Continuity and Change: Evolution, Not Revolution, in Japan’s Foreign and Security Policy Under the DPJ

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In this article, we address four common, often contradictory misconceptions concerning Japanese foreign and security policy. First, Japan’s strategic “normalization” is dangerous. Second, Japan is incapable of having a “normal” policy. Third, Japan is about to become “normal.” Fourth, foreign and security policy under the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) will differ radically from what it was for fifty years under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). We contend that Japan is not a threat; that it has a security policy, but not one that fits well with Western models; and that Japan’s security policy is changing, gradually not radically, and is not becoming just like the West’s. Keywords: East Asian politics, foreign and security policy, normalization, Democratic Party of Japan.

An understanding of Japan’s foreign and security policy has historically labored under three often contradictory misconceptions. The first is that when Japan was previously empowered to act as a normal state in terms of self-help security maximization, Japanese militarism posed a threat (to its neighbors and world peace, for instance), and therefore normalization of its foreign and security policy is dangerous. Second, Japan has no foreign and security policy either because it is a reactive state or because it is not a unified rational actor and therefore is incapable of a “normal” policy. The third misconception is that Japan is at a crossroads in terms of foreign and security policy and is about to become a “normal” state.

To these three we may add another to account for Japan under Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) administrations. Japanese foreign and security policy under the DPJ, it is said, will be radically
different following fifty years of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) dominance.

We contest these misconceptions by contending that Japan is not a threat. It does have a foreign and security policy, but maybe not one that fits well with the traditional Western rational actor model of decisionmaking, or even with alternative pluralist models proposed for the analysis of states such as the United States. We further argue that Japan’s foreign and security policy, like that of all states, is gradually evolving, but not so as to become just like the West’s. The DPJ administrations both reflect and contribute to these evolutions but do not represent a dramatic departure. These arguments have been discussed piecemeal in the Japan foreign policy literature but have generally not been drawn together into an overall framework. We hope that a survey of all four aspects of Japanese foreign policy yields a more accurate picture of the current nature of decisionmaking. At many moments Japan has been described as being at a turning point in its foreign relations; the contemporary debates about normalization or the impact of new governance under the DPJ are only the latest. Yet evolution, not revolution, is the name of the game.

The Threat?

A Nuclear-Armed Japan?

The threat of a nuclear-armed and hostile North Korea following the Stalinist state’s quasi-successful nuclear test in October 2006, combined with the election that year of the hawkish Abe Shinzo, raised the specter of an arms race in Northeast Asia. That prospect was reinforced by Japanese arms purchases and speculation about a nuclear-armed Japan (“Arms Race in Northeast Asia” 2007). In fact, two intertwined issues have dominated Japanese thinking about North Korea over the past decade: Pyongyang’s development of nuclear weapons and the abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. The former concern was most prominent within the community of security analysts, while the latter seized the popular imagination largely due to frequent reminders about