



PREPARATION, NOT PACIFISM, DEFINES JAPAN'S DEFENSE POLICY

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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Enough! Yes, this week's decision by the Japanese Cabinet to relax restrictions on arms exports is a landmark in the country's postwar history. It is not, however, the end of Japan's pacifism as every headline screams. Defense policies have been guided by constraints on the use of force and there is a powerful suspicion of the military, but that is not the same as pacifism.

Demanding accuracy in the description of Japanese security policy is not pedantry. It is the foundation of an understanding of the evolution of Tokyo's defense policy and will prevent hyperventilating about and overreacting to a much-needed adaptation to a changing security environment.

This week, the government of Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae [approved](#) revision of the "Three Principles" that govern transfers of defense equipment and technology. Previously, Japan could only export nonlethal equipment that could be used for rescue, transport, warning, surveillance and minesweeping, and it could not be sent to countries engaged in active conflict.

Now, Japanese companies can sell gear to countries with which Japan has an arms export agreement. That list includes 17 countries, the United States among them, and the number is expected to soon grow to 20. The National Security Council will review all sales, ensuring that the equipment ends up in the right hands, and the Diet will be notified after a decision is made. The restriction on exports to countries with active combat will continue, although there can be exceptions if the Japanese government finds a compelling national security reason.

Prime Minister Takaichi explained that the policy shift was necessary because of an "increasingly challenging security environment," adding that "No single country can now protect its own peace and security alone." Most important, Takaichi wrote that "There is absolutely no change in our commitment to upholding the path we have taken as a peaceful nation over the past 80 years since the end of the war, as well as our fundamental principles."

Every [major news outlet](#) has [noted](#) that the new regulations break with the country's "pacifist" orientation. (In some cases, Takaichi's statement is translated as "Japan's postwar path as a pacifist nation...") Indeed, every time Japan revises defense policy, this charge is batted about. It dominated [reporting](#) a little over three years ago when Tokyo issued three new national security documents.

Japan's constitution does restrict war-fighting capabilities. Article 9 famously forbids the country from using force to settle international disputes and from possessing the tools to wage war. That is why Japan has "Self Defense Forces" (SDF), not a military. It's the rationale for the previous restrictions on arms exports and it has become the cornerstone of the country's postwar identity.

But Japan isn't pacifist in the sense that it isn't willing to use force at all. Existence of the SDF—since 1954—is repudiation of that position. It will use force to defend itself. Note too that successive Japanese governments regularly call on the US to reaffirm that Article 5 of the Mutual Defense Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands, meaning Tokyo wants its ally to use force to defend it.

Japan has slowly improved both its military capability and the ability to use it. In 1992, Japan passed laws that enabled SDF participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. In 1997, revisions to the Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation extended the jurisdiction of the SDF to address "situations in areas surrounding Japan." The SDF joined international efforts after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, supporting Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. In recent years, the SDF has reorganized its forces to make them more capable.

As Christopher Hughes detailed in *Japan as a Global Military Power*, the country has the world's third- or fourth-largest military budget, the largest F-35 advanced-jet fighter inventory outside the

US, military satellite constellations, mini-aircraft carriers, amphibious forces, and has pursued counterstrike capabilities, the right to partake in collective self-defense operations, and a proactive cyberdefense.

Every action has been circumscribed or slowed by national law and political consensus, but those actions were not those of a “pacifist” nation. Eagle-eyed observers argue that Japan has used Article 9 to avoid being pushed into military action except on its own terms.

When I checked in with Andrew Oros, professor of political science at Washington College and author of *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century*, he explained how Japan's leaders have clouded the picture. He noted that former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Takaichi's mentor and avatar for conservatives who chaff against postwar constraints, “framed this greater military role for Japan within the long-standing language of ‘pacifism,’ calling for a more ‘proactive pacifism’ in the 21st century — which really looks nothing like the actual philosophy of pacifism, so much so that in English-language translations of his speeches, translators used the term ‘proactive contributions to peace’ rather than the literal translation ‘proactive pacifism.’”

None of this supports the claim that Japan is embracing military revanchism, a charge that Chinese officials have been [making](#) with increasing urgency as relations between Tokyo and Beijing continue their downward slide. After this week's Cabinet decision, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman called the move contradictory to Japan's identity as a peaceful nation and evidence of “new militarism.”

Hughes would disagree. In an earlier email exchange, he insisted that Japan's overall evolution in defense policy “in no way implies a rewind to the wartime period of Japanese military adventurism and imperialism, as is the knee-jerk reaction of some to the term who would like to overly-relativize and thus obfuscate the extent of contemporary change in Japan's security policy.”

Japanese sentiment is best described as antimilitarist. As Oros put it, the public “views active military solutions to security challenges suspiciously.” That explains the high number of Japanese—67% in an [Asahi poll](#)—who said that they oppose exports of lethal equipment. That is why Japan has been characterized at various times as a country of “reluctant realists,” “resentful realists” or “pragmatic realists.”

Their hesitance reflects begrudging acknowledgement that this region is becoming more dangerous. They worry about arms racing and potential instability. But there is no appetite to ignore the risks or to acquiesce to foreign pressure or threats. Japan is being vigilant and responsible. Prepared, and never pacifist.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.