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Japan's Changing Security Policies: Much Ado About (Almost) Nothing

If Japan re-interprets Article Nine of its Constitution, will it then pursue more forceful foreign and security policies? Not according to Axel Berkofsky. Domestic politics and Tokyo's long-standing partnership with the West will prevent it from jettisoning its traditional emphasis on self-defense.

By Axel Berkofsky for ISN

While alarmist Chinese policymakers and scholars might beg to differ, the Abe government's recent decision to re-interpret Article 9 of Japan's constitution will not result in Tokyo developing a new and increasingly aggressive set of foreign and security policies. Yes, Shinzo Abe might have wanted to do more than just enable Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defense. However, both he and his fellow revisionists were obliged to settle for just a constitutional re-interpretation as opposed to the kind of revision that would 'restore Japan's national dignity.' As a result, fears in Beijing, Seoul and beyond that the remilitarization of Japan is on the horizon are undoubtedly misplaced. They have Japan's domestic politics and its ties to the West to thank for that.

What Abe wanted (and didn't get)

Put simply, Shinzo Abe wants a Self-Defense Force that reflects his determination to make Japan a more assertive presence on the global stage. To achieve this, Japanese soldiers must be able to undertake the type of activities that counterparts in other 'normal' countries take for granted. This includes the ability to become more heavily involved in bilateral and/or multilateral military operations that extend way beyond Japanese territory. In doing so, Tokyo would be sending out a strong message to the likes of China at a time of heightened tensions across the Asia-Pacific region.

Yet the chances of Abe fulfilling this ambition remain very much at the mercy of Japan's complex domestic politics. To begin, a major overhaul of the constitution requires the adoption of ten amendments to existing laws, a contentious process that could take years of negotiations and horse trading. In addition, all amendments require two-thirds support from the House of Representatives and Councillors, followed by the approval of a national referendum. To stand any chance of success, Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) would also have to convince its coalition partner that constitutional reform is necessary.

That's never going to be easy, given the Komeito Party's pacifist credentials and 'hardline' approach to Article 9. It maintains that Japan's self-defense forces should remain strictly limited to responding

to the type of military activities that unambiguously constitute a direct attack on Japanese territory. Intercepting North Korean missiles bound for the United States over Japanese air space and fighting alongside Western partners in Afghanistan remain strictly off limits. Accordingly, what Komeito expects of Japanese soldiers at home and abroad remains fundamentally different from its senior coalition partners.

This has resulted in a re-interpretation of Article 9 that is very much in keeping with the core principles of the Komeito Party. Under the new conditions for defense mobilization, Japan's self-defense forces will only be [dispatched to support allies](#) under attack on the condition that the attack poses a clear danger to Japan and the rights of its citizens. Consequently, Japan will not be acquiring the ability to engage in high-intensity combat in East Asia and beyond any time soon. Indeed, Japanese troops deployed on peacekeeping missions will continue to rely on their partners for the protection of their facilities, much like that provided by Australia and the Netherlands in southern Iraq between 2004 and 2005.

Ties that bind

Simon Chelton, the former British defense attaché to Japan, is one of a growing band of observers that think Abe's bid reinterpret Article 9 is a triumph of branding over substance. He believes [that changes to Japan's defense policies](#) that actually pre-date the LDP initiative bind Tokyo even closer to the United States and other Western partners, making a more assertive military posture highly unlikely. Indeed, the upcoming revision of the US-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation (last revised in 1997) should provide further evidence that any changes to Tokyo's defense posture will be gradual as opposed to radical. It's widely expected, for example, that the revisions will only result in the expansion of Japan's so-called 'rear area support' for US military operations. That's hardly going to put the Self-Defense Forces on the frontline. Indeed, it's highly likely that the bilateral security alliance between Washington and Tokyo will continue to be regarded in some quarters as the 'cork on the bottle' of Japanese World War II-style militarism.

Silver Linings?

However, Shinzo Abe and his fellow defense and security hawks can nevertheless console themselves with the prospect of Japan's defense industries making their presence more keenly felt in the global marketplace. On April 1, the Diet lifted the country's decades-old ban on exporting weapons and associated technology. Developed at the height of the Cold War, the ban prevented Tokyo from selling weapons to communist states, countries involved in conflicts and states subject to UN weapons embargoes. Indeed, the ban had already been partially abolished in 2011 to allow Japanese contractors to cooperate with US counterparts on joint weapons development and production. As a result of the legislative changes, Japan is now only forbidden from exporting weapons to conflict-prone states or countries with the potential to undermine international security.

Lifting the export ban was naturally music to the ears of Japan's defense industry, a sector that has traditionally accounted for less than 1 percent of the country's total industrial production. Unsurprisingly, the Abe government has worked quickly to try to redress the balance. In the days following the end of the embargo, for example, Tokyo outlined its determination to become a regional maintenance hub for F-35 fighter aircraft belong to Australia, South Korea and the United States. More recently, Japan signed a bilateral agreement with Australia for the transfer of defense technology, and has plans to enter into similar arrangements with Vietnam and the Philippines.

Indeed, further reforms might be in the offing. For instance, the Abe government also wants to revise Japan's official development assistance (ODA) charter and assign parts of the annual \$10 billion budget to train foreign armed forces. While large parts of the budget will continue to be assigned to infrastructure development and poverty reduction, funds could be reassigned for assistance and training to non-combat operations, such as military-led disaster relief. Reforming the ODA charter might eventually lead to Japan providing training, ships and coast guard support to other countries embroiled in territorial disputes with China. Japan's provision (and possible leadership) of such activities could quite easily fall under the rubric of 'low-intensity security cooperation', a term that sits comfortably with the country's pacifist sensibilities.

The view from...

So, has Tokyo's far less ambitious revision of Article 9 actually done enough to convince the likes of China that Japan is not intent on becoming a more assertive military power? Probably not, is the short answer. After all, the annual budget for the Self-Defense Forces is roughly \$50 billion, a figure that easily puts Japan among the world's top military spenders. And let's not forget that the Self-Defense Forces number almost 250,000 active personnel, with approximately 60,000 reservists at its disposal. That's a lot of spending and manpower for a supposedly pacifist country.

The growing presence of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and coast guard (albeit for 'low-intensity security cooperation' purposes) in the contested waters of the East China Sea will undoubtedly be a cause for concern in Beijing. China will also watch the revision of the US-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation with great interest. The prospect of the JMSDF, coast guard and US forces jointly repelling a Chinese attempt to reclaim the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands might lead to a period of strategic reappraisal within the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Consequently, tensions are likely to remain high throughout East Asia, even if recent changes to Japan's defense and security posture are much ado about (almost) nothing.

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