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Japan's Defence Engagement: Implications of Abe's Yasukuni Visit

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Synopsis

Japan may have benign intentions for greater military engagement and a larger role in international security, but such aims have been thrown off-course by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent Yasukuni visit.

Commentary

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine on 26 December 2013, sparked angry responses from China and South Korea and even drew a statement of "disappointment" from the United States. Moreover, actors outside the immediate neighbourhood have also taken note, with Singapore voicing "regret" over the visit.

The preceding week the Japanese Ministry of Defence had released its National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG), which stated that Japan's aims in security cooperation were to foster collaboration "to ease the atmosphere of confrontation and the sense of mutual wariness in the region". Such measures include "closer cooperation with the Republic of Korea" and the promotion of "security dialogues and exchanges with China [to] develop confidence-building measures to avert or prevent unexpected situations".

Japan's military development overstated

Such stated aims, however, have been thrown off-course for now. While the Japanese defence establishment may have genuine intentions to conduct positive military engagement with its neighbours, the latest Yasukuni visit, the first by Mr Abe as prime minister, has thrown this into doubt, and is likely to complicate Japan's regional defence engagement.

Much has been said about Mr Abe's right-leaning stance, including his intention to revise Japan's war-renouncing constitution, and to be more assertive towards countries appearing to pose a threat to Japan. Thus any move by Japan to enhance military capabilities is often viewed through the lens of Mr Abe's political posture. But what is important to note is Japan's trajectory from a pacifist state to one that has a greater stake in international security, rather than outright "remilitarisation" as some observers have claimed.

In fact, neither Japan's 2013 defence white paper nor the NDPG show any significant departures from previous years, with security issues like North Korea revisited as in previous white documents. New discussions are also underway, including the enhancement of Japanese amphibious capabilities through the development of a new

amphibious unit.

While these do not show a marked shift by Japan towards “remilitarisation,” they do send a robust message of deterrence, which may be deemed necessary in the context of a tense security environment in Japan’s neighbourhood, especially where tensions with North Korea and China run high. The Ministry of Defence also announced it was pursuing a budget increase of over two per cent for 2014, but many initiatives for capability upgrades slated in the budget were actually started before Mr Abe’s term.

Moreover, the development of an amphibious unit is neither inherently offensive nor anything unique given that similar units are fairly common throughout the region. Nonetheless, it sends a clear signal to other countries that Japan is willing and able to defend its territories if attacked. Mr Abe’s intention to revise the constitution is also likely to encounter opposition from a Japanese public still wary of any departure from pacifism.

As such, Japan’s capability improvement is not necessarily due to Mr Abe’s politics, but rather follows past trends, though the current administration has certainly given it a boost. Japan’s path towards a military with a greater international role is only to be expected given its past participation in supporting roles for overseas assignments like Operation Enduring Freedom, as well as in anti-piracy and humanitarian and disaster relief operations, for which amphibious capacity is also an enabler.

Defence engagement thrown off course

One of the stated aims of Japan’s military is regional defence engagement. Japan and China have had such engagements in the past, but many of these have been frozen. Regarding South Korea, Japan has made significant overtures recently, with the Self-Defence Force supplying ammunition to South Korean peacekeepers in South Sudan.

Notwithstanding the political wrangling that erupted between the two countries and within Japan itself in light of this move, it is a step towards Japan further enhancing its role as a major stakeholder in international security.

However, Mr Abe’s visit has thrown such good intentions off course. The Yasukuni shrine was built to commemorate the war dead from Japan’s past conflicts. But it is not this fact alone that is so repugnant to China and South Korea. A number of military personnel convicted of war crimes are also enshrined at Yasukuni.

Any visit by a Japanese head of state to the shrine is thus seen by both countries as evidence of Japan’s unrepentant attitude towards its conduct in World War II and its return to militarism, even if Mr Abe’s visit may have been motivated by domestic politics.

Implications for positive engagement

The shrine visit has three implications. Firstly, it is likely to stall any moves on Japan’s part for greater defence engagement with South Korea. Japan has indicated a willingness to reach out to its neighbour, as indicated rhetorically in the NDPG, and in action in South Sudan. But this engagement, much needed in the context of possible North Korean instability, would now be put on hold by South Korea.

Secondly, it would only serve to heighten tensions with China. Engagement for confidence building is required to prevent a potential incident from escalating, as rightly pointed out by the NDPG. With tensions running high after China’s establishment of its Air Defence Identification Zone over the East China Sea, this should be a priority. But again, with Mr Abe’s Yasukuni visit, this looks more remote than before.

Thirdly, it would also put a stress on the US-Japan alliance. The US has generally favoured a greater role for Japan’s military in international security, and sought to deepen military inter-operability between its own forces and those of Japan. As the US further strengthens its alliance with Japan, it would find itself needing to be more circumspect in the way it deals with its ally given Chinese sensitivities to the US rebalance.

While Japan’s military enhancement and greater international role will still go on unabated, what is likely to recede in the fallout is the political willingness of South Korea to cooperate with Japan, as well as of China for much needed dialogue to ease tensions. Trilateral US-Japan-South Korea cooperation will also suffer as a result. At a time when defence engagement is sorely needed to address rising tensions in the region, Mr Abe’s Yasukuni visit has only achieved the opposite.

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