon the SS-N-6 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).9

There have been conflicting reports about the Paektusan-2’s performance during the flight test. On July 6, Yi Song-gyu, Director of Intelligence for South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified before the National Assembly that the missile developed problems about 42 seconds into flight but continued to fly for about seven minutes to a range of about 499 km.10 However, the South Korean press reported that in closed testimony before the National Assembly, National Intelligence Service officials estimated the missile developed engine problems and crashed into the sea off the coast of Musudan-ri about 40 seconds after liftoff.11

The Japanese government initially believed the missile traveled somewhere between 400 and 640 kilometers from the launch site. However, the Japanese media subsequently reported that according to U.S. intelligence, the missile apparently exploded about 1.5 km from the launchpad and fell into the sea about 40 seconds after liftoff.12 Despite


the failure of the Paektusan-2, the missile exercise has exposed political rifts in South Korea and has stimulated a domestic debate in Japan on preemptive strikes and whether they would be an appropriate countermeasure against North Korean missiles.

On July 10, 2006, Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe said that Japan should discuss whether preemptive strikes against missile bases are within the constitutional right of self-defense. The idea of Japanese preemptive strikes against North Korea missile facilities is controversial; the mere suggestion of a preemptive strike drew a swift rebuke from Beijing and Seoul. Abe’s remarks were unwelcome in South Korea because many people believed they would escalate tensions in the region. South Korean officials called any Japanese discussion of preemptive strikes irresponsible and part of Japan’s “inclination towards aggression.” Despite opposition to such a discussion, on August 4, 2006, the Subcommittee on Defense Policies in the Liberal Democratic Party’s National Defense Division began a debate on whether Tokyo should acquire the capability to attack “a foreign enemy base.”

President Roh Moo-hyun remained silent about North Korea’s missile tests for several days, drawing severe criticism from his opponents. However, Roh and his advisers were concerned about overreacting and raising tension, which could aggravate the regional security environment and destabilize South Korean markets and investor confi-

dence. On July 9, the Office of the President issued a blistering rebuttal that said the opposition party and some of the media were exaggerating the threat and utilizing citizens’ fear for political purposes—just as South Korea’s authoritarian rulers did prior to democratization. The statement also said there was no reason “to make a fuss like Japan.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu said it is “extremely irresponsible that some high-level politicians of Japan keep on speaking of a preemptive strike on another country.” Nevertheless, on July 15 Beijing voted for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1695, which:

- **Condemns** the multiple launches by the DPRK of ballistic missiles on 5 July 2006 local time;
- **Demands** that the DPRK suspend all activities related to its ballistic missile program, and in this context re-establish its pre-existing commitments to a moratorium on missile launching;
- **Requires** all Member States, in accordance with their national legal authorities and legislation and consistent with international law, to exercise vigilance and prevent missile and missile-related items, materials, goods and technology being transferred to DPRK’s missile or WMD programs;
- **Requires** all Member States, in accordance with their national legal authorities and legislation and consistent with international law, to exercise vigilance and prevent the procurement of missiles or missile related-items, materials, goods and technology from the DPRK, and the transfer of any financial resources in relation to DPRK’s missile or WMD programs;
- **Underlines**, in particular to the DPRK, the need to show restraint and refrain from any action that might aggravate tension, and to continue to work on the resolution of non-proliferation concerns through political and diplomatic efforts;
- **Strongly urges** the DPRK to return immediately to the Six-Party


Talks without precondition, to work towards the expeditious implementation of 19 September 2005 Joint Statement, in particular to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs, and to return at an early date to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards;

- **Supports** the six-party talks, calls for their early resumption, and urges all the participants to intensify their efforts on the full implementation of the 19 September 2005 Joint Statement with a view to achieving the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner and to maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in north-east Asia;

- **Decides** to remain seized of the matter.\(^{19}\)

While China has expressed concern over Pyongyang’s missile tests, Wang Guangya, China’s Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, “urged all concerned parties to practice restraint and continue the diplomatic endeavors for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the normalization of relations between the countries concerned.”\(^{20}\) Beijing is dissatisfied with Pyongyang’s missile tests, but is more concerned about the regional repercussions rather than any direct North Korean threat against China. Beijing is particularly sensitive to any North Korean actions that could trigger Japan to “re-militarize” or that accelerate the deployment of U.S.-Japan missile defense systems that could potentially be deployed in the Taiwan Strait.

Pyongyang’s response to UN Security Council Resolution 1695 was predictably defiant. Pak Kil Yon, DPRK Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, declared that Pyongyang “totally rejected the resolution” and “condemned the attempt of some countries to misuse the Council for despicable political aims and to put pressure on the DPRK.” Ambassador Pak also said, “The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea would have no option, but to take strong actions, should any


\(^{20}\) Ibid.
country take issue with the exercises and apply pressure on the DPRK.”

The DPRK Foreign Ministry called the resolution “a product of the U.S. hostile policy,” and promised the country would “bolster its war deterrent in every way.”

On July 26, 2006, an editorial in the Rodong Sinmun, official daily of the Korean Workers Party, depicted Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe remarks on July 10th about the need to discuss preemptive strikes as part of “Japanese maneuvers to reinvade Korea.” The editorial also cited remarks by Japan Defense Agency Director Fukushiro Nukaga on July 9th that “Japan must have the capability for the preemptive strike of enemy bases,” as well as Foreign Minister Taro Aso’s remarks on NHK Television that Japan must consider the acquisition of a preemptive strike capability within constitutional constraints.

While many in East Asia are alarmed about the mere discussion of Japanese preemptive strikes, this discussion is not new. After Pyongyang flight tested the Paektusan-1[Taepodong-1] over Japanese airspace on August 31, 1998, the Japanese government, media, and security specialists discussed countermeasures against North Korean missiles. The debate mostly focused on the development of missile defenses, but the debate also included discussions about the acquisition of military strike capabilities against North Korean missile sites. Japanese advocates for

21 Ibid.
a preemptive strike capability often cite former Prime Minister Hatoyama who stated in 1956, “It is not an objective of the Constitution to oblige us to sit and wait to perish.” The topic was also broached in January 2003 by then Defense Agency Director Shigeru Ishiba when he stated, “If a country declares that ‘we will turn Tokyo into flames,’ and that country is about to fuel a ballistic missile, and they erect the missile on a missile launcher, then this action can be seen as the beginning of an attack against Japan.” Furthermore, in 2004, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) recommended discussing whether Japan should acquire offensive military strike capabilities, and if so, how the capabilities should be used.

**The North Korean Nuclear Test**

Any discussion of preemption is complicated by an adversary’s ability to retaliate, particularly with nuclear weapons. Although North Korea has not demonstrated the capability to produce reliable nuclear warheads for its ballistic missile arsenal, Pyongyang’s nuclear test on October 9, 2006 indicates that Tokyo could run the risk of nuclear retaliation in the case of preemptive military strikes. The test was conducted near Punggye-ri in Kilchu-kun, North Hamgyong Province with a yield of less than one kiloton, but U.S. media reported North Korea

had informed China that the target yield would be four kilotons. If the low yield was due to a flaw in weapon design, this would undermine the credibility of Pyongyang’s declared “nuclear deterrent,” but the test will enable North Korean scientists and engineers to reassess their design and possibly correct the problems. In the days after the test, speculation began swirling over a subsequent test after North Korean officials hinted one could be forthcoming and U.S. media reported “suspicious activity” at North Korea’s nuclear test site. However, on October 19, 2006, National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il reportedly told visiting Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan that North Korea did not intend to conduct a second nuclear test. Despite these reports, many in the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea were skeptical that Kim Jong Il made any such remarks or that North Korea would refrain from additional nuclear testing.


North Korea’s nuclear test was preceded by a DPRK Foreign Ministry “clarification statement” on October 3 announcing Pyongyang’s intention to conduct a nuclear test in response to “the U.S. extreme threat of a nuclear war and sanctions and pressure.” The statement claimed “the United States . . . made a de facto ‘declaration of war’ against the DPRK through the recent brigandish adoption of a UNSC resolution.” Resolution 1695—was approved unanimously to condemn DPRK ballistic missile tests on July 5, 2006.

The UN Security Council also responded to the DPRK nuclear test by unanimously passing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718. This resolution condemns the test and demands that the DPRK refrain from conducting additional tests of ballistic missiles or nuclear weapons, and return to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. The resolution also imposes a number of sanctions, including:

- the prohibition of trade in “any battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles or missile systems, or related materiel including spare parts;
- the prohibition of trade in all items, materials, equipment, goods and technology that could contribute to DPRK’s nuclear-related, ballistic missile-related or other weapons of mass destruction-related programs;
- the prohibition of luxury good imports by the DPRK; and
- the freezing of funds and financial assets of DPRK persons or entities that own or control the country’s weapons of mass destruction or ballistic missile programs.

The resolution also established a committee consisting of Security Council members to review the list of items and persons or entities sanctioned under the resolution, and to suggest additional measures if necessary.34 The committee is required to report to the Security Council at least every 90 days with its “observations and recommendations, in particular on ways to strengthen the effectiveness of the sanction measures.”35

Pak Kil-yon, the DPRK’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, said Pyongyang “totally rejected resolution 1718,” calling it “gangster-like’ for the Security Council to adopt such a coercive resolution against the DPRK, while neglecting the nuclear threat posed by the United States against the DPRK.” Pak said the test “bolstered the country’s self-defense” and was entirely attributable to United States threats, sanctions and pressure,” but he added that Pyongyang “still remained unchanged in its will to denuclearize the Korean peninsula through dialogue and negotiation, as that had been Kim Il Sung’s last instruction.”36 On October 17, the DPRK Foreign Ministry “vehemently denounced and refuted the resolution,” calling it a “declaration of war against the DPRK based on the U.S. hostile policy, which seeks to destroy the country’s socialist system.” The Foreign Ministry also warned the United States not to miscalculate, and declared that the DPRK will closely follow the U.S. attitude and take corresponding measures.”37

36 Ibid.
North Korea repeatedly has claimed that the United States has forced it to acquire a nuclear deterrent, but Pyongyang prudently has refrained from saying it needs nuclear weapons to deter Tokyo. Any blatant announcement that it is developing nuclear weapons specifically to target Japan would have serious negative consequences for North Korea, including severe Chinese reprisals, war, or a nuclear arms race with Japan and the region that North Korea could not win. Nevertheless, we should assume that North Korea seeks to deter any preemptive strikes by Japan, and that the North Korean leadership would almost certainly retaliate with ballistic missiles—conventional or possibly nuclear—against a Japanese military attack. In the case of U.S. military operations against North Korea, Pyongyang might perceive Tokyo just as culpable given the close alliance ties between the United States and Japan. And since North Korea has no long-range missile system to strike the continental United States, Pyongyang would have to settle for striking U.S. military bases in the East Asia, including those in Japan. North Korea’s ability to hold Japan hostage in its effort to deter the United States is a primary reason Japanese policymakers have revisited the idea of acquiring offensive strike capabilities.

**Military Rationality and Japan’s Exclusively Defense-Oriented Policy**

Japan’s past discussions about preemptive strikes have focused on the legal and political aspects. One result of this debate is the public realization that Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) do not possess any preemptive strike capabilities against North Korea. Under Article Nine of the constitution, Japan has renounced war and the use of force to settle international disputes. In accordance with its constitutional and political constraints, Tokyo has maintained an “exclusively defense-oriented policy” (EDOP) for the JSDF. Under the EDOP, the JSDF can attack an enemy only after another country initiates military conflict. Therefore, the JSDF has not acquired any offensive capabilities that could be utilized to attack missile facilities in North Korea or any other country.

Legal and political constraints have prevented Japan from acquiring offensive strike capabilities, but these constraints clash with military rationality that justifies preemptive strikes against imminent attacks.
While Japan has renounced the use of force to settle international disputes, Article Nine does not prevent Japan from providing for its self-defense. However, it is unconstitutional to possess offensive weapons that can be used exclusively for the massive destruction of other countries because these weapons would exceed the minimum required for self-defense.38 The Japan Defense Agency (JDA) describes such offensive weapons as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), long-range strategic bombers, and offensive aircraft carriers.39

The EDOP is more restrictive than the Japanese Constitution regarding the acquisition of offensive weapons since the policy requires that “military force cannot be exercised until armed attack has been initiated.”40 While this contradicts military rationality prescribing preemption in the case of an imminent attack, Japan was able to maintain this policy under the Yoshida Doctrine, which focused on economic recovery and close alliance with the United States for security during the Cold War. Moreover, JSDF operations have been limited geographically to the area around Japan, but the scope of operations has been gradually increasing. In 1972, then Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka declared that according to the EDOP, the JSDF must defend Japanese territory without striking an enemy’s military bases.41 This policy was appropriate when the Soviet Union was the greatest threat to Japanese security, so the JSDP did not acquire any offensive weapons. Under this policy, the JSDF still do not have any long-range strike capabilities; therefore, Japan would be dependent upon its alliance partner the United States to exercise any preemptive strike against North Korea.

Some analysts argue that possessing an offensive strike capability could be effective in defending Japan against ballistic missile attacks. Japanese security and military specialists often argue that offensive capabilities are useful because, firstly, the JSDF can attack missile

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
launch sites when a country intends to attack Japan and the missile is being prepared for launch. Secondly, even if Japan is attacked first, an offensive capability could prevent subsequent ballistic missile attacks against Japan. Thirdly, an offensive capability could deter ballistic missile attacks. And finally, the Japanese government could avoid possible blackmail by adversaries such as North Korea.42

Japan would have to change or modify its interpretation of the EDOP before striking a North Korean missile site, but there are splits within Japanese society over changing this policy. For example, The Ryukyu Shimpo, a strongly pacifist Okinawa-based daily, published an editorial stating that “the idea of striking missiles contradicts the EDOP; it provokes neighboring countries and influences the international security environment. It also may violate the constitution.”43

Legal Issues and Offensive Strike Capabilities

The Japanese government has interpreted the constitution as granting the right of self-defense—including preemption and striking enemy military bases. In 1956, then Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama explained in the Diet that “if there were an imminent and illegitimate act of aggression against Japan and if guided-bombs were to be used in the aggression against our territory, then resorting to the minimum necessary level of force—for example, striking the guided-bombs launch sites when there is no appropriate means to deal with this aggression—fits the legal principle of self-defense.”44 Subsequent cabinets agreed with Hatoyama’s interpretation, including former Defense Agency Director Chief Shigejiro Inou in 1959, and former Defense Agency Director

Yoshinari Norota in 1999.\(^{45}\)

Legally, current interpretations of Hatoyama’s 1956 criteria of when “there is no appropriate means to deal with aggression” are critical in determining whether Japan can acquire offensive strike capabilities or not. The Japanese government’s official interpretation of the EDOP is that it “refers to the posture of a passive defense strategy consistent with the spirit of the Constitution.”\(^{46}\) However, the relationship between the EDOP and the constitution is murky. In order to maintain the EDOP, the Japanese government considers U.S. offensive capabilities within the U.S.-Japan security alliance as the “appropriate means to deal with aggression.”\(^{47}\) Thus, the JSDF cannot possess offensive strike capabilities under the current strict interpretation of the EDOP. Advocates in favor of changing the current interpretation stress that the EDOP is a defense policy not strictly defined under the Japanese Constitution, and therefore, different governments can change the EDOP without revising the constitution.\(^{48}\) If the Japanese government modifies the EDOP, then, advocates argue, the JSDF legally can possess offensive strike capabilities.

Even if Tokyo feels it has the legal right to strike an adversary, it can be difficult to judge when aggression against Japan has begun. The Japanese government has set the condition that there must be an imminent and illegitimate act of aggression against Japan in order to exercise the right of self-defense.\(^{49}\) Therefore, the JSDF can attack enemy missile sites only when the JSDF can determine that the missile attacks are aimed against Japan,\(^{50}\) but this would be difficult if not impossible to


\(^{47}\) Takahashi, p. 119.


ascertain before the missiles are launched. If Japan acquires an offensive strike capability, the Japanese government will have to determine the conditions whereby they can employ those capabilities in exercising the right of self-defense.\(^{51}\)

In sum, under the Japanese government’s interpretation of the constitution and current laws, Tokyo has the legal authority to strike an enemy’s missile bases, including preemptively. However, the relationship between the EDOP and the Japanese Constitution is murky and it would be difficult for Japanese leaders to judge when they should use offensive strikes in exercising the right of self-defense.

### JSDF Capabilities for Striking North Korean Missile Sites

The JSDF currently does not have the military capability to strike North Korean missile facilities. According to Takemasa Moriya, former Director-General of the Defense Policy Bureau, the JSDF will need four different types of equipment or systems to acquire this capability: 1) the ability to destroy air defense radars; 2) low-flying aircraft capable of avoiding radar detection; 3) air-to-surface guided missiles or cruise missiles; and 4) the ability to collect intelligence on enemy missile facilities.\(^{52}\)

Japan’s Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) aircraft do not have the range to attack North Korean missile facilities and return to base without in-flight refueling. However, the JASDF is scheduled to acquire KC-767 tankers in February 2007 and begin operating them in 2008.\(^{53}\) While

\(^{50}\) Tajima, et al.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.


an in-flight refueling capability will put North Korean missile facilities within striking distance, the JASDF will also have to acquire surface-to-air missiles and countermeasures for North Korean air defenses. In the near term, Japan would be dependent upon U.S. Forces for some reconnaissance and electronic warfare capabilities, so an independent attack against North Korea is very unlikely.

Budget constraints will be a significant obstacle if Tokyo decides to acquire the necessary weapon systems for striking North Korean missile facilities. Since 2003, the Japanese government has reduced the defense budget for four consecutive years because of large fiscal deficits, and Tokyo plans to reduce the total budget for the next five-year defense plan (2006-2010). Therefore, the Diet will have to increase defense expenditures, which is not impossible, but very difficult. The Cabinet would have to increase the budget expenditures for future defense plans and submit the increase along with the total government budget for Diet approval. Legally, the Diet has the authority to change line items in the budget, but the Diet normally approves the total budget submitted by the Cabinet.

Japan will also need time to deploy any offensive strike capabilities. Tokyo would have to produce or procure the equipment and weapons systems, and then train JSDF personnel to become proficient in operating the systems. While Washington has encouraged an expansion of Japanese military capabilities in support of the bilateral alliance, it is unclear if Washington would support the deployment of an offensive strike capability, and Japan would be dependent upon the United States for the procurement of some equipment and systems for the deployment of any offensive strike weapons.

Considering that Japan does not possess ballistic or cruise missiles capable of striking North Korea, the likely option for Tokyo would be to procure air-to-surface missiles that could be launched from Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) aircraft, or to launch strikes from Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) warships. The JASDF has about 300 combat capable aircraft, including about 150 F-15 Eagle fighters, about

60 Mitsubishi F-1/F-2 fighters, and about 70 F-4 Phantom fighters.55 However, these aircraft do not have the range to strike North Korea and return to base, and they have been equipped for air defense missions. Furthermore, if any JASDF aircraft were equipped with in-flight-refueling and air-to-surface missile capabilities and they were launched to conduct a preemptive strike, they would face a highly motivated North Korean air defense system as they approached DPRK air space.

The DPRK aircraft inventory includes approximately 20 Mig-29 Fulcrum fighters, 46 Mig-23 Flogger fighters, 120 J-7 (Mig-21) Fishbed fighters, 159 J-6 (Mig-19) Farmer fighters, 107 J-5 (Mig-17) Fresco fighters, 34 Su-25 Frogfoot fighters, and 18 Su-7 Fitters.56 Although many of these aircraft are outdated and DPRK pilots receive limited flight training due to fuel shortages, JASDF aircraft would have to confront any DPRK aircraft scrambled to intercept a preemptive strike. JASDF air-

56 Ibid., p. 284.
craft would also have to contend with the DPRK’s estimated 10,000+ surface-to-air missiles.\textsuperscript{57} In 1999, NATO’s experience during the air war in the Balkans revealed that the suppression of enemy air defenses can be difficult even for systems lacking the depth of the DPRK’s.\textsuperscript{58} Preemptive strikes by JASDF aircraft against North Korean missile facilities also would require attacks against the DPRK air defense system, so it would probably be impossible to prevent escalation to a full-scale war.

Conceivably, JMSDF warships could fire Harpoon anti-ship cruise missiles at North Korean coastal missile facilities, such as the Musudan-ri test site. However, Harpoon missiles have a range of only about 67 nautical miles (about 107 kilometers) and could not strike missile bases in the interior of the DPRK.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, JMSDF ships would have to contend with the North Korean Navy and aircraft that would certainly be deployed as JMSDF crossed into the DPRK’s claimed 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone and approached the country’s claimed 50-nautical mile exclusionary military zone.

**Japan’s Domestic Debate over the Acquisition of Offensive Strike Capabilities**

As the public debate in Japan has unfolded, many Japanese opinion leaders and influential politicians have revealed their positions on acquiring a capability to strike North Korean missile facilities. Those clearly advocating the acquisition appear to be on the fringe, but this could change given the Japanese public’s outrage over the nuclear test, missile exercise and the abduction issue. According to a poll conducted by Nippon Television Network Corporation during July 14-16, 2006, 40.6 percent of respondents agreed that Japan should acquire an offen-

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.


sive strike capability while 48.8 percent disagreed; 10.6 percent were not sure. However, the same survey revealed that 60.1 percent of Japanese felt threatened by the North Korean missile tests while 35.4 percent did not; 4.5 percent were not sure.60 Those advocating the acquisition of an offensive strike capability include: Masahiro Sakamoto, Vice President of the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies;61 Tadae Takubo, Visiting Professor of Kyorin University;62 and Izuru Sugawara, Research Fellow of the Tokyo Foundation.63

Some Japanese media and political leaders have advocated a discussion of the issue without committing to the deployment of offensive strike capabilities. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe64 is most prominent in this group, but others include: Fukushiro Nukaga, former Defense Agency Director and LDP Diet member;65 Toro Aso, Foreign Minister and LDP Diet member;66 Shigeru Ishiba, former Defense Agency Director and LDP Diet member;67 The Yomiuri Shimbun;68 and The Sankei Shimbun.69

62 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
Some political figures are more cautious about holding this debate over concerns that the debate might be premature and that it could trigger negative responses from neighboring countries. Officials in this group include: Junichiro Koizumi, former Prime Minister and LDP Diet member; Sadakazu Tanigaki, former Finance Minister and LDP Diet member; Fumio Kyuma, Defense Agency Director (former Chairman of the LDP General Council); Tsutomu Takebe, former LDP Secretary General of the LDP; Takenori Kanzaki, former Leader of the New Komeito, which is a political party in coalition with the LDP. In September 2006, both the LDP and the New Komeito held elections for party leadership positions; only Taro Aso retained his cabinet position as Foreign Minister.

Former Prime Minister Koizumi cautiously mentioned that “there is no harm in discussing how to respond when a missile has been launched . . . but it is a different thing to say that Japan should conduct a preemptive strike before actually being attacked.” He also said that politicians should be careful in discussing preemptive strikes because it is a constitutional issue. Then Defense Agency Director Nukaga also seemed to moderate his July 9, 2006 remarks regarding the need to acquire a military strike capability when he emphasized on July 11 that he did not deviate from official statements of the Japanese government and that military strikes only apply to limited cases.

Those completely opposed to the idea of acquiring an offensive strike capability also appear to be in the minority. This group includes: Taku Yamasaki, former LDP Vice President; Ichiro Ozawa, Leader of

70 H. Nakata.
72 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
the Democratic Party of Japan; the Japan’s Communist Party; and the Social Democratic Party. Japanese society has a strong pacifist tradition following the country’s defeat in World War II, but those opposed to the acquisition of military strike capabilities are now expected to decline in number following North Korea’s nuclear test.

So far, the domestic debate has focused on whether Japan should acquire offensive strike capabilities, but it has not addressed how Japan should use such capabilities—whether for deterrence, preemption, and/or retaliation against adversaries to prevent them from launching a second attack. Furthermore, the debate has not addressed the types of weapons—such as air-to-surface missiles or cruise missiles—to acquire and use in case Tokyo intended to strike an enemy missile site.

Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

If Japan decides to acquire the military capability to strike its neighbors, Tokyo will need Washington’s cooperation in order to procure the necessary equipment and systems. Japan’s defense industry currently does not have the capability to produce Tomahawk cruise missiles or air-to-surface missiles for JASDF F-15 fighter-bombers. While the United States has supported an increase in Japanese military capabilities in support of the bilateral alliance, Washington could balk at weapons sales perceived to have a negative impact on the regional military balance.

Talking about offensive military strikes is much easier than executing them. Japan’s neighbors are heavily armed and they would employ all of their resources to thwart an attack. Despite Pyongyang’s claim that Japan is plotting a reinvasion of Korea, Tokyo would almost certainly use an offensive strike capability to dissuade or deter adversaries from attacking Japan. But a credible capability would require competence in the areas of reconnaissance, intelligence, in-flight refueling, electronic warfare, command and control, and countermeasures against enemy air defenses. And if Japan were to employ a preemptive strike, the JSDF would have to be prepared for retaliation and escalation. Japan would have to rely upon its alliance partner for some of these functions, and there would have to be a clear division of labor in offensive strike operations.81

Although Japan’s threat perception of North Korea has worsened following the ballistic missile exercise and nuclear test, Tokyo has little choice but to reaffirm its basic security policy as described in the “National Defense Program Outline, FY 2005,” which requires the minimum necessary level of force and reliance upon the U.S.-Japan bilateral security alliance. According to the outline, Japan will strengthen cooperation with the United States in the areas of: intelligence exchanges; operational cooperation—including situations in the areas surrounding Japan; ballistic missile defense; equipment and technology exchanges; and joint efforts to make the stationing of U.S. Forces in Japan more efficient.82

Conclusion

Historical legacies matter in East Asia; Japanese discussions about the acquisition of offensive military capabilities make some of its neighbors uneasy—and others furious. The deployment of offensive strike capabilities could trigger responses with negative implications for the regional military balance. However, the deployment of these capabili-

81 Tajima, et al.
ties would take time, which creates an opportunity to manage regional security dilemma dynamics.

Japanese perceptions of the North Korean ballistic missile and nuclear threats have pushed the Japanese to hold a broad debate over countermeasures. While the debate will weigh the pros and cons of offensive strike capabilities, there are obstacles—legal, political, financial, and technical—to a rapid deployment of these capabilities. But the urgency of the threat requires a response, and ballistic missile defense is the response with the least political resistance. Washington and Tokyo are already cooperating in this area, and Pyongyang’s nuclear test and missile exercise will probably accelerate and deepen this cooperation. To alleviate concerns that Japan might reconsider its nuclear options in the wake of the North Korean nuclear test, Foreign Minister Taro Aso told visiting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Japan is “absolutely not considering” the development of nuclear weapons at this time.83 In return, the United States has reconfirmed its defense commitments to Japan, which includes extended nuclear deterrence.

While China has reservations about the deployment of missile defenses in East Asia, Beijing is more likely to accept the deployment of missile defense systems than Japanese offensive military capabilities. In Japan, missile defense will not face the same legal and political hurdles that will impede offensive militarization. Given Japan’s budget constraints, Washington would rather see Tokyo’s scarce military resources directed towards missile defense while the United States remains responsible for any offensive military operations in defense of Japan.

In sum, statements by Japanese politicians expressing the need to acquire, or the need to debate the acquisition of offensive strike capabilities are not credible in operational terms. Japan faces a number of legal and political constraints against such a military posture, and the credibility of the U.S. alliance commitment is robust. Things could change in the future, but now Tokyo is so constrained that Japan’s domestic debate on preemption against North Korea is mostly for

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domestic consumption as Japanese politicians and policymakers seek to establish their credentials as tough leaders in the face of a rising North Korean threat.