

Japan's security policy under Abe: much ado about almost nothing by Crystal Pryor

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Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has been able to reorient his country's security policy. The defense budget has been increasing since 2013, for the first time in a decade. The ban on arms exports has been loosened, allowing Japan to export defense items and technologies for the first time in 40 years. And, Abe pushed a set of controversial bills through the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-controlled Diet to enact changes in Japan's security posture in 2015, despite widespread public opposition. The legislation came into effect this week.

Despite this reorientation, there remain real domestic constraints on Abe's vision of "proactive pacifism." Nevertheless, Abe must be careful of overreach, both regarding constitutional revision and what he promises Japan's allies. Rather than pursuing more changes, the prime minister should stop while he is ahead and focus on institutionalizing the changes he has already made.

Progress, but obstacles remain

In the December 2012 election, Abe campaigned on patriotic messages such as "Towards a Beautiful Country" and promised constitutional revision and a hardline stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, disputed by China and Japan. Some saw the LDP win and Abe's return to power as fueled by public concern over China's military expansion, as well as a more general turn toward nationalism or even militarism.

But the LDP in 2012 prevailed because of governance concerns. Japanese voters brought the LDP back into power because they disapproved of Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) economic policies and poor governance, particularly after the Fukushima disaster, *not* because of Abe's nationalist posturing.

Moreover, many changes that Abe has made were set in motion under the DPJ government. The DPJ were first to lift restrictions on defense-related exports. The 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines put forward by the Abe government appropriated the DPJ's concept of "dynamic defense" in its thinking about a "dynamic joint defense force." The LDP approach emphasizes joint operations of land, sea, and air forces in addition to the DPJ push for quick and flexible responses to emergency situations, and a focus on the southwestern seas instead of "basic defense," which deploys Self-Defense Force (SDF) troops evenly over the country.

And while Japan's defense budget is growing, a weakened yen, higher personnel costs, and an increase in expenses for the planned relocation of the US Marine Corp's Futenma air base in Okinawa Prefecture are the primary drivers. Remove Special Action Committee on Okinawa-related expenses and actual defense spending is approximately ¥4.93 trillion (\$41.4 billion), roughly what Tokyo spent on defense in 2002.

Constitutional changes

The most controversial and widely covered aspect of Japan's recent security shift is the issue of collective self-defense. A new approach to the long-standing ban on collective self-defense under Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution is one of several pieces of legislation that were passed last September and came into force this week.

Under the US-Japan security treaty, the United States is obliged to defend Japan in a contingency. Before constitutional reinterpretation, Japan could not help defend the United States, but was required to grant the United States routine use of its military bases. Abe argued that the US-Japan alliance would be critically damaged if Tokyo refused to defend its ally during operations to protect Japan.

Instead of outright amendment of the Constitution, which was considered politically unfeasible, the Abe administration in July 2014 changed the government's longstanding interpretation of Article 9 to allow for collective self-defense. The security legislation puts that new interpretation into practice. Japan is now permitted to use collective self-defense to come to the aid of an ally – read: the US – under three conditions: if Japan's "survival" is at stake, there is no alternative, and the use of force is kept to the "minimum necessary." Plainly, even under the new legislation, exercise of the right of collective self-defense is circumscribed.

Still, many citizens fear the new laws could drag Japan into a war involving the United States. Public opinion polls show continuing widespread doubt about the validity and value of the new legislation. Many constitutional scholars also believe the new laws violate Article 9.

Next steps for Japan and the US-Japan alliance

Lifting the arms export ban will permit Japan to increase participation in international joint development and production of weapons systems, a major goal of the changed rules. Japan will work with the United States and others on space and cyber security, as well as advances in defense-related technology.

The new security legislation allows Japan to respond better alongside the United States to so-called "gray-zone contingencies," which are not outright military attacks but actions by state or nonstate actors with security implications.

We can also expect greater Japanese participation in US-led military operations.

In the region, North Korea presents various challenges to Japan, from blatant nuclear threats to gray-zone provocations and cyber-attacks. In response to Pyongyang's missile and nuclear tests, Japan will continue working on ballistic missile defense with the United States and Australia. Meanwhile, China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea are turning the area into a permanent gray zone. On Monday, the SDF brought the Yonaguni radar station online in Okinawa, which will help monitor activities in the East and possibly South China Seas, as well long-range rocket or missile launches from North Korea. Japan will continue to augment surveillance operations like these.

Japan will also continue to strengthen trilateral (US-Japan-Australia, US-Japan-India, US-Japan-ROK) and bilateral (Japan-Australia, Japan-UK, Japan-Indonesia, Japan-Philippines) relationships. While Japan has long had positive economic relations with countries in Southeast Asia, it is now paying more attention to the countries' strategic significance. Japan is enhancing cooperation and outreach in Southeast Asia in fields such as humanitarian and disaster relief, maritime security, and defense technologies.

Taken together, these movements signal less naïve, more engaged, and more proactive foreign and security policies. Nevertheless, the SDF still faces real limitations on its use of power, both legally and due to public opinion.

Indeed, some analysts worry about an expectations gap between what the United States thinks Japan can do (or what Abe says it will) and what Japan actually *will* do. After all, the SDF is a *de facto* military that has never fought in battle. There are across-the-board shortfalls in defense equipment performance, logistics support, training, and interoperability, whether among the SDF services themselves or with their US counterparts. The Defense Ministry's new procurement and industrial base policies together with Japan's recent *National Security Strategy* and defense guidelines will help address these shortfalls, but the potential for both political and security misunderstandings remains.

Back to the ballot

Japan will hold an Upper House election in July. Some are concerned that Abe will call a snap double election to exploit a disorganized opposition and use it to gain a supermajority (two-thirds of both houses of the Diet) to begin the process of constitutional revision. Yet constitutional revision is unlikely – even if the LDP wins a supermajority, it will only be together with its junior coalition partner, Komeito, a liberal and pacifist party that will restrain the LDP from taking further steps in this direction.

Rather than continue his advance in security policy, Abe and his allies should:

- Better explain to the Japanese people the reality of the new security legislation. The majority of Japanese voters did not support or feel adequately informed about the bills. The debate last year was an argument for or against war, or the constitutionality of

collective self-defense, and not a discussion of the need for the legislation.

- Engage in a similar campaign to allay regional suspicions about Japan's intentions and new capabilities. Japan has a PR problem in Northeast Asia. It needs to ramp up diplomacy so its rivals better understand what is going on and thereby avoid reactive buildups in other countries.

At the same time, the fractured opposition must do more than just criticize existing policies and instead offer a cohesive and coherent alternative.

Attempting to revise the Constitution will be a distraction from more important matters, such as getting the economy on a sustainable footing. Abe should use his political capital to institutionalize the recent changes in Japan's security policies so that they endure after he is gone. Japan has enough legislation on the books to become a more active and influential participant in regional security. Attempting to revise Article 9 of the Constitution will incite the public at home and in the region. Abe would be well-suited to focus instead on closing the gap between what he has said Japan will do with what it can and is prepared to do.

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