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The Rhetoric and Realities of Japan's 1,000-Mile Sea-Lane Defense Policy

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Since the creation of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in 1953, the process of defining the specifics of Japan's self-defense role has become a focal point of US-Japanese discord. In recent years the Japanese have made an effort to alleviate this tension by adopting a more extensive defense policy which has included an official Japanese statement of policy to extend its defense responsibility to incorporate a 1,000 nautical mile "Sea Lanes of Communication" (SLOC) security responsibility. While the military implications of the policy suggest a Japanese willingness to significantly increase the capabilities of the JSDF, this willingness is not reflected in Japanese defense planning now or for the future.

Until the recent 1,000-mile SLOC policy, the Japanese had been reluctant or incapable of assigning any significant regional responsibility for their self-defense forces. US efforts to establish a security burden-sharing arrangement in the Pacific, therefore, had been frustrated by Japan's inability to broaden its defense capabilities. Although the Japanese adaptation of this 1,000-mile SLOC defense policy would appear as a positive step toward the establishment of such an arrangement, there exists a significant chasm between the political commitment to adopt such a policy and the reality of Japan's efforts to attain the necessary capability.

Through an analysis of the 1,000-mile SLOC defense concept, it becomes apparent that Japan may be supporting a policy which has the immediate goal of improving relations with the United States. Though it is likely that the Japanese leaders who support this new policy are firmly committed to its development and practical application, little is being done to reduce the barriers to its realization. As a result, the military significance of the Japanese 1,000-mile defense policy is rather questionable.

Evolution of the 1,000-Mile SLOC Concept

The defense of vital sea lines, or lanes of communication is not an entirely new concept for postwar Japan. The Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force

was in fact created with the primary missions being “to defend Japan against seaborne invasions and to secure the safety of sea lanes in the waters surrounding Japan.”¹ Though this description obviously lacks a clear definition of how far the “waters surrounding Japan” actually extend, it is not unlikely that Japanese defense planners assumed the possibility of a 1,000 nautical mile sea lane responsibility even during the early development of their maritime forces.² By the early 1970s, support for the development of such a sea lane responsibility for Japan became more apparent both inside and outside the Defense Agency. Commander Hideo Sekino, a retired Imperial Japanese naval officer and an expert on Japanese national security affairs, claimed that Japan “must at least secure the sea communications north of Indonesia on her own.”³ Whereas Sekino agreed that such a task was being emphasized by the MSDF, such a position was not publicly voiced by the Defense Agency until 1977. In November of that year, Asao Mihara, the Director General of the Japanese Defense Agency, explicitly stated that the future of the JSDF would include the defense of “key sea transport routes within 1,000 miles” of Japan’s coasts.⁴ Despite this rather concrete statement of support by the Defense Agency, it is important to note that the 1,000-mile defense had not become an official policy of the Japanese government.

In January 1980, US Secretary of Defense Harold Brown made an official visit to Japan. During the course of his talks with Japanese leaders Brown conveyed the security problems which the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Crisis (fall 1979) had created for the Pacific region. Specifically, because the United States had chosen to deploy Pacific naval forces to the Indian Ocean, it had become apparent that the security of the West Pacific could no longer essentially be the sole responsibility of the United States. For the United States to avoid an overextension of its forces and thereby hinder adequate security for the region, Brown announced that “steady and significant increases” in Japanese defense expenditures and capabilities were necessary.⁵ In nominal terms, “steady and significant” was interpreted by the Japanese Ministry of Finance as implying a minimum increase of 9.7 percent in the defense budget. While this 9.7 percent figure was less than the US Administration desired, it was “accepted in public and private talks as the minimum necessary increase.”⁶ When it became obvious later in the year that Japan could only meet a 7.6 percent nominal increase, Secretary Brown voiced intense public criticism of the Japanese.⁷

Secretary Brown’s criticism of the Japanese in December of 1980 did little to establish an atmosphere of cooperative US-Japanese relations. Recognizing this, in January of 1981 the Reagan administration took immediate steps to improve the situation.⁸ While the criticism of the Japanese by Brown was based on US perceptions of Japan’s hesitance to adopt “steady and significant increases,” it became obvious that the definition of such increases was somewhat unclear. The Reagan administration recognized that defense

capabilities could not be directly traced to arbitrary estimates of defense spending. Consequently, the administration affirmed that the emphasis of defense cooperation should be based on the specific roles and missions within individual security arrangements.⁹ During testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in March of 1981, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger further emphasized such a position and stated that a “rational division of labor among the U.S., Japan, and our NATO Allies would be a central thrust of the administration’s defense policy.”¹⁰

By adopting a defense policy which espoused a division of labor between the United States and its Allies, the Reagan administration attempted to reduce the ambiguities of Japan’s efforts to attain a significant security role. The United States chose to clearly define its intended role in the defense of the Pacific and encourage the Japanese to do the same. In meetings with the Japanese foreign minister, Secretary Weinberger outlined a two-phase US security role for the region. This security role was summarized by Assistant Secretary of Defense Francis J. West, Jr., in 1982, “Mr. Weinberger stated that in the Northwest Pacific the United States would provide the nuclear umbrella, offensive projection forces as necessary, and assist the Republic of Korea in the defense of its territory. In the Southwest and Indian Oceans the U.S. would provide the nuclear umbrella, projection forces as necessary, and sea-lane protection.”¹¹

By dividing its security role into two distinct regional responsibilities, the United States was attempting to deemphasize Japan’s reliance on US defense air and sea control forces in the Northwest Pacific. Clearly, the administration was trying to create a security arrangement in which the United States could comfortably and adequately protect interests in the Indian Ocean without leaving vital areas in the Pacific exposed to additional threats. The Weinberger statement excluded a US commitment to provide for defensive sea-lane protection in the Northwest Pacific. It appeared logical, therefore, that the Japanese would be expected to assume this responsibility in accordance with US proposals for a “rational division of labor.”

In May of 1982, Japanese Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki visited the United States and participated in talks with President Reagan. The joint communique issued by the two leaders confirmed “the desirability of an appropriate division of roles between Japan and the United States” as a means of “insuring peace and stability in the region.”¹² While the communique made no specific mention of the 1,000-mile SLOC defense, in response to a question at the National Press Club, Prime Minister Suzuki stated that the 1,000-mile SLOC defense responsibility was indeed a part of Japanese national defense policy. It has been argued that Suzuki made this confirmation with little knowledge of its military implications, but his statement was significant in that it introduced the 1,000-mile SLOC concept as official Japanese policy for the first time.¹³ When Suzuki’s successor, Yasuhiro Nakasone, visited the United

States in January 1983, the new prime minister reaffirmed Suzuki's commitment to the 1,000-mile defense. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Nakasone stated, "For the ocean, our defense should extend several hundred miles, and if we are to establish sea lanes, then our desire would be to defend the sea lanes between Guam and Tokyo and between the Strait of Taiwan and Osaka."¹⁴ Nakasone's knowledge and experience with defense issues seemed to lend a greater degree of credibility to any Japanese commitment to the 1,000-mile policy.

With the Suzuki and Nakasone statements, the 1,000-mile SLOC defense concept became generally accepted as a genuine policy of Japan. The 1983 Japanese White Paper on Defense further emphasized this policy. In a five-point support of the policy, the white paper cited the significance and necessity of adopting a 1,000-mile SLOC burden. The white paper stressed the importance of protecting maritime traffic to and from Japan and helped define the geographic parameters of the policy.¹⁵

As consistent with Nakasone's statement, the SLOC area was established as a zone which extends south from Tokyo to Guam, west from Guam to the Straits of Taiwan, and northeast from the Straits of Taiwan to Osaka. The extreme limits of this zone are approximately 1,000 nautical miles from Tokyo and the zone includes the most heavily used sea routes to Japan. These sea routes are essential to maintaining the flow of imports to Japan which include vital crude oil supplies from the Middle East. An analysis of ocean trade routes emphasizes the necessity for adequate protection of this SLOC zone. The ocean trade routes which pass through the 1,000-mile zone accommodate a majority of Japan's trade and are clearly the most heavily used routes in the hemisphere. In a wartime situation, Japan's dependence on trade through this zone could critically inhibit the nation's overall survivability if these trade routes were not adequately protected. As the Japanese Naval Attache to the United States accurately observed, Japan's dependence on trade through this zone had eliminated the enemy's need to invade the island in order to defeat Japan.¹⁶ With this prospect in mind, the Defense White Paper contended that the Japanese would be "exercising their right of self-defense" by assuming responsibility for the protection of these sea routes.¹⁷

The Political and Military Significance of the 1,000-Mile SLOC Policy

By adopting the 1,000-mile defense policy, Japan has been forced to contend with diverse political and military implications. With respect to relations with the United States, the 1,000-mile policy is extremely significant in that it signalled a Japanese willingness to accept a realistic role in the "division of labor." The 1,000-mile policy closed the gap of sea-lane responsibility which had been left open by the US decision to primarily

provide sea-lane protection in the Southwest Pacific and the Indian Ocean. More importantly, the 1,000-mile policy implied a Japanese intention to expand its military capabilities in order to play a greater role in its own defense. This perceived intention, whether real or imaginary, was, at least temporarily, extremely valuable in reducing US political pressure and criticism.

An examination of what the 1,000-mile SLOC defense means in terms of military requirements helps to explain why the Japanese political commitment to such a policy was so enthusiastically supported by the Reagan administration. Essentially, the Japanese 1,000-mile SLOC policy was and is perceived as requiring a substantial increase in Japanese military capabilities. The value of this perception to the United States is that by achieving a 1,000-mile defense role, Japan would at the same time increase its overall capabilities to meet a potential threat in other areas. This overall increase in Japan's capabilities would be an advantage to Japan and the United States in two specific ways. First, the increase would create a safety zone around Japan in all directions and reduce US responsibility for the defense of the region. Second, the larger Japanese capability would contribute to global security as the Soviet Union's military planning became complicated by the additional consideration of a respectable Japanese force. The frustrations of Secretary Brown and the Carter administration had apparently been eliminated by the Japanese acceptance of a larger, more realistic self-defense role. A logical corollary to this acceptance was that the Japanese would have to strive for increased defense spending to attain the capabilities required for a 1,000-mile SLOC responsibility.

Though it is generally accepted that the Japanese will have to significantly increase their defense spending to meet the SLOC policy, there are varying opinions as to where the thrust of this spending should go. Obviously, a sea-lane defense would have to counter threats from aircraft, surface ships, and submarines. For Japan, each particular threat is formidable and necessitates a relatively extensive increase in countercapabilities. In several recent defense white papers, for example, Japanese vulnerability to the submarine threat has been emphasized.¹⁸ A more predominant perception, however, is that the Japanese must concentrate their efforts in the development of a capable air defense system. Presently Japan and the SLOC zone are extremely exposed to air attacks originating from over 2,000 aircraft stationed in the eastern part of the Soviet Union. At this time, the Japanese maritime and air forces have no means to cope with such a formidable air threat. With respect to Japanese anti-air defenses, Larry Niksch, an Asian expert with the Congressional Research Service, adequately cites this vulnerability: "It is unlikely that the Air Self-Defense Forces could control the skies over Japan and adjacent waters in the face of attacks by modern Soviet Mig-27s, Mig-23s, and SU-19s, which have become the backbone of the Soviet attack fighter force in eastern Siberia."¹⁹

With the prominence of the air threat in mind, Prime Minister Nakasone proposed that the first objective of Japan's new defense policy would be to create an impenetrable air defense system on the Japanese islands. In his interview with *The Washington Post* in January of 1983, Nakasone was quoted as saying that this system would "be like an unsinkable aircraft carrier."²⁰ Though Nakasone's statement caused much controversy in Japan, the simile still stands as a symbol of his emphasis on air defense. Masahara Gotoda, a chief Japanese cabinet secretary, explained that the concept of the unsinkable aircraft carrier is "nothing but a kind of metaphor" which emphasizes Nakasone's commitment to make Japan capable of countering the Soviet military buildup in East Asia.²¹ Clearly, most air threats to the SLOC zone from the Soviet Union would have to first pass over the Japanese islands. A formidable air defense system in Japan, therefore, is seen as the vital prerequisite for a credible 1,000-mile SLOC defense.

While it is obvious that opinion will vary as to where the Japanese should exert the greatest effort in the process of achieving a 1,000-mile SLOC defense capability, it is also quite obvious that an overall increase in several Japanese defense capabilities is necessary to achieve this goal. An effective air defense system, for example, is only capable of handling the air threat. Currently, Japanese forces are not prepared to counter the submarine or surface threat, and they are similarly unprepared to conduct adequate minelaying or blockading operations.²² The exclusive improvement of merely one of these capabilities will do little to improve overall Japanese readiness to assume the 1,000-mile responsibility. US Defense Department officials are aware of this overall need and are currently engaged in talks with Japanese defense officials which will help determine what the 1,000-mile burden should necessitate in terms of actual procurement.

Though the conclusions of this joint US-Japanese study will most likely remain classified, general unclassified estimates of what is required to fulfill the SLOC responsibility do exist. In a statement to the Congress on 27 June 1983 Senator Carl Levin of Michigan submitted such an estimate. Senator Levin's assessment was included in a rather harsh criticism of Japanese defense burden-sharing efforts and it represents one of the few specific lists which provide any insight as to the type of capabilities the Japanese need to defend themselves and their sea lanes out to 1,000 miles. A summary of Senator Levin's estimate is contained in Table 1.

While it is true that Senator Levin cannot be considered a credible military strategist, it is inaccurate to assume that these figures merely represent a random, uneducated compilation of military force levels. When questioned as to origin of these figures Senator Levin's assistant, Mr. Peter Lennon, asserted that the list was derived through consultations with official and unofficial sources knowledgeable in defense strategy and the Japanese SLOC defense issue.²⁴

Table 1.²³
Increased Capabilities Needed for Defense of Japan
and 1,000-mile SLOC

Equipment	# Needed in Addition to 1983 Force level
F-15 Fighter Aircraft	300
AWACs Equivalent Aircraft	8-10
KC-10 Tanker Aircraft	10-14
Tactical Jet Aircraft	60-90
SAM Groups	3-7
Attack Submarines	10-12
Frigates-Destroyers	20
P-3C ASW Aircraft	130
Personnel	
Active	25,000
Reserves	30,000

Norman Polmar, an internationally recognized authority on the US and Soviet navies, commented that, except for certain exceptions, Senator Levin's figures appear to be a reasonable estimate of what the Japanese need in order to achieve the SLOC defense capability. Mr. Polmar stated that several of the figures (F-15, AWACs, SAM groups, tactical jets) were somewhat inflated yet, at the same time, he noted that the list excluded the need for other necessary capabilities such as LAMPS (Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System) helicopters (2 per frigate or destroyer) and some number of AV-8B Harrier jump jets.²⁵ Whereas Senator Levin's figures appear to stress air defense of the SLOC by land-based F-15 fighter aircraft, Mr. Polmar emphasized that the size of the SLOC zone necessitated a capability for some sea-based aviation. In both cases, the force estimates indicate that major increases in Japanese defense expenditures will be necessary.

Obstacles to Japan's Acquisition of the SLOC Defense Capability

While the Japanese commitment to expand its sea-lane responsibility to 1,000 miles has had favorable effects on US-Japanese relations, several obstacles to Japan's realization of such a capability imply that this initial improvement of relations will be the only tangible product of the commitment. Some of the obstacles to Japan's attempts to achieve the SLOC defense, for example, are linked to public opinion and the constitutional prohibition of military expansion. Specifically, Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution explicitly states that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other

war potential, will never be maintained.”²⁶ Although the very existence of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces appears to directly contradict this constitutional provision, Japanese leaders have been fairly successful at convincing the populace that the SDF forces comply with constitutional restrictions. As previously explained, however, the military increases necessary to provide credible 1,000-mile protection would create a respectable and relatively large Japanese defense capability. It is likely that such an increase in military capabilities would evoke a greater effective resistance from the government opposition. In his support of the 1,000-mile responsibility, Prime Minister Nakasone suggested that this constitutional renunciation of war and war-fighting capabilities had already become a major obstruction. Nakasone went on to imply that he felt that constitutional revision may be necessary before Japan could attain the SLOC defense capability.²⁷

Despite Nakasone’s position, the legitimate obstructive potential of the constitutional issue is somewhat dubious. The Japanese have been successful at “constitutionally” justifying significant increases in defense capabilities in the past, therefore, the constitutional renunciation of war, in itself, is not necessarily an obstacle to increased defense capabilities. However, public opinion opposed to increases in defense spending may indeed increase the salience of the constitutional issue by using it as an excuse for reduced spending. Currently, public opinion supports established defense policy guidelines but opposes major increases such as those suggested by the SLOC role.²⁸ Also, the Japanese government’s attempts to finance this larger defense role will most likely be impeded by the reluctance of the ruling Democratic Party to raise taxes. Specifically, farmers and small businessmen are the most lightly taxed group in Japan and also represent the largest block of political support for the LDP. The LDP, therefore, will avoid a tax increase which could alienate this group and subsequently diminish the party’s vital rural support.²⁹

Whether it is linked to the constitutional issue or to other internal political factors in Japan, it is evident that the 1,000-mile policy lacks the financial commitment to defense which the policy requires. With respect to financial commitment, perhaps the major obstacle to Japan achieving the 1,000-mile SLOC capability is related to the problems which most democratic governments experience when attempting to raise the funds necessary to support particular policies. Certainly, raising the defense budget involves an intense domestic debate through which the limit on defense spending is governed. The defense budget debate for the fiscal year ending in March 1984 emphasizes this point. When the Japanese accepted the 1,000-mile role, US defense specialists estimated that their defense budget would have to increase annually by 10 to 12 percent in real terms (approximately 15 percent nominally) in order to facilitate the procurement of the corresponding capabilities within a reasonable time frame. The Japanese Defense Agency

originally agreed with this US estimate, but for FY-1983 they decided to push for only a 8.8 percent nominal increase over the FY-1982 budget. The cabinet debate and decision reduced the proposed increase even further to 6.5 percent. Secretary Weinberger confirmed US disappointment with the Japanese defense budget: "We had rated the FY-1982 defense budget as a significant first step, but the FY-1983 budget cannot be considered the second step. It is insufficient to achieve the stated goals and even greater defense build-up efforts are needed."³⁰

With the FY-1983 budget increase fixed at this 6.5 percent maximum, it is possible to conclude that the Japanese have not significantly altered their defense planning to financially accommodate their political commitment. Yet, the Japanese have remained committed to the 1,000-mile policy. The inadequacy of the FY-1983 budget has been justified by Japan's self-proclaimed domestic financial problems. Secretary Weinberger expressed hope that these financial conditions would improve and that in the future the Japanese would implement "the kind of increases which will be necessary to achieve their own self defense goals."³¹

The Japanese failure to commit sufficient funding for defense is cited as the most obvious indication that the 1,000-mile capability will not be realized in the near future. A more convincing indicator is related to the fact that a country's spending in defense does not directly translate to capability. Cost, therefore, is not the critical factor in determining whether Japanese efforts are consistent with their SLOC defense commitment. Specifically, though limited by budget constraints, Japanese spending in defense is not oriented toward the development of a sustainable or practical military capability.

For its one percent of GNP, Japan has procured front line equipment that has limited logistic support and dubious utility in Japan's overall defense needs. For example, Japan maintains 13 army divisions, which only possess enough ammunition for one month of fighting.³² Furthermore, experts question the necessity of maintaining such a large army force when the threat of invasion is not the most realistic threat to Japan's security. Currently, "more than a quarter of the budget, or about \$3 billion, is being spent on manning an army which does not meet the acknowledged threat."³³ Certainly, if Japan cannot increase its defense spending, action should be taken to divert funds from the army to accommodate the more pressing and contemporary needs of Japan's defense. The thrust of Japan's air and maritime spending has also ignored the importance of sustainability. While the Maritime Self-Defense Forces critically lack the necessary replenishment capabilities, the Air Self-Defense Forces lack both "depth and sustainability."³⁴

Characteristics of the FY-1983 defense budget imply that a Japanese spending/capability gap clearly exists. When faced with budget cuts, the Defense Agency chose to reduce spending in logistics.³⁵ More importantly,

the Defense Agency is basing its recommendations for spending on guidelines set forth in its 1981 Mid-Term Defense Plan. The purpose of this plan was to carry out Japan's 1976 National Defense Program Outline. The 1976 outline, however, was developed before the 1,000-mile SLOC defense became national policy. It is highly unlikely that the Defense Agency's requests for military procurements for FY-1983 are in tune with the capabilities required for the SLOC defense, and a majority of these requests have in fact been cut significantly. With respect to some of Senator Levin's estimates, Table 2 illustrates the huge disparity between what the defense of Japan and the 1,000-mile SLOC may demand and what has actually been procured:

Table 2³⁶
1983 Japan Front-Line Procurement

Equipment	Requested	Approved	Total Needed in Addition to Current Forces
F-15s	20	13	300
P-3Cs	10	7	130
Destroyers/Frigates	3	2	20
Submarines	1	1	10-12

While it is unrealistic to assume that the Japanese could achieve the total necessary capability in one year, the 1983 procurements indicate that, at such a pace, Japan is well over a decade away from obtaining the 1,000-mile SLOC capability. Furthermore, it is important to note that such procurements were made at the expense of increased logistical capabilities.

In March 1983, the US Department of Defense prepared a report for the Congress which was entitled *Allied Contributions to the Common Defense*. In this report, Japan's performance was criticized and its dependence upon the 1976 outline and the Mid-Term Defense Plan was deemed inappropriate. The report stated, "The MTDP was drafted in 1981. Although it followed the Suzuki announcement, the MTDP makes no mention of, or provisions for, a SLOC protection force. The MTDP is inadequate to make Japan's present forces sustainable and to build the requisite level of Air and Maritime Forces."³⁷

The most significant implication of Japan's acceptance of a 1,000-mile SLOC responsibility is that the responsibility requires a major increase in Japanese military capabilities. For the United States the increased Japanese capability would contribute to a more effective deterrent in the West Pacific and promote greater regional security. For Japan, this increase would provide for the SLOC defense in a zone vital to that nation's trade and survival. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the overall increased capability would alleviate US political pressure on the Japanese.

Though Prime Minister Nakasone appears to be genuinely committed to the SLOC policy, Japanese defense planning is inconsistent with the needs of this defense responsibility. The 1976 Defense Outline is not designed to produce the capabilities necessary for the 1,000-mile SLOC defense, yet it continues to be the guideline for Japanese defense spending. While a new plan is obviously necessary, there are no indications that one will emerge in the near future. As the Research Institute for Peace and Security noted in a 1983 report on Japan's defense posture, "All there is at the moment is general acceptance that some build-up will have to be made to keep Washington happy, but no more than that. Extra defense spending is prompted not by a revised military concept but simply by a need to placate the United States."³⁸ Clearly, if the 1,000-mile SLOC defense policy is to be regarded as anything more than empty rhetoric aimed at fulfilling a political requirement, Japanese defense planning must be reassessed and directed toward creating the necessary capability. The prospects for such a change in the near term appear unlikely.

Notes

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Of all men, naval officers ought to be most entertaining. In the first place they go to sea and it stands to reason that a great deal more of what is worth telling must happen on such an uncertain floor as the top of an ocean wave than on the fixed and stable earth. People who live in earthquake countries are the only ones who have an equal advantage.

From an 1883 review of W.H. Parker, *Recollections of a Naval Officer*