

The sleeping Samurai

In terms of economic power, Japan is a giant: It alone accounts for 10% of the world's economic activity. Even so, this island nation remains a military midget. Its 243,000-man Self Defence Forces cannot defend Japan's airspace, sea lanes and maritime approaches nor its islands against anything stronger than a limited attack.

For decades, Japan has sheltered behind its security agreement with the U.S. that promises American aid in the event of a major attack. In turn, Japan has given the U.S. important air, naval and intelligence facilities and helps offset the costs of stationing U.S. forces in Japan.

When pressed by Washington to spend more on defence, the Japanese have always fallen back on the postwar constitution imposed on them by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. It banned any recourse to war and prohibited foreign deployment of troops. The only forces allowed were limited self-defence units. Most important, total spending on defence was not to exceed 1% of gross national product.

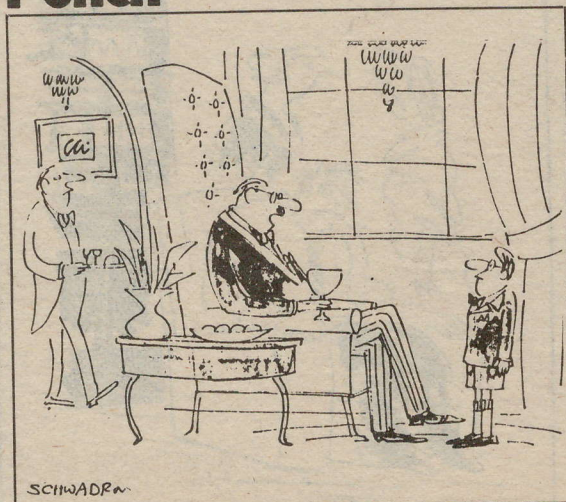
Japan's allies have grumbled for years that the Japanese have shirked their military responsibilities, diverting money saved on defence into industry. As a result, Japan has been under mounting pressure to beef up its armed forces.

Former prime minister Nakasone startled Japan and pleased his western allies by announcing that Japan was "an unsinkable aircraft carrier" for the West and would devote more resources to defence. During his term, military spending broke the important 1% of GNP barrier and now runs at about 1.007%, or \$27 billion per annum.

This is not enough to defend a nation split into four major islands that in war risk being isolated from one another and attacked in detail. Nor is it enough to keep the sea lanes, on which Japan depends for all its raw materials and energy imports, free from submarine attacks and mining.

Most worrisome is the vulnerability of the northern island of Hokkaido, where Japan keeps four of its 13 small divisions. The Japanese island chain

Punch



"Nothing comes easily in life, Junior. If you want something, you usually have to ring for it."

ERIC MARGOLIS



blocks the exit of the Soviet Pacific Fleet into the open ocean. To break out of the confined Sea of Japan, Soviet warships would have to fight their way through the narrow Soya, Tsugaru and Tsushima Straits, all of which are controlled by Japan. It is no secret that in a major war, the Soviets plan an amphibious invasion of Hokkaido that would unblock the Soya Strait.

Japan could not stop a determined Soviet amphibious attack. Not only are its divisions too small and deficient in heavy weapons, the Japanese armed forces are perilously low in war stocks. My estimate is that Japan could fight for no more than a few days before running out of missiles, shells, spare parts and even basic munitions. Without active U.S. intervention, Japan would be quickly defeated by a Soviet offensive.

Most Japanese don't seem concerned about such things. Polls show Japanese devoted to their anti-military constitution and incredulous that anyone would want to threaten them. There is also the lingering national shame of the World War II defeat and painful memories of massive wartime destruction. More people were killed in Tokyo by U.S. fire bombings than in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic weapons.

At the same time, Japanese officials are keenly aware of the growing threat posed to their rich islands by steadily expanding Soviet military power in Asia that now stretches from Kamchatka to Vietnam. And this at a time when U.S. power in the Pacific is on a sharp decline — and soon to be accelerated by Washington's budget crisis.

Japan knows it must re-arm but can't yet seem to find the political will or popular support to do so. So the government has adopted a typically Japanese solution: Increasing defence spending in tiny increments and by clever subterfuges.

A just-opened, very expensive rail tunnel that connects the island of Honshu with Hokkaido is primarily a military project, though it is disguised as a civilian one. Japan's great numbers of tough paramilitary police are not counted in the armed forces but could form two or three combat divisions in a crisis. Even current talk about contributing Japanese troops to peacekeeping forces abroad is, in my view, a deft way of getting the public used to foreign operations.

There is also Japan's "hidden army." Japan now is the main financial backer of the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. Japanese aid allows these nations to build effective armed forces. Today, the mighty South Korean army is Japan's main shield.

But it's quite clear that Japan will also need a sharp sword and a reawakening of some old Samurai skill if it is to turn from being a nation of traders and merchants into a true world power.