

'3 arrows' plan boosts Japan

By Dr Tang Siew Mun

FORCEFUL STRATEGY: *Shinzo Abe has confounded all expectations and succeeded in galvanising the region's second largest economy*

JAPANESE Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "three arrows" strategy to reinvigorate the Japanese economy is finding its target.

After years of languishing in political and economic doldrums, Abe has confounded all expectations and succeeded in galvanising the region's second largest economy around his reformist agenda.

He has provided a rare sense of direction and decisive leadership to a society more accustomed to risk aversion. Nowhere is Abe's strong leadership more evident than his nudging of a sceptical nation to join the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) negotiations.

Corporate Japan approves of Abe's initiatives. The Nikkei 225 Index has improved almost 50 per cent since the early days of the Abe administration. It is riding high above the 15,000 mark. A weaker yen has also improved Japan's competitiveness and brought back smiles to Japanese exporters.

With the three arrows of fiscal stimulus, monetary expansion and structural reforms in full flight, Abe moved to unleash a "fourth arrow".

With the control of both houses of parliament firmly in the hands of the Liberal Democratic Party-led coalition, Abe endeavoured to tackle one of the "sacred cows" of Japanese politics — revision of the constitution.

Specifically, his administration had advocated a more realistic approach to security that would among others, allow Japan's security forces to undertake collective self-defence responsibilities.

Abe, however, suffered a setback and had to put aside his long cherished ambition of revising the constitution in the face of strong domestic objections.

Instead, Abe sought to remove the shackles on the Self-Defence Force (SDF) by reinterpreting the constitution. While Article IX remains intact, the parameters for the use of force is streamlined and expanded to the effect that it would enable Japan to better respond to contingencies.

To be sure the reinterpretation is not a blank check for Japan to undertake an enlarged security role. On the contrary, under the new Cabinet directive, force is only permissible under three conditions. It applies when the country's existence is threatened and in the presence of imminent and clear threats to the "people's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Under these circumstances, the use of force must be the last resort and kept to a minimum.

The basic tenet of Japanese security policy as defensive oriented remains unchanged. The new interpretation allows Japan to assist friendly parties that come under fire in international missions authorised by the United Nations. It would also enable Japan to play a more balanced role in the US-Japan security alliance, albeit strictly limited within defensive parameters.

Detractors view the adoption of collective self-defence as a sea change in the direction of a more hawkish and militaristic Japan. These voices are most audible in Beijing and to a lesser extent in Seoul as well.



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Japan has indeed taken steps to “normalise” its defence establishment and security policy. For example, the Japan Self Defence Agency was upgraded to ministerial status in 2007.

The Abe administration also introduced the Three Principles of Transfer for Defence Equipment and Technology in April this year, effectively setting aside the ban on arms export that had been in place since 1976.

Last year, Abe presided over Japan’s first defence budget increase in 11 years. However, it is fallacious to draw the conclusion that Japan is reverting to militarism based on these developments and the adoption of collective self-defence.

The Abe administration’s efforts to normalise its security policy should not be conflated with its mismanagement of issues and historical legacy related to World War 2. Until and unless the administration exercises leadership and statesmanship to acknowledge and resolve extent issues relating to the war, its ghost will continue to haunt Japan and handicap its regional diplomacy and standing.

The strongest defence against the rise of Japanese militarism — if this is even a possibility in contemporary times — is the vitality and strength of Japanese democracy. The dynamic balance of power within the ruling coalition is an effective moderating force to ensure that Abe’s reforms do not get too far ahead of public sentiments.

Similarly, the Japanese electorate that took to the streets to protest against the revision of the constitution would continue to guard against any decisive turn toward right wing ideology and neo-conservatism.

The best line of defence against Japan’s purported militarism does not come from the barrel of the gun or murmuring from abroad but rather in the pervasive and strong Japanese pacifist and democratic political culture.

Indeed, these voices are being heard loud and clear. Abe is paying a high price for pushing ahead with the reinterpretation of the constitution with his cabinet approval dipping to the lowest level at 48 per cent since taking office in a poll conducted by Nikkei Research last week. The poll also reports that “nearly 60 per cent of the respondents in their 20s and 30s do not support Abe’s push to let Japan come to the aid of allies under attack”.

Nevertheless, the push to “normalise” Japan’s security policy and operational parameters will continue apace with the Abe administration and beyond.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric on the revival of militarism, Japan has the right and moral obligation to its people to boost its security.

As Japan moves in an incremental fashion to unshackle itself from self-imposed restraints, it will inevitably take on a more visible and expansive role in regional and global security.

The region needs to reconcile and accept Japan as a security player just as it will have to get accustomed to an enlarged Chinese role in regional affairs. But for Japan to gain acceptance it must shed its historical baggage and face up to its past misdeeds.

Japan will not be able to harness its full potential as a major power if it continues to live in the past. Similarly, it does not bode well for the region if it is fixated on seeing Japan in shades of the 1930s.

For Japan and East Asia to have a future, they need to be looking ahead and not allow history to shape and colour the future.

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