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Japan's Rising Security Challenges

By Barry Desker and Bhuhindar Singh

Synopsis

Japan's decision to reinterpret its pacific constitution to allow the right to collective defence has angered China. It is crafting a more active role in security and defence in response to rising instability in Northeast Asia.

Commentary

ON 1 JULY 2014, the Japanese cabinet decided to "reinterpret" its post-World War Two pacifist constitution by allowing the right to collective self-defence. This marks the end of Japan's self-imposed ban on military assistance to an ally under attack and would allow the overseas deployment of the Japanese military. China immediately condemned the decision.

The Abe government has taken significant steps to boost Japan's defence posture. It has strengthened Japan's navy and air force, enhanced its patrol and surveillance capabilities and is building an amphibious capability. Japan and the US are in the process of revising the US-Japan Guidelines for Defence Cooperation for the first time since 1997. These measures are supported by Abe's defence budget increases, which reversed the 11-year trend of reducing defence budgets.

Removing constraints on security policy

Shinzo Abe is reforming the post-war agenda and removing constraints that have prevented Japan from pursuing an activist security policy. But these developments have been criticised in Beijing and Seoul. The level of suspicion towards Japan reached its peak when Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, becoming the first Japanese prime minister to visit Yasukuni in seven years. These suspicions were reinforced by the release of a report on World War Two sex slaves in June this year. The report claimed that the 1993 Japanese Government apology resulted from behind-the-scenes negotiations with South Korea and suggested that it was not based on solid evidence, opening the way for pressure to retract the apology in the future.

However, Japanese security policy measures undertaken by Abe are part of a long-term trend since the early 1990s that point to Japan crafting a more active role in security and defence affairs. Japan's actions should be seen as defensive measures in response to the rising instability in the Northeast Asian region. The build-up of defence capabilities reflects Japan's emergence as a normal state.

Long-term trajectory

An early measure was the incorporation of humanitarian and disaster relief operations, including peacekeeping, into the Self-Defence Force (SDF)'s mandate. With the passing of the 'Law Concerning Cooperation for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Other Operations' in 1992, the SDF was authorised to participate in United Nations-mandated peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs).

Japan has also expanded the responsibilities of Japan's Self-Defence Force (SDF) in the context of the US-Japan security alliance. The SDF is now authorised to provide active rear-area support to US forces not only during a direct attack on Japan (as stipulated by the 1978 US-Japan Defence Cooperation Guidelines and Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty) but also during contingencies in the Asia Pacific region that have an impact on Japanese security. More recently, Japan participated in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, expanding the area of deployment of its defence forces.

Other developments in Japanese security policy include Japan's contribution to the international anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and diversification of strategic partnerships beyond the US to include strategic partnerships with Australia, India, Philippines and Vietnam.

The enhanced role of the military in the formulation of security policy was highlighted by the elevation of the Japan Defence Agency (JDA) to Japan's Ministry of Defence (JMOD) in 2007.

Enhancing regional stability

These Japanese actions should not be perceived as deliberate attempts to destabilise the regional security environment. They are a reaction to the rising levels of perceived threats from North Korea and China and a response to growing American criticism of Japan as a 'free rider' benefitting from the umbrella provided by US defence expenditure.

North Korea's continued development of its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities worries Japan. Defence planners are pre-occupied with responding to a nuclear warhead on a missile targeted at Japan.

China's strategic rise is another long-term concern for Japan. The rapid increase and lack of transparency in Chinese defence expenditure is an immediate source of anxiety. Although still a distant second to the US (which spends four-and-a-half times more than China), Chinese defence expenditure dwarfs the Japanese defence budget.

China has added an aircraft carrier to its naval fleet to facilitate its capability to project power, developed stealth fighter jets (J-20) to boost its air force capability, and is able to destroy or disable another nation's military assets from afar by deploying anti-ship/carrier missiles, modern submarines and cyber and anti-satellite weapons.

For Japan, China is perceived as unilaterally threatening the existing international order. Some examples include China's declaration of an Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013 covering the East China Sea, and Chinese behaviour in the East China and South China seas. Recent exchanges between Japanese and Chinese representatives at international meetings have been reminiscent of the Cold War, when the US and Soviet Union accused each other of increasing tensions and being provocative.

Peace and stability in Northeast Asia requires the emergence of strong, stable regimes committed to cooperating with one another and building an increasingly integrated region. A dynamic Japan is therefore a source of stability.

Effective domestic institutions within Japan, the pacifism of large sections of its population and active civil society provide reassurance while the resilience of the US-Japan military alliance acts as a constraint on Japanese adventurism.

Negative domestic actions

Nevertheless, Japan's denial of its World War Two role has undermined its effort to develop the defence capabilities of any normal state. Its image regionally and internationally has been tarnished by denying past events. Japan should refrain from behaviour that escalates bilateral tensions.

It is important for Japan to engage its immediate neighbours, China and South Korea. These three countries should strengthen defence and foreign ministry interactions and embark on confidence building measures. Unless Japan's relations with its immediate neighbours improve, it will be constrained in playing a wider role in international affairs.

Barry Desker is the Dean, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and Bhubhindar Singh is an Associate Professor at RSIS. A version of this commentary was published in The Straits Times.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg