By Adam Dempsey

Since the end of World War II the activities of Japan's military have been heavily restricted by Article 9 of the Constitution. In seeking to build a pacifist state, Article 9 limits Japan to strictly defensive operations. Yet with the onset of the 'war on terror' the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) in particular has been deployed beyond its constitutionally restricted mandate. In January the Japanese Diet began considering legislation that will permit the JMSDF to join international efforts to combat piracy off the Somali coast. Despite exact terms of the legislation remaining unclear it is speculated that the JMSDF will be granted its most permissive rules of engagement yet. Whilst some Japanese legislators see combating piracy as

crime-fighting rather than a strictly military activity, domestic critics suggest that such initiatives represent a long-term shift from traditional pacifist foreign policies. Thus Somali piracy has emerged as a potential turning point for both Japan's Constitution and the JMSDF.

Particularly influential upon Japan's plans to deploy the JMSDF to the Horn of Africa were events in the second half of 2008. At least five ships with a close affiliation to Japan were captured by Somali pirates. This prompted some Japanese companies to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope thereby increasing journey times and costs. Furthermore, as Japan is almost entirely reliant upon sea lines for raw materials and trade a robust response to Somali piracy seems unsurprising. Such a response is further justified by the outlook of the Ministry of Defence's White Paper for 2008. The White Paper seeks to shift Japanese forces from the employment of 'deterrent effects' towards a 'response capability.' These changes are in response to security challenges posed by asymmetric threats such as piracy and terrorism. Accordingly, Japan continues to make a direct correlation between global stability and its security concerns.

In seeking to respond to diverse security concerns the White Paper empahsises continued proactive involvement from Japan in international peace cooperation. Such an approach has been advocated by conservative politicians and the United States since 1991. If Japan is to fulfil its ambition of a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council it is vital that it becomes a 'normal' military power. In doing so, Japan must send troops on missions that involve combat activities. In this respect Japan potentially could make a telling contribution to international security. Despite self-imposed limits on defence expenditure to 1% of the budget Japan's post-war economic success ensured that more money was available for defence than most other nations. In 2007, for example, Japan spent more on defence than Russia and North Korea. A particular beneficiary of economic successes has been the JMSDF. At the end of the Cold War the JMSDF was the world's second most powerful navy with a reach in the Asia-Pacific region comparable to the United States.

Through its involvement in maritime interdiction in the Indian Ocean and support of military

operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the JMSDF continues to project an expeditionary outlook. Such an approach therefore makes the JMSDF a natural vector for further proposals contained within the White Paper. If Japan is to make an effective contribution to peacekeeping activities its military needs to be aided by supportive advanced technologies. Emphasis is also placed on the optimisation of resources via the rationalisation of personnel, equipment and operations. This suggests that if Japan wishes to continue making significant contributions to key security coalitions the JMSDF will have to increase its blue-water capabilities. In doing so, the JMSDF may also have to pay less attention to its more traditional conceptions of sea-power solely for self-defence.

Arguably the strongest indication that the JMSDF is seeking to increase blue-water capabilities is the Hyuga programme. In 2001 the JMSDF was allocated US$223.6 billion for the development of up to four helicopter-destroyers. Yet the launch of the Hyuga in 2007 was nevertheless intriguing. The JMSDF now has a 13,500 tonnes helicopter-carrying destroyer increasing to 20,000 tonnes when equipped with resources and weapons. This means the Hyuga has a displacement twice the size of normal destroyers. Furthermore, the Hyuga also consists of forward and aft pads and a central hangar for eleven helicopters. The JMSDF is, therefore, now in possession of vessel which facilitates greater force projections. According to John Hemmings of RUSI the Hyuga allows Japan to address humanitarian disasters in a manner similar to the USS Lincoln following the 2005 Tsunami. Yet even more telling are the Hyuga's original design plans. These show a vessel with a bridge on the starboard thereby creating a through deck. Unofficial artwork also show a F-35B VSTOL strike fighter on-board. Despite Article 9 forbidding armaments that exceed the limits of self-defence, in the Hyuga the JMSDF have a vessel that resembles an aircraft carrier.

A further sign of Japan's increasing confidence in the assertion of sea-power is the recent empowerment of the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG). The 2006 JCG White Paper utilises the term 'war potential' when establishing the JCG's core missions. For 2007, the JCG was allocated Y189 billion to procure 21 new boats and the introduction of new aircraft for long range surveillance. Such purchases underpin the JCG's new core objectives of securing and maintaining order on Japan's immediate sea-lanes. Crucially, the JCG also has a wider regional security function. This has involved training a range of South-East Asian states to manage Middle East oil-routes and the Malacca Straits. The JCG also has regular dialogue with the ASEAN Regional Forum, South-East Asia's principal security organisation. Thus, by concentrating on more localised security issues the JCG serves to increase the JMSDF's ability to operate further from Japan's immediate coastlines.

Yet if recent advancements in equipment and objectives for the JCG point towards an increasingly assertive JMSDF, they must be done so with caveats. Just as Japan is increasing sea-power capabilities the same can also be said of China. Yet whereas Japan's Constitution strictly forbids the development of aircraft carriers, the same cannot be said of their neighbours. In December 2008 Xinhua, China's official news agency, indicated that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) regarded aircraft carriers as a prerequisite for power projection. This expands upon a 2007 statement from PLAN that the Chinese shipbuilding industry is actively undertaking research and development to begin construction of an aircraft carrier in 2010. Furthermore, as its coastal waters have witnessed many incursions from Chinese and North

Korean vessels Japan still needs a substantial naval presence within its Exclusive Economic Zone. Despite the more robust objectives of the 2006 White Paper, the JCG still lack the required equipment for modern naval battles.

A potential response to China's increasing naval assertiveness lies in the fact that Japan now has in operation its largest submarines since World War II. Launched in December 2007, the Soryu class submarines are 84 metres long and 4,200 tonnes when submerged. Crucially, they are submarines designed with stealth warfare in mind. A key feature of certain components is sound isolation. The submarines also have an anechoic coating that contributes to the avoidance of detection. A further key feature is a virtually vibration-free engine and an X Rudder configuration that allows these submarines to operate with greater manoeuvrability at greater depths. It is, therefore, questionable just how much these submarines could contribute to the more humanitarian and asymmetric security missions that the JMSDF is increasingly committed to. A more plausible explanation for the development of these vessels is the long-standing disputes that Japan has with its historical local rivals. Thus, the Soryu submarine will more likely be useful for safeguarding Japanese sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands than making a passive contribution to the 'war on terror.'

Upon reaching a conclusion it firstly needs to be established that Japan's aspirations for increasing sea-power capabilities remain compromised by the post-war Constitution. Despite changes in its understanding of contemporary security concerns Japan still remains committed to undertaking military activities that stop short of combat. Yet there are considerably loud political voices that indicate that Japan should seek to change the status quo. Indeed, such voices are by no means restricted to domestic Japanese politics. In anticipation of such changes the JMSDF is currently working within the confines of the Constitution. Some of its newest vessels appear more suited to humanitarian operations, but with some alterations could be utilised for combat purposes. Furthermore, the extent of Japanese cooperation in regional security initiatives is also on the increase. Such measures have been assisted by recent changes to security and policing measures around Japan's coastal waters. Yet Japan's increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region is by no means unchecked. As China becomes increasingly confident the JMSDF needs to remain vigilant of more long-standing territorial issues. Accordingly, the JMSDF will likely balance priorities between its new security outlook and its more traditional concerns.