



THE JAPANESE AND THEIR SELF-DEFENCE FORCES TODAY

Marjorie VANBAELINGHEM

Deputy Director of IRSEM

Alice ORTEGA

Research Assistant

ABSTRACT

Japan is currently the fifth largest conventional military power in the world, and yet it has no armed forces, since the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF), created after World War II, cannot be considered as such. This paper looks at this paradox from the perspective of the relationship of these forces to Japanese society and the way in which their image affects defence policy in Japan. To do so, we go back to the origins of the JSDF's status and consider their characteristics and the current limits to their development. We also look at how their image, missions and prerogatives are out of step with the geostrategic context of 2022. The image of the JSDF in the eyes of the Japanese population proves to be the key to understanding the permanence of this paradoxical status. We thus analyze how this image is constructed through public opinion, official communication policy and the influence of external actors, such as the American armed forces.

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INTRODUCTION

Not since the end of the Korean War have tensions been so high in the Indo-Pacific region: China's assertive posture and North Korea's ballistic and nuclear ambitions are now compounded by the threat of an uninhibited Russia. This will certainly inform the new Security Strategy that the Japanese government is due to adopt by the end of 2022. However, for Japan, even beyond the issues of strategy, posture or alliances, it is the question of defence resources that must be addressed. Japan's military forces are substantial in terms of equipment, budget and manpower, but it is impossible, in 2022, to speak of Japanese armed forces because the term does not apply to the JSDF, neither *de jure* nor "symbolically" (to use Yves Lacoste's terminology¹), in the representations that the Japanese have of them. Moreover, the influence of the geostrategic context in building the relationship between the armed forces and the nation² does not seem to come into play in the case of Japan. This observation is the starting point for our reflection. Our objective will thus be to understand why, despite the intensification of the regional threat, the status of the JSDF has failed to evolve. We will seek to lay the groundwork for an understanding of the levers and barriers affecting the adaptation of Japanese defence resources and policy. In order to do so, we will study the bond between the Japanese (the State and society) and their defence forces, with respect to the historical heritage and geostrategic trends. We aim to reveal the interplay between the image and the employment of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces in their relationship with the Japanese society, and to understand the characteristics that make the Japanese military unique in the world in 2022.

HOW JAPAN CREATED (H)ARMLESS ARMED FORCES

The unique status of the Self-Defence Forces³ can be explained by their troubled historical origins

Militarism and war have left a deep imprint on Japanese society. The military's dominance over civil society until the end of the Tokugawa shogunate (1867) or the period of expansion in the Pacific between 1875 and the end of World War II, which resulted in wars and the colonisation of countries such as Korea, are just some examples. From the figure of the samurai to that of the kamikaze, militarism permeates the entire culture of the country. Éric Seizelet describes a "culture of war aestheticized to the extreme",⁴ in a country where military action has not only had an impact on the colonized countries but also on the Japanese population itself. World War II and its tragic outcome for Japan put an end to

1. Yves Lacoste, "[La géopolitique et les rapports de l'armée et de la nation](#)", *Hérodote*, 116, 2005, p. 5-21.

2. More terminology from Yves Lacoste (ibid.).

3. In Japanese, 自衛隊 (*jieitai*). 自 (*ji*) stands for 'self', 衛 (*ei*) for 'defence' and 隊 (*tai*) for 'regiment'.

4. Éric Seizelet, "Mourir au combat : l'impensé des Forces d'autodéfense japonaises", *Études de l'IFRI, IFRI*, September 2017.

the hyper-militarisation of Japanese society when the imperial army was defeated.⁵ Japan capitulated on 2nd September 1945 and came under American occupation.

After the adoption of the 'Peace Constitution' on 3rd November 1946 (imposed by General McArthur's staff and so named because it institutionalised state pacifism in its Article 9⁶), war was very quickly banished from the collective unconscious, and it was amnesia that became the 'breeding ground for Japanese pacifism'.⁷ Thus, pacifism was born from 'the experience of the suffering caused by war and the rejection of militarist ideology', and Article 9 was a promise to the population that Japan would no longer experience the horrors of war.⁸ Trust in the military was lost, and distrust of the armed forces and the state's ability to control them became deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of post-war Japan.⁹

What Japan experienced in terms of the collapse of the military institution was comparable to what was happening in Germany. For both countries, as the bond with the armed forces broke down, the relationship with the nation¹⁰ was partly redefined. The Tokyo trials, organised in the same way as the Nuremberg trials, and the judgement of the 28 defendants divided into three categories (political leaders, military officers and lower-ranking officers) between November 1945 and October 1946, laid the foundations for national renewal.

In the context of the Cold War and growing instability in various Asian countries, with the rise of communism and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Japan signed the first Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (*nipponkoku to Amerika gasshûkoku to no aida no anzen hoshô-jôyaku*) with the United States on 8th September 1951 to ensure its defence.¹¹ The United States was granted the right to base armed forces in Japan, while Japan was prohibited from providing bases for foreign powers or concluding military agreements without the consent of the United States. In addition to establishing the complete demilitarisation of Japan, the treaty placed the security of the archipelago entirely in U.S. hands.

It was at the request of the United States, which encouraged the progressive rearmament of Japan (although this rearmament had already been envisaged from 1946 onwards, in view of a possible Soviet attack on Japan¹²), that the National Police Reserve (*keisatsu yobitai*) of 75,000 men was created in July 1950. In 1952, it became the National Security Force (*hoantai*)

5. It was the use of nuclear weapons (for the first and only time in history) that led to this rapid capitulation. The trauma of the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings strongly contributed to the persistence of pacifism as discussed in Part 3. On the complexity of the nuclear subject in the collective imagination and Japanese politics, see *Imaginaires nucléaires* (under the direction of Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and Céline Jurgensen, Odile Jacob, 2021) as well as IRSEM report n° 93, *La Latence nucléaire du Japon: un levier diplomatique à double usage?* by Timothée Albessard.

6. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution reads: "Aspiring to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, armed forces will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."

7. Éric Seizelet, "Mourir au combat : l'impensé des Forces d'autodéfense japonaises".

8. Mari Yamamoto, *Grassroots Pacifism in Post-War Japan: The Rebirth of a Nation*, London/New York, Routledge/Curzon, 2004, cited in Jennifer Chan, "Le mouvement pacifiste japonais depuis les années 1990", *Critique internationale*, 37:4, 2007, p. 51-69.

9. Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011.

10. Yves Lacoste, "*La géopolitique et les rapports de l'armée et de la nation*".

11. Edwin Reischauer, *Histoire du Japon et des Japonais*, t.2, *De 1945 à nos jours*, Éd. du Seuil, coll. "Points Histoire", 2014.

12. Sugita Yoneyuki, "The Yoshida Doctrine as a Myth", *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 27, 2016.

with 110,000 men. Very quickly, the rearmament process ran into strong opposition from civil society and part of the political class. The debate focused on the interpretation of the pacifist Constitution and the legitimacy of armed forces within the framework of Article 9. During the renegotiation of the Japan-U.S. treaty, between 1959 and 1960, the *Anpô* protest movement illustrated this phenomenon. This movement, which began in 1959, was characterised by large-scale demonstrations throughout the country against the revised Japan-U.S. treaty.¹³ These even led to the dismissal of then Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi. A new version of the pact was finally adopted, which provided that the United States would defend Japan in the event of an attack, and that Japan would assist the U.S. in the event of an attack on its national territory. In this context, the position of the armed forces in Japan's defence policy remained minimal and marked by a negative modality.

The Japanese Self-Defence Forces: a legally contested existence

Although a process of "re-militarisation", albeit relative, formally began with the two laws that created the Defence Agency (*bôeichô*) and the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF - *jieitai*) in June 1954, two major obstacles stood in the way of their public recognition: on the one hand, the ambivalent position of Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida from October 1948 to December 1954, until the creation of the JSDF, and on the other hand, the debate around the constitutional legitimacy of the JSDF.

Shigeru Yoshida, who gave priority to the economic development of Japan, was opposed to rapid rearmament and relied on Article 9 to keep the size of the armed forces and military spending in check¹⁴ (this prioritisation of the economy and limitation of defence spending is still referred to as the "Yoshida doctrine"). However, although initially he clearly stated his opposition to building a military potential to defend the country in a situation of self-defence, he was forced, under American pressure, to shift his position and to justify the creation of a defence force.¹⁵ The government then adopted a new position affirming that the JSDF did not constitute the potential for war that was prohibited by the Constitution and that self-defence was allowed.¹⁶ Thus, the JSDF, directly after their creation, were immediately caught in a contradiction and, in a way, disqualified, in the sense that their military potential was denied and attempts were made to render them invisible.

Under the authority of the newly created Defence Agency, the JSDF's mission, as set out in Article 3 of the 1954 Act, was limited to the defence of national territory in the event of aggression, as well as the maintenance of public order.¹⁷ The deployment of troops outside Japanese territory was explicitly forbidden, and Japan's defence policy was founded on an exclusively passive posture.¹⁸ Thus, anchored on the pacifist foundation of the Constitution,

13. Nick Kapur, "Japan's Streets of Rage: The 1960 US-Japan Security Treaty Uprising and the Origins of Contemporary Japan", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Japan Focus, 18:11 (3), 2020.

14. Guibourg Delamotte, *La politique de défense du Japon*, Presses universitaires de France, 2010.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Jean-José Ségéric, *Le Japon militaire*, L'Harmattan, 2013.

18. Éric Seizelet, Régine Serra, *Le pacifisme à l'épreuve : le Japon et son armée*, Les Belles Lettres, coll. "Japon", 2009.

the JSDF were kept far removed from any offensive activity – a posture that obscured the issue of national defence, their primary mission.¹⁹

The lack of constitutional recognition would become the crux of the debate on the legitimacy of the troops. The different interpretations of Article 9 of the Constitution²⁰ divided and profoundly impacted the political debate, on the one hand, and, on the other, the relationship of the population to these newly created self-defence forces whose very legitimacy was contested. This lack of constitutional and legal recognition placed the JSDF in a position of uncertainty regarding their function and nature. Establishing their missions, but also their image, represented a major challenge to ensure that the JSDF would be accepted in the eyes of the population and more widely in the world, and to underline their difference compared with the armed forces of other countries.²¹ But despite their organisation and equipment, which are now highly developed, the constitutional interpretation that defines the JSDF as a defence force still poses problems.²² Thus, to this day, part of the population continues to question the legitimacy of the JSDF, as shown by a poll conducted in March 2017 by the NHK (*nippon hōshō kyōkai*) in which one-third of respondents considered the JSDF illegitimate or had doubts about their constitutional legitimacy.²³

It was not until October 1971 that Japan's first White Paper on Defence was published. The government – while affirming the intention to regain relative autonomy in defence matters, to restructure and strengthen defence policy – attached major importance to preventive defence. At the same time, four plans for the reinforcement and modernisation of the JSDF were introduced, still in agreement with the United States, between 1958 and 1972. However, and despite these reinforcement plans, the archipelago has found itself in a delicate position several times with respect to its allies, due to the difficulty in employing its forces. This was the case, for example, in 1958, when the Japanese government was obliged to refuse to help its American ally during the crisis in Lebanon, or later, in 1991, when Japan was asked to participate in mine clearance operations in the Persian Gulf; the request was initially refused, in the absence of an adequate legal framework.²⁴ The JSDF, which are kept out of combat and even out of theatres at all costs, are characterised more by what they cannot do than by what they can do.

This negative modality is also found in many aspects where shortcomings are clear. This is the case, for example, in terms of supervision and support by civilian personnel: in 2007, the civilian-military ratio within the JSDF and the Ministry of Defence was 11.7:1 (compared to 3.4:1 in Australia, for example),²⁵ which seems paradoxical given the high level of civilian

19. Éric Seizelet, "[Japon: des Forces d'autodéfense à l'Armée de défense nationale. Autopsie d'un changement potentiel de paradigme](#)", *Mots. Les langages du politique*, 104, 2014.

20. For interpretations see Éric Seizelet, Régine Serra, *Le pacifisme à l'épreuve*, p. 18-19.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, "Military Sociology in Japan" in Martin Elbe, Heiko Biel and Markus Steinbrecher, *Empirical Social Research in and on the Armed Forces: Comparative and National Perspectives*, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2022.

24. Akihiro Sado, "The End of the Cold War and Japan's Participation in Peacekeeping Operations: Overseas Deployment of the Self-Defense Forces", *Japan's Diplomacy Series*, Japan Digital Library, 2015, p. 26-35.

25. Garren Mulloy, *Defenders of Japan: The Post-Imperial Armed Forces 1946-2016, A History*, C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2021.

control and certainly does not make things any easier in terms of management, anticipation and coordination with the other administrations.

The lack of visibility of the JSDF is also obvious – it will be the subject of an in-depth analysis in Part 3. It stems from mistrust of the military institution, which has proven difficult to eradicate, since it has been reactivated by certain events. Such was the case when, on 25th November 1970, the writer Yukio Mishima, who had been in the JSDF since 1967, attempted a military coup and then killed himself in JSDF headquarters using an ancient ritual technique employed by imperial soldiers. This demonstration of nostalgia for Japanese military values would leave its mark on people’s minds and dissuade the authorities from showing, or communicating about, the armed forces. Another illustrative aspect is the fact that there are no national military decorations or orders, which might indicate a lack of recognition of the JSDF. One might therefore question their integration into Japanese society and their identity.

What and who are the Japanese Self-Defence Forces in 2022?

Although the military condition has been stigmatised since the end of World War II and the constitutional legitimacy of the JSDF remains far from assured, Japan is now the fifth largest military power in the world.²⁶

According to the 2021 Defence White Paper published by the Ministry of Defence, the Japanese Self-Defence Forces comprise a total of 232,509 military personnel²⁷ (in comparison, the French armed forces have 203,250 troops, the Bundeswehr, 183,500 and South Korea, 599,000²⁸). These numbers are divided between the land force (*rikujoyô jieitai*, 141,443 personnel), the navy (*kaijyô jieitai*, 43,419) and the air force (*kôkû jieitai*, 43,830).²⁹ The level of feminisation of the forces, while still low, is nevertheless constantly increasing. At the end of March 2018, the JSDF had 18,259 female personnel, i.e. approximately 7.9% of total manpower (in France, the average level is approximately 15.5%).³⁰ It is noted that coordination between the different branches remains limited: a joint staff was only created in March 2006, and joint training and exercises are rare.³¹

The budget allocated to defence is growing, reaching a total of 42 billion euros for the year 2022. Expenditure is divided between personnel (42.8%), maintenance (22.7%) and investment (17.9%).³² In addition to this substantial defence budget, the seventh largest in

26. According to the Global Firepower Index, updated in 2022, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=japan.

27. Ministry of Defence, Defence White Paper, JSDF personnel trends, 2021 [in Japanese]. URL: <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/wp/wp2021/html/ns050000.html>.

28. *The Military Balance 2021*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021.

29. Ministry of Defence, White Paper on Defence, JSDF personnel trends.

30. Ministry of Defence, *Statistics on Female Personnel of the Ministry of Defence* [in Japanese]. URL: <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/profile/worklife/keikaku/tokei.html>.

31. Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, “Developments in Japan’s Defense Strategies and Readiness: Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?” *Asie. Visions*, 124, IFRI, October 2021.

32. Ministry of Defence, Defence White Paper, 2021 [in English]. URL: https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_EN_Full.pdf.

the world in 2022 according to the Global Firepower Index, Japan is a military power in terms of its equipment, with more than 900 fighters, 36 destroyers (placing it in third place behind the United States and China) and 21 submarines.³³

There are a total of ten different recruitment routes to join the JSDF. Most recruitment takes place in one of the headquarters for cooperation between the *jieitai* and the local authorities (*jieitai chihô kyôryoku honbu*), of which there are about 50 throughout the archipelago, providing the JSDF with a very strong regional base. The two recruitment processes known as *ippan sô kôhosei* and *jieikan kôhosei* account for the largest number of candidates (29,848 and 28,903, respectively, in 2020). The former is intended for people between the ages of 18 and 33 who wish to pursue a career in the self-defence forces. The second is organised to allow people to join the JSDF for a fixed period of time, between 1 year 9 months and 2 years 9 months.³⁴ In parallel, there are two other recruitment channels, one for the medical field (the National Defence Medical College, *bôei ika daigakkô*), the other for the training of senior officers (the National Defence Academy, *bôei daigakkô*). These are free, high-quality courses in exchange for a few years of service in the self-defence forces, a great advantage in a country where university tuition fees can be very high.

At their creation, recruitment for the JSDF depended less on the large urban centres such as Tokyo and Osaka than on the more economically depressed regions in the south (Kyushu Island) and in the north of Japan (Hokkaido Island and the Tohoku region). In 1980, Tokyo provided only 7,000 recruits, compared to almost 25,000 for Hokkaido. Conversely, Tokyo accounted for almost 30% of officer candidates, while Hokkaido accounted for only 10%.³⁵ Despite their negative image, recruitment in the period immediately following the creation of the JSDF posed no problems. Over 170,000 applicants applied for 55,000 places in the new defence force.³⁶

Today, Japan's declining birth rate and the decreasing population aged 18-26 are playing a major role in reduced recruitment. As a result, the authorities changed the age limit for recruitment from 27 to 33 in October 2018. At the same time, they started their active policy of feminisation. In addition, the recruitment methods have also changed over the years, and the communication campaigns aimed at secondary school students have moved from pure canvassing to awareness-raising.³⁷ The Japanese citizens who decide to join today do it for various reasons. There may be economic reasons (job stability and pay with bonuses). Others want to be useful to the Japanese population, or simply want to be autonomous.³⁸ As we will see below, there is little sociological analysis of JSDF members. However, it appears from the topics discussed in online forums and in the communication of JSDF family associations that there are many single people and that the subject of marriage and family is

33. Global Firepower, *2022 Japan Military Strength (Annual Ranking)*, 2022.

34. Ministry of Defence, *Recruitment event navigation*. URL: <https://www.mod.go.jp/gsdf/jieikanbosyu/about/recruit/index.html>.

35. Garren Mulloy, *Defenders of Japan*.

36. Ibid.

37. Éric Seizelet, "Les nouvelles lois japonaises sur la sécurité nationale et la conscription : propos sur un fantasme récurrent", *Cipango - Cahiers d'études japonaises*, Presses de l'Inalco, 2021, p. 277-315.

38. Éric Seizelet, "*Japonaise et militaire? La féminisation des professions de défense au Japon*", Études de l'IFRI, IFRI, July 2019.

a complex one for recruits (it can be noted that 62.5% of female recruits are married to a member of the JSDF, as opposed to only 4.3% of male recruits).³⁹

At the end of the recruitment process, recruits are allocated to military bases, of which there are 163 for the land force, 44 for the navy and 73 for the air force.⁴⁰ These are located in five distinct zones (North, Northeast, East, Central and West) with a distribution of land, sea and air forces that allows troops to be mobilised quickly and to respond to all situations.⁴¹ Under the terms of the security treaty with the United States, the archipelago hosts many U.S. bases and troops. Currently, there are approximately 55,000 U.S. military personnel on Japanese soil, spread over 130 bases throughout the country, with a particular concentration on the island of Okinawa (30 bases). Of these 130 bases, 81 are exclusively American, the rest being shared with the JSDF.⁴²

Maintaining harmony (*chôwa*) between civilians and the *jieitai* is a priority for the Japanese authorities in order for the population to accept this military presence. To this end, the JSDF are regularly mobilised to carry out road repairs or even soundproofing work in schools.⁴³ Similarly, various events such as meetings with members of the JSDF or even concerts given by them take place throughout the year to allow the military to meet civilians.⁴⁴ However, if one considers the JSDF as the main instrument of Japanese defence, there is a mismatch between acceptability and the capacity to deploy the forces, on the one hand, and the evolutions and ambitions of Japanese defence policy, on the other.

JSDF EMPLOYMENT OUT OF STEP WITH DEFENCE POLICY

First paradox: the Japanese are increasingly aware of the deterioration of their security environment, but the place of the JSDF in political discourse remains limited

Japanese society has become increasingly aware of the evolution of the threat and of the need for a change of posture. This process has taken place very gradually since the Cold War, with occasional jolts (the nationalist posture of Yasuhiro Nakasone in the 1980s) and has led to what Céline Pajon defines as “the abandonment of the minimal defence posture (*kibantei boeiryoku*) in force since 1976 and characterised by a minimum level of defence”, and the adoption of the terminology of *shoyo boeiryoku koso* (necessary defence posture)

39. Ministry of Defense, *The Ministry of Defense Self-Defense Forces in Figures*, 2019 [in Japanese]. URL: https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/book/pamphlet/pdf/sujidemiru_h3103.pdf.

40. Ministry of Defence, *General Information on the Recruitment of Self-Defence Forces*, 2021 [in Japanese]. URL: <https://www.mod.go.jp/gsdf/jjeikanbosyu/details/pamphlet/index.html>.

41. Ministry of Defence, *Garrison and Organization*, 2022 [in Japanese]. URL: <https://www.mod.go.jp/gsdf/station/>.

42. Department of Defense, *List of U.S. bases*, 2022 [in Japanese]. URL: https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/zaibeigun/us_sisetsu/pdf/ichiran_2022.pdf.

43. Ministry of Defence, *Aiming for Harmony with the Local Community: Ministry of Defence Assistance Operations*, 2021 [in Japanese].

44. Ministry of Defence, *Events and Exchange Activities*, 2022 [in Japanese]. URL: <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/events/>.

and its corollary, “dynamic deterrence (*doteki boeiriyoku*).”⁴⁵ Since coming to power in 2012, Shinzo Abe has advocated “pro-active pacifism” and continues to strive for normalisation of defence rhetoric and posture.⁴⁶

The deterioration of the security environment in recent years is evident, whether it is the “rapid expansion of Chinese military activities in the East China Sea, repeated incursions by Chinese vessels, Chinese air operations near the Senkaku Islands”⁴⁷ (the widely reported *grey zone situations*) or the “acceleration of North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, the resurgence of Russian military power [and] the intensification of Russian activities, both in the air and at sea, close to Japan’s exclusive economic zone.”⁴⁸

A survey by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 2008 showed that “60% of Japanese believe[d] that China would become a military threat to their country.”⁴⁹ Ten years later, another survey showed that 85% of Japanese think their country could be drawn into war, citing international tensions and conflicts as the primary reason.⁵⁰ Yasuo Takao notes that the Japanese are “just as sensitive to external security threats as American or Western European societies.”⁵¹

In addition, many Japanese also became aware in the 1990s and 2000s of the need for their country to play a more active international role and to contribute to world peace in ways other than “chequebook diplomacy”. This led to a more systematic projection of the JSDF into peace-keeping operations (PKOs, see below), which for Japanese society constituted a moment of revelation... but also of contestation.

The JSDF have little presence in political discourse. The strong polarisation on the subject of defence, between an anti-militarist left and a pro-rearmament right that was deliberately provocative on the issue of the Yasukuni shrine,⁵² has faded. Today, while the left remains generally pacifist, and while the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is in favour of reinforcing the JSDF, no party, not even the Japanese Communist Party, declares itself today to be “anti-JSDF”, just as no politician ignores the subject of defence.

National security and defence have thus become important themes in political communication. Looking at all of the speeches of Japanese prime ministers before the Diet from 2010 to 2021, we observe that these subjects are systematically mentioned. However, they

45. Céline Pajon, “Le réarmement contrôlé du Japon”, *Politique étrangère*, 1, 2011, p. 129-141.

46. “Le Premier ministre [...] demandait, dès [...] décembre 2012, [...] une augmentation continue du budget du ministère de la Défense (+14 % depuis 2012). Les directives nationales de programmation militaire furent mises à jour à deux reprises (en 2013, puis en 2018), visant à mieux protéger le Japon dans la perspective de scénarios de haute intensité, avec en particulier la défense de l’archipel des Ryūkyū contre une potentielle offensive conventionnelle des forces chinoises et la menace balistique nord-coréenne” (François Duhomez, “[Les Forces d’autodéfense japonaises: dix ans après. Priorité à l’alliance nippo-américaine et à la défense contre la Corée du Nord et la Chine](#)”, *Ebisu* [Online], 58, 2021).

47. Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, “Military Sociology in Japan”.

48. François Duhomez, “[Les Forces d’autodéfense japonaises](#)”.

49. Céline Pajon, “Le réarmement contrôlé du Japon”

50. Cabinet Office, *Opinion Poll on Self-Defence Forces and Defence Issues*, 2018 [in Japanese]. URL: <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h29/h29-bouei/index.html> [accessed Thursday 14 April 2022].

51. “Like people in the US and Western Europe, the Japanese are equally sensitive to external security threats” (Yasuo Takao, “Democratic representation in Japanese Defense Spending: Does public sentiment really matter?”, *Asian social science*, 7:3, 2011).

52. A Shinto shrine in Tokyo dedicated to, among others, military personnel who have been convicted of war crimes, which is sometimes visited by political leaders, with a very strong connotation.

are mentioned from the perspective of diplomacy, the strengthening of bilateral relations, the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and, increasingly, multilateralism (although there is no mention of peacekeeping operations or the JSDF contribution). The security environment and regional threats are also discussed, but not how to respond to them or the readiness level of the forces.

As for the JSDF, they are rarely mentioned and, when they are, it is in a cursory manner and from a retrospective angle only (nothing on their development or reforms), with an emphasis on their humanitarian activities, which reflects a need to justify their existence. For example, Mr Kishida's speech of 17th January 2022 mentioned, on the subject of "security/defence", the strengthening of cooperation between the Coast Guard and the JSDF, as well as the subject of assistance for Japanese citizens abroad, even though China's posture and the tensions in the Indo-Pacific area could have been considered as more pressing issues. Similarly, the Japanese Prime Minister's official website has a "security and diplomacy" section but no mention of the JSDF in the relevant pages.

Second paradox: while Japan was increasingly deploying the JSDF abroad, their 'internal', civil security role became the most important and high-profile

Deployment of Japanese troops abroad was for a long time a taboo and, moreover, was blocked by a legal barrier. This barrier was lifted thanks to a series of laws "tailored" to requirements. Thus, in 1987 and 1992, laws were adopted on external operations known as "relief" and on cooperation in UN peacekeeping activities (also known as the PKO law, for *Peacekeeping operation*). They allowed the deployment of the JSDF abroad, which had previously been considered unconstitutional. However, this deployment is tightly restricted: participation is limited to a special JSDF corps, on temporary secondment and subject to five conditions,⁵³ in order to keep it away from the firing line.

Akihiro Sado notes that it was in response to the changing post-Cold War security environment that Japan "took the plunge" and sent the JSDF abroad.⁵⁴ Pressure from the U.S. side, particularly in the context of the first Gulf War and then in the aftermath of September 11th, was particularly decisive. Thus, another law was passed in 2001 on support for anti-terrorist operations, then another one in 2003, specifically to allow support for the reconstruction of Iraq. Garren Mulloy estimates that in 2020, a total of more than 11,000 JSDF personnel participated in international operations.⁵⁵

53. The five conditions are: the existence of a ceasefire, the acceptance by the parties of Japan's participation, the absolute neutrality of the UN mission, the withdrawal of troops in the event of a resumption of hostilities and the non-use of force.

54. "In response to the changing post-war security environment, Japan has decided to take the plunge and send the JSDF overseas [PKO]" (Akihiro Sado, "The End of the Cold War and Japan's Participation in Peacekeeping Operations").

55. In 2018, not including deployments under the Disaster Relief Law (*kokusai kinkyû enjô hô*), there were 19 overseas operations: 9 PKOs, 5 international humanitarian relief missions (*jindôtekina kokusai kyûen katsudô*), 2 counter-terrorism contribution missions, 1 mission under the Law on Special Measures for Humanitarian and Reconstruc-

The missions of the JSDF during these deployments were perfectly compatible with “state pacifism”, as the forces remained outside of combat zones and focused on transport, supply or humanitarian aid tasks. Akihiro Sado notes that it was during this period that the Defence Agency acquired the status of a ministry (2007).⁵⁶ It was also the time of pay reforms and the relative rise of feminisation, which increased the economic incentive to join up and created a stronger bond with the population. The JSDF’s contributions abroad were therefore the early stages of a change of vision. Prerogatives during operations – non-kinetic and highly regulated – evolved very slowly.⁵⁷

However, these external deployments of the JSDF, even for peacekeeping purposes and far from the front line, are not always viewed favourably by the Japanese. Already in the 1960s public opinion had delayed the development of Japanese contributions to UN operations by blocking a draft bill from being presented to the Diet.⁵⁸ This opposition is still alive and well: for example in 1991 around 60 fishing vessels in the port of Kure tried to prevent the departure of ships carrying JSDF mine clearance teams (even though they were to play a non-offensive role in Iraq).⁵⁹ The recent case of Ukraine (see below) shows the sensitivity to any kind of involvement in conflict zones.

For Paul Midford, the Japanese have always been reluctant to send troops abroad⁶⁰ but the repercussions of the Japanese contribution to Iraq from 2003 onwards, under heavy U.S. pressure and “in spite of public opinion”⁶¹, provoked a popular movement for a “retrenchment” from what was perceived as “re-militarisation”.⁶²

Finally, one might ask to what extent the outpouring of rejection and fear among some Asian neighbours (many of whom experienced Japanese military invasion before and during World War II) on the occasion of Japan’s participation in UNTAC in Cambodia in the 1990s,⁶³ has not had an impact at the national level.

Meanwhile, the “internal” role of the JSDF and their visibility in the field of civil security has increased even more rapidly and strongly than their international and military role.

The JSDF’s role in civil security has existed since their creation (one of their first deployments took place following a devastating typhoon in Ise Bay, which killed 5,000 people in 1959). Although the JSDF share these missions with the Coast Guard, the Fire Service and the Police, with whom they occasionally carry out disaster prevention exercises (*gôdô*

tion Assistance in Iraq (*iraku jindô fukkô shien tokusohô*), and 2 counter-piracy missions (source: https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/book/pamphlet/pdf/sujidemiru_h3103.pdf).

56. “The Defence agency has been elevated to ministry status [2007] and international cooperation is viewed as a fundamental mission of the SDF” (Akihiro Sado, “The End of the Cold War and Japan’s Participation in Peacekeeping Operations”).

57. “In fact, the freeze on participation in PKF was lifted, and the restrictions on the use of weapons was subsequently amended so that it is now significantly less rigid than before. However, it is also a fact that there are limitations to the SDF’s participation in PKOs” (ibid.).

58. Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security*, p. 62.

59. Akihiro Sado, “The End of the Cold War and Japan’s Participation in Peacekeeping Operations”.

60. Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security*, p. 33.

61. Garren Mulloy, *Defenders of Japan*, p. 148.

62. Garren Mulloy notes that although Koizumi sends the JSDF to Iraq, he does so against public opinion, which is not in favour of this ‘remilitarisation’ (ibid., p. 218).

63. Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s declaration (“Letting the Japanese armed forces intervene abroad is like giving liqueur chocolates to an alcoholic”) caused a stir at the time.

sôgôbôsai kunren), in practical terms crisis management has been organised around the JSDF and relies on them for major crises. Furthermore, beyond major disasters, during the Cold War the forces were assigned a motley collection of tasks (e.g. catching bears or picking apples⁶⁴) which remain very diverse – and not very military – in the more contemporary period (organisation of sporting events or general interest tasks such as the slaughter of poultry infected with avian flu). It is with the Fukushima disaster in 2011, and then with the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020, that this role became even more important, and above all more visible, for Japanese society.

In response to the earthquake and tsunami of 11th March 2011 and the subsequent nuclear accident in Fukushima, the JSDF deployment was in accordance with the missions laid down in the 1954 Act, but it was unprecedented in several respects. Firstly, by its scale, since by 14th March, 107,000 JSDF personnel had been mobilised, supported by 540 aircraft and 60 ships, in an action organised as a taskforce and directed by a general, like a real operation. The JSDF action was also unprecedented in terms of the danger (radiation exposure) and complexity of the operations carried out, which required “the hasty adoption of a joint force approach”,⁶⁵ as François Duhomez explains.

However, the JSDF’s action was limited to their role as “domestic forces”, since they were never involved with the surge of international support (apart from Japanese-American collaboration in Operation Tomodachi) and were thus “left on the sidelines”.⁶⁶

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the JSDF also played an important role, both in implementing prophylactic measures for travellers arriving at ports and airports in the early stages of the pandemic and, following the easing of travel restrictions, in participating in clinical trials or in providing emergency care (deployment of nurses and use of JSDF hospitals). By carrying out large-scale vaccination operations, the JSDF gained even greater visibility in the public health domain.

These two situations have given the JSDF a prominent role and recognition that was lacking, while at the same time obliterating the military and international dimension of their image. The result is a scissors effect between what the forces can actually do (which has evolved and increased) and their image.

In addition to the paradoxes underlying actual JSDF employment, several factors keep hindering the JSDF’s development, including in times of crisis

There are many limitations to the development of the JSDF, the most obvious being the inability of the authorities to amend the Constitution to include the JSDF.

In 2017, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed to add a clause to Article 9 of the Constitution stating that the JSDF are a legitimate military organisation, renamed “Japanese Armed Forces”. This provoked debate in the press and in society and rekindled the controversy

64. Garren Mulloy, *Defenders of Japan*, p. 61.

65. François Duhomez, “[Les Forces d’autodéfense japonaises](#)”.

66. Ibid.

surrounding the status of the JSDF, although the involvement in PKOs and the positive image created by the contribution to civil security could have brought sufficient recognition and allayed any fears. In the end, the project did not go through, with polls showing a divided society⁶⁷ and even a decline in support for the Abe proposal between 2018 and 2020. The fact remains that, without a change in the constitution, this obstacle to JSDF employment remains in place.

Other legal and institutional obstacles stand in the way of the development of the JSDF as an “armed force”. An excellent illustration of this is A. Sado’s⁶⁸ description of the lengthy internal debates about the ways and means of sending the JSDF on operations without JSDF status (the procedure finally used is the temporary secondment of JSDF members who depart on operations). Garren Mulloy sees obstacles in the “lack of overall [politi-co-military] vision and the overtly restrictive civilian control [...] taking precedence over coordination.” Guibourg Delamotte stresses that the legal framework on defence issues is “opaque”⁶⁹ and that the resulting inertia of the process only increases popular distrust. The high degree of civilian control makes mobilisation and planning difficult.

In practice, JSDF employment standards are still very restrictive and tie the forces’ hands in external operations, with some JSDF officers lamenting the fact that, concretely, it would be impossible for a JSDF member to defend himself in the event of an attack in one of the PKO theatres.⁷⁰ Similarly, although the JSDF’s missions were theoretically extended to the field of counter-terrorism following September 11th, this extension has not come into effect and is not very realistic in view of the difficulties in changing the doctrine for the use of force. The government has addressed this issue, as evidenced by the adoption in 2015 of the “peace and security” (*heiwa anzen hôsei*) laws, but it faced strong opposition from a section of the political class and civil society.⁷¹

In view of the current geostrategic landscape, with the further increase in tensions, one might wonder whether the time for realism has not arrived. It is true that political will is increasing as the regional threat diversifies, but the JSDF remain a sensitive issue, even in 2022.

Russian aggression in Ukraine has given concrete substance to the threat from a neighbour with whom relations have always been complex: talks on a peace treaty between

67. Media opinion polls cited by A. Yasutomi and S. Kiba show 51% for and 46% against in 2018, 41% for and 50% against in 2020 (Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, “Military Sociology in Japan”, p. 160-161). Overall, LDP voters tend to support the proposal, but here again the political divide is not so clear-cut.

68. Akihiro Sado, “The End of the Cold War and Japan’s Participation in Peacekeeping Operations”.

69. “Évolutif, le cadre juridique est opaque : les longues négociations avec les alliés du gouvernement aussi bien qu’avec ses adversaires ralentissent l’action gouvernementale et le processus engendre au sein de la population une méfiance à l’égard du gouvernement, lequel est également critiqué à l’échelle internationale par les partenaires de Tôkyô qui ne peuvent être assurés du soutien du Japon dans une intervention” (Guibourg Delamotte, “[La politique de défense d’Abe Shinzô : remise en cause ou réaffirmation du pacifisme ?](#)” Sciences Po, Centre de recherches internationales, 2015).

70. Akihiro Sado, “The End of the Cold War and Japan’s Participation in Peacekeeping Operations”.

71. These laws greatly expand the prerogatives of the JSDF, which are authorised, among other things, to “use weapons for collective defence operations” under certain conditions; see Valérie Niquet, “[La politique de défense du Japon: nouveaux moyens, nouvelles ambitions](#)”, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), *Défense&Industries*, 6th February 2016.

Russia and Japan,⁷² which was never signed after World War II, were even broken off in March 2022. This reduces the prospect of settling the dispute over the Kuril Islands — annexed by Russia in 1945 and only a short distance from Japanese territory.

With a view to drafting a new National Security Strategy (*kokka anzen hoshou senryaku*) by the end of 2022, the Japanese authorities have begun to lay the foundations for a policy that takes into account the heightened state of threat⁷³ in a more determined manner. The programme on which the LDP won the elections at the end of 2021 and which brought Fumio Kishida to power thus provides for a new military spending target, raised to 2% of GDP.⁷⁴ The Minister of Defence, meanwhile, has stated the objective of “increasing airborne capabilities at a radically new pace.”⁷⁵

A new rhetoric is emerging, centred on the possibility of a counter-attack by Japan or even a pre-emptive strike against North Korean nuclear facilities (decisions have reportedly already been taken on the acquisition of hypersonic missiles⁷⁶). Several LDP politicians have raised questions never openly asked before about deterrence and the ability to conduct surveillance operations and develop resources ensuring effective air superiority and a strike capability.⁷⁷

However, many of these issues are intended primarily to test the water. The announcement of a budget boost seems to be mainly aimed at preparing the ground, since the period following Kishida’s appointment in September 2021 has failed to produce a timetable or details on the allocation of this additional budget, notably concerning a possible increase in JSDF manpower. In general, the JSDF and their employment do not appear clearly in these reflections, underlining the difficulty in reconciling the intention (a reinforced defence policy) and the instrument (the JSDF). The prospects of progress in terms of budgets and strategy, therefore, remain relatively abstract.

Moreover, even at a time of international crisis such as now, popular opposition continues, as demonstrated by the March and April 2022 demonstrations in Tokyo, which expressed not only opposition to the war in Ukraine but also pacifist and anti-nuclear sentiment, following statements by F. Kishida suggesting a request for U.S. nuclear protection for Japan. The Japanese government, after having sent defensive equipment (bullet-proof vests) to Ukraine, wanted to deploy JSDF medical personnel. Many civil society observers and some of the media immediately questioned the legality of the initiative, since no legal study had been carried out and no request had been made by the UN. This recent episode

72. Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “[Russia halts WWII peace treaty talks with Japan in response to sanctions over Ukraine invasion](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 22nd March 2022.

73. “Taiwan is a Japanese emergency given its proximity to Okinawa”, “invasion of Dongsha Islands situated in the South China Sea... is a possibility [according to Japan]” (Titli Basu, “[Defending Japan: the National Security Agenda of 2022](#)”, IDSA, 2022).

74. Liberal Democratic Party Secretary General Mogi says he wants “defence spending at 2% of GDP within 5 years” (NHK News, 26th April 2022 [in Japanese]. URL : <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20220426/k10013600921000.html>).

75. Junnosuke Kobara, “Japan to Scrap 1% GDP Cap on Defense Spending: Minister Kishi”, *Nikkei Asia*, quoted in Titli Basu, “[Defending Japan](#)”.

76. Titli Basu, “[Defending Japan](#)”.

77. “Strike enemy-bases to take out launch sites, conduct ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) operations, building air superiority, and gauging the effectiveness of strikes” (ibid.).

makes clear the difficulty of dealing with the JSDF, even in 2022 and even for non-military missions.

Thus, there are some initial signs of a shift, but a gap still exists between the threat, which is real, the perception of the threat, which is clear, and the acceptance of the need for a more “military” role for the JSDF, which remains in limbo. In other words, societal evolution has been slower than the evolution of political doctrine – which is why we now turn our attention to the image of the JSDF among the Japanese and how this image is constructed.

JSDF DEVELOPMENT HAMPERED BY THEIR IMAGE AMONG THE JAPANESE

Growing popularity despite the struggle to attract people to a military career

Today, the JSDF have become undeniably popular among the Japanese. According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Ministry of Defence and published in January 2018, 89.8% of respondents say they have a good image of the JSDF.⁷⁸ Although this figure is slightly down from 2015 (92.2%), it has increased significantly from the earliest polls. In the very first one, in 1956, only 42% of Japanese considered JSDF members to be “good people” or “honest people” (*shikkari shita ningen*). In 1967, 66.2% of respondents said they had a positive image.⁷⁹ Thirty years later, in 1997, 81% of Japanese people expressed a good opinion of the JSDF, compared to 12% who said they had a negative image (only 6% in 2018).⁸⁰

Thus, the vast majority of the population now accepts the existence and intervention of the JSDF within the Japanese archipelago.⁸¹ Regarding the population’s appreciation of the JSDF’s various missions, the most recent survey (2018) shows that, unsurprisingly, disaster relief comes first in terms of positive assessments, at 79.2%, ahead of national security (60.9%) and the maintenance of order and internal security (49.8%).⁸²

Beyond this popularity expressed in the polls, the representation of Japanese soldiers has gradually evolved in popular culture. Representations prior to the 1990s – which were rare and depicted the Japanese soldier as cowardly and only interested in protecting his own interests – evolved and diversified in the 2000s and 2010s to make way for the representation of a courageous individual, ready to protect civilians at the risk of his life.⁸³ The well-known series “Gate” (*GATE: Jieitai kare no chi nite kaku tatakaeri*) broadcast between

78. Cabinet Office, *Opinion Survey on Self-Defence Forces and Defence Issues* (2018).

79. Cabinet Office, *Opinion Survey on Self-Defence Forces and Defence Issues*, 1967 [in Japanese]. URL: <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/s42/S42-08-42-06.html>.

80. Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, “Military Sociology in Japan”.

81. Ibid.

82. Cabinet Office, *Opinion Survey on Self-Defence Forces and Defence Issues* (2018).

83. Orlando D. Hermawan, “Transformation of JSDF image in recent Japanese animation”, IOP Conf. Series, *Journal of Physics*, 2019.

2015 and 2016, and inspired by a novel with the same title, helped to popularise and modernise the JSDF.⁸⁴

The popularity of the JSDF can also be explained by the selection criteria for recruits, which are also important, since the recruitment process excludes profiles that are considered too openly nationalist⁸⁵. The authorities try to avoid recruiting ultra-nationalists who, although they represent a political minority on the archipelago, embody a revisionist movement, in favour of the abolition of Article 9 for example, which is far removed from the pacifist values of the rest of the population. The JSDF are thus representative of Japanese society and do not contradict society's pacifist ethos. In other words, they are able to embody the "citizen soldier".⁸⁶

But despite this popularity, young Japanese see a military career as less and less attractive. The number of applicants is constantly falling: for example, applicants fell from 51,192 in 2011 to 29,848 in 2020⁸⁷ and, since 1990, there has been a continuous decrease of 10%.⁸⁸ The average age of soldiers has therefore been steadily increasing since 1990, from 31.8 years in 1990 to 35.9 years in 2018.⁸⁹ While the falling birth rate and the shrinking target population for recruitment have played a major role in the reduced number of applicants, other factors should not be overlooked in explaining the lack of appeal of a military career.

Thus, the rising enrolment rate at university and the generally favourable economic situation are leading young people to choose a more conventional path in the eyes of society.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the appeal of a military career seems to vary according to the context of the missions: in periods of high-profile civil security missions (such as after the Kobe earthquake in 1995), the number of applications tends to increase, while it drops at times of JSDF interventions abroad (the three and a half years of intervention in Iraq, between 2003 and 2006, saw a significant decline in the number of applicants⁹¹).

Finally, despite the appreciation that the Japanese have for the work of the JSDF, they find the military profession unattractive, and the reconciliation of professional and personal life remains difficult. Family support is not well developed and does not yet fully meet the expectations of soldiers and their families.⁹² The taboo surrounding conscription and the strong reactions to any rumour of its potential return are enough to illustrate the refusal of the Japanese to commit themselves personally to the defence of the country.⁹³ The

84. Ibid.

85. Éric Seizelet, "Les nouvelles lois japonaises sur la sécurité nationale et la conscription".

86. Yves Lacoste, "La géopolitique et les rapports de l'armée et de la nation".

87. Ministry of Defence, JSDF Personnel Applications and Recruitment Status, 2021 [in Japanese]. URL: http://www.clearing.mod.go.jp/hakusho_data/2021/html/ns051000.html.

88. *Nihon keizai shinbun*, article dated 20th May 2021. URL: <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA307RX-0Q1A430C2000000/>.

89. Imai Kazumasa, "Déclin de la population, du taux de natalité et vieillissement de la population et infrastructure humaine des capacités de défense – état actuel du recrutement des FAD et son impact sur la posture de défense", *Législation et enquête* 2019, n° 419. URL: https://www.sangiin.go.jp/japanese/annai/chousa/rippou_chousa/backnumber/2019pdf/20191220003.pdf.

90. Éric Seizelet, "Les nouvelles lois japonaises sur la sécurité nationale et la conscription".

91. Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy warriors: gender, memory, and popular culture in the Japanese army*, University of California Press, 2007, p. 147.

92. Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, "Military Sociology in Japan".

93. Ibid.

2018 opinion poll on the JSDF and the relationship with defence issues reflects this trend, since, to the question “In the event of an aggression against Japan by an enemy country, what would you do?”, only 5.9% of Japanese answered that they would join the JSDF. The results show that 54.6% of Japanese prefer to support the JSDF without joining the forces themselves, and 19.6% prefer opposition without violence (6.6% declare their intention to surrender to the enemy⁹⁴).

Communication policy has evolved, but not enough to change the archetypal image of the JSDF

Based on all the above, one could say that the popularity of the JSDF is generic, a somewhat abstract sympathy vote. Official statistics show that one-third of Japanese respondents say they have no interest in the JSDF. Of these people, 40% of people say that this is because of a lack of knowledge about JSDF.⁹⁵

In fact, academic studies and research on the armed forces in Japan are very limited. Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, in a recent article on military sociology in Japan, explain this by the fact that the JSDF administration and the Ministry of Defence are reluctant to provide data, but also by the difficulties researchers face when dealing with military issues, as they are “accused of being disloyal to the peaceful spirit of the Constitution and of supporting armed conflicts and wars in the world.”⁹⁶

Éric Seizelet notes that “unlike the legal status of the *jieitai*, the condition of the soldier in post-war Japan has not been a major political issue.”⁹⁷ It is as if the existence and reassuring presence of the JSDF enjoyed a high level of support, as long as the thorny issues of their legitimacy, their working conditions and their evolution were not addressed. This is another explanation for the recruitment problems: as little research is undertaken on how JSDF personnel experience their life in the forces and their work, few actions can be designed and implemented to improve this condition.⁹⁸

Official communications about the JSDF, meanwhile, have changed, and the inhibitions that caused the JSDF to keep a low profile in the post-war period and until after the end of the Cold War are tending to disappear. Interestingly, it was the criticism by U.S. authorities after the first Gulf War – saying that the Japanese had not been involved enough or had taken few risks – that led the JSDF to create a public relations section and to communicate about their contributions, both domestic and foreign (the first operation to be followed by press and communications officers was the deployment to Cambodia, starting in 1993). The JSDF PR, Press and Communications Section now has a staff of over 1,000.⁹⁹

94. Cabinet Office, *Opinion Poll on Self-Defence Forces and Defence Issues* (2018).

95. Ibid.

96. Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, “Military Sociology in Japan”.

97. Éric Seizelet, “Japonaise et militaire?”.

98. Recent efforts have been made, however, with the publication of infographics on the JSDF by the Ministry of Defence: https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/book/pamphlet/pdf/sujidemiru_h3103.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1651736719664070&usg=AOvVaw0JnA4zE70y-noBabtWs7Nb.

99. Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy warriors*.

This communication remains ambivalent, however, in that it tends to project an attractive image that is relatively distinct from military reality. If we look at the media dedicated exclusively to the JSDF, notably the magazine *MAMOR* (“protect” in Japanese), we observe several characteristics.

In general, the glossy, full-colour pages of this magazine are mainly used to showcase innocuous aspects that have no apparent connection to the military sphere. For example, the covers of the last three accessible issues (February, March and April 2022) show pleasant young women in poses more reminiscent of the aesthetics of women’s magazines, with military equipment serving as a background or setting. One can also find some of the classic elements of military communication for the general public, such as reports on sports activities or “first person” accounts from JSDF members. The presence of comic strips is not surprising either in a country where manga is a way of communication with all types of audience.

Other sections, also in these colour pages, are more unexpected: cooking recipes, restyling of male and female members of the JSDF, articles on handicraft and even horoscopes. A central section, “Military Report”, in colour, does highlight international military activities, around the Japanese base in Djibouti¹⁰⁰ for example. But most aspects relating to new equipment, training or intervention activities, are relegated to the black and white pages, giving them a more abstract, even downgraded, character.

However, normalisation is occasionally also achieved through communication actions that dare to show self-defence forces in action. For example, the annual “Fuji fire power exercise” (*fuji sôgô karyoku enshû*), which welcomes the public to a shooting range, with live broadcasting on YouTube, exposes Japanese soldiers, weapons in hand, to the eyes of the population. Though it does display the combat potential of the JSDF, which is not insignificant in view of the text of Article 9 of the Constitution, this event, as Sabine Frühstück points out, is more like a spectacle which leaves no room for improvisation and can ultimately seem very artificial.¹⁰¹

Yet, there is continued development of more explicit communication. For example, scramble alerts, which are on the increase, are highlighted on the JSDF’s Twitter account, in order to give visibility to this more active defence. A video posted in 2019 on the official YouTube channel of the land forces illustrates an effort to educate about new threats, the new defence posture and the new missions of the JSDF. Using films of training activities and computer graphics, it shows the recent evolution of the JSDF and how they must adapt to the new challenges of cybersecurity and space, multi-domain and hybrid warfare and grey areas. Moreover, Japanese television also broadcasts documentaries featuring women in positions of responsibility, in complete opposition to the representations of women in *MAMOR*. One might thus conclude that, alongside communications that seek to present

100. The only Japanese base outside Japan was established in 2011 on land adjacent to the U.S. base in Djibouti, and the few hundred JSDF personnel there are mainly engaged in airborne maritime patrol counter-piracy activities. In 2016, the expansion of the base was justified by the development of the mission to evacuate Japanese nationals from Africa.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 137-146.

the JSDF as citizens “like any others”, the authorities are now keen to display an image that is closer to the reality of the military condition.

Nevertheless, one can agree with Sabine Frühstück when she questions the effect of the systematic use of women’s images in official communication, in that it converges with this very attractive and “danger-free” communication, which seems intent on making the JSDF socially acceptable to the public and, in fact, freezes them in a non-combatant pose. Frühstück speaks of the “euphemisation” of the transformation of the JSDF into an armed force, which “prevents Japanese soldiers from maturing as combatants.”¹⁰² She uses the example of a recruitment poster from the 2000s showing a young woman wearing not a uniform but a T-shirt with the words “Peace People”. The aim is to present an “army of peace” in the country of the “Peace Constitution”. The communication policy, and in particular the way the JSDF are presented, oscillates between the desire for “normalisation”, realism and the need for acceptability of these JSDF developments, hence the relative invisibility of the JSDF “with weapons in their hands”.

Thus, despite these timid steps forward, for the Japanese the image of the JSDF as a “peace force” remains steadfast, and for many its role remains limited to national and international aid during disasters. Indeed, it is the deployments during disasters (*saigai haken*) and the participation in international peacekeeping operations (*kokusai heiwa kyôryoku katsudô-tô*), in parallel with a skilful communication policy, that have allowed the JSDF to gain in popularity and to appear in the eyes of the public as “an intervention force at the service of the national community and the population.”¹⁰³ For the Japanese, the popularity of the JSDF is based on the actual usefulness of the troops for the population, in non-combat operations.¹⁰⁴

This is why, despite the controversies that may have arisen, in retrospect the overseas activities of the JSDF are judged very positively by 87.3% of those surveyed. The dispatch of troops is seen by the public as a way for Japan to make a pacifist international contribution but does not translate into support for a greater military role abroad.¹⁰⁵

The idea of sending Japanese soldiers into battle alongside other foreign soldiers remains taboo, as does the question of death in combat, which Japanese society cannot even bring itself to contemplate. A former high-ranking officer caused a scandal when he revealed that the government had ordered him to conceal the “precautionary” sending of coffins to the Iraqi theatre between 2003 and 2009 for fear of the Japanese public’s reaction.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, as Éric Seizelet writes, in post-war Japan, the Japanese soldier does not “die in combat” (*senshi*), since he does not fight or wage war; he “dies on duty” (*kômushi*), a term that applies to any public official who dies in the performance of his duties.¹⁰⁷

102. Ibid.

103. Éric Seizelet, “Les nouvelles lois japonaises sur la sécurité nationale et la conscription”.

104. Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security*.

105. Ibid.

106. Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, “Military Sociology in Japan”, p. 174.

107. Éric Seizelet, “L’impact des lois japonaises sur la sécurité nationale sur l’organisation du système de santé militaire”, *Asia focus*, IRIS, 2017.

Changes in the image – and the employment – of the JSDF are slowed down by internal and external factors

The image of the JSDF can hardly move forward because of two fundamental factors, which are still relevant today: pacifism – though there has undoubtedly been progress, especially beyond anti-militarism – and the importance of the United States for Japanese defence. The JSDF struggle to be seen as “the Japanese armed forces”, not simply because the existence of an armed force is inconceivable (and in this respect the Yoshida doctrine is a thing of the past) but because another armed force continues to play part of the role that could be that of the JSDF.

In 2022, we still have the paradox of Japan’s ranking among the top seven countries in the world in terms of military expenditure while it is in third place in the Global Peace Index and at the very bottom of the militarisation index of the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (117 out of 138). If the Japanese have gradually gained a very positive appreciation of their self-defence forces, it is because the latter no longer appear as the armed forces that led Japan to defeat in 1945, nor as conventional armed forces. Only in this sense can it be said that anti-militarism has declined, while the societal repudiation of war, pacifism, remains intact.

Numerous surveys show that, even in the face of an obvious and well-identified threat, even in times of international crisis, the Japanese remain pacifists and resist any significant change in the JSDF and the defence apparatus in general. A Fondapol survey¹⁰⁸ in 2011 showed that, compared to 71% of Chinese and 33% of French people who said they would die for their country, the percentage in Japan was only 11%. Jonathan Baron, Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Stephen Herzog,¹⁰⁹ in their work on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and Japanese public opinion, reveal that neither social pressure nor arguments based on safety or norms are effective in changing popular beliefs. They conclude that public opinion on security matters is stable and homogeneous among different age groups. They also cite a 2017 poll showing that 69% of Japanese respondents do not want Japan to go nuclear, even if North Korea were to go ahead with its nuclear programme.¹¹⁰ The concept of “the homeland in danger”, to use Yves Lacoste’s expression, does not therefore alter the mindset in terms of the use of force and the JSDF. Takao asserts that “in general, popular distrust of the use of the armed forces by the State remains intact. An overwhelming majority of Japanese are strongly opposed to the JSDF being involved in overseas combat, even in a UN context. The Japanese are in favour not of the use of force but of military

108. Dominique Reynié, *2011, la jeunesse du monde*, Fondation pour l’innovation politique, 2011.

109. “Japanese government cannot shift public opinion through the use of policy arguments or social pressure”, “the population does not appear to be swayed by typical security, institutional and normative-based arguments made by government against the Treaty” (Jonathon Baron, Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Stephen Herzog, “[Japanese Public Opinion, Political Persuasion, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#)”, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 3:2, 2020, p. 299-309).

110. “A 2017 survey indicated that approximately 69% of the Japanese would want Japan to remain non-nuclear even if Pyongyang did not denuclearize” (ibid.).

preparedness.”¹¹¹ We have already mentioned the even more topical case of popular reactions in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.

Contrary to all the clichés about the lack of interest or participation of Japanese citizens in political life, on issues relating to defence policy¹¹² and its agencies, Japanese public opinion weighs heavily. Paul Midford even refers to it as a “separate field”, where relations between society and State are very heavily institutionalised and intertwined, and where the Japanese State is much less autonomous with respect to society than one might expect.¹¹³ Midford also draws on the work of Peter Woolley to argue that Japanese public opinion has slowed the development of JSDF missions and prerogatives.¹¹⁴

The vicious circle of mistrust between the civilian and military spheres hinders the evolution of the JSDF (whether it is to conduct forward planning or to acquire experience “under fire”). This complexity in civil-military relations is not a purely internal factor: these relations are in fact intertwined with an external factor, that of relations with the United States.

The Japan-U.S. security treaty,¹¹⁵ which has not been revised since 1960, remains fundamental. Japanese defence relies heavily on U.S. forces. Even beyond the legal and strategic aspects, it should be recalled that more than 55,000 American soldiers are permanently stationed on Japanese soil, in 80 bases. The centrality of the Japan-U.S. treaty in Japanese defence policy has an impact on JSDF capability development. The effective modernisation of the JSDF has been hampered by certain characteristics of defence procurement contracts that perpetuate a dependence on American systems (theatre ballistic missile defence system dependent on a U.S. green light to open fire; artificially extended dependence for the maintenance of certain equipment, not to mention the uncertainties surrounding the Aegis system, whose tracking and communication systems would be operated from American bases or even from U.S. territory).

The aforementioned “internal” mistrust is also linked to the importance of the United States in the Japanese military domain, as it is obvious, even to the Japanese who are not very interested in the subject, that the American presence weighs heavily. This is illustrated by Natsuyo Ishibashi’s analysis¹¹⁶ of events in Iraq: the alliance with the Americans led some Japanese to accept a mission and a type of JSDF role for which there was no national

111. “Public mistrust of the state ability to use armed forces remains intact. Overwhelming majorities of Japanese firmly oppose the JSDF becoming involved in overseas combat, even within a UN peacekeeping framework [, which] would indicate that the Japanese public does not support the use of armed forces but does support military readiness” (Yasuo Takao, “Democratic representation in Japanese Defense Spending”).

112. “Japanese public opinion thwarted the ambitious plans of hawkish leaders such as Koizumi and Abe to play a role in international politics” (Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security*, p. 171).

113. “Japanese national security policy, however, is a particular area in which the Japanese state is far less autonomous from society than one would expect. In this policy area, the policy networks linking state and society are heavily institutionalized in regularized ways which have become embedded in policy-makers’ expectations” (ibid.).

114. Peter J. Woolley, *Japan’s Navy: Politics and Paradox, 1971-2000*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2000.

115. It places responsibility for protecting Japan primarily on the United States, with the obligation for each side to treat any attack on the other’s territory as an attack on its own, having long been considered asymmetrical – the United States is obliged to defend Japan, but not the other way around, even if the Japanese are obliged to assist the Americans. For more information see: Ministry of Defence, *Defence White Paper, 2021* [in English].

116. Natsuyo Ishibashi, “The Dispatch of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces to Iraq: Public Opinion, Elections, and Foreign Policy”, University of California Press, *Asian Survey*, 47:5, 2007, p. 766-789.

interest and no spontaneous support. On the other hand, the lack of autonomous capabilities¹¹⁷ perpetuates Japanese dependence on American defence, creating a vicious circle. Garren Mulloy goes further, arguing that the development of the JSDF was only achieved at the behest of the U.S. and, at the same time, within a framework constrained by the presence of the U.S. military on Japanese soil and the protection provided by the U.S. In a way, for him, this development was accomplished “in disguise” from the population.¹¹⁸ This element of concealment may have affected the bond between the forces and the nation and may also explain the divergence between the image and reality of the JSDF.

This external factor is therefore a determining factor, both objectively and in terms of representation. The role of the United States is critical not only in the evolution and *status quo* of the JSDF but also in image-building. On the one hand, the image of the JSDF, as we have explained, clearly appears to be the reverse side of – or the counterpoint to – the image of the American armed forces. On the other hand, the framework of the Japanese-American alliance, even reinterpreted by the regularly issued “guidelines” (by which the Japanese authorities correct the asymmetry of the 1960 treaty), makes the JSDF an element of support for American military activities. In the eyes of the Japanese, the image of the JSDF is all the more immutable or distorted. Although one cannot speak of a “dispossession” of defence, nor of a substitution of American forces for the JSDF, the U.S. forces do indeed “cast a shadow” over the Japanese forces.

Indeed, the population’s vision of the JSDF is inseparable from this coexistence with the American military presence, which is less a physical cohabitation (since few of the American bases in Japan are shared with the Japanese forces) than the mental juxtaposition of two armed forces, one of which does not have the status of an “armed force”. In the absence of polls on Japanese opinions about the American soldiers present in their country, we cannot rely on the official surveys alone, which only concern the Japanese-American security agreement. The latter, as a bilateral instrument, is generally considered useful by the Japanese, but they have an ambiguous image of the American troops themselves. The Japanese press regularly reports on problems around American bases, from incidents of aircraft crashing in Okinawa¹¹⁹ to incidents involving American military personnel. Furthermore, there is the Japanese prejudice against the United States as the antithesis of Japanese prudence and pacifism: their opinion of American overseas operations is negative and they see in any American movement a risk of their country being dragged into a conflict (*sensô ni makikomareru kikensei*).

Finally, a distinction must be made – and again we note the civilian/military divide – between the appreciation of the population, which is only aware of the issue of American bases through media coverage and is fearful of foreign engagement, and that of the Japanese military elites, the vast majority of whom go through exchange programmes with American military academies and for whom foreign countries sometimes means only the

117. “The trust deficit also resulted in limited intelligence capabilities and continuing reliance upon the US” (Garren Mulloy, *Defenders of Japan*, p. 44).

118. “Calder identified JSDF development as having usually been driven by external rather than internal factors. Even by the early 90s, when Japan’s defence budget had become the world’s third largest, the enduring image was of a civilian, pacific state. If Japan had crossed the Rubicon and become a significant military power, it had done so heavily disguised” (ibid., p. 121).

119. Ibid., p. 197.

United States. This deep connection with the American military elites, coupled with the difficulty of being “visible and/as military” in their own country, could explain the difficulties in the emergence of a national military culture.

CONCLUSION

While it can indeed be said that “the relationship between the JSDF and Japanese society is notable for its contradictions”,¹²⁰ in this analysis we have been able to clarify the discrepancy that both characterises and constrains the JSDF. The image of the Japanese forces remains anchored in their role in civil security or humanitarian aid abroad – a non-offensive, rescue role. This image hampers efforts to modify their status and prerogatives, a process that has failed to keep pace with changes in the geostrategic context and defence-related political projects. The way in which JSDF employment meshes with the JSDF’s image appears complex, even deadlocked, in a context where the Japanese authorities seem to be primarily focused on the ability to “transform Japan from a peace-promoting country to a country capable of waging war.”¹²¹

However, as recent events show, in order to wage war, being well equipped or having a substantial defence budget or powerful allies is not enough: the bond between the armed forces and the nation, more precisely the social acceptability of the use of force and the legitimacy of the forces themselves, is important. The Japanese authorities have worked to correct the asymmetry of the defence relationship with the United States, while at the same time working towards normalisation, but the issues of the JSDF’s image and its constitutional legitimacy linger on and are closely interconnected.

Relations between the JSDF and the Japanese therefore continue to pose challenges. First, even if political decisions were to lead to a more prominent role and increased normalisation of the JSDF, the lack of change in the military condition and the image of the troops will perpetuate the problems to attract new recruits. And even if the JSDF were made more attractive, Japan’s current demographic crisis would still be a constraint. These challenges also have implications for Japanese defence and foreign policy. Until the JSDF acquire a clearer constitutional status and operational prerogatives, they cannot be used as a tool, and will remain peripheral in both the thinking and discourse of the Japanese government. Unlike France or the United States, which integrate their forces and their projection capacity into the positions they adopt, Japan will have difficulty in persuading others to take its military capabilities into consideration, with the consequences that this may have with regard to its Russian, Chinese or North Korean neighbours... but also with regard to its American ally.

Our analyses show that the trends and paradoxes observed will persist, both in terms of legal and institutional barriers and in terms of the representation and acceptance of the

120. “The relationship between the JSDF and Japanese society is notable for its contradictions” (Atsushi Yasutomi and Saya Kiba, “Military Sociology in Japan”, p. 159).

121. Éric Seizelet, “Les nouvelles lois japonaises sur la sécurité nationale et la conscription”.

JSDF. In the short term, there seems no prospect of a major shift in public opinion, and consequently in the status of the JSDF and in national defence policy. In other words, without an upheaval of the national or international order, the JSDF seem unlikely to “enter the real world”.

Nonetheless, we have also uncovered some very positive aspects of this interplay between image and employment, and of the evolving relationship between the JSDF and the Japanese. Appreciation of the JSDF has undergone a remarkable change – today they are viewed in a very positive light by the whole population. This favourable public opinion is an invaluable asset. In a certain way, and without going so far as to speak of post-modern armed forces as Sabine Frühstück does,¹²² the Japanese armed forces are ahead of those of other nations, insofar as the frustrations that have marked their history have obliged them to take public opinion into account and to learn how to employ forces for missions far removed from combat, including on national territory.

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Marjorie Vanbaelinghem is the deputy director of IRSEM. She is a graduate of the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), holds a doctorate in Anglophone studies on British contemporary art and is an alumna of ENA (National School of Administration). She joined the diplomatic service in 2009, initially specialising in strategic affairs. She has since been posted for varying periods to Japan, the UK, Spain and India.

Contact: marjorie.vanbaelinghem@irsem.fr

Alice Ortega completed an internship at IRSEM as a research assistant between November 2021 and May 2022. She is currently in her second year of a research master's degree in Japanese studies at INALCO, after a double degree in international relations and Japanese language and civilization. She is fluent in Japanese, and studied for a year at Meiji University in Tokyo. Her research focuses on societal issues in contemporary Japan.

Contact: aliceortega.inalco@gmail.com

122. Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy warriors*.