

BOOK REVIEWS

***Reconstructing Japan’s Security Policy: The Role of Military Crises.* By Bhubhinder Singh. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. E-version: 204pp.**

The literature on Japanese security has long been dominated by research on the country’s alliance with the United States. Bhubhinder Singh’s *Reconstructing Japan’s Security Policy* therefore makes for a refreshing reading. The book poses a familiar question for contemporary Japan experts: how do Japanese elites negotiate domestic and external factors to produce changes in the practice of national security? The author’s key argument is that external military crises are a significant variable that has been missing in explanations about how policymakers have introduced changes to Japan’s security policy since the end of the Cold War.

The book joins a well-established debate in International Relations scholarship. It shares the mainstream literature’s core assumption that today’s Japan stands as a more proactive security actor in East Asia. Based on this assumption, it reviews Tokyo’s journey away from the “minimalist” security outlook during the Cold War. Singh’s natural interlocutors are scholars from the realist (and neorealist) camp as well as constructivists. The book highlights the realist camp’s emphasis on the role of external factors in the making of Japan’s security policy, most notably the impact of its alliance with the United States. Neorealists, and especially social constructivists, have added nuance to this view. They reconsidered structural variables in light of the shifts in domestic politics and the relationships among Japanese stakeholders, the significant rise of political conservatism, and the role of normative ideas about Japan’s identity as a “peace state” and “international state”.

Still, Singh argues that within the literature, there is a glaring gap between these “underlying causes” and the actual process of policy change. What specific circumstances trigger it? How do specific events affect the ways change comes about? These questions are especially important if we want to comprehend and anticipate future changes. In this respect, the author points his readership towards the relevant factors that may create the political conditions for an actual revision of Article 9 of the Constitution—also known as the “peace” clause because of the constraints it imposes on the nature and scope of military forces.

What are these factors? Singh’s answer is “external military crises”. The book defines military crises as global or regional military events that “disrupt peace and stability” (p. 11). They can be single events or a series of sequential events. The book argues that four military crises fuelled the Japanese debate over security reforms and empowered elites to produce lasting changes to Japan’s security posture: the 1990–91 First Gulf War; the 1994 North Korean and 1995–96 Taiwan Straits crises; Operation Enduring Freedom following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11); and the incidents around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2010–12.

Indeed, these crises were not chosen by coincidence. The First Gulf War set the context against which the legal frameworks for Japan’s participation in international peacekeeping missions were adopted. The Korean and Taiwan Straits crises, on the other hand, expanded the geographical boundaries of Japan’s security actions within the context of the US-Japan alliance. The events of 9/11 pushed the security envelope towards the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF) undertaking “global missions”, from naval operations in the Indian Ocean to the two-year deployment to Iraq. Last but not least, the tensions in the East China Sea led Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to expand the country’s military role with the adoption of laws allowing the SDF to engage in collective self-defence missions. Singh concludes that these crises have changed how Japanese elites ideationally conceptualized Japanese security, how they legally engage with it, as well as how they politically and operationally meet the demands of security action.

How does the author make his case? Drawing upon a variety of sources, Singh’s narrative offers a particularly refreshing take on the broader importance of the First Gulf War in resetting the Japanese political debate. By combining media data with interviews with Japanese officials and experts, Singh highlights how events in the Gulf expanded the realm of possibilities in Japan’s security actions.

The First Gulf War was a crisis that directly affected Japanese security, especially in terms of US perceptions of the importance of the bilateral alliance. This, in turn, created the conditions for a review of Japan's participation in multilateral operations culminating with the commitment to engage more regularly in UN-sponsored missions. The peace-keeping law that resulted from this process has expanded the boundaries of Japanese security and planted the seeds for a political consciousness of the need to adapt the country's profile in international affairs depending on the security demands at hand that has lasted to the present day.

Singh's narrative in the chapter on the correlation between the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the 2015 security bills is also well argued. Clashes at sea in 2010 and 2012 provided the context for a crisis that propelled Prime Minister Abe's "radical" agenda of expanding Japanese security missions alongside the United States and other coalition partners. The chapter also highlights how, during this same period, North Korean nuclear and missile brinkmanship, coalition missions in maritime security in the Indian Ocean, as well as the deterioration of security in the South China Sea, all played a role in shaping the Japanese debate. What becomes clear by the end of Singh's narration is that Japanese security is today a process in which a wider canvas of "issues" has replaced narrow "crises" in informing the policy process. However, this raises questions about the nature and scale of events that would be needed today to recreate the soul-searching phase experienced in the early 1990s, or indeed if that is possible at all.

For those interested in Southeast Asian security, the book offers important context and background to a familiar story. After all, the region has been at the centre of Japan's renewed security activism over the last two decades. This became particularly true during Abe's second premiership. Since his keynote speech at the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue, which offered the framework for Japan's approach to the importance of "rule of law" in maritime disputes, Abe's Japan has consistently engaged in maritime capacity building and presence missions in Southeast Asia. Singh's book will allow Southeast Asian specialists and practitioners alike to better grasp the domestic debate that has led to the implementation of Abe's agenda.

One potential issue with Singh's book is that the idea of "crises" as opportunities for change seemingly rests on the assumption that Japan's policy changes have been, since the end of the Cold War,

quite reactive. While this is convincingly argued in the review of events in the 1990s and early 2000s, this approach risks undervaluing the multiple initiatives under Prime Minister Abe that have been crucial in shaping the realm of maritime security in East Asia in more recent times.

Overall, Singh's book is a very enjoyable read that helps expand our understanding of Japan's security policy. It makes a convincing case that "military crises" contributed to resetting the Japanese approach to the practice of security in the aftermath of the Cold War. Today, as Japan continues its trajectory of "normalization" in security matters, the question of how military crises uniquely impact Japan naturally unfolds from this book. The book leaves the reader with a clear sense that there is a new path to explore ahead.

ALESSIO PATALANO is Professor of War and Strategy in East Asia at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. Postal address: King's College London, Strand Ln, London, WC2R 2LS, United Kingdom; email: patalano@ws.kcl.ac.uk.