

## China's growing assertiveness transforms Japan's security policy

19th July, 2014

Author: Jennifer Lind, Dartmouth College

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced on 1 July a decision to reinterpret the Japanese constitution, allowing Tokyo to militarily support partners that are under attack. Former prime minister Zenko Suzuki would approve. In 1981, Suzuki became the first Japanese leader to use the word 'alliance' to describe Japan's relationship with the United States. The seemingly innocuous word sounded alarmingly militaristic to many Japanese who, since their country's defeat in World War II, have been skittish of rearmament and involvement in overseas military operations.



The most recent change in Japanese defence policy is both remarkable and routine. It is remarkable to see Japan embracing what had been politically unthinkable. Yet the decision is routine in that it marks one of many such milestones in the country's evolving security posture.

After World War II, the Japanese constitution imposed severe restrictions on security policy. Article 9 of the constitution declares: 'Land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained'. In the aftermath of a defeat that left millions dead, the country's cities in ashes and sovereignty in the hands of the United States, Japan's people embraced Article 9 — and the country's political left vowed never again to go to war. The Japanese also feared entanglement in the Cold War and the hot wars of its US ally. Article 9 provided Japan with an institutional sanctuary from American adventures in Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf.

Yet reinterpretation of Article 9 began before the ink was dry on the constitution.

Many Japanese conservatives — some resentful of Japan's perceived emasculation, some fearful of US abandonment and others nostalgic for lost grandeur — wanted Japan to play a greater military role. Japan's moderate pro-alliance conservatives were supported by Washington, which was continually pressuring Tokyo to acquire more defence capabilities and engage in a wider array of alliance missions.

So, despite the constitution, Japanese leaders created the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in 1954, reinterpreting Article 9 as permitting military forces for defensive purposes. The 1954 law prevented the SDF from being dispatched overseas. But this too would later change. In the wake of US and global censure of Japan for its perceived free riding in the first Gulf War, Tokyo passed the Peacekeeping Operations Law in 1992 which permitted the overseas deployment of the SDF, albeit under highly restrictive conditions. For example, SDF peacekeepers could not be armed or sent to an area with ongoing hostilities.

Over time, Japan passed more milestones, loosening additional military constraints. In 2006, Tokyo elevated the Japan Defense Agency to a more politically influential Ministry of Defense, discarding previous restrictions on the policymaking influence of the Japanese military. Japan's 1967 Arms Export Ban, which was adopted to rein in a feared military-industrial complex, [was relaxed](#) <sup>[1]</sup> earlier this year.

Tokyo has also acquired military capabilities that were previously seen as taboo.

A 1969 Diet resolution prevented Japan from using space for military purposes. But Japan jettisoned this restriction in 1998 after North Korea lobbed a rocket over its territory, prompting Tokyo to acquire military satellites. And, although aircraft carriers were long seen as power-projection forces prohibited by the constitution, last year the SDF acquired the Izumo-class helicopter destroyer (which in any other country's fleet would be called an aircraft carrier). Over the years, several Japanese leaders have argued that nuclear weapons are consistent with Article 9, laying the groundwork for Japan to obtain those weapons.

But Japan's gradual relaxation of defence constraints should in no way suggest that the country is rearming with intent to once again commit aggression in East Asia.

Japan is a responsible democracy. Its citizens remain committed to peace and wary of involving their country in overseas military operations. In fact, when announcing the [reinterpretation of Article 9](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, Abe emphasised that his government would need legislative approval before the SDF could be sent to support an ally under attack. Clearly, Japan's postwar evolution is not a recidivist's inexorable march toward aggression.

An important lesson from Japan's post-World War II history is that Tokyo has reinterpreted and reformed its laws in keeping with [changing strategic conditions](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. A worrisome Soviet naval buildup in East Asia in the late 1970s led Suzuki (and his successor, Yasuhiro Nakasone) to move closer to the United States. Similarly, today China is modernising its navy and behaving with growing assertiveness in its territorial disputes as well as challenging US military access to East Asia. Tokyo is responding both by embracing the US-Japan alliance and by accepting more defence roles.

Japan's adoption of [new roles and capabilities](#) <sup>[4]</sup> has been neither automatic nor straightforward. Deep-seated antimilitarism prompted outrage against Suzuki in 1981 and motivated protesters in Tokyo to condemn Abe's recent announcement. But, as the Japanese perceive growing menace from Chinese capabilities and behaviour, this recent milestone in Japan's security evolution will not be the last.

*Jennifer Lind is an associate professor of government at Dartmouth College. She is the author of Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics (Cornell University Press, 2008).*

*This article first appeared [here](#) <sup>[5]</sup> on Aljazeera America.*

Article from the East Asia Forum: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org>

URL to article:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/19/chinas-growing-assertiveness-transforms-japan-s-security-policy/>

[1] was relaxed: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26830504>

[2] reinterpretation of Article 9:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/18/japans-article-9-will-it-be-revised-or-get-the-nobel-peace-prize/>

[3] changing strategic conditions:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/20/abe-and-japans-regional-diplomacy/>

[4] new roles and capabilities:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/21/can-japan-exercise-collective-self-defence-effectively/>

[5] here:

<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/7/japan-tokyo-shinzoabesecuritypolicychange-schina.html>