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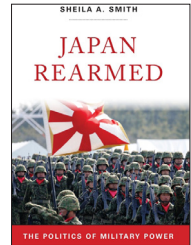
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Reviewed by Ben Ascione



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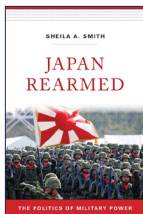
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Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power

Sheila A. Smith

Harvard University Press (April 2019)

Reviewed by Ben Ascione



In *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power*, Japan specialist Sheila Smith (senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations) traces the evolution of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and ‘Japan’s increasing embrace of the military as an instrument of statecraft’.¹ Smith weaves together the myriad influences on Japan’s defence policymakers to explain the circumstances under which the roles and missions of the SDF have been incrementally expanded through to the present day. The analysis begins with the influence of Japan’s wartime legacy, the establishment of the SDF as an exclusively defence-oriented military in 1954, and the gradual expansion of SDF capabilities in the late Cold War period to support the US military

presence in East Asia. Subsequently, in the post-Cold War era amidst the rise of China and North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile development, Smith examines the dispatches of the SDF overseas in non-combat roles, measures to mobilise the SDF to defend Japan, constitutional restrictions on Japan’s use of force, and management of the US–Japan alliance.

Smith’s analysis of Japanese military power comes at a timely moment. The balance of regional power in East Asia is shifting with the rise of China, the Trump administration in the United States is retreating from multilateralism, US–China rivalry in trade and technology is intensifying, and discussion of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Indo-Pacific security cooperation is attracting renewed interest. Against the backdrop of this increasingly uncertain security environment and debate over how Japan might respond, *Japan Rearmed* helps illuminate the long arc of change in politics over Japan’s military power since the end of the Second World War and the crossroads Japan is now approaching over the future development of its military posture.

One strength of *Japan Rearmed* is the analysis of Japan’s defence policy evolution during the Cold War. The enactment of Japan’s post-war Constitution—and the Article 9 ‘peace clause’ which forswears force as a

¹ Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 17.

means of settling international disputes —as well as the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the US–Japan Security Treaty, shaped the position from which Japan established the SDF and designed it as an exclusively defensive military. Externally, Smith highlights Japan’s balancing act between US demands to play a greater role in the battle between the free world and communism and Japan’s need to re-assure its Asian neighbours that it no longer harboured hostile intentions. Domestically, political debate focused on civilian control while a desire for greater self-reliance remained an unrealisable but powerful undercurrent in conservative Japanese thinking. In balancing these demands, Japan kept the SDF at home throughout the Cold War, but gradually expanded its capabilities. By the end of the Cold War, even though the SDF operated under rigid legal strictures and with significant gaps in defence planning, it was one of the most technologically advanced militaries on the planet.

Many analysts tend to neglect the late-Cold War period in Japanese history and focus on the fall of the Soviet Union and the role of the Gulf War in forcing Japan to expand the SDF’s activities. For instance, former Japan Defense Agency Director-General Shigeru Ishiba once quipped that the SDF could lay down on the job during

the Cold War as Japan knew the US military would come to its aid against any potential attack by the Soviet Union.² Smith’s analysis shows that such a portrait of SDF complacency was far from the case. The story of SDF General Hiroomi Kurisu’s call to Japanese civilian political leaders in 1978 to address gaps in planning in case of an armed attack against Japan, and his subsequent firing, demonstrates the significant contestation over the politics of military power that took place in this period. It also shows that the SDF did not use strict civilian control as an excuse to slack off from its mission to defend Japan. Similarly, Smith’s description of the increasing capabilities of the SDF and its deepening complementarity with US military forces in the Pacific towards the end of the Cold War shows that the SDF was already making significant and critical contributions to the US–Japan alliance, such as in protection of sea lanes and intelligence gathering, before the fall of the Soviet Union.

Another strength of *Japan Rearmed* is the analysis of the US–Japan alliance, the question of Tokyo’s expectations, and the complications inherent in ‘relying on borrowed power’.³ The US–Japan strategic bargain of bases for a defence guarantee has been maintained for over seven decades underpinning Japanese and East Asian regional security and the United

2 Shigeru Ishiba, *Kokubo* [National Defence] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2005), 87.

3 Smith, *Japan Rearmed*, 173.

States' position as a Pacific power. However, as Japan's economy grew, this strategic bargain came under increasing scrutiny. The solution to dealing with domestic resistance to US military bases in local communities, Smith explains, saw a reduction of US forces on Japan's main islands and a concentration in Okinawa prefecture. Managing relations with the Okinawan people continues to be a major challenge for Japan's defence policymakers today.

Smith's analysis of Japan's growing fear of being abandoned by the United States provides a key contribution to the literature. A number of English language scholarly works on the US–Japan alliance fall into the trap of viewing policy primarily through the lens of US interests. However, by highlighting the combined effect of a rising China and an increasingly unpredictable United States, Smith provides a fresh and up-to-date look at the alliance from the Japanese perspective. The sharpening of tensions surrounding the disputed Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands) since 2010 raised questions about the reliability of the US security guarantee. The election of the mercurial US President Donald Trump has intensified Japanese anxieties. The credibility of the US nuclear umbrella has come under doubt and the long-term sustainability of the US–Japan

strategic bargain has been put under the spotlight as Trump demands a huge increase in host-nation support under threat of terminating the alliance. The risk that the United States could sacrifice its allies for its own interests is also highlighted, especially with regard to Trump's stance on the question of North Korean missiles. The reality of Japan's abandonment fears should serve as a wake-up call to alliance managers in Washington.

Smith devotes a chapter to Japan's post-war Constitution. This is a worthy inclusion. Security generalists advocating for a more rapid expansion of SDF roles, missions and capabilities have often failed to understand the critical role of the Constitution in the politics of Japan's military power, at least as far back as Herman Kahn.⁴ At the same time, constitutional politics has heated up since 2014 as the Abe government reinterpreted Article 9—to enable the SDF to engage in limited forms of collective self-defence in situations when Japan's survival is threatened—and now seeks its formal revision.

Smith identifies two key issues in the constitutional debate over security policy. The first concerns the proper scope of the SDF's roles, missions and capabilities. This has shifted over time to include participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations since 1992, rear-area and logistics

4 Herman Kahn, *The Emerging Japanese Superstate: Challenge and Response* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1970).

support for the United States military in areas surrounding Japan since 1999, and limited forms of collective self-defence since 2015. The second concerns ‘responsibility for making decisions about the use of force and monitoring SDF compliance’.⁵ Smith summarises the continual process of government reinterpretations of Article 9, the new laws that have been passed and the old laws that have been amended to implement these reinterpretations. With the passage of the security-related bills in September 2015, Smith concludes, ‘Japan has stretched its interpretation of the constitution to the fullest’.⁶

A weakness in the analysis is a lack of deeper probing into public opinion on constitutional politics and how this might affect the possibility of revising Article 9. Smith canvasses Japanese public opinion as a break on constitutional revision and concludes that ‘it remains to be seen whether [the Abe government] has the support of the Japanese people’.⁷ To be fair, going deeper than this is not without its challenges given that significant segments of the Japanese public lack understanding of the intricacies of Article 9 and opinion polls often show different answers depending on the exact wording of questions and the ideological bias of the relevant poll-

ing organisation. Yet given that any revision of Article 9 requires a two-thirds vote in both houses of the Diet and a majority of votes in a national referendum, public opinion is absolutely critical to any potential revision. Any future SDF posture outside the framework of Article 9 must first be convincing to the public.

Connected to this point, another weakness in the analysis is the omission of the deep historical revisionist and nationalist wellsprings that belie Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s thinking. Smith notes that Abe’s mixed messaging has ‘often confused the Japanese public on his real ambitions’ and that he has proven incapable of separating ‘a realist call for greater military power with a revisionist desire to free Japan from American influence’.⁸ However, this does not fully acknowledge Abe’s motivations. Abe’s pre-existing desire to revise Article 9 is more a result of his ideological proclivities, inherited from his grandfather (former prime minister Nobusuke Kishi) as well as his association with the historical revisionist right-wing lobby group Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), rather than a well-thought out strategic response to the changing external security environment. Indeed, the historical revisionist assertions of the Abe government unnecessarily dump

5 Smith, *Japan Rearmed*, 140.

6 Smith, 162–63.

7 Smith, 171.

8 Smith, 172.

complicated political baggage into an already fraught defence reform debate and constitute a self-inflicted hurdle in persuading the public on the necessity of constitutional revision.

Smith concludes that Japan's growing fears of being abandoned by the United States and the worsening regional security environment mean that Japan faces tough choices ahead and that 'limiting Japan's military power may no longer make Japan feel safe'⁹ in the 21st century. This conclusion may be interpreted by policymakers in Australia, India, the United States, ASEAN nations—and others keen on promoting increased security cooperation for a free and open Indo-Pacific—as an encouraging sign that Japan is likely to continue to expand its military capabilities in the future. Yet the domestic political constraints that continue to keep Japan inside the framework of Article 9—including the brake of public opinion and public distrust of the Abe government's historical revisionism and its rationale for constitutional revision—should not be forgotten in predictions on the future posture of the SDF.

Overall, in *Japan Rearmed* Smith provides an excellent analysis that will be useful to both novices and specialists alike. Smith achieves a rare balance in her writing style making the book both eminently digestible but also loaded with insight. Anybody interest-

ed in the post-war history of Japan's evolving defence policy and the security challenges Japan now faces will benefit from reading Smith's expert scholarship.

⁹ Smith, 240.