

China's Response to a Post-Pacifist Japan

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GRACE CHENG, SEP 14 2014

Japan's independence as a strategic international actor in the postwar period has long been constrained by its constitution's restriction of the country's military forces to self-defense. Until July 2014, Article 9 of the constitution was interpreted to embody its pacifist character, limiting the deployment of Japanese forces to direct threats to the country, while relying on the United States to maintain security in the region. Since the end of the Cold War, however, Japan has gradually moved away from its initial post-war pacifist stance, beginning with the participation of Japanese forces in Cambodia in the early 1990s. In the meantime, US administrations have called on Japan to assume a greater share of the burden in their security alliance. Given the challenges that have emerged in the regional and global security landscapes, it would seem logical that Japan's role in its alliance with the US would move in this direction. As a result, the Japanese Cabinet's reinterpretation of Article 9 in July 2014 was welcomed by the US as well as other states in the region that are wary of China's "peaceful rise". As such, Tokyo's new interpretation of Article 9 is taking place in a period of particularly tense relations with China. Although the tensions are not new, they have been aggravated by the more pronounced role of conservative nationalists in Japanese politics following the 2012 election of Shinzo Abe. In this second tenure as Prime Minister, Abe has overseen closer relations between Japan and Australia and emerging other powers in the Asia-Pacific region, including exchanges of a military nature.

At the time of writing, Chinese President Xi Jinping has yet to agree to any meeting with Abe since he's been in office. The lack of mutual trust between the two countries is reinforced by the politics of history and insecurity on both sides about shifting power relations in the region. Japan's abandonment of its previous pacifist interpretation of its postwar constitution may have a major impact on the latter. Many accounts have suggested that a dangerous situation would emerge if the Japanese Parliament approves the necessary legal reforms to implement the new interpretation of Article 9. Indeed, the number of incidents in the past two years does suggest that opportunities for confrontation have increased, with both countries looking to extend their claims to territorial waters and air space. By exploring Japan's post-pacifist stance in the context of its relations with China, this essay assesses the prospects for reversing the current course of relations between the two countries.

Between the mid-1980s and 2001, China and Japan developed some rudimentary confidence-building measures, including the exchange of visits between the two countries' top defense officials. Following the end of the Cold War, the two countries agreed on the need for more regular bilateral exchanges on security issues. However, relations between Japan and China have been on the decline since 2001, when an annual bilateral security dialogue initiated in 1993 was suspended temporarily. [i] The issue at the time was the Japanese government's approval of a textbook omitting reference to Japanese war crimes in China during World War II and visits by then-prime minister Junichiro Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors fourteen class-A World War II war criminals, along with other war dead. Less than one percent of Japanese schools adopted the textbook for use during the 2002-2004 period. However, in March 2005, the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which was behind the 2001 textbook, submitted a revised edition that was subsequently approved by Japan's Ministry of Education in April. In response, protests erupted in nearly 40 cities in China in opposition to the textbook, constituting what was at the time the largest mass demonstration in the country since June 1989. The protests also demonstrated against a proposal to give Japan a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Over the years, Japan's efforts to become a "normal" country and play a greater role in international affairs have

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been met with great concern by China. Both the Chinese leadership and public are sensitive to Japanese constructions of history and associate Japanese groups that downplay or deny historical acts committed by Japanese forces in Asia during World War II with a latent nationalistic militarism, which would be unleashed with a revision of Japan's constitution. The Chinese media was critical of Abe's nationalism since before he assumed office a second time in 2012. Chinese officials refrained from a strong response to Abe's December 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, but they became increasingly concerned about his nationalist leanings when his office brushed aside statements by his appointees to the NHK (Japan's public broadcaster) Board of Directors, denying Japan's wartime actions, including the Nanking Massacre (Laurence 2014). Since 2001, Japan has also incorporated hundreds of islands, atolls, reefs, and outcrops in order to claim the 200-mile oceanic zone around them for Japan. Most controversial of these claims is Japan's 2012 purchase of three of the five islands that make up the Senkaku (in Japanese) or Diaoyu (in Chinese) island chain, the status of which Tokyo has refused to acknowledge as being in dispute. Other contested territories have also sparked protests in China, including the August 2012 Japanese landing and unfurling of a flag on Uotsuri Island, which prompted tens of thousands to take the streets in a dozen Chinese cities.

China, for its part, has not only increased military expenditures significantly in recent years, but continues to be less than transparent about its military spending. It has also become more provocative in confronting Japan in contested territories in the East China Sea. [ii] For the Japanese leadership, modernized Chinese naval capability would have critical implications for Japan, whose main strategic resources are imported via seaways. In the context of its eclipse by the Chinese economy, Japan's claims to a total of 4.5 million square kilometers as part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are increasingly important to its economy. China has become more assertive in staking its claims over maritime territory, both by sea as well as by air, as it seeks to diversify its energy sources. In November 2013, China for the first time announced its claim of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), which includes space that overlaps with the ADIZ claimed by Japan that China refuses to acknowledge. As a result, there have been an increasing number of incidents in overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the East China Sea as well as in the sky (although China has not enforced the ADIZ on flights from other countries, such as the US, South Korea, or the Philippines).

With these developments in the background, Abe in January 2014 compared the current tensions between Japan and China with the rivalry between Britain and Germany before World War I, obliquely suggesting that military conflict would not be precluded by the strong economic ties that had developed between the two countries since the 1980s. [iii] Tensions were therefore high by the time the Japanese Cabinet adopted a new interpretation of Article 9 of the country's constitution in July, permitting the participation of the country's defense in collective self-defense. Although the Japanese parliament still must approve legal revisions to enable its implementation, adopting a collective self-defense posture represents a radical shift in Japan's policy, as it would permit the deployment of Japanese forces in response to "clear threats" to the state and to aid "friendly nations" in situations in which Japan's security is not directly threatened. Critics have noted that the lack of clarity of what constitutes a "clear threat" and the limits of Japanese involvement in overseas operations represent a blank check to conservative nationalists to invoke the right of collective self-defense to pursue national interests (Yellen 2014).

Historically, constitutional change has faced strong opposition within Japan. However, China's military spending and actions in the East and South China Seas have become a growing source of concern to the Japanese public. In this context, Japan has sought to strengthen its alliance with the US in order to guarantee its maritime lifeline against any Chinese attempt to control these waters. In addition, the alliance has seen Japan taking a more active role in regional security issues. Japan has cultivated closer relations with India since the launching of a Trilateral Dialogue between the two countries and the US in November 2011. Abe has been a vocal supporter of India's increased presence in the Pacific, which has irked Beijing. Japan has agreed to a sale of US2 amphibian aircraft to India and to a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement, marking the first time that Japan has approved the sale of equipment of potential military use to another country. In January 2014, a month after a visit by the Prime Minister to the Yasukuni Shrine and a week after his statement comparing relations between Japan and China with that of pre-war England and Germany, Abe made a state visit to India, during which the India-Japan Global and Strategic Partnership was extended beyond Japanese development assistance to involve more military-to-military exchanges and joint exercises. The visit also yielded a joint statement criticizing China's declaration of an ADIZ. Such a public

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pronouncement undoubtedly caused strain with China, which has been wary of the emerging security community among the two countries and Australia, which welcomed Japan's "decision to be a more capable strategic partner in [the] region" (Wardell and Kelly 2014). Since April, when Abe eased a four-decade ban on military exports, the prospect of Japanese cooperation with Australia to develop technology to extend maritime surveillance into the Indian Ocean has been a cause of concern for Beijing.

With the lifting of its ban on weapons sales, Japan approved plans to supply missile parts to the U.S. and to conduct joint military research with a British company. Even more troubling for Beijing is Tokyo's decision to give several naval vessels and send technical experts to the Philippines and to Vietnam to patrol the South China Seas, where they have clashed with China over disputed waters. Abe stated that Japan is providing the two Southeast Asian countries with these ships "in case China does not abide by the rules of the sea, including freedom of the seas, making and clarifying claims based on international law, refrain from the use of force or coercion to drive their claims, and to settle disputes by peaceful measures." This sounds consistent with Abe's strategy of "active pacificism," which he invoked to justify his reinterpretation of Article 9. Some have praised Abe for being more active than his Chinese counterparts in pursuing crisis management. This perspective appraises Abe's actions solely in the context of regional developments, in which China is considered the key menacing factor. Abe has developed his foreign policy well within this framework. His moves, however, would be evaluated differently if viewed instead in the context of Japan's bilateral relations with China.

Abe's defenders have argued that by refraining from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine on the 69th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II in August, his behavior reflects more restraint and respect for the resolving tensions with Japan's neighbors. Some have also characterized him as politically pragmatic, citing his extension of the period for parliament to consider adopting legal reforms to implement a collective self-defense posture, following public opposition to the proposed change. However, this move is likely an effort to buy time in order to convince the Japanese public to support such reforms. Through its official statements, Beijing has attempted to exploit the Japanese public's wariness of changes to the country's pacifist position, which continues to be strong, particularly following the government's unpopular handling of the Fukushima nuclear meltdown and the failure of Abenomics. Although he did not visit the Yasukuni Shrine, Abe did send a ritual offering, which the Chinese Foreign Ministry described as "a symbol and spiritual tool of Japanese militarism" in its criticism of this act. Beijing knows well that Abe's conservative nationalist position lacks widespread support among the Japanese public, which also includes many who see his rejection of the convictions of the Tokyo Military Tribunal and his government's efforts to repudiate the 1993 Kono Statement, acknowledging Japanese responsibility for the exploitation of "comfort women," as out of step with contemporary norms.

While many among the Japanese public do not believe that developing a military-industrial economy is desirable or beneficial to Japan, Beijing also seems to understand that escalating tensions with Japan is neither desirable nor beneficial to its own interests. Despite the rhetoric from China, the Chinese foreign minister did informally meet with his Japanese counterpart on August 9th, during the ASEAN meeting in Myanmar to exchange views about ways to improve relations between the two countries. The Chinese and Japanese presses have also reported that China will be sending a "high-level emissary" to Japan in September. While the official purpose of her trip is to promote people-to-people exchanges between the two countries, Li Xiaolin, the daughter of former President Li Xiannian, will likely also meet with senior Japanese officials, according to the reports. These meetings indicate efforts to demonstrate to the Japanese public China's ability to act with restraint and its interest in promoting relations between the two countries. However, these are not signs that Xi Jinping will agree to a formal meeting with Abe during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Beijing in November. By not directly confronting the conservative nationalist government, Beijing hopes that the issue will resolve itself among the Japanese themselves. In the meantime, the Asian security order has changed in ways that should cause Beijing to reconsider its strategy in the region.

Notes

[i] Tensions were already brewing prior to this. Japan suspended its foreign aid to China three times between 1995 and 2000 in protest against Chinese military behavior, including the conducting of nuclear weapons tests, a large-

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scale war game that included the launching of missiles across the Taiwan Strait, and naval activities in disputed areas in the East China Sea (Takamine 2005).

[ii] Chinese behavior has not only been provocative in waters near the disputed islands, but also around the Ryukyu Islands. In November 2004, a Chinese nuclear submarine entered the waters near the island chain, prompting the Japanese government to dispatch two destroyers and a P3C anti-submarine patrol plane to pursue the Chinese submarine into international waters. In the years that followed, the Chinese press published numerous articles claiming the islands as part of China. It was not until June 2013 when Beijing affirmed Japan's sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands (Wong 2013).

[iii] Abe is not the first to make this comparison. Kent E. Calder did so in his 2006 article in *Foreign Affairs* (Calder 2006).

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