

Policy hard sell turns hard



behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara

The attempt to modify Japan's constitutional provisions on sending troops abroad for battle has become more difficult than the Abe government had expected

JAPAN'S desire to "adjust" Article 9 of its Constitution, allowing for greater military adventurism, has created unease within and outside the country.

It is no secret that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's conservative government is supported by domestic right-wing forces in this seemingly reactionary lurch. The political colours at play are clear enough.

For decades following the defeat of the Japanese Empire, postwar Japan had a "pacifist Constitution" that banned the deployment of its military forces abroad.

With very limited exceptions, such as a troop of army engineers under UN auspices for construction work in Cambodia in the 1990s, the ban stayed effective. Now all that may change.

It does not help Abe's cause that his maternal grandfather, the far-right Nobusuke Kishi, was jailed as a Class A war criminal for championing the brutal fascism of Imperial Japan.

In Asia where family connections still matter, Kishi – nicknamed "the Showa era monster" – is not the stuff of pride for any national leader. Still, hardly anyone now expects Abe to follow in his grandfather's exact footsteps.

However, the more reactionary forces behind Abe and his party are another matter. Long seen as a small but vocal minority, and a shadowy one, their influence in Japanese mainstream politics may be peaking now.

The far right is akin to Europe's neo-Nazis in their campaign methods and denial of historic atrocities they had perpetrated in other countries. Activists are typically unrepentant former soldiers seeking to rewrite history after their own self-glorified image.

Unlike Germany's reformed former Nazi officers however, these reactionary Japanese still wallow openly in their disgraceful past. At a far-right party's international conference in Tokyo in the 1990s, the host proudly introduced me to a reactionary author who had just penned a book debunking the "myth" of the Nanjing massacre.

And still there are people in Japan wondering why the Chinese and Koreans don't love them. Perhaps Japan's history books should be less regimented.

Earlier this month German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Tokyo and advised the Japanese to face up to their own history. Even if there was nobody better to say it, it is doubtful whether her advice would be heeded.

With Abe's personal resurgence as prime minister again, attempts to refashion the Constitution have surfaced. Japanese officials and diplomats have been working overtime to try and convince everyone of the virtues of tweaking the Constitution.



Against change: Most Japanese people do not support Abe's proposed tweaking of Article 9 that disallows its military forces from attacking another country that had not attacked it, even if it had attacked a country friendly to Japan. changing the pacifist constitution. — AFP

And therein lies the enormity of their task: having to say, at the same time, that it is important to do so, and yet it is not really so significant so nobody has to worry so much. Such a contradiction also harbours suspicion of untruths.

A senior Gaimusho (Foreign Ministry) official recently made a whirlwind tour of Asean capitals in yet another round of trying to sell Abe's controversial policy. In Kuala Lumpur he went through the policy's selling points with me.

I explained why people have reservations about it. In the end he still thought the problem was with the inadequate sales pitch for the policy rather than the policy itself.

Over the past year or two I have been treated to such public relations spiels, sometimes over disputed island territories with official maps, occasionally with lunch thrown in. It was all very amusing if repetitious.

Luckily for Japanese industry, businesses do not operate like that. When Toyota discovered a problem with their cars, they may have played it down initially but soon decided on recalls in massive batches to correct the problem.

If Toyota had relied on public relations alone while denying there was a problem with their product, they and their customers would be the losers. Why can't politicians learn from their business leaders?

During the week Prof Shinichi Kitaoka of the International University of Japan tried to spread a familiar message from Tokyo at an ISIS International Affairs Forum in Kuala Lumpur.

The difficulty of his task is reflected in the problems that a person of his stature and accomplishments had in doing so.

Kitaoka said Japan's postwar Constitution (Article 9) that disallowed its military forces from attacking another country that had not attacked it, even if it had attacked a country friendly to Japan, was "not effective at all."

The obvious question was that, after the Constitution had served Japan and the region well for more than half a century, why was it "not effective"? No discernible reason was given even from a professional academic trained to seek and provide answers.

He further said the people of Japan had the right to write the Constitution. That is certainly true enough, but the issue is about the government and not the people trying to rewrite the Constitution.

Most Japanese people actually disagree with Abe and do not support his proposed change in Article 9. A survey showed that more than 50% opposed Abe's intentions, a small majority but still a majority.

In support of a more active Japanese military, Kitaoka cited the prospect of nuclear weapons coming into the hands of North Korea or terrorist groups. If Japan were ever attacked with nuclear weapons again, how would a more active military help it?

Abe's diplomatic strategy was unveiled as essentially improving relations with the US, Asean countries, India, Australia, and even countries in Africa and West Asia.

As some participants had observed, Abe had left out China and the Koreans. To do so at any other time would have been regrettable, but omitting China and Korea when Japan's relations with them need repair – and when Japan wants to embark on military adventurism – is a tragic mistake.

Furthermore, Abe's stated intention to draw closer to the US and some of its allies at such a time can only aggravate the sense of encirclement in Beijing. It would help if only Abe's advisers can take time out to look at the world from other countries' perspectives too.

Kitaoka surprised many strategic thinkers by declaring that "everyone knows that China is stronger" militarily, when the opposite is true. Not only did he underestimate Japan's strength against all the evidence, he overrated China's capabilities without any basis.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a large, hulking mass of mostly inadequate personnel with basically outdated equipment. Beijing has had to trim down the numbers and raise its technical capacity, thus the decades-long demobilising campaign.

Over disputed territories in the East China Sea, however, it is the navy that matters more than the army. And Japan's naval forces are far and away superior in both technological capability and field prowess.

Much had been made in the news about the Liaoning, China's first and only aircraft carrier, despite its battle un-readiness. Never intended as an aircraft carrier, incompletely constructed and repeatedly refitted, it cannot serve as anything more than a training vessel for the PLA Navy.

Concerns over Japan's plan to tweak Article 9 of the Constitution go beyond the unilateral dispatch of troops to battle zones.

It may signal an opening of the policy floodgates, permitting the government of the day to interpret a key portion of the Constitution any way expediency demands.

Those interpretations would mean the action of Japanese soldiers on foreign soil again, beyond the wishes of – and any recall by – the Japanese people themselves.

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