

Why Japan's collective self-defence is so politicised

1st September, 2014

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On 1 July, the Abe Cabinet issued a [reinterpretation](#) ^[1] of Japan's longstanding self-imposed ban on the right of collective self-defence. It was justified as a minimalist countermeasure to the increasingly severe security environment posed by a rising China and an unpredictable, nuclearised North Korea. But the reinterpretation fell well short of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's long-cherished goal of formally amending the constitution and eradicating what he and others criticise as the Japan's over-reliance on US security guarantees as well as its [collective naiveté](#) ^[2] 'about the minimum necessary measures for our self-defence'.



Japan, Abe argues, must prepare to share security burdens commensurate with that of a 'responsible' global and regional power.

From this perspective, the reinterpretation represented little more than a logical next step in a long sequence of prior security changes, including: expanding the defence perimeter of the Maritime Self-Defense Forces; deploying the Self-Defense Forces abroad to support United Nations peacekeeping operations and US military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq; boosting the status of the Defense Agency to that of a full-fledged ministry; and enhancing trilateral military cooperation between the US, Australia and Japan.

But there has been widespread public criticism of the reinterpretation of Article 9 — thousands demonstrated, one man self-immolated at Shinjuku Station and the Abe cabinet's [approval rating](#) ^[3] fell to its lowest level since taking office at 45.2 per cent. In contrast, the US [Defense Department](#) ^[4] was quick to welcome the historic decision to enhance US-Japan alliance security cooperation in the Asia Pacific. While security analysts will differ on the inherent merits of collective self-defence per se, the decision raises two interwoven problems that are particularly worrisome.

First, the decision was made in a context of rapidly diminishing checks on executive authority. In past decades, the combination of a vigorous political left, internal Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) factionalism and electoral sensitivity provided partial checks on executive branch autonomy. Yet the 1994 electoral reforms, the Abe-led triumph in the 2012 elections and a distant electoral horizon stretching into 2016 have combined to eviscerate all three.

The [Cabinet Legislative Bureau](#) ^[5] (CLB) had previously been a stalwart voice declaring that Article 9 prohibited collective self-defence. But its new chairman, Abe-appointed acolyte Ichiro Komatsu, [quickly telegraphed his conviction](#) ^[6] that the cabinet, not the CLB, should decide matters of constitutionality, declaring: ‘It is not correct for the Cabinet Legislation Bureau unilaterally to decide “left” when the cabinet is thinking “right”’. Japan’s public broadcaster, NHK — which is rarely the most independent of voices, but is legally obliged to be non-partisan — was further muzzled by four right-leaning [Abe appointees](#) ^[7] who explicitly committed NHK to toeing the government line.

Also, a sweeping 2013 [state secrecy law](#) ^[8] now gags government whistle-blowers. And the once fulsome opposition to collective self-defence reinterpretation by the LDP’s coalition partner, New Komeito, evaporated once the party faced the choice between its peace-oriented principles and bringing down the Abe government.

None of this is to suggest that Japan remains anything less than a vibrant democracy, but executive power — in the absence of meaningful checks — risks evolving into an ‘unguarded guardian’.

Second, and equally troubling, are the nationalistic trappings surrounding collective self-defence. Frictions following the decision might have been eased if Abe had focused the bulk of his policy efforts on his key election promise: restructuring the national economy. Collective self-defence could then have been packaged as just one small piece of a multifaceted effort to resuscitate Japanese leadership across a range of issues.

But, before and after taking office, Abe has repeatedly challenged Article 9, dismissing the constitution as a sovereignty-eviscerating manifestation of ‘victor’s justice’. Equally vociferous are his claims that Japan’s pre-war history has been unfairly castigated. Abe’s scepticism about the merits of prior apologies for the Japanese government’s wartime behaviour, including its role in providing sex slaves for the Japanese military, has also been divisive.

Abe has justified politically provocative [visits to Yasukuni Shrine](#) ^[9] by senior politicians, including his own in December 2013, as no more than manifestations of personal spiritual ‘beliefs’. And [Taro Aso](#) ^[10], the deputy prime minister and finance minister, was caught in a gaffe where he suggested that Japan could learn from the Nazis’ stealth in revising a democratic constitution. In such a climate it is impossible to evaluate security-based arguments concerning collective self-defence solely on their merits. Instead, they are tabled as no more than appetisers whetting the palate for a larger entrée of revisionist nationalism.

Collective self-defence in itself is likely to have minimal short-to-medium term impact on Japan’s grand security strategy. Yet, in the context of sweeping historical revisionism and

executive overreach, the constitutional reinterpretation provides an easy-to-wallop piñata for nationalistic South Korean and Chinese leaders anxious to bolster their own domestic support. In addition to poisoning a once blossoming trilateral cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea, recent Abe-led actions have also stymied [trilateral security cooperation](#) ^[11] among erstwhile allies Japan, South Korea and the US. The end result will likely be a more regionally isolated and less tolerant Japan.

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

URL to article:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/09/02/why-japans-collective-self-defence-is-so-political/>

[1] reinterpretation : http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000273.html

[2] collective naiveté:

<http://www.voanews.com/content/japan-ease-restrictions-on-collective-self-defense/1948254.html>

[3] approval rating:

http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/japan-s-parliament-begins/1264534.html?cid=TWTCNA&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

[4] Defense Department:

http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201407120020

[5] Cabinet Legislative Bureau: <http://www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp99.html>

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[8] state secrecy law:

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[9] visits to Yasukuni Shrine:

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[10] Taro Aso:

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[11] trilateral security cooperation:

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