



BULLETIN

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Towards Proactive Pacifism or New Militarism? Bolstering Japan's Security Posture

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Shinzo Abe's accelerated efforts to modify Japan's security policy through decisions to set up a government-led Security Council, draft the first security strategy and revise the defence guidelines, demonstrate the new concept of "proactive pacifism." The government is considering lifting self-imposed bans on collective self-defence and arms exports, and revising the constitution. The aforementioned plans, together with Abe's assertive stance, spark unease in East Asia. V4 countries should use the 2014 V4+Japan Exchange Year for strengthening security dialogue with Japan.

Context. After World War II, Japan's security policy was founded on a defensive approach, and based on the imperative to break decisively from Japan's militaristic past. This stance is visible in the pacifist constitution imposed by the United States, Article 9 of which renounced war, and in the U.S.-Japan treaty on mutual cooperation and security, with the U.S. as a guarantor of Japan's security. Additional principles, such as the self-imposed bans on exercising collective self-defence and on arms exports, were traditionally supported by Japanese society, even if they undermine Japan's position as a "normal" state. They limit the external activities of Japan's Self-Defence Forces to humanitarian operations, and prohibit the use of weapons for offensive purposes and assisting partners in military conflict, which means that the country is not a fully-fledged ally of the United States. Export restrictions result in loss of revenues for Japan's contractors. Although there are examples of bypassing the rules (for example, the anti-piracy operation in Gulf of Aden, and the refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean to support the U.S. in Afghanistan, which were in fact collective self defence operations, while in 2011, export of defence-related equipment to support peace-building or humanitarian objectives was allowed), Japan's defence principles tie the government's hands in the security domain. But nevertheless there was a consensus in Japan that the principles should not be changed.

In recent months one can observe attempts to modify this approach. The main reason is the shift of power in the Asia-Pacific region, mainly the raise of China, including its military modernisation and more assertive stance, threats from North Korea, and a desire to improve Japan's international status and defence capabilities. The other rationale is raising nationalism, used as a tool for underlining Japan's increased clout under the new leadership. Abe, contrary to his predecessors, seems to feel strong enough to change Japan's security policy. In recent months, parliament and government have adopted important security-related bills, while Abe has made some assertive and sensitive moves triggering concerns in Japan's neighbourhood.

Security-Related Decisions. In November, the Japanese parliament established the U.S.-style National Security Council, a revision of the nine-member Security Council that had existed since 1986, chaired by the prime minister and embracing the defence and foreign ministers and the chief cabinet secretary. The new body centralises management of security issues, facilitates internal coordination, and creates a better channel for direct cooperation with Japan's allies, mainly the U.S.

A few days later, government adopted a series of security-related bills. Among them was the first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS)—an overall foreign and security agenda, and a revision of the National Defense Programme Guideline (NDPG) adopted in 2010. Rationales for these decisions are severe changes in the security environment around Japan, such as threats of ballistic missile attacks from Pyongyang and attempts by Beijing to change status quo in the region, especially in maritime and air domains, as well as the perils of cyber attacks and terrorism. Tokyo

intends to improve its international status and be an active global power. This course might also be interpreted as a consequence of Japanese concerns about the quality of its alliance with the United States, as the American “pivot” has not resulted in its involvement in East Asia disputes. Japan’s new approach is called “proactive contribution to peace.” Emphasis is placed on deterring threats to Japan’s territory, sovereignty and integrity, improving the security environment including maritime security (for example, the protection of remote Japanese islands), and strengthening the alliance with the U.S. and cooperation with South Korea, Australia, ASEAN and India.

Cabinet has also modified Japan’s Mid-Term Defense Programme (2014–2018), announcing the purchase of military equipment and a rise in defence spending by 5% over five years. What is more, parliament adopted the controversial Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets, which includes a wide definition of official secrets, and which curbs public access to information for the sake of state security, in order, for example to facilitate intelligence sharing with Japan’s allies, especially the U.S.

Abe’s Assertive Stance. Apart from parliamentary and governmental decisions, Abe presents a political course which might be perceived as a response to rising nationalism in Japan and requirements from his political base to pursue a more right-wing policy.

In December 2013, celebrating his first year in office, Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto temple commemorating those who died for the emperor, including war criminals convicted in the Tokyo trial (1946–1948, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East tried Japanese criminals for wartime deeds). It was the first visit by an incumbent premier since 2006 and Abe was aware that this move would infuriate China and Korea. Moreover, there are other plans controversial for Japan’s neighbours, such as a revision of manuals for teachers and school textbooks. Changes will probably tackle contentious issues, including the death toll of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre—Japan argues that China’s estimates are overrated—and the role of the Japanese army in the “comfort women” issue, a euphemistic term for sexual abuse of Asian women by the Japanese army. Tokyo claims that there is no convincing evidence that its army played a direct role in the process. What is more, the government intends to add information to manuals and textbooks, stating that the island territories of Senkaku/Diaoyu (claimed by both Japan and China), and Takeshima/Dokdo (claimed by Japan and South Korea) are inherent Japanese territory. Abe’s party is working on a law to identify and then repatriate the bodies of Japanese troops killed in Asian states during the Second World War, while there is also a suggestion that farewell letters written by Kamikaze pilots should be submitted to the UNESCO Memory of the World programme.

All these steps, especially Yasukuni’s visit and alterations to textbooks, have infuriated South Korea and China, which have expressed strong indignation and severe condemnation. For Abe, the aim of the ostentatiously presented assertiveness is to restore the country’s reputation tarnished by the global perception of Japan’s wartime deeds.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The bills adopted have not changed the foundations of Japan’s defence-oriented policy. Nevertheless, they manifest a conceptual shift in Tokyo’s security stance. More emphasis than before is put on threats from China, mainly the potential clash over the Senkaku islands. Moreover, the new guidelines indirectly suggest lifting the ban on arms exports, while slogans of proactive pacifism might be perceived as a signal for preparing ground for Japan’s participation in collective self defence operations. In that sense, the bills might be perceived as a springboard for significant changes, which may pave the way for Japan’s active participation in military actions beyond its territory, changing the country’s security philosophy.

Yet it is uncertain whether all the proposed changes will be endorsed, as the junior coalition partner is reluctant, undermining Abe’s plans to reinterpret the constitution or to change it. The latter requires a two-thirds majority in both chambers, and approval in a referendum. Hence, Abe’s priority is to change Article 96 first (constitutional amendments) to decrease the required majority of votes. Japanese society supports his efforts to improve Japan’s status, but mainly through economic revival (nationalistic views are not represented by the majority of society). In that sense, Abe might tone down his nationalistic approach, bearing in mind that there will be elections in 2016.

Nevertheless, even small changes (regardless of Tokyo’s intentions) trigger accusations in the region of Japan’s militarism revival. Abe’s assertive steps reinforce the assumption of Japan’s bad intentions. This stance complicates the situation in the region, and may provoke further controversial steps (for example, by China), which in turn appears to be exacerbating a vicious circle of mistrust. Japan, China and South Korea’s “war of words” and suspended high-level political dialogue are only a few examples. Unconvincing explanations given by Abe after Yasukuni’s visit—that it was an act aimed at preserving peace-oriented Japan and renewing, before the souls of the war dead, the pledge that Japan must never wage a war again—has not defused tensions at all.

Escalation of conflict in the region may negatively influence European states, which are strengthening their relations with Asia. Under the circumstances, Europe (for example, the V4 group), which is experienced in defusing post-war distrust, should cooperate with Japan more closely. At the V4-Japan summit in Warsaw last year both sides announced 2014 as the V4+Japan Exchange Year. A joint statement mentions cooperation in the area of security, noting that paying attention to peace in East Asia as an indispensable condition for world-wide stability. Collaboration should be focused on better understanding of security circumstances in Asia, promotion of amicable settlement of disputes and persuading Tokyo to refrain from controversial moves.