

The Sea Change in Japanese Foreign Policy

BY *Kenneth B. Pyle*

Japan is in the midst of a sea change in its postwar foreign policy strategy. The change has been taking place incrementally since the end of the Cold War. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe the pace of change is picking up. On May 15, 2014, an advisory panel convened by his administration issued a long-anticipated report recommending a constitutional reinterpretation of Article 9—the article in which Japan forever renounces war—that would permit Japan to engage in collective self-defense. Achieving this reinterpretation will represent another step in the steady evolution of Japanese foreign policy, which, taken as a whole, is bringing about a quiet revolution in Japan’s international role.

The report of the advisory panel is occasioning a great deal of debate in Japan about the legitimacy of the government changing the interpretation of the constitution without following the cumbersome, formal procedures required for a constitutional amendment. The fact is, however, that because the Japanese Supreme Court has chosen to cede official interpretation of Article 9 of the constitution to the political process, this so-called no-war clause has always been the subject of controversy, reinterpretation, and political manipulation. Absent the ruling of an independent judiciary, official interpretation of Article 9 has been made by a bureaucratic agency attached to the Cabinet, the Cabinet Legal Bureau, which has been at critical times subject to the will of a strong prime minister and his foreign policy agenda.

Article 9 became a convenient shield that Japanese leaders used to withstand relentless U.S. pressure to

take an active role in the Cold War. “It may seem devious,” the shrewd postwar prime minister Shigeru Yoshida privately told a colleague before instructing the Cabinet Legal Bureau to draft a new interpretation of Article 9 allowing only individual self-defense in 1954, “but let the Americans handle our security...If the Americans complain, the constitution gives us a perfect pretext.” Yoshida and his successors adopted a series of self-binding policies to ensure that Japan could stay out of political and military involvement in the Cold War, leaving the defense of Japan to the United States and allowing Japanese concentration on economic growth. The self-binding policies interpreted Article 9 to mean that there would be no overseas deployment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces, no participation in collective defense, no power-projection capability, no nuclear arms, no arms exports, no sharing of defense-related technology, no more than 1% of GNP for defense expenditure, and no military use of space.

This grand strategy known as the Yoshida Doctrine worked brilliantly for the Cold War years when the U.S. security guarantee could be assumed. But it left Japan ill-prepared for the post-Cold War era. Incredibly, the Japanese had no plan or legislation that would allow the government to deal with national emergencies. Japan, supposedly a sovereign country, had in effect no plans for ensuring its national security. Dependence had become the foundation of the nation’s foreign policy.

In recent years, responding to the changing post-Cold War international structure, various administrations have steadily loosened all these self-binding policies (with the exception of the nuclear one, but even there the taboo on openly discussing it is gone). The relaxation of these self-binding policies has amounted to an incremental reinterpretation of what Article 9 allows.

In this context, a policy of collective self-defense is significant but only the latest step in the revision of

Japanese security policy. Beijing's bluster and bullying are foolishly making Abe's agenda of sweeping away the remnants of the Yoshida Doctrine much easier. One sees Abe's goals of a tighter U.S.-Japan alliance and an activist foreign policy in the recent establishment of a National Security Council, legislation to strengthen control of state secrets, repeal of restrictions on exporting weapons and sharing of military-related technology, formulation of long-term strategic priorities, and reworking of defense guidelines to enhance U.S.-Japan military cooperation and interoperability.

Establishment of collective self-defense will inevitably take some political shoving and hauling. The pace of change will depend on many factors, including the success of Abe's economic reforms, known as Abenomics, and his own political strength. Nevertheless, even among the opposition parties there is considerable support for reinterpretation. Popular support for the Japan Self-Defense Forces as well as for the U.S.-Japan alliance, as a result of their role in the response to the recent earthquake disasters, is at record levels. A consensus is steadily emerging. While the Liberal Democratic Party's coalition partner, the New Komeito Party, will have to be accommodated by some qualifications that will limit the exercise of collective self-defense to areas that directly affect Japanese national security, Abe (like other strong prime ministers) will lean on the bureaucrats in the Cabinet Legal Bureau. The bureau will eventually issue a "clarification" providing much greater latitude for defense cooperation as well as for relatively unfettered participation of the Self-Defense Forces in UN peacekeeping operations. For the alliance, Japan will offer much more logistical support and cooperation in intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and cyberwarfare. Many laws that presently ban aspects of collective self-defense will have to be amended to institute these changes.

What is less clear is the aspect of Abe's agenda that seeks greater autonomy in its foreign policymaking. Throughout the postwar period, Japan has occupied a uniquely subordinate position in the American world order. The result of unconditional surrender, occupation, and an imposed alliance, subordinate independence has compelled Japanese deference to American hegemony. The cost of such deference to national self-respect has been considerable. Although not openly revealed, the recovery of a more autonomous foreign policy is fundamental to Abe's agenda. The hegemonic alliance was intended to achieve a double containment: containment of Communist expansion, but also containment of Japan. The United States did not want an independent Japanese rearmament or a Japan that might tilt toward neutrality in the Cold War. While the immediate goal of adopting an interpretation to allow collective self-defense is to bring about a tighter U.S.-Japan alliance, the larger goals of the foreign policy revolution now underway are not yet clear. Historically, modern Japan has always adapted to the perceived changes in the international order. Today, that structure is changing with the rise of an assertive China, the travails of the U.S.-led world order, and the increasing likelihood of a multipolar order in its place. In this context, the long-term goals of Abe remain unclear as he has yet to articulate a vision of what a more independent Japan would seek. ♦

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