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# Japan Under Shinzo Abe: 'Too Nationalist for the Rest of Asia?

Tokyo's nationalist rhetoric and actions in recent months have left analysts wondering -- is Japan abandoning its post-War pacifism in favor of a more aggressive approach? According to Axel Berkofsky, such anxiety forgets that the overwhelming majority of the country is opposed to such a change.

By Axel Berkofsky for ISN

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Six months into his second term as Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe's policies are beginning to raise eyebrows. While the adoption of what is dubbed "Abenomics" - a mix of economic stimulus packages and massive quantitative easing - has led the Nikkei Index to surge by more than 40%, as well as boosted exports and corporate profits (due to the Yen losing roughly 25 per cent of its value against the US dollar), the prime minister's nationalism and, increasingly, historical revisionism are alarming the country's friends and foes in the region and beyond.

When Abe, a nationalist politician with a decade-long track record of attempts to revise or downplay Japan's history of militarism and imperialism, took power last December, he initially acted against his instincts and focused on economic and monetary policies. After that brief period of self-restraint, however, Abe changed focus and now questions universally acknowledged facts about Japanese history immediately before and during World War II.

Backed up by 70% approval rates, the list of statements and policies with a nationalist and revisionist undertone is getting longer. "Now that he's riding high in the polls, he feels he doesn't have to restrain himself", concludes Jun Iio, professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, in an interview with the [Japan Times](#).

## Revising Japanese Militarism and Imperialism

On April 25, Abe questioned the aggressive character of Japan's World War II colonialism when he announced a revision of Japan's official 1995 apology for its wartime aggression. The definition of "aggression" used to describe the country's World War II policies in Asia, Abe claimed, was [hard to establish](#). "The definition of what constitutes an invasion has yet to be established in academia or in the international community", Abe said in the Japanese parliament, adding that "Things that happened between nations will look different depending on which side you view them from."

By any standard, Japanese policies in the 1930s and 1940s would have felt like 'aggression' to the

large parts of Asia that were under Japanese occupation or control. In denial of universally acknowledged historical facts, LDP policymakers and lawmakers have regularly claimed that Japanese imperialism and colonialism should not be referred to as such. Instead, they argue that Japan conducted a 'war of liberation', i.e. a war liberating Asia from Western colonial powers at the time.

At the risk of damaging relations with South Korea, Abe also questioned whether South Korean 'comfort women' (i.e. South Korean women who were forced to work as prostitutes for Japan's Imperial Army during Japan's wartime occupation of the Korean Peninsula) actually did so against their will. Scientific research and historians, Abe maintains, have yet to establish whether they were forced into prostitution or whether instead – as Abe seems to suggest – they did so voluntarily. Leaving aside the fact that much independent research has produced evidence of the former, Tokyo -- under then-prime minister Tomiichi Murayama in 1994-- has already acknowledged its role in the episode by establishing the 'Asian Women's Fund' to financially compensate former South Korean 'comfort women.'

And there is more on Abe's policy agenda that is bound to cause diplomatic irritation among its neighbors. For example, an LDP education committee has already suggested scrapping the so-called "neighbouring country clause" in guidelines for Japanese school textbooks. The clause states that textbook authors are advised to take relations with Japan's neighbors into account when dealing with Japanese World War II policies and colonialism.

### **Celebrating with the Emperor**

The prime minister also decided that April 28 will from now on be Japan's 'National Restoration Day.' On that day, the Japanese Emperor for the first time accepted the prime minister's invitation to celebrate the anniversary of the end of the US military [occupation](#). While Abe claimed that 'National Restoration Day' would give Japan 'hope for the future and help the country to become resolute and strong', critics of the event argue that, in his constitutional role as a 'symbol' of the state (as formulated in Article 1 of the Japanese Constitution), the emperor should not even have been allowed at the ceremony, given the politically-charged nature of the [event](#).

Japan's post-war US-drafted constitution degraded the former 'head of state' to 'symbol of state' to strip the Emperor of any political power given his support for Japanese imperialism. Inviting the Emperor to a ceremony celebrating the end of US occupation is part of decades-old revisionist campaign to restore the Emperor as Japan's 'head of state' (in order to restore Japan's 'Japaneseness' and 'full sovereignty', as the revisionists typically claim), or so it is feared among moderate constitutional scholars in Japan.

### **Visiting Yasukuni**

"My ministers will not yield to any kind of intimidation," Abe said in parliament after a visit on April 23 of 168 parliamentarians to the controversial Yasukuni Shinto shrine in downtown Tokyo, which is the final resting place of 2 million fallen Japanese soldiers, including 14 convicted class-A war [criminals](#).

The visitors to the controversial shrine, among them Abe's deputy and finance minister Taro Aso, refused to acknowledge that there was a direct connection between their visit and China dispatching vessels to the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands and South Korea cancelling an official [visit to Japan](#).

To Beijing and Seoul, visits to the Yasukuni shrine indicate that a good number of LDP lawmakers are willing to let righteous nationalism prevail over common sense and the need to maintain stable relations with the country's main trading partners in the region.

## Getting Rid of Pacifism...

Speaking of priorities, an opinion poll conducted by Japan's second biggest newspaper, the Asahi Shimbun showed that while half of the respondents supported the prime minister's economic and monetary policies, less than 15 per cent support his foreign policy. More tellingly, only six per cent in the Asahi poll were in favor of Abe's plans to revise the constitution's Article 9, which renounces war. Nevertheless, Abe has announced his intention to make constitutional revision the core issue of the upcoming Upper House election campaign.

According to Abe and like-minded LDP members, Article 9 stands in the way of Japan being a 'truly sovereign' country, as it strictly prohibits the country from maintaining armed forces (which is why Japan's military is referred to as the 'Self-Defence Forces'). Of course, the war-renouncing clause does not prevent Japan from spending almost \$50 billion per year on its state-of-the-art armed forces. Only the US, China and Russia spend more on defence than the officially pacifist Japan.

Moreover, Abe also plans to change the interpretation of Article 9 that prevents the country from exercising the right to collective self-defence as formulated in Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Allowing itself the right to collective self-defence would, e.g., authorize Japan's armed forces to fight alongside the US military in the event of a regional conflict.

To be sure, another December 12, 2012-style political earthquake would be required for the main revisionist parties – the ruling LDP, the Japan Restoration Party and the Your Party – to win the two-thirds majority (that it holds in the Lower House) in the Upper House after elections in July, not least because only half of the chamber's 242 seats will be contested.

In order to do that, Japan's pro-revision forces would need to double their share of the seats up for grabs in the upcoming election in order to secure the 162 votes necessary to revise the requirements for constitutional revision contained in Article 96 of the Japanese constitution. Article 96 stipulates that constitutional revision requires a two-thirds majority in both chambers of the parliament (and would then have to be followed by a national referendum). Abe and his LDP want to cut the requirement for constitutional revision to 50% of the lawmakers in both chambers of the parliament.

## ... And Revising Human and Civil Rights?

According to Setsu Kobayashi, a constitutional scholar at Keio University in Tokyo, this is exactly what advanced democracies should not do. "A (modern) constitution is something to protect the rights of the people from abuse of power by the state. LDP members don't understand at all the basics of what a (modern) constitution should be," argues Kobayashi in an [interview](#) with the Japan Times.

As if to illustrate this point, the LDP's draft constitution (approved by the party last year) would also revise the basic concept of universal human rights, which, according to the LDP, are ill-suited for Japan's traditional culture and values. To make the constitution more 'Japanese', the LDP draft constitution deletes a guarantee of basic human rights and prescribes duties, such as submission to an undefined "public interest and public order". Japan's military, the LDP draft constitution suggests further, would be authorized to maintain that "public order."

In the context of past Japanese authoritarianism, Tokyo's recent displays of nationalism, and its attempts to underplay or re-interpret established facts and events, Japan today might seem like a nationalist, revisionist country seeking to re-write its history.

But that would be an inaccurate picture of Japan. With the exception of a small minority of the electorate, most of the country still opposes a revised constitution, 'real' armed forces and

pilgrimages to Yasukuni as much as it wants economic growth, higher wages and good relations with its neighbours.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Japan's Possible Entry Into the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Its Implications](#)

[Shinzo Abe's Government](#)

[Japanese Politics: "Season Three"](#)

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