

Leif-Eric Easley, "Know Thy Neighbor: Legitimate Security Concerns and Credible Engagement in East Asia," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), January 22, 2007, page 7; reprinted in the *Taipei Times* and in *OMNI* as "Upgrading Defense in East Asia: Japan and China need more trust building, South Korea and Taiwan better strategic focus," January 23, 2007.

Japan and China are upgrading defense postures in ways that will change the contour, if not the shape of East Asia's security landscape. Such change involves uncertainty and raises concerns for conflict. As observers try to distinguish benign intentions from potentially aggressive ones, a key question is whether military improvements are based on legitimate security concerns.

On Jan. 9, Japan upgraded its Defense Agency to a full ministry, an important step toward "normalization" of its foreign and security policies. Japan also plans to establish a National Security Council to coordinate policy among its agencies and with other countries. An upcoming meeting of Japanese and U.S. foreign and defense ministers will likely welcome expanded roles and missions for Japan within the alliance. Most significantly, Japan's Prime Minister has stated his intention to push for revision of the "peace constitution" to resolve legal issues regarding Japan's contributions to international security.

Given the history of war that remains fresh in the minds of Japan's neighbors, these developments might seem reason for pause. Tokyo no doubt has serious diplomatic work ahead to explain how its military normalization is a positive development for regional security and not a sign of aggressive nationalism. However, despite incomplete historical reconciliation with its neighbors, Japan has a sovereign right for a normal military, and its defense upgrades appear legitimate as the need to deter North Korea is on the rise.

Neighbors would have more reason to doubt Japan's intentions if it were aggressively pursuing offensive capabilities and moving away from its alliance with the U.S. But Japan's military capabilities remain defense-oriented. Japan's military spending is actually decreasing overall, while programs like missile defense receive more funding. Rather than go it alone, Japan is further integrating its military with the U.S. and devoting more resources to multinational peacekeeping. These are hardly signs of a "re-militarizing" Japan.

Changes of a much greater scale are underway by the Chinese military, as highlighted by Beijing's anti-satellite missile test on Jan. 12. China has sustained double-digit spending increases for 17 years, focused on improving the technology and power projection of the largest military in the world. China's status as a nuclear power already deters external aggression and its permanent seat on the UN Security Council protects Chinese interests in diplomacy. China's diplomatic clout is only increasing with rapid

economic growth. Meanwhile, China's relations with countries on its borders and with the United States are better than any time in recent memory. The only exception is North Korea, a country greatly dependent on China and a supposed ally. So why does China need such significant increases in military capabilities?

Beijing released its most recent defense white paper last month, claiming the driver for China's military modernization is deterring Taiwan independence. This white paper describes China's security concerns in greater detail than earlier versions, a positive step toward military transparency. But the white paper is far from candid about Chinese weapons procurement. Nor is it convincing about why China needs additional military capabilities vis-à-vis Taiwan. Capabilities sufficient to deter Taiwan from declaring independence, avoiding armed conflict in lieu of a negotiated settlement, may be legitimate. China likely has such capabilities today. Acquiring greater military capabilities, to a level against which Taiwan could not credibly deter invasion, would be of very questionable legitimacy. Such buildup would not only be threatening to Taiwan, but also destabilizing for the entire region.

China's growing importance on the international stage cannot be denied and Beijing should be engaged as an honest partner for dealing with myriad international challenges. However, China's peaceful rise is not predetermined. Beijing would make great contributions to regional trust and stability if it made clear how Chinese military modernizations are based on legitimate security concerns.

Ironically, the governments in East Asia with the most legitimate and pressing security concerns - South Korea and Taiwan - are experiencing the most difficulty upgrading their defense postures. This is not because of their military establishments, but out of political considerations.

In December, South Korea's Defense Ministry published a white paper explaining why "North Korea's conventional military strength, nuclear test, WMD and deployment of armaments along the front line" are grave and increasing threats to South Korea's security. South Korean security specialists recommend strong countermeasures and closer cooperation with the United States. But the South Korean administration downplays the threat from the North and denies the need for tougher policies that might upset Pyongyang.

Taiwan's military sees an urgent need to upgrade defensive capacity vis-à-vis Beijing's increasing missile, naval and air forces. In response to Taiwan requests, the U.S. approved a landmark arms package to help Taipei maintain a stable balance across the Taiwan Strait. But Taiwan's legislature has resisted funding the arms package, instead allowing Beijing's united front tactics to divide Taiwan's democracy.

By putting short-term politics ahead of security strategy, Seoul and Taipei are losing the ability to credibly engage North Korea and China, and have frustrated their key security partner, the United States. In contrast, Tokyo and Beijing are pushing ahead

with military upgrades without adequate trust-building efforts to reassure neighbors that these developments are for legitimate security concerns, not aggressive intentions.

Perhaps East Asia needs a bit more exchange of ideas. Seoul and Taipei might benefit from adapting assertive strategic thinking from Beijing and Tokyo. In turn, China and Japan might benefit from a dose of South Korea and Taiwan's preoccupation for relations with their neighbors.

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