

Reconciling Japan's security policy with Northeast Asian stability

20th October, 2014

Author: Ben Ascione, ANU

On 1 July 2014, the Abe government made a cabinet decision to reinterpret the Article 9 peace clause of Japan's constitution to recognise the exercise of collective self-defence under limited circumstances. While the scope of the proposed changes are an evolution rather than a revolution in Japanese security policy, especially due to the tough negotiations with Abe's coalition partner New Komeito, furore and misconception have surrounded the move.



The cabinet decision addresses four areas. First is the remit for the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to respond to grey-area infringements short of an armed attack against Japan. Second is narrowing the definition of activities which are banned because they constitute an integral part in the use of force. This would enable the SDF to provide more rear-area logistical support from non-combat zones to 'armed forces of foreign countries engaging in activities for the security of Japan or for the peace and stability of the international community'.

The third area is the loosening of restrictions so that SDF personnel participating in UN peacekeeping operations will be able to use weapons in line with UN rules of engagement. The final area is allowing the SDF to come to the aid of a 'foreign country in a close relationship with Japan' if three conditions are satisfied: the attack threatens the Japanese people's constitutional right to 'life, liberty and pursuit of happiness'; there are no other means to repel the attack; and the use of force is limited 'to the minimum extent necessary'.

So why the backlash, given the limited scope of these changes? The UN Charter declares that collective self-defence is a prerogative of all sovereign states, and the cabinet decision merely seeks to move Japan from a total self-ban to partial recognition of this internationally recognised

right. Moreover, the Japanese Diet needs to amend a number of existing laws before the new interpretation can be implemented.

Abe has long called for formal revision of the constitution to abolish Article 9, but the military allergy — or anti-militarism — in Japan remains strong nearly 70 years after World War II. Defenders of Article 9 promote it as a model for Japan to hold up to the world, challenging the idea that the ability to go to war defines ‘normal’ state behaviour and confers prestige. They fear that Abe’s changes will provoke and entangle Japan in conflict rather than bolster the country’s security.

Japanese protesters also distrust Abe’s intentions and the ideology he represents. Ignoring popular sentiment, he recently forced through a state secrecy law and relaxed Japan’s weapons export ban. Abe also leads or participates in numerous parliamentary study groups with extreme revisionist convictions related to topics including history, patriotic education, the Yasukuni Shrine and the ‘comfort women’ issue. Abe does not have a broad mandate for change on any of these issues. The majority of the public would prefer him to focus on revitalising the economy.

There are pockets of support in Japan for Abe’s moves on security policy. Right-wing nationalists believe that Article 9 besmirches the honour of Japan’s imperial past and is a shackle to its just place as a fully sovereign state. But many moderate Japanese defence specialists have welcomed the cabinet decision on the grounds that the country’s security policy needs to respond to security challenges in the post-Cold War era.

Some have expressed frustration that the new move is a symbolic rather than a substantial recognition of the right to exercise collective self-defence. By their reckoning more should be done, including expanding the scope of permissible peacetime activities that the SDF can conduct with other nations to allow for enhanced contingency planning and joint military exercises. Legal inconsistencies due to the peculiarities of Japan’s positive list system of what functions the SDF may perform also need addressing.

But riding Abe’s wave to generate momentum and break through the military allergy and change Japan’s security policy has come with unwanted side effects. Japan’s relations with China and South Korea have hit unprecedented post-war lows, and the task of upgrading Japan’s security policy has been unnecessarily complicated by Abe’s stance on revisiting Japan’s history issues.

China and South Korea stress that Abe’s historical revisionism means he must not be trusted on collective self-defence. Such pronouncements, including during President Xi Jinping and President Park Geun-hye’s joint summit in Seoul in early July, offer an easy opportunity for cheap political point scoring at home. But Abe handed them the issue on a silver platter when he visited Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, where 14 class-A war criminals are enshrined, and by his government’s ‘re-examination’ of the Kono Statement on the treatment of wartime ‘comfort’ women.

The US, having long called for Japan to take on greater security roles commensurate with its

economic capacity, has welcomed the cabinet decision as a positive step to strengthen US–Japan alliance cooperation and increase Japan’s contributions to regional peace and stability. America’s support should also be understood in the context of President Obama’s emphasis on multilateral cooperation and the US ‘rebalancing’ to Asia.

With this approach to security it is hoped that Japan’s exercise of collective self-defence can contribute to alleviating some of the US defence budget pressures after the billions spent on Afghanistan and Iraq, the global financial crisis and the US government shutdown in October 2013. A sense of urgency is involved, as the US and Japan have declared their intent to upgrade their defence cooperation guidelines by the end of the year.

But for Japan to be able to say yes to collective self-defence in a more meaningful way, where it will truly be able to make ‘proactive contributions to peace’, it has to convince more than its own defence specialists and the United States. China, South Korea and the broader Japanese public also need to be brought on board. The domestic political dynamics in China and South Korea make this a complicated task. But there are a number of measures Japan can take to lay the groundwork.

First, the Japanese government must not undermine but strengthen official positions, such as the Kono Statement and the Murayama Statement, which acknowledge wartime transgressions. This should include a moratorium on Yasukuni Shrine visits by Japanese prime ministers.

Second, Abe’s assertion that the door for dialogue is always open must go beyond political rhetoric, and greater efforts must be taken to realise bilateral leaders’ summits with China and South Korea. A bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping while Abe is in Beijing for the APEC Leaders’ Meeting in November presents an excellent opportunity to start.

Third, Japanese, Chinese and South Korean leaders must publically acknowledge the mutual importance of the Japan–China and Japan–ROK bilateral relationships. The frame through which the public in each country perceives the bilateral relationship must be broadened to emphasise areas of cooperation rather than the relentless focus on the territorial disputes and history issues that dominate mainstream media. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands issue presents a particularly dangerous scenario and greater efforts from both countries are needed to reduce tensions and avoid an accident that could spark conflict. Establishing a military-military hotline to deal with emergencies would be a good first step.

Fourth, Japan’s cooperation with China and South Korea should be [boosted in areas of mutual importance](#) ^[1], such as the environment and energy efficiency.

Finally, military-level confidence-building among the three Northeast Asian states should be bolstered. The recent announcement of joint military exercises in Australia with China and the US under Exercise Kowari in October shows that such cooperation is possible. Such exercises could be expanded in the future to include Japan and South Korea.

China and South Korea have often interpreted Japan’s adherence to Article 9 as a message that the country is a non-actor in security affairs, with the underlying implication being that

Japan might still be a dangerous country were it not for the strict legal barriers and the US cork in the militarist bottle. Japan must emphasise its post-war record as a peaceful nation and demonstrate that it can play a positive and active role in security affairs that can be reconciled with the interests of all regional actors.

Ben Ascione is a PhD candidate in international relations at the Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, an associate researcher at the Japan Center for International Exchange, and an associate editor at the EAF Japan and North Korea desks.

This article appeared in the most recent edition of the [East Asia Forum Quarterly](#) ^[2], 'A Japan that can say 'yes' ^[3]'.

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

URL to article:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/10/20/reconciling-japans-security-policy-with-northeast-asian-stability/>

[1] boosted in areas of mutual importance: <http://www.jcie.or.jp/insights/9-3.html>

[2] East Asia Forum Quarterly: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/quarterly/>

[3] A Japan that can say

'yes': <http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/east-asia-forum-quarterly/volume-6-number-3-2014/>