

This column by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Wednesday, January 4, 2023.



Opinion

Amid US-China tensions, Japan must choose deft diplomacy, not Top Gun tomfoolery, to ensure peace



- Japan's plans to double its military investment will only deepen anxiety in a region marked by superpower rivalry
- Tokyo must strike a delicate diplomatic balance, strengthening ties with the US while not poisoning the Chinese market for Japan's exporters

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Published: 12:30am, 4 Jan, 2023



Illustration: Craig Stephens

Is it conceivable that the risk-taking pilot of the Chinese Navy J-11 fighter that [flew within metres](#) of a US Air Force RC-135 over the South China Sea two weeks ago once swooned over a pirated version of the new *Top Gun* movie? [The 2022 sequel](#) to the 1986 original film, both starring Tom Cruise, has raked in more than US\$1 billion and is streaking into new international markets.

It's an "America is super cool" film, as if only an American pilot could possibly be skilled enough to slip into the cockpit of a super-advanced jet fighter, roar the plane down a carrier runway and pick off aerial bad guys like a cowboy gunslinger. In the tense atmosphere of [US-China relations](#), no Chinese jet jockey

could land such a Hollywood blockbuster role, so perhaps People's Liberation Army pilots might be inclined to play out *Top Gun* scripts on their own.

In real life, close calls in the air happen with uncomfortable frequency. Recall the [2001 mid-air collision](#) not far from Hainan island, when a US Navy signals intelligence aircraft and a PLA Navy interceptor jet collided. Whether incidents are best characterised as “encroaching on sovereign airspace” or “freedom of navigation operations”, they are risky, destabilising and need to be, in military jargon, detensioned at the very least.

But more such incidents are sure to hit the unfriendly skies once Japan gets its rearming act in gear. Tokyo has plans to [double its military investment](#) across the board after decades of letting the United States and its Seventh Fleet run the Pacific air show. This long-simmering policy change is beloved by some domestic constituencies that have been trying for years to get Japan to abandon its commitment to pacifism and become a “normal country” again, but it will only deepen anxiety in the region, on top of existing concerns about China and its ever-growing navy.

The delicate diplomatic balance Tokyo must strike is to somehow strengthen ties with the US while not poisoning the Chinese market for Japan's exporters. Even for Japan's top diplomats, playing both sides of the street without getting run over by one, the other or both is no easy feat.

Tokyo has all the skilled diplomatic talent it needs, but it will fail without equally skilled political backing, especially from the top of the establishment. That is precisely where Japan looks handicapped.

Since the 1980s, only three prime ministers have stood out internationally. One was [Yasuhiro Nakasone](#), who built a policy expressway to Washington. Another was Shinzo Abe, who [was assassinated](#) last year. While in office, he added wide lanes to the roadway Nakasone built.

In between was the extraordinary [Junichiro Koizumi](#), who at the time of the US decision to invade Iraq did not wish to risk bickering with American interventionism. The US, he felt, was as close as kin while China was only very close. In a 2002 interview at his official residence, Koizumi astonished me with his adamant support for the US invasion of Iraq.

In retrospect, while the invasion was tragically misguided, Koizumi's cheerleading was arguably in Japan's national interest. The calculation was that influence with the US was never going to be cost-free but trying to stand up alone to China presented great existential risk.

Japan has to pay a dear price while not selling out. “We will keep trying the diplomacy,” one Ministry of Foreign Affairs careerist told me. “If that doesn't work, then we go the other way.”

Asking whether the Japanese establishment is ready to further proceed towards the fraught on-ramp of nuclear militarisation, in plain sight or behind closed doors, is unavoidable. Saying one certainly hopes not is hardly enough. Pointing to the Japanese public's commendable antipathy to [the nuclear option](#) offers hope but no predictive surety.

But speculating as to whether Japan's “*bushido*” norms – the moral code of the samurai – are categorically different from those of America's cowboy-gunslinger heritage (shoot first, ask questions later, as in the case of Iraq) seems to me inherently insulting to one of our greatest cultures and to its newer generations. It is external threats – a US seen by some as increasingly weak and a China that is unbalanced but increasingly determined – that more than anything else might push Tokyo to go openly nuclear.

Surely, both threat vectors surfacing at the same time could yield a perfect storm that shoves an existentially challenged Japan off the ledge and into [nuclear ambition](#). Confucius has been quoted as saying, "Perceiving what is right and doing it not argues lack of courage." Japan, a true giant in economic terms but otherwise much smaller than China or the US, will feel the impulse, if severely pressed, to act first. Not doing so under certain circumstances would be viewed as dishonourable.

Will it not be too long before the skies over the South China Sea see Japanese pilots flying "freedom of operation" missions? No, a continuing suicide circus is not what is best for East Asia. *Top Gun* heroics might be great fun to watch on the big screen, but they are dangerous in reality, where there is no safety net 12,000 metres in the sky.

Leave the fantasy heroics to Cruise and imagine a much less risky regional order for East Asia. Smart Japanese policy that seeks to fly a safe, prudent course between the two superpowers should and must lead the way.

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