Modern Japan, especially during the Premierships of Mr Junichiro Koizumi and Mr Shinzo Abe, has developed a new sense of national self-perception, propelling it towards greater self assurance and boldness in the pursuit of state objectives and goals. In the past, Japan bound itself to a series of self-imposed restraints on participation in military security affairs. Contemporary Japan, however, is incrementally undoing its Cold War strategy and constructing a new one to fit the still-emerging order in its region and in the world.

Japan has important relations with three major ‘players’ in Northeast Asia - these being China, South Korea and the United States. China is fearful of what it regards as possible ‘containment’ by Japan and its ally the US and Japan’s policy is one of reassurance towards this giant neighbour. South Korea remains suspicious of Japan’s motives and has made scathing criticisms over matters such as the Takeshima/Tokdo Islands, thereby harming cordial relations between the two states. The US is willing to maintain the decades-old alliance with Japan, and, having provided a ballistic missile defence [BMD] system, is also entertaining a more equal connection within the bilateral relationship.

As Dick K. Nanto and Emma Chanlett-Avery point out, China, and not the United States, is now the number-one trading partner of Japan. Indeed, in 2005, combined two-way trade between Japan and China amounted to an estimated US$186 billion, this constituting 16.9% of Japan’s total trade with the world for that year. Not only is Japan becoming more dependent on China, but China is becoming more dependent on Japan’s economy for imports and exports. Moreover, China is supplanting Japan as the leader in Asia and Japan is having to cede diplomatic territory to Beijing. Japan’s economic recovery has been maintained partly by exports to China and Japan’s businesses have incorporated China as an important manufacturing platform for their products. Economic interaction appears to have induced the two sides to keep their political rhetoric to a manageable level and to adroitly step around potential military clashes. Both sides, however, continue to build their military capabilities. The question is whether economic and cultural ties will continue to induce military restraint as China grows into a major regional power and Japan begins to deploy its military outside of its homeland defence perimeter.

Until recently, relations between Japan and South Korea were on a positive track. As Michael J. Green relates, in October 1998 former ROK President Kim Dae Jung and former Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi issued a joint statement in Tokyo in which Obuchi expressed deep remorse and an apology for Japan’s past treatment of Korea and Kim welcomed Japan’s playing a larger role in Asian and international affairs. However, the political relationship between Japan and Korea quickly deteriorated in March 2004, when Japan’s Shimane Prefecture passed a local bill claiming the disputed Liancourt Islands (‘Tokdo’ in Korean and ‘Takeshima’ in Japanese) as sovereign Japanese territory. This negative trend, as B.J. Lee outlines, worsened in the Spring of 2006, when
President Roh Moo Hyun minced no words in a widely-publicized tirade against Japan, calculated in the opinion of commentators to gain support among Korea’s young and nationalistic citizens prior to local elections. Angered by Japanese moves to survey the contested range of islets occupied by Korea (the Tokdo or Takeshima Islands), he sharply denounced Tokyo for essentially reaffirming ‘Japan’s criminal history of waging wars ... as well as 40 years of exploitation, torture, imprisonment, forced labour and even sexual slavery.’ The comments drove relations between the neighbouring states to a new, even lower, level, though were well received by Roh’s young and intensely nationalistic core supporters. As a result, Japan-Korea summits have been chilly or non-existent and well-meaning officials in both countries appear uncertain regarding how they can put their bilateral relationship back on the positive track that lasted from 1998 until 2004.

Both the United States and Japan hold a strong wish to maintain cordial and supportive bilateral relations. They also display an ongoing willingness on the part of Washington to continue the alliance and on the part of Tokyo to be a reliable pillar of support for joint security interests. In 2005, combined two-way trade between both nations amounted to an estimated US$195 billion, or 17.8% of Japan’s world trade for that particular year. Moreover, the US maintains some 50,000 troops stationed in Japan as part of the protective alliance that has existed for more than 50 years. In terms of Japanese and American interaction, it can be said that Japan has no intention of abandoning its alliance with the United States - a security relationship that has guaranteed Japanese safety and territorial integrity for more than five decades. There will, however, be some movement in the alliance as Japan asserts itself more in the Asia-Pacific and in the world at large. The ‘patron-client’ relationship appears to be over and both partners are re-defining their roles within a more equal connection. Washington and Tokyo will continue to be close, though, and Japan will continue to look upon the US as a friend, benefactor and protector.

Japan, in pursuit of ‘normalcy’, is steadily loosening the restraints on its post-war, hitherto staunchly pacifist, foreign and defence policies. As Kenneth B. Pyle describes, first, it has dispatched the Self Defence Force outside of the home islands to overseas destinations - to Mozambique, Rwanda, the Golan Heights, East Timor and Iraq. Second, it has broadened its interpretation of the Constitution to allow Japanese forces to assist the US in the Afghan and Iraq campaigns and is considering the revision of Article IX (which bans all aggressive military force) to legally justify collective self defence. Third, Japan's purchase of Boeing 767 in-flight refuelling tankers indicates a readiness to acquire a power projection capability and its military, through modernization, is now comparable to those of Britain or France. Fourth, it is no longer taboo in Japan to discuss Japanese possession of nuclear weapons, this option being continually studied by Japan’s conservative leaders. Fifth, the 1976 prohibition against the sharing of military technology or the export of arms has been breached by the procurement of a ballistic missile defence [BMD] system from the US and by the readiness of Japan's defence industries to develop airborne lasers (to shoot down hostile missiles in mid-flight) in conjunction with American counterparts. Sixth, Japan’s military spending is estimated to
be the third or fourth largest in the world, at some US$ 42 billion each year. Finally, having launched its first military spy satellite in 2003, Japan has set aside the 1969 Diet resolution proscribing the military use of space. Such concerted initiatives represent a marked change from decades of former Japanese practices and denote a new, more confident and more assertive direction in national policy. By such actions, Japan is clearly re-defining its defensive and diplomatic posture. The hesitant reluctance to assume international responsibilities which characterized Japan’s cautious, almost timid, behaviour in the 1970s and 1980s has now been replaced by a new, expansive proactivism - summed up by Foreign Minister, Mr Taro Aso, on 30 November 2006 as consisting of ‘value oriented diplomacy’ and of extending ‘the arc of freedom and prosperity’ throughout the Asia-Pacific region and the world.

Japan in the twenty-first century is not the same Japan of earlier times. It has emerged from the ‘lost decade’ of the 1990s with an economic recovery, a reconstituted political landscape and a redefined international agenda for itself, typified by a greater input into world affairs and the goal of a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. It is led by a new generation of political figures who are increasingly nationalistic in their outlook and who are less encumbered by the taboos which dominated their predecessors. They seek a revitalized role around the world for their country and are casting off former misgivings about adopting an assertive, high profile and confident stance at home and abroad. They perceive their country as a benevolent defender of human rights and political freedoms in addition to being a trustworthy partner in the creation of wealth throughout the world. They also perceive their country as a well-prepared, capable and ready protector of its own military security and territorial integrity.

Such attitudes represent a marked sea-change in the politics and practices of contemporary Japan when compared to those of a few years ago. Japan has realized that it is acceptable to perceive itself in noble terms and that its self-image need not be forever seared by the militaristic practices of the 1930s and 1940s. For 60 years, Japan has laboured long and hard to rebuild itself industrially, economically and politically - thereby rehabilitating and revitalizing itself domestically and externally. It now stands at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium confident at last that its voice will be heard with respect and that its diplomacy will be accepted with appreciation. It is clear that modern Japan intends to become a major ‘player’ on the world scene and that its years of hesitancy and self-doubt appear to be over.

Dr Michael Vaughan PhD

(Dr Vaughan is a Postgraduate of the School of Political Science and International Studies of The University of Queensland and is a Specialist in the Field of Asian Government.)