

# Japan flexes its military muscle

**B**ack in the darkest days of 1941, a huge Japanese force was preparing to invade Wake Island. Pearl Harbor radioed the tiny garrison — a handful of U.S. Marines — and asked what supplies they needed.

The immortal, defiant reply: "Send us more Japs." I recalled this story as I went off to see if Rockefeller Centre's name had been changed yet to the Mitsubishi Building. Would the ice skating rink be covered over with sushi stalls? Would the statue of Atlas holding up the world have been replaced with one of a sumo wrestler?

Happily, the core of the Big Apple appears unchanged, even though the Japanese just bought 51% of it this week. New Yorkers, not easily moved, were howling. Now they know how people in Los Angeles feel after Sony bought Columbia Pictures.

Reckless spending by the U.S. Congress and the resulting huge deficit have run the dollar's value down. Everything in the U.S. — and Canada, for that matter — is now dirt cheap for the Japanese with their big yens. Yet in spite of all the hooting and hollering that Japan's buying up the U.S., Japanese investment in America is no larger than Holland's. Kabuki dancers are not yet about to replace the Rockettes at Radio City.

But the Japanese are certainly coming — though not in the way most people expect.

Far more interesting, at least for me, is the fact that Japan is now gingerly taking the first discreet steps to begin sending its military forces abroad. Japan's postwar constitution, imposed on it by the U.S., forbids any armed forces or their deployment abroad. To skirt this unrealistic ban, Japan created "Self-Defence Forces" which today number 247,000. In terms of non-



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nuclear military capability, Japan is close to Britain, though in spending Japan will soon rank No. 3 after the U.S. and USSR.

Now that Japan is the world's leading economic power, pressure is mounting on Tokyo to start flexing its military muscle — both to protect its interests and to start exerting its rightful role in world affairs. But the constitution and many Japanese are against any foreign military ventures.

Japan's political leaders and strategists have been trying to figure a solution to this problem. During my last visit to Japan, I met with strategists who outlined a plan that is now going into effect. Japanese military personnel will gradually be introduced into UN peacekeeping missions — in all cases, in non-combat, support functions. This will get the Japanese public used to seeing their troops abroad. After a few years, the defence ministry should be able to begin stationing air and naval units overseas. Troops will follow later, if necessary.

The most likely future locations would be the shaky Philippines and unstable Burma, both nations where there is a large Japanese economic investment and growing political influence. Indochina could also be on the list.

More important, the Japanese Navy will probably soon break its self-imposed ban on operating more than 1,000 miles from home bases. With 63 destroyers and frigates, and 29 attack submarines, the navy is again a powerful fighting force. But if it is to leave home waters, the Japanese Navy must have air cover — and that can only be provided by aircraft carriers.

Here, alarm bells go off. Say "Japanese aircraft carriers," and non-Japanese instantly think of the *Hiryu*, *Soryu*, *Kaga*, and *Akagi* whose planes attacked Pearl Harbor.

However, what the Japanese Navy has in mind are small carriers with 15-20 vertical takeoff Harriers — just like the ones Britain used in the Falklands war. Even so, defence critics are beating the war drums over the carrier issue and Japan's neighbors are less than delirious at the thought.

Yet if Japanese power is to extend into the Persian Gulf, from where Japan draws much of its oil, carriers will be necessary. They are also necessary to balance India's fast-growing naval power in the Indian Ocean. Remember that Japan, which grows only rice and hard-working, smart people, must import all its fuel and raw materials by ship. Japanese officials are also talking about the need for their military to protect imports of plutonium used in the nation's power reactors from attack by terrorists — of which Japan has its fair share.

Japan is still only a middle military power. But in a few more years we will probably see the dramatic resurgence of Japan in its traditional role of Asian military giant. And just wait until the first Japanese aircraft carrier sails under the Brooklyn Bridge, which will no doubt by then be owned by Toyota, its crew yelling "Banzai!"