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Japan's Security Policy Reform: Institutional Changes Facilitating a Larger Role in Regional Security

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In light of the recent summit between President Trump and Prime Minister Abe and the latter's fifth year in office, it is a good time to take stock of the recent changes to Japan's security policy. While these changes lie within a broader continuum since the 1950s of gradually moving away from the post-World War II constraints, the recent reforms are notable for two reasons: quantity — much has been enacted, amended, or established; and quality — these changes are systemic.

Over the past five years, Japan has redefined its national security strategy and reshaped its postwar system of pacifism, offering more options to respond to and proactively shape its own security environment. The government has built a justification for adopting collective self-defense, developed a broad political consensus about the security challenges facing Japan, and implemented a series of executive decisions through the legislature and bureaucracy. These reforms are fundamentally reshaping how Japan communicates, thinks about, and implements national security policy by establishing a new institutional culture. These changes should not be valued so much for what they are now, but for their potential.

Two key reforms should be highlighted:

First, the September 2015 adoption of national security legislation expanding options for the Self-Defense Force to utilize force to defend the country. Building on an advisory panel report recommending such changes and the Cabinet reinterpretation of Article 9 (previously prohibiting the use of force to settle international disputes) in July 2014, the legislation authorized the exercise of collective self-defense, enabling Japanese forces to aid a country under armed attack if that attack results in a threat to Japan's survival. The Cabinet decision outlined three strict conditions for such a response; but essentially, Japan now has more options under a wider variety of scenarios to consider utilizing military force.

This new authority has been framed as enabling Japan to serve as a more equal alliance partner: for example, Japan will now be able to respond to an attack on US warships. The United States and Japan can now plan and train for this contingency. But this authority is not exclusively tied to the United States. In many respects, it represents a "beyond the United States" option. The Cabinet decision authorizes the use of force in support of a country with which Japan has a close relationship, and there are no criteria delineating which countries qualify. This framework provides Japan with the option to develop security relationships more broadly, and even opens up the possibility for developing future alliances as Japan perceives changes in its strategic needs.

Marta Ross, recent Council on Foreign Relations Hitachi International Affairs Fellow, explains that "These reforms are fundamentally reshaping how Japan communicates, thinks about, and implements national security policy by establishing a new institutional culture."

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Second, the establishment of a National Security Council and Secretariat staffed by personnel from across the bureaucracy has centralized strategic thinking within the government. This new institution is breaking down barriers and building relationships. The staff also includes uniformed personnel from the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), serving to mainstream a uniformed presence in national security policymaking. Both impacts are hailed as positive. However, this change has not come without adjustment, namely on the part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), which held primary responsibility for any international policy since the end of World War II. Placing diplomats in charge of international security affairs was intended to serve as a stopgap to the military’s involvement in politics. Now, much of the strategic guidance emanates from the National Security staff, where the Ministry of Defense has a louder voice than in previous decades, creating somewhat of an “identity crisis” within MOFA.

These two reforms, combined with numerous others such as the revision of defense export controls, and the strategic utilization of foreign assistance, have broadened the foreign policy and national security toolbox for Japan’s political leadership. Japan has enhanced its capability to define and reach its strategic goals as well as to build security relationships, shape regional challenges, and deter potential threats. Application of these new options has been moderate to date, but in the next 10 to 20 years, the regional security environment may present further opportunities to exercise them.

It should also be noted that these security reforms have been largely successful due to the commitment of the Prime Minister, who is inextricably linked to a pragmatic approach focused on laying the legal, institutional foundation before exercising any dramatic shift in policy. Yet, this association has personalized the policy and contributed to its highly contentious reception, as evidenced by large scale public protests against the security legislation. Japan’s commitment to pacifism runs deep, and many view the new policies as incompatible to that commitment. They fear Abe’s personal conviction to restore Japan’s “national spirit” will go too far.

However, primarily because Abe has focused on creating institutions and norms surrounding the reforms, it will be much harder to weaken them. The stage is set. How the reforms evolve from this point will depend largely upon the Prime Minister’s staying power, and who succeeds him. If Abe is reelected Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) President in 2018, as many expect he will be, by the end of that third term he would have stayed in office long enough for a younger generation of politicians to grow accustomed to this new institutional culture and possibly take the reins.

For the United States, these security reforms have several implications. First, Japan is a more capable and confident alliance partner. Our alliance has more relevance in line with the changing regional balance and threats facing both countries, such as North Korea. Second, the institutions supporting Japan’s security policies now more closely resemble our own; this can benefit bilateral communication and mutual understanding of strategic interests. Finally, Japan has developed the tools to take more initiative in responding to global security challenges and shaping regional security, and in conjunction with the United States as a balancing power, this shift can benefit peace and security in Asia.