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Japan's strategic outlook

by Rod Lyon

Having been stalled for almost twenty years as an economic power, and having wrestled fitfully to build a domestic consensus for a growing Japanese role in Asia, Japan now finds itself at a particularly challenging crossroads. 2011 has been a difficult year in Japan, and 2012 looms with most of the great strategic questions still unanswered. The country has been plunged into a new bout of introspection and introversion by the earthquake, subsequent tsunami and nuclear troubles at Fukushima, while its political transition from a long period of cautious one-party government to a genuine multiparty system is only half completed. Japan's sixth prime minister since the resignation of Junichiro Koizumi in September 2006 has now taken office, and its economy is struggling to gain forward momentum. In the midst of this upheaval, Tokyo looks out on a region where other powers are growing quickly, where its principal ally is attempting to expand its footprint across the broader Indo-Pacific, and where its own role remains hesitant and uncertain.

In consequence, Japanese strategy has entered a difficult phase: the country seems to be drawing in upon itself, even as the strategic environment becomes more challenging. True, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) are doing more internationally,

and a new set of National Defense Guidelines issued in December 2010 promises a more vigorous Japanese military operational presence in Asia. Still, Japan continues to follow its traditional strategic policy, finding comfort inside the US alliance and anxiety outside it. The present conditions seem to contain the seeds for greater volatility in Japanese decision-making—the possibility for a second 'Meiji Restoration', as it were¹—but it's hard to see Japan's leadership seizing that moment.

Carnegie Council scholar Devin Stewart has written of 'a modern Japanese culture wrought with victimization and self-doubt over questions of national identity'² and a national mood of great bleakness. It's from those roots that a different Japanese strategic policy might spring—a policy for an anxious Japan to take greater responsibility for its own strategic path.

We're not at that point yet. Japanese leaders remain fixated upon a set of overwhelming domestic problems, and foreign and strategic problems are being managed within traditional frameworks. Even in the domestic arena, a series of prime ministers over recent years have lacked the vision and boldness necessary to chart new courses. Only a considerable reversal of Japan's current strategic fortunes—a 'gamechanger'³—could offer Tokyo a future as a key shaper of the

regional security environment over the next decade or so.

Grand strategy

About five years ago, Japan seemed poised at a major turning point in its strategic policy. Some commentators argued that Japanese grand strategy was about to undergo its most fundamental transformation since the 1950s, when Japan adopted a strategic policy that made it the loyal, low-profile ally of Washington.³ US academic Kenneth Pyle wrote in 2007 of a coming ‘resurgence of Japanese power and purpose’.⁴ Australia’s own strategic partnership with Japan took a large step forward at that time: the Joint Declaration on Security was signed in Tokyo in March 2007. And much that followed in building a pattern of closer defence cooperation between the two countries was predicated upon Japan’s emergence as a key regional strategic player in the 21st century.

In 2010 and 2011, little evidence remains of a likely turning point in Japanese grand strategy. The advertised resurgence in power and purpose is now much more difficult to see. There are three reasons why that’s so: first, Japan has lacked the strong leadership it would have needed to forge a new grand strategy; second, a culture of political change in Japan has failed to flow through to strategic policy, as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has settled for the old Liberal Democratic Party’s way of managing strategic affairs; and, finally, Japan’s economic and demographic settings have undermined adventurism in strategic choices. Kenneth Pyle’s ‘*hei-sei* generation’—the generation born since the end of the Cold War, which Pyle imagined was going to be the basis for a resurgence of Japanese power and purpose—is just as hesitant and confused about Japan’s place in the world as its predecessors have been.

Moreover, the devastation wrought by the great East Asian earthquake of March 2011 has made Japan’s domestic problems even more of a priority than they already were. The challenges of cleaning up and rebuilding are such weighty ones that they seem likely to dominate the political attention of Japan’s leadership for a decade. And that leadership has had more than its own share of difficulties lately—precisely because the political revolution that was bound to follow the end of one-party rule in Japan is still incomplete.

Politics

The recent succession of Yoshihiko Noda to the prime ministership signals a move from a weaker leader to a stronger one. But much the same could have been said of any of his recent predecessors when they first took over the reins. Since Koizumi’s resignation as prime minister in September 2006, Japan has seen Shinzo Abe, Yasuo Fukuda, Taro Aso, Yukio Hatoyama, Naoto Kan and now Noda succeed to the office. True, long-lasting prime ministers have tended to be the exception rather than the rule under the Japanese system: Noda is the 31st prime minister to occupy the office since the 1947 Constitution, and only a handful were in power for four years or longer. Still, even by Japanese standards, the recent years have seen a rapid turnover in the country’s political leadership.

Noda’s room for manoeuvre is constrained because the country is still in the experimentation phase with a true multiparty system. The DPJ has welded together a coalition of unlikely allies to form a government—a coalition that can’t move boldly on strategic policy issues. And the old Liberal Democratic Party, the core player in Japanese politics between 1955 and 2008, faces an uncertain future—some believe

it's still experiencing slow disintegration. Moreover, the DPJ has been something of a disappointment to its followers. It's been cautious and hesitant rather than bold and innovative, and Noda himself represents the conservative wing of the party.⁵ For a society in which political revolution typically comes from the top rather than the bottom,⁶ the lack of bold, charismatic leaders bodes ill for Japan's short-term political future.

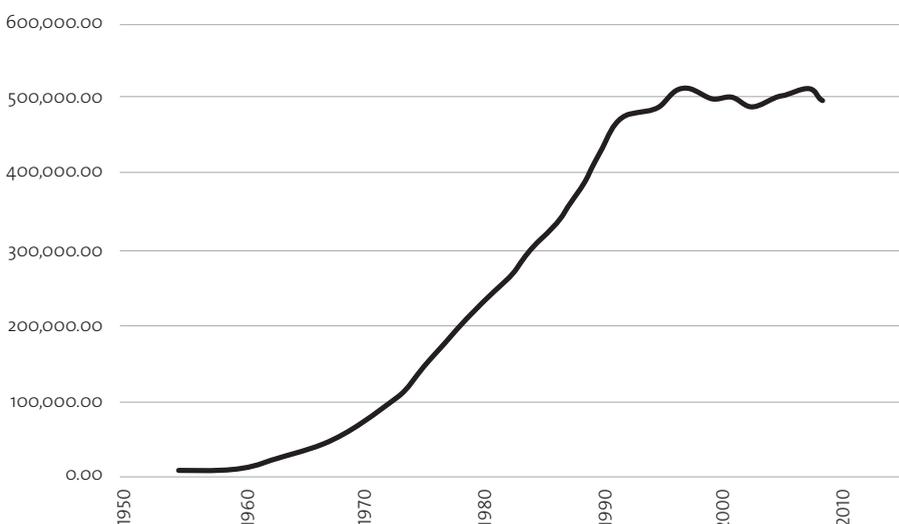
In the place of earlier predictions of Japanese boldness and adventurism, an entirely different framework has emerged. Devin Stewart wrote in 2010 of what he called Japan's 'Galapagos syndrome'.⁷ The term was originally coined to explain why Japanese cellphones were too narrowly evolved to survive outside the ecosystem of Japan's own high-technology environment.⁸ Stewart extended the sense of the phrase to describe a Japan that had turned inward, that felt itself to be a special case, more disconnected from the outside world. Others have since used the term to talk about the tendency of Japanese youth to refuse the option of studying abroad, and to avoid risk.⁹

Economics

For much of the second half of the 20th century, the Japanese economy was the envy of the modern world. But in recent years the Japanese economic story hasn't been a happy one. Despite its impressive trajectory of historical growth in the decades after World War II, Japan's gross domestic product (GDP) is virtually no higher now than it was in the mid-1990s. Figure 1 shows the trajectory of Japan's nominal GDP between financial years 1955 and 2008. The graph rises impressively for the first 40 years, but then stalls. A Japanese economy worth ¥489,379 billion in 1994 had become one worth ¥494,199 billion fourteen years later in 2008.

A better sense of the comparative size of the economy might be gained from the *CIA world factbook*, which estimated the size of Japan's economy at US\$4.31 trillion in 2010 (in purchasing power parity terms). That was larger than its 2009 estimate (US\$4.146 trillion) but lower than the 2008 figure (US\$4.424 trillion). The natural disasters of 2011 will probably severely reduce this year's figure, but need to be seen in context.

Figure 1: Japan's GDP, 1955–2008, measured in billions of yen (current prices)



Source: Japan's Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication

The CIA estimated Australia's economy at US\$882.4 billion in 2010, on a similar purchasing power parity basis, so Japan's economy then was still approximately five times the size of our own.¹⁰

Still, the rise of both China and India, the strengthening of South Korean industrial capacities and even the more distant development of Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand will produce a more competitive market in areas—such as cars and silicon chips—where Japan long dominated. As more of the world comes late to the Industrial Revolution, Japan faces a more competitive future.

At face value, the level of Japanese public debt is staggering—over 200% of GDP. The saving grace is that the Japanese owe the money primarily to themselves. Morgan Stanley's latest downgrade of Japan's credit worthiness turned upon a number of factors: the country's sluggish growth, its high debt level, the continuing response costs for the recent disasters, and a challenging demographic future that portends substantial future social

welfare costs as more and more Japanese move towards old age.

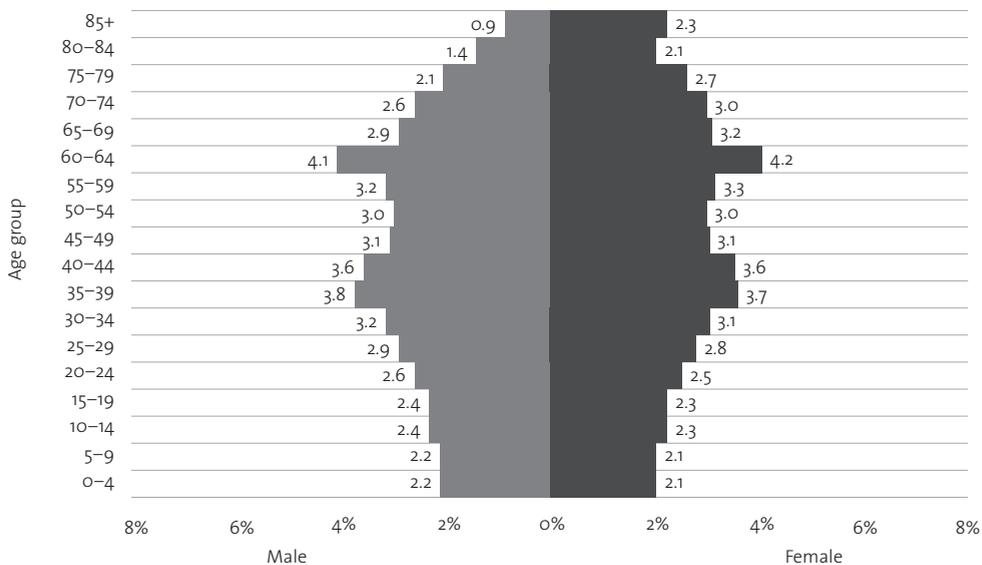
Demographics

The Japanese population pyramid (Figure 2) shows the difficulties that Japan now confronts. Its population is both ageing and shrinking.

Figure 2 shows two bulges in the Japanese population pyramid. The first (and largest) occurs among 60–64-year-olds (the Japanese 'baby boomers' born between 1947 and 1951). The second occurs among 35–39-year-olds (logically, the children of the early baby boomers). Below the 35–39-year age group, every younger group is smaller than the one before it. This is true even of the bottom two youngest groups, although percentage rounding tends to obscure it in the chart.

In brief, Japan's demographic challenges are serious—so serious that they prompted two analysts in 2009 to forecast that 'we may have seen the high-water mark of Japan's international presence and assertiveness.'¹¹

Figure 2: Japan's population pyramid



Source: data from Japan's Statistics Bureau, population estimates, September 2011, <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/jinsui/tsuki/index.htm>

That's a big call: Japan's presence and assertiveness have both been artificially constrained—by politics and history—since World War II. So even an ageing, shrinking Japan might yet make its presence felt rather more in Asia than has been typical over recent decades. But there's no denying that a different Japan probably looms in the future—a greyer, more risk-averse one. And that Japan will be facing pressures to spend a higher percentage of its national wealth on social welfare rather than on its military. In short, demographic forces are pulling in a similar direction to many other factors—towards a Japan with fewer options in international security.

International orientation

Unfortunately, greater insularity seems likely to be only a weak strategic response to the quickening pace of Asian transformation. The Japanese people still seem as wary as ever about China's growing military power; indeed, the Pew Research Center's latest findings (from July 2011) show that Japan is almost in a class of its own in that regard. Only 7% of Japanese respondents believed that China's growing military power would be a 'good thing' for Japan, while 87% believed it would be a 'bad thing'—figures that placed Japan simultaneously as the both lowest and highest in those categories among the range of surveyed countries.¹² But those concerns just don't seem to find a transmission belt to distinct political outcomes. Japan's political system, underperforming economy and demographic weaknesses all seem to militate against a robust strategic posture.

During the Cold War, Japan was drawn to a 'comprehensive' view of security—one that allowed it to see security as something other than raw military power, and to play to Japanese strengths on the softer side of security issues. Its constitutional limitations and policy settings defined a Japanese role

in international relations in which economics prevailed and issues involving 'hard' power were handled inside the US–Japan alliance framework. The 'Yoshida doctrine', espoused in 1955 by then Japanese prime minister Yoshida, essentially said that Japan should shun the 'high-profile' politics of international security and military force in favour of the 'low-profile' agenda of trade and multilateralism.

The Yoshida doctrine was not well designed for the post-Cold War world: its critics charge that it left Japan with too little muscle and too little autonomy. Moreover, it turned upon Japan's economic strength, assuming that Japan would have readily at hand a set of levers that would allow it to exert non-military pressure when needed. Since the bursting of the economic bubble in 1990, those levers haven't been available. And that's meant that Japan's struggled on a range of counts: not just to define its position in the region and the world, but to find the instruments that give it leverage.

Even today, Japan lacks a domestic consensus that would get it much beyond the Yoshida doctrine. And, for all the reasons that Samuel Huntington sketched in 2001, it often feels a deep sense of isolation. Huntington described Japan as 'a lonely state': the smallest of the global civilizations, unique in that the civilization was entirely contained within one country, with no appreciable overseas diasporas, and a total population of only about 130 million. Moreover, said Huntington, Japan was distinctive as the most successful non-Western state to modernise but not to Westernise. The differences between Western and Japanese culture were profound: between 'individualism and groupism; egalitarianism and hierarchy; liberty and authority; contract and kinship; guilt and shame; rights and duties; universalism and particularism; competition and harmony; heterogeneity and homogeneity'.¹³

But building a domestic consensus on Japan's future course in Asia has been made more necessary by the relentless pace of change within an emerging Asian security environment. During the 1990s and 2000s, the growth of Japanese interest in external events was incremental. It was driven more by external events (North Korean ballistic missile testing and the rise of China) than by domestic pressures. Japan is by nature a homogeneous society, resistant to immigration, and focused upon its own civilisational imperatives. It's yet to be determined whether—and by how much—Japan even wants to play a larger role in global and regional politics. March's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident have only accentuated the domestic focus of both the country and its decision-makers.

Japan has been able to take the low road in international relations precisely because of its close alliance relationship with the US. Much more dependent upon the health of that relationship than other US allies, Japan is acutely sensitive to issues of alliance marginalisation. Since at least the 1970s, Tokyo has believed that US relative strength has been—slowly—weakening. However, more recently, it seems to have been worried about a more deeply layered issue: can the unique historical circumstance that underpins current global order actually last? Due to historical events, an offshore superpower, the US, is committed to the defence of the Eurasian rimlands against authoritarian great powers on the Eurasian continent itself. Tokyo increasingly worries that the US might be sliding towards a period of closer cooperation with China—at Japan's expense. For its part, the US, weakened by deficits and wars, certainly seems headed for a period of greater reliance upon its forward-based partners to carry a greater share of the strategic weight.

But the two grand strategic alternatives to the alliance—self-reliance or stronger

partnerships in Asia—remain unappealing options. True, Japan is a country with advanced technologies, but with a stalled economy, an ageing population, and its polity caught in a difficult transition point, it's not well placed to make the leap from 'low-risk, low-gain' policies to 'higher risk, higher gain' ones in order to enhance its strategic autonomy. Meanwhile, Japan has found few strong Asian partners that could provide it with a sense of heightened security through the turbulent Asian geopolitical transformation that now looms.

Defence

Some commentators argue that the political revolution that's coursed through Japanese politics since the DPJ came to power retained one important element of the status quo: that foreign and defence policy weren't the drivers for change, and are therefore more likely to continue relatively unchanged into the future.¹⁴

The argument is appealing at one level. It accurately reflects the centrality of domestic concerns in voters' rejection of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2009. And it helps explain why there's still forward momentum in Japan's evolving defence policy—so that the National Defense Guidelines of December 2010 continue to suggest an expansion of defence roles and missions, for example. But can that continue? And, if so, at what level? There's a problem with this 'continuity' argument: Japanese foreign and defence policies aren't immune to a broader crisis of Japanese national identity—and that's exactly what Japan's experiencing now.

It's easy to become too despondent about Japan's future defence capabilities. The JSDF isn't a weak or trivial force. It boasts substantial and growing maritime capabilities: the 2011 International Institute for Strategic Studies *Military balance* lists ground

forces that number over 150,000, naval forces that include 18 submarines and 49 principal surface combatants, and an air force with 374 combat-capable aircraft. Certainly, Japan faces modernisation challenges, but in comparison to many of its Asian neighbours it already deploys a modern, effective military force, which will become more capable as it expands.

Moreover, for at least three reasons, there's a new sense of possibility about Japan's future defence policy. First, even though Japan hasn't yet found itself a 'normal' role in Asia, the JSDF is increasingly accepted as a 'normal' actor within Japan. The military's no longer shunned as a career choice for Japanese youth or as a contributor to Japan's security and wellbeing. Military assistance to civilians during the earthquake and its aftermath has been one of the factors contributing to a reevaluation of the JSDF within Japan, but other factors, including international ones, have also played a part over the years—including recent North Korean aggression, the tensions with China over the Senkaku Islands, and the Chinese embargo on rare earth exports to Japan in late 2010.

Second, the DPJ government, like its Liberal Democratic Party predecessor, has bought into the idea that Japan's military forces need to be less static and more mobile—that they should be poised for 'dynamic deterrence' rather than merely to repel acts of aggression against the Japanese homeland. There appears to be bipartisan agreement about the need to reorient Japanese defence efforts towards the southwest, and to enhance JSDF capacities to respond to incidents there. True, the money might be difficult to find for a major reorientation, so it will be important to watch the pace of developments, but a political consensus is at least the precursor to such a policy shift.

Finally, both of those developments have been accompanied by a growing level of international engagement by the JSDF over recent years. That engagement has clearly been mainly in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, but the Japanese have also become more broadly engaged in unpacking a series of strategic partnerships with regional countries and in contributing to distant operations, including the counterpiracy operation around the Gulf of Aden. As a consequence of its counterpiracy efforts, Japan now enjoys access to facilities in Djibouti, which support Japan's maritime presence in the northeast Indian Ocean.

Japanese defence spending typically amounts to only 1% of GDP, but that's still a substantial figure. The problem, of course, is that a wave of defence modernisation is now underway across Asia, and if Japan hopes to maintain its relative weight it will probably need to spend more. Moreover, it will need to spend more efficiently—not just on good equipment purchases from abroad, but on strengthening its own defence production base, which has weakened over the years.¹⁵ Strengthening the production base, though, might well mean that Japan has to revisit its longstanding policy of banning arms exports—because Japanese defence industry could only realise the efficiencies of larger production runs by selling equipment to foreign customers. Media hints in October that the government was preparing to ease Japan's arms exports ban haven't yet borne fruit in any substantial policy change—perhaps because DPJ leaders haven't been able to convince their coalition partners of the need for change.

Implications for Australia

A speech on 30 September by Japan's ambassador to Australia, Shizegaru Sato, stressed two points: that Japan is determined to rise again, and that its relationship with Australia remains a key theme of its strategic

policy. Both points are perfectly credible. Japan has trillions of dollars in investments and savings: it's quite capable of reinventing itself, should it choose to do so. But whether it will make that choice remains to be seen. Furthermore, the idea that Japan values its relationship with Australia is entirely understandable: it wants to reach out to strategic partners other than Washington. In some ways, it continues to do so even today: the momentum of earlier decisions propels defence cooperation outwards and upwards. Still, both themes require Japan to have a clearer vision of its own role in a transformational Asia, and a more robust engagement with partners.

Australia derives a considerable portion of its own security from the environment around it. If that environment is fractious, volatile or unbalanced, securing Australian interests gets harder. A Japan that turns in on itself in Northeast Asia is not in Australia's interests. An inward-looking Japan leaves space—some might say too much space—for other players. A smaller Japanese role in regional security would leave the US–China relationship looking more dominant than it might otherwise. And already it's possible to see the contours of a Northeast Asia in which South Korea carries more of the load, and in which the US partners more with South Korea in that expanded role.

Can Australia exert influence on Japan's strategic decisions? Yes, but not much. The focus on domestic problems is currently so strong in Japan, and the national mood so gloomy—so riddled with shame over the nuclear accident—that the Japanese have little appetite for greater international engagement. If we want a more vigorous Japanese partner in Asia, we'll have to be patient.

So, what should we do in the meantime? The sensible approach is a dual strategy that

might be tersely described as 'work with, work around'. Australia should continue to work with Japan where it can, offering Japan opportunities to be more involved. Frankly, if Japan's going to bring a little less to the partnership during this decade, we should be prepared to bring a little more. If we genuinely believe that Japanese engagement is an important part of Asian stability, then we should be prepared to put our money where our mouth is and pick up a larger share of the costs of the bilateral relationship. With some commentators, including the Indonesian president, mooted the idea of China's forces training alongside those of the US and Australia at the new shared facility in Darwin, perhaps we ought to be thinking about Japan being similarly involved. Our message to Japan should be that our judgement about its regional role is a long-term, strategic one—that we value it as a partner during the hard times as well as during the good.

But we should also have a 'work around' leg to our strategy, being prepared to do more with other partners, whether to diminish the sense of a power vacuum in Northeast Asia during the next decade, or to build frameworks of security partnership that might ease Japan's own path. That might mean Australia going a little out of its way in order to expand its own limited 'presence' within the sub-region, typically as a result of partnership arrangements with other local stakeholders, principally South Korea and the US, but to a lesser extent with Russia and China as well. Similarly, Australia's modernisation of its own alliance relationship with the US—with new forms of defence cooperation, and a new footprint for US presence—might ease Japan's own alliance modernisation challenges. Alternatively, Canberra might promote its own closer strategic partnership with Indonesia as a model for others, including Japan, to build upon. Such arrangements could not, by themselves,

substitute for Japan's playing a more vigorous role. Australia doesn't have Japan's economic or military weight. But we have a capacity to be innovative in our strategic thinking, and we should use it.

On the broader foreign policy canvas, Australia's hope of building good strategic relationships with each of the four great regional players—the US, Japan, China and India—is still a plausible engagement strategy. But the strategy is struggling. China's bout of assertiveness in 2009–10 made Australians wonder whether we could ever have a meaningful strategic relationship with Beijing. Now, Japan's new introversion shows that building good relations is going to take some time, even good relations with the only other US ally among the Asian great powers. That's discomfiting—Asia's environment is changing apace. Meanwhile, both the US and India seem to be the focus of attention for Australian policymakers, especially after the government's decision to take the option of exporting uranium to India to the Australian Labor Party conference in December, and the latest announcements about increased Australia–US military cooperation.

Canberra has long seen the US–Japan alliance as the key 'spoke' in the US 'hub and spokes' security order in the Asia–Pacific region. Some of that perception derived from the logic of containment during the Cold War, when Japan's location in close proximity to the Soviet Union was critical. The logic's different today, but a bipolar East Asia, in which power is basically shared between the US and China, could more easily harden into competing blocs than an East Asia where power is more diffused. There aren't many Japan-sized players in the regional system, so we want the one we have to succeed and to be a stabilising power in Asia. In that regard, British academic Christopher Hughes' recent depiction of the US and Japan as an 'odd couple', sticking together to manage their

own relative declines and insecurities in the Asia–Pacific¹⁶, isn't a reassuring picture for Australian policymakers. If Asia's geopolitical transformation is to unfold while Japan sits on the sidelines, it will be the region as a whole that's worse off, not just Japan.

Notes

- 1 The term 'Meiji Restoration' refers to a period in the 1860s when Japan finally opened to the West, transforming itself from a feudalistic to an industrial society. It was the basis for the rapid growth of Japanese economic and military power in the succeeding decades.
- 2 Devin Stewart, 'Is Japan giving up?', *Huffington Post*, 8 March 2010.
- 3 See, for example, Richard Samuels, 2006. 'Japan's Goldilocks strategy', *The Washington Quarterly*, 29(4):111–127, p. 112.
- 4 Kenneth Pyle, *Japan rising: the resurgence of Japanese power and purpose*, Public Affairs, New York, 2007.
- 5 Mihoko Matsubara, *It takes two to have 'win-win' relations*, PacNet, no. 54, 20 September 2011.
- 6 Michael Green, 'Japan's confused revolution', *The Washington Quarterly*, 2010, 33(1): 3–19.
- 7 Devin Stewart, 'Slowing Japan's Galapagos syndrome', *Huffington Post*, 29 April 2010.
- 8 Hiroki Tabuchi, 'Why Japan's cellphones haven't gone global', *New York Times*, 20 July 2009.
- 9 Michael Fitzpatrick, "'Galapagos syndrome": Japan's gaze turns inward', *Times Higher Education*, 27 January 2011, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=414933>.
- 10 The data for this paragraph is drawn from the *CIA world factbook website*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

- 11 Tomoko Tsunoda and Brad Glosserman, 'The guillotine: Japan's demographic transformation and its security implications', *Issues and Insights*, 2009, 9(10), Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Honolulu, p. 42.
- 12 Pew Research Center, *China seen overtaking US as global superpower: 23-nation Pew global attitudes survey*, 13 July 2011, p. 39.
- 13 Samuel Huntington, 'Japan's role in global politics', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2001, 1:131–142.
- 14 For an example of this argument, see Michael Green, 2010, 'Japan's confused revolution', pp. 10–13.
- 15 Tsunoda and Glosserman, 2009. 'The guillotine', p. 23.
- 16 Christopher Acheson, *Japan's shifting security environment: an interview with Christopher Hughes*, National Bureau of Asian Research website, 13 September 2011.

Acronyms and abbreviations

DPJ	Democratic Party of Japan
GDP	gross domestic product
JSDF	Japan Self-Defense Forces

About the Author

Dr Rod Lyon is the Director of the Strategy and International Program at ASPI. His research interests focus on a range of problems associated with global security, nuclear strategy and Australian security. His most recent publications include *Changing pace: ASPI's strategic assessment 2011*, *Forks in the river: Australia's strategic options in a transformational Asia* and *American primacy: what future?*

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