



Japan, the United States, and the Shifting Balance of Air Power in Northeast Asia

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In Northeast Asia, the balance of aerospace power is shifting – with pressing consequences for Japan and the alliance between Japan and the United States. Russia is modernizing its air power; North Korea periodically takes bellicose actions; and China is rapidly building military might. Previously constrained by underdeveloped air forces, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army is now investing heavily in aerospace capabilities – to the great concern of Japanese strategic planners. Japan is a key U.S. ally, so regional shifts matter for us, too.

Air Power Developments in the Region

Japanese and U.S. military planners cannot help but take note of specific military trends:

- In China, increasingly accurate and lethal missiles beef up the nation’s capacity to project aerospace power. Theater missiles – that is, conventional ballistic and land attack cruise missiles with medium ranges – enable China’s air force to compensate for its longstanding incapacity to suppress enemy air defenses, maintain air superiority, and go on the attack. China’s air force aspires to conduct more complex aerospace operations and is developing the necessary technologies. China’s fifth-generation fighter, the J-20, conducted its maiden flight in January 2011, and U.S. intelligence estimates that this aircraft will be operationally capable by 2018. Japan and China contest sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and China may become more assertive if it believes it can achieve air superiority.
- The Russian Air Force is now only an afterthought in Japanese security planning, because of Russia’s aging aircraft and shortage of trained personnel. But this could change if Russia succeeds in boosting its inventory of new aircraft, increases flight hours for its pilots, and deploys a new, advanced air defense system. A conflict with Japan over the Kurile Islands remains a possibility. Last year, in fact, Japan’s Air Self Defense Force intercepted Russian aircraft near Japanese air space on 264 occasions.
- Although North Korea’s dilapidated aircraft do not currently pose any offensive threat, the erratic nation’s missile development program is a constant worry for Japanese security specialists. In the past three years, North Korea’s military arsenal has increased by 25%, and the 1000 missiles of dubious accuracy are a threat to Japan’s civilians. North Korea could use that threat to try to pressure Japan to deny U.S. use of its bases during a regional conflict.

Implications for Japan as America’s Ally

In response to regional developments, Japan’s Air Self Defense Force plans a boost in air power. But Japan’s

economic troubles – and heightened fiscal constraints following the 2011 earthquake and nuclear power disaster – have made it difficult to free up resources for military investments. Although Japanese defense spending has been steady (at one percent of Gross Domestic Product) for the last decade, actual expenditure has declined since 2000, and support for new technologies may take a backseat to more pressing national reconstruction and economic priorities.

For decades, the Japanese air force cooperated with the United States to produce aircraft and operate a front-line fighter fleet. America has an interest in a more capable Japanese air force that could take on a greater share of the security burden in Asia while advancing common strategic interests.

Given current realities, both Japan and its ally the United States, have an interest in making investments to meet the challenges posed by the shifting balance of air power in the region. In various possible scenarios of military conflicts involving China, Russia or North Korea, the United States would almost certainly end up being involved, so America has an ongoing stake in Japanese credibility in meeting potential threats from its regional neighbors.

What America Should Urge Japan to Do

Both Japan and the United States must make the critical procurement and policy decisions necessary to ensure long-term strategic stability in the region.

- The United States should encourage Japan to place a budget priority on funding new aircraft and long-range capabilities for interdicting enemy missiles launched through the air or from the sea.
- If a conflict breaks out in the region, Japan also needs to convincingly signal that it is willing to bear the costs of supporting U.S. military responses. Potentially, Japan could add a provision to its treaty with the United States committing Japan to allow American use of its bases in the event of an attack from North Korea.

In the final analysis, modernizing its air force is only one step that Japan needs to take to meet challenges from a more capable Chinese air force. Japan should also reach out to China to cooperate in confidence building measures to reduce the likelihood of a conflict, especially about the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. As the two nations modernize their air fighters and maintain patrols in the airspace around the disputed islands, they need to take steps to avoid inadvertent conflict and escalation. China and Japan should consider a system in which each side commits to refrain from intercepting the aircraft of the other, as long as each side provides prior notifications of routine flight patrols.

In its own efforts to manage strategic relations in a changing Northeast Asia, the United States can place a diplomatic priority on urging this sort of understanding between Japan and China. Japan is an important U.S. ally, so we need to help its air force keep up with regional competition and ensure that plans are in place to meet all military contingencies. But we also have a strong interest in heading off conflicts in this vital region.

Read more in Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Air Power Trends in Northeast Asia: Implications for Japan and the U.S. Japan Alliance,” (with Mark Stokes), Project 2049 Institute, August 2011.