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Does the United States Want Japan to Fight China?

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According to the *New York Times*, [Japan is set to release later this week](#) [3] a new defense strategy that will focus less on Cold War-era fights with the Russians to the north, "in favor of...more mobile units that could respond to China's growing presence near its southernmost islands." The reports, first circulated in Japanese newspapers over the weekend, have attracted little attention here in the States. Nonetheless, according to the *Times*, the shift was partly precipitated by pressure from Washington. "The United States is making new calls for Japan to increase its military role in eastern Asia," the *Times* reported, "in response to recent provocations by North Korea as well as China's more assertive stance in the region."

If that is true, the Obama administration has an odd way of going about its business. After all, when then-Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama requested last year that the United States renegotiate the terms of the six-decades long U.S. Marine Corps presence on Okinawa, the Obama administration flatly refused. Indeed, Washington's intransigence ultimately led to Hatoyama's humiliating resignation from office in June. If the Obama administration was truly committed to ensuring that Japan played a larger role in its own defense, and in its region, U.S. officials would have seized upon Hatoyama's professed desire to reduce Japan's dependence upon the United States for its defense.

[The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era](#) [4] But I suspect that the *Times* got the story wrong, or, more likely, was fed bad information by U.S. officials who regularly conceal the true purpose of U.S. foreign policy: namely, to discourage other countries from taking a more active role in their own defense. The

preferred euphemism is “reassurance.” Here is how Michael Mandelbaum, in his book, *The Frugal Superpower*, describes the concept:

Reassurance is the policy of instilling confidence in countries that they are not in imminent danger,...and that they can therefore conduct their relations with other countries without fear.

In Asia, Mandelbaum goes on to say, the American role:

Reassures countries in the region that they have a means of counterbalancing China, while reassuring China that Japan...will not reprise its past pattern of conquest.

I have argued [elsewhere](#) [5] that fears of resurgent Japanese imperialism are overblown to the point of absurdity. If one truly believes, however, that the only thing restraining Tokyo’s desire to resume its “conquest” of China is the American obedience trainer tugging hard on the choke collar, then the reports that U.S. officials are simultaneously encouraging our reassured ally to get serious about containing a rising China make no sense.

But there is a lot about U.S. foreign policy that doesn’t make any sense. I strongly suspect that many of the inconsistencies flow from Washington’s pattern of concealing from the American people the real purpose -- and the real cost -- of our military power. For reference, the average Japanese spends about \$360 a year on national defense; the average American spends more than \$2,700. Now, obviously, some portion of the American total covers a *lot* of other countries, as well as the defense of the homeland. And it is unrealistic to expect that Japan would spend eight times what it spends today on defense if it had a more "normal" relationship with the United States. But to argue that our military posture has no effect on how much Japan spends on defense is obtuse. And to whisper to reporters that Japan should do more while maintaining a permanent military presence to discourage them from doing so is disingenuous.