

Reclaiming Pacifism in East Asia

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Today, East Asia stands at the crossroads, not least due to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's efforts to accelerate the long-pursued attempts by the Liberal Democratic Party to change Japan's peace constitution – and more specifically, its Article 9 that renounces war and prohibits maintenance of war potential.

Japan's proactive pacifism a force of peace?

On July 1st, Japan's Cabinet passed a decision that fundamentally departs from the government's long-standing interpretation of Article 9 to allow exercise of the right of collective self-defense and significantly slacken Japan's restraints on the use of force overseas. The latest of a long series of measures¹ that overstep Article 9 and some of the country's longstanding peace policies, the decision is being justified in the name of a new doctrine of "proactive pacifism" that seeks to extend Japan's military role regionally and internationally.

The decision on collective self-defense, and more generally the new doctrine of proactive pacifism, are adding oil to the fire of relations between Japan and its neighbors, already tense over territorial disputes and history recognition issues. Despite Abe's pledge that Japan will continue to be a "peaceful country", the move raises alarms in China and Korea, which see it as a worrying shift in the country's defense policy, thus also raising questions on Japan's intentions.

Japan's rising nationalism

Indeed, Tokyo's military buildup cannot be taken apart from the recrudescence of Japanese nationalism combined with historical revisionism, as epitomized by the long series of inflammatory comments and provocative actions by top officials in Prime Minister Abe's administration.²

Abe has made no secret of his long-held aim to "break away from the postwar regime." The composition of his Cabinet reflects this agenda, with many of its members belonging to the Japan Conference (Nippon Kaigi), the largest right-wing organization in Japan. But the fact that a sizable majority of Japanese voters oppose reinterpreting Article 9 to authorize the use of collective self-defense, and that support for Abe's government has come from his economic agenda more than from his foreign and security policy, cannot be overlooked. Although the Cabinet decision certainly stems partly from Abe's right-wing nationalist agenda, it does not fully explain it.

A US-driven move

The move must also be understood in the context of the security cooperation between Japan and the US that has gradually and consistently expanded since the 1990s.

Indeed, Washington has long prodded Tokyo to become a "full partner" in the alliance and play a greater role in the US "Pivot to Asia," reprobating Japan's self-imposed ban on collective self-defense as "an impediment to the alliance" – and more generally Article 9's restrictions as "anachronistic constraints" that should "be eased." Japan's decision on collective self-defense thus

1 Other measures include formulating a new national security policy; establishing a National Security Council; revamping defense guidelines; increasing the country's military budget; and drastically relaxing the long-held arms export ban.

2 These include visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, offensive remarks over "comfort women", the revision of guidelines for Japan's history textbooks, the questioning that Japan's wartime actions should be considered as "aggression", calls for a revision of the 1993 Kono and 1995 Murayama statements, photographs with a known neo-Nazi leader, as well as growing anti-Korea and anti-China propaganda and hate speech.

comes as a direct response to US demands, at a time when the two countries are renegotiating their defense guidelines.

Washington naturally welcomed the cabinet decision as “an important step” towards “mak[ing] a greater contribution to regional and global peace and security.” Echoing this statement, Abe has repeatedly claimed that “the reinforced Japan-U.S. alliance has contributed significantly to the peace of Japan and this region over many years, by serving as a deterrent.” Yet, the reality is in fact quite the opposite, as shown by regional reactions to the decision.³

Impact on East Asian neighbors

International public opinion polls reveal strong public resentment among key East Asian countries. A global survey found that 79% of respondents in South Korea hold negative sentiments against Japan, and as many as 90% in China - the highest figures since 2006. In reverse, 37% of Japanese respondents have a negative opinion of South Korea, and 73% of China. Another survey found that about 53% of Chinese respondents and 29% of Japanese respondents expected a war to break out by the year 2020.

Such a climate of increasing mistrust is thus raising questions about Japan’s current strategy pursued in the name of proactive pacifism, which threatens to destabilize the fragile peace in East Asia. Tensions between Japan, China, and the Koreans over territorial disputes, historical issues, and nuclear weapons programs are already severe enough; using them to justify Abe’s US-driven military approach will only make it worse.

Although, as a matter of fact, there hasn’t been any armed conflict among countries in the region, Japan’s mutually reinforcing trends of nationalism and militarism are nonetheless justifying similar dynamics in the region, triggering an arms-race and threatening a dangerous escalation that could lead to an actual military confrontation.

While global military spending has tended to decrease in recent years, including in the US, territorial disputes and regional tensions in East Asia have driven a significant rise in defense expenditures in the region, and led Japan to reverse its 10-year decline in military spending. In 2013, China ranked second top military spender, with Japan 8th and South Korea 10th.

Need for a new approach

It is a matter of urgency to find ways to diffuse tensions and avoid the development of an uncontrollable situation in East Asia.

Recent brief encounters between Abe and his Chinese and Korean counterparts, though symbolic more than substantial, offer some encouragement regarding the resumption of dialogue. But improving regional relations will require building confidence, which is direly lacking in this region still trapped in Cold War structures.

Forming a new regional security arrangement will require new dynamics – by East Asia, for East Asia – towards establishing a regional peace, human security and cooperation framework, which is disentangled from the current US-led military-dependent security approach. Any such mechanism will necessitate sincere, coordinated efforts towards reconciliation. In this regard, East Asia has much to learn from Europe’s post-war experience. The Japanese government must recognize that it can no longer evade responsibility for its wartime actions and should instead take the lead in

³ China and South Korea reacted to the decision with a joint communiqué that shared their concerns over Japan’s reinterpretation of its pacifist constitution. Chinese state-run newspapers called it “a dangerous signal” and accused Japan of “dallying with the specter of war”, while a South Korean parliamentary committee qualified the decision of “provocation” and interpreted it as “explicitly revealing an ambition to become a military power.”

addressing history issues, including refraining from honoring war criminals and taking concrete steps to restore honor to the victims.

To date, initiatives including former Japanese Prime Minister Hatayama Yukio's vision for an East Asian community and Chinese President Xi Jinping's "Asia-Pacific dream" have failed to garner traction, for they were seen as attempts by one another to demonstrate diplomatic leadership amidst regional rivalry. In order to succeed, any effort towards multilateral institution-building will need to be pursued in an inclusive, consultative manner and expand on existing frameworks, including the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue.

Article 9 as a regional peace mechanism

In this process, it is important to recognize the crucial role Article 9 of Japan's Constitution has played as a foundation for peace and stability in East Asia, as attested by the international attention received for its nomination for this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

Civil society has long acknowledged the value of Article 9, as well as the important role it can play in addressing the root causes of the current tensions and fostering dialogue in the region. Several regional initiatives, such as the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) – Northeast Asia, the Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute (NARPI) and Peace and Green Boat, attest of the positive impact the principles enshrined in Article 9 have had in developing confidence-building measures and building bridges towards a common human security framework.

As the world is preparing to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, East Asian nations must develop a shared vision for a common future. Now is time for them to decide whether they will continue with the regional blame game that has kept them hostages of the vicious circles of nationalism and militarism – which squander limited resources on fueling an arms-race and threaten to draw East Asia into regional, if not global conflict – or whether they will choose the path of peace and reconciliation.

Article 9 can work as a regional mechanism for peace that promotes reconciliation, conflict prevention, disarmament, non-military solution to disputes, and cooperation towards the establishment of mechanisms for peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Only then will it be possible to (re-)claim a real policy of "proactive pacifism", which is reconciled with the very peace principles enshrined in Japan's constitution.