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# A LOOK INTO JAPAN'S REMILITARIZATION

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Japan's remilitarization will lead to major shift in the geopolitical balance in East Asia. Japan seems to have already taken steps towards remilitarization. The expanding role of Self Defence Forces (SDF) demonstrates that Japan has started to increase its defence and become more militarized. Currently, Japan's self-defence force – the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF), which has maintained an anti-piracy base in the Horn of Africa, mandated to use lethal force where necessary as part of an overseas contingent in South Sudan. Japan has been an active contributor to collective security; however, after 9/11, Japan sent naval ships to the Indian Ocean to support the US military in Afghanistan, and in 2004 dispatched peacekeepers to Iraq to support the US occupation. Thereafter, there was to be seen expansions in Japan's military role in which Japan increased its military contribution at times of elevated threat. Scholars dealing in Japanese studies have repeatedly pointed out that since the end of Cold War, the developments in the region such as North Korean efforts to develop

nuclear weapons and Chinese misadventures have alarmed the Japanese state. The fear of Japan's remilitarization has not been repulsed by all in the region. There is no denying the fact that Japan's past military aggression continues to shape public opinion in many of its neighbouring countries. It is important to note here that since becoming the prime minister of Japan in 2012, Shinzo Abe has been pursuing abrogation of Japan's pacifist position.

Japan has used the term 'remilitarization' during the Meiji period. Meiji Japan adopted two basic national policies: *fukoku* (enrich the country) and *kyohei* (strengthen the military). The two Japanese victories over China and Korea (1894-1895) are worth mentioning in order to understand the contemporary changes in the security doctrine of Japan. This can be deemed as one of the various causes of tense relations with China.<sup>1</sup> China and Japan are locked in a difficult relationship, with heavy historical baggage. Although there are glimmers of Chinese 'new thinking' about Japan, the history issue, deep

societal antipathy and substantial strategic divergences keep the political relationship from progressing the way the bilateral economic relationship has grown. Japan–China tensions therefore simmer on, with the risk that a crisis over Taiwan or some other issue will plunge the East Asian giants into a cold war.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary geopolitics is determined by the relative decline of U.S. dominance in Asia, a belligerent North Korea and China's steady modernizing its armed forces and acting increasingly assertive in its territorial disputes (South China Sea and East China Sea). On the hand, Japan's explicit dependence on the U.S. nuclear protection has enabled the country to maintain a "pacifistic" security strategy, showing a lack of concern about the possibility of a nuclear attack by any other country. Even after the late 1970s, when the Soviet threat intensified once again, Japan did not bother to make any fundamental changes in its non-nuclear doctrine. North Korea's nuclear weapons program has resulted in global concern about Japan's nuclear posture. A number of Japanese defence analysts noted that a very strong conventional defence capability could take the place of the nuclear power.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has stated his desire to revise the Japanese constitution implemented by 2020, more specifically the peace clause that denounces Japan's rights to possess the means to wage a war. Abe's intention is basically to move

Japan away from its post-World War II pacifist posture towards a more active one in the Indo-Pacific security environment. And also emergence of new threats such as terrorism and cyberattacks, Japan feels that it needs to contribute more actively to the peace and stability of the region and the international community, while coordinating with other countries. In retrospect, Japan's rewritten constitution under the auspices of the allied powers, principally the United States, which came into effect in 1947, is argued to have uprooted the country's entire political system and imposed Article 9 on the Japanese constitution. As part of his plans to revise the constitution, Abe's new budget request is 5,255 billion yen in military spending (USD 48.1 billion) or 2.5% of Japan's GDP for fiscal year 2018. The budget increase would allow for new land-based missile defence systems to monitor space and detect potential launches from North Korea to be introduced. Earlier, in May 2017, Abe pledged to amend the constitution by 2020. When describing his vision and timeline, he aimed to revise Article 9 by "keeping the two pacifist clauses intact, while adding a third clause that would legitimize the constitutional status of the Japan SDF."<sup>3</sup>

The uniqueness of Article 9 is that, it explicitly states that Japan may never build, or maintain, a military force with war-waging capabilities. It specifically states that "in order to accomplish this aim ("aspiring sincerely to an

international peace based on justice and order...”) land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained and the right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Japan’s security policy has become much more globalized due to a fear of potential abandonment on the one hand and the growing potential threat posed by North Korea and territorial disputes with China on the other hand. However, this fear of abandonment has shifted the Japanese foreign policy in a pro-active direction hence the Japanese Self-Defence Forces have also become more prone to become entangled in US security concerns and major third-party conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the time has come for Japan to make strong presence in the East Asian security issue such as the traditional Regional Security Complex (RSC); the main actors (Japan and China) are sensitive to each other’s movement or securitization processes. Since the mid-2000s, the Japanese government has committed itself to go beyond technical research and embarked to introduce and procure Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) programmes. Also, Japan is rebalancing its defence budget. Presently, Japan has become more nationalistic and militarized than taking a defensive posture in the past.

Furthermore, legitimizing the SDF proved to be controversial as many interpret it to be a violation of the “war potential” prohibition in the first two clauses of Article 9. Rather than

changing the entire constitution, Abe calculated that adding to it would provoke less popular resistance, and thus proposed that the article only be revised to clearly legitimize and grant special constitutional status of the SDF.

To conclude, for Japan revising Article 9 will not be an easy task. This is because of the strong public resistance, who favours aligning with its longstanding ideals of goodwill and diplomacy, and widespread fear of a resurgence of the country’s militarist past. The strengthening of Japan’s military jeopardizes peacekeeping efforts with China which may result to instability and tension in the region. Lastly, should Abe succeed in revising the constitution, the dangers of developing brinkmanship and an arms race between Japan and North Korea could implicate countries beyond Eastern borders.<sup>6</sup>

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Japan’s Remilitarization: Implications For Regional Security – Analysis”, June 18, 2018, Available at <https://www.eurasiareview.com/18062018-japans-remilitarization-implications-for-regional-security-analysis/>, accessed 14 October 2018.

<sup>2</sup> “The sources and limits of Sino-Japanese tensions”, 19 July 2006, Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396330500156495>, accessed on 14 October 2018.

<sup>3</sup> “A Case for Japan’s Remilitarization”, 12 November 2017, Available at

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<https://www.mironline.ca/case-for-japan-remilitarization/>, accessed on 15 October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The Remilitarization of Japan, Explained, 10 May 2017, Available at <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201705101053473382-japan-remilitarization-abe/>, accessed on 15 October 2018

<sup>5</sup> David Adebahr, Japan's Security Policy in the 21st Century New Implications for an Old Strategy? 2013, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

