



**ABE'S ELECTION WEAKNESS:  
COULD CONSTITUTIONAL  
WRANGLING HURT JAPAN'S  
DIPLOMACY?**

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Abe Shinzo, incumbent Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president and prime minister of Japan, defeated former LDP Secretary General Shigeru Ishiba in the LDP presidential election on Sept. 20. Ishiba performed solidly in securing local assembly representative votes, and increased his Diet support more than predicted. Ishiba's stronger than expected showing in the LDP ballot means that Abe's proposal for a soft, diplomatic version of constitutional amendment may reach an impasse, which could lead to agitation for more radical amendments. That would destabilize Japan's already shaky foreign diplomacy.

The ruling coalition underpinning the Abe administration (LDP and Komeito) has won five national elections in a row, and with more than two-thirds of the seats in both Houses, it has sufficient power to institute a referendum on amendment of the Constitution. Abe thought it would be difficult to obtain a majority vote on a referendum to amend the Constitution, however and therefore set out a personal draft constitutional amendment with the intent "to describe the existence of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF)" while preserving Items 1 and 2 of Article 9 of the current Constitution. He framed his personal draft as a reply to questions raised in the Diet in January 2018 and signaled his intent to maintain the current security legislation, which restricts the range of SDF activities to rear-guard logistics support, rather than granting the right of full collective self-defense, which

would allow actions such as a pre-emptive assault on a country that attacked an allied nation.

Ishiba, as vice chairperson of the LDP Headquarters for the Promotion of Revision of the Constitution, led the creation of an LDP draft of the Constitution that clearly stipulates deletion of Article 9 and the establishment of national defense forces that would effectively give Japan full-scale collective self-defense rights. Ishiba criticized Abe's proposal as "practically the same as not changing anything in the Constitution." If those who are critical of Abe's draft, including Ishiba, gain more power in the wake of the presidential election, it may be difficult for Abe to introduce an amendment based on his preferred draft at the extraordinary Diet session in the autumn.

Withdrawal of Abe's draft would not stop the constitutional amendment movement. The LDP's Headquarters for the Promotion of Revision of the Constitution is likely to pursue its examination of 'complete constitutional amendment' abrogating Article 9 and establishing a national defense force. This would affect Japan's foreign diplomacy. The situation could become unstable: look for example at Japan's relationship with China.

At present, there is an opportunity to improve the relationship between Japan and China, which has been steadily worsening for years. China is approaching Japan about joining the Belt and Road Initiative, which has been losing momentum. (Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Pakistan are balking at investment and loan conditions set by China.) Also, the trade war between the United States and China is continuing to intensify. As a result, China could begin to look favorably toward Japan.

At the same time, Japan is troubled on several diplomatic fronts. In Russo-Japanese relations, President Vladimir Putin proposed the hasty agreement to an unconditional Russo-Japanese Peace Treaty, with no mention of the longstanding conflict over the Northern Territories. Also, the multi-directional trade war launched by President Trump has finally turned its focus on Japan.

Given this complex set of challenges, Japan needs to improve relations with China. Abe and Chinese

President Xi Jinping held a summit meeting in Vladivostok on Sept. 12, and decided to proceed with Prime Minister Abe's visit to China in mid-October.

China has remained silent about Japan's current security legislation, probably a reflection of economic relations with Japan. The integration of Japan's SDF and the US military is under way, based on that security legislation. The Abe administration is considering the first application of the provision allowing "international collaborative peace and security activities," which empowers the SDF to participate in multinational forces. The Japanese government also intends to accept responsibility for missile interception in the case of North Korean aggression aimed at the United States. Furthermore, submarines and escort ships of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force recently engaged in training with US armed forces, anticipating anti-submarine warfare in the South China Sea where China is creating military bases.

However, if Japan starts to deliberate a constitutional amendment that enables the creation of a fully normalized armed forces, China would object and could begin openly criticizing Japan. Originally, China warned strongly against Japan's constitutional amendment. When the ruling party of the Abe administration for the first time claimed two-thirds of seats in both houses – enough seats to allow proposal of a constitutional amendment – the *New China News Agency*, which is seen as a propaganda organ of the Communist Party of China, declared that having the ability to propose a constitutional amendment would surely accelerate the process toward amendment. It also expressed concern that the proposed amendment of Article 9 was a bid to escape the restraints of the postwar pacifist constitution and allow Japan to move gradually toward militarism.

If Japan sought a radical constitutional amendment that would allow full collective self-defense armed forces, the country could create a "security dilemma." China could step up its own military expansion to confront Japan. If Japan responded, there could be an unlimited arms race. The risk of conflict between Japan and China would increase. In other words, Abe's prime ministerial draft, which Ishiba branded as "practically the same as not changing anything in the

constitution," may be the most realistic approach for stabilizing Japanese diplomacy.

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