

ISIS focus

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Diplomacy and Security Policy of Prime Minister Abe

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In March 1999, the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces (MSDF) detected two suspected North Korean spy vessels intruding in Japanese waters. Despite repeated warning shots and giving chase, the Japanese failed to stop the intruding ships and had to stop pursuit once the ships entered international waters.

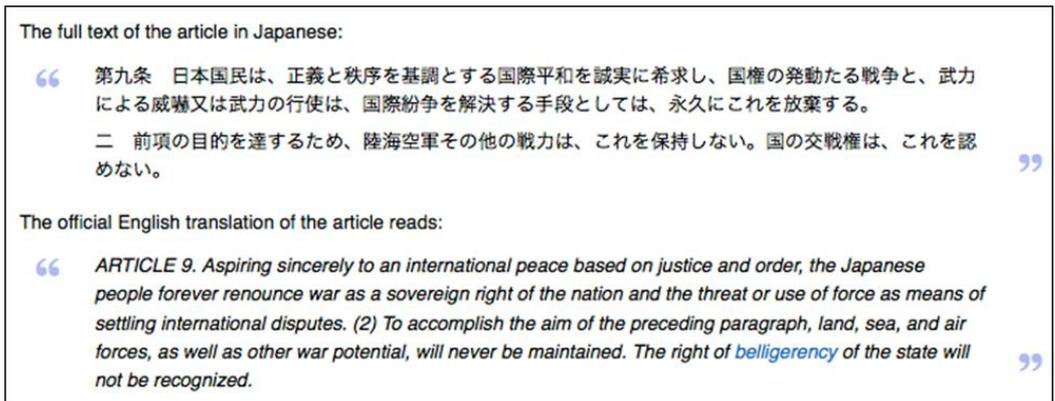
Under international law a nation has the right to chase and inspect vessels that have violated its waters. However Japan's strict defence law prohibits Japanese military from firing unless it was fired on first. Thus the MSDF were unable to fire live rounds directly at intruding vessels, limiting them to warning shots. The incident was noteworthy because it was the first time the Japanese military fired a shot since 1953. It also demonstrated the limitations of the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF) in combat situations.



From left: Shinichi Kitaoka and Rastam Mohd Isa

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Image 1: Article 9 of Japanese Constitution



Source: <http://www.viewzone.com/enough22.html>

Article 9

The genesis of the SDF can be traced back to the formation of the Japanese ‘constitution’. Not many are aware that the Japanese constitution was not written by the Japanese themselves but was, in fact, drafted by General MacArthur’s young staff and adopted with minimum amendments. Historical accounts of the Japanese ‘constitution’ after World War II make an interesting read. At the very centre of it was the desire of the Americans to ensure that Japan will not be a future military aggressor but for it to evolve into a peace loving nation.

It is no coincidence that the Japanese constitution shares similarities with that of America, including items such as the American bill of rights, labour rights, and universal adult suffrage. The most significant provision of the Japanese constitution is the inclusion of Article 9, which essentially ‘outlawed the creation of armed forces and the right to make war’ (see Image 1). This has had an enormous impact on Japan’s postwar landscape.

The second half of Article 9 is where the point of contention lies. At its most extreme interpretation, one could argue that Japan should not have any military establishment at all as they could qualify as a ‘war potential’. Clearly it is not a practical state of being; every country should have the right to defend itself against external aggressors. Japan interpreted it as having a military force whose sole purpose is to be a defensive and never an offensive force. Hence the SDF was established.

A militarised Japan?

On 1 July 2014, the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the SDF, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s Cabinet approved the motion that would allow for a more ‘liberal interpretation’ of the Japanese constitution concerning defence. In essence, Japan was looking at reinterpreting the second half of Article 9 and, in this case, it specifically involves increasing the scope of the Japanese SDF as part of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operation (PKO).

Currently, Japanese peacekeepers are mostly confined to reconstruction efforts, logistics and other support activities and are only mandated to fire back at hostile forces if they come under attack first. While Japanese peacekeepers can receive assistance from fellow peacekeepers of other countries, under Japan’s current law, they cannot reciprocate the gesture — Japanese peacekeepers cannot extend help to fellow peacekeepers under fire.

Abe wants Japan's PKO to have a more significant role and for its peacekeepers to be able to protect, not just be protected. Looking at the larger picture, Abe's move towards a more liberal interpretation of Article 9 paves the way for Japan to send its ground troops, maritime and air forces to join in United Nations' sanctioned security activities as well as to provide military support to allies such as the United States.

On 30 May 2013, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDPJ) Council of National Defense approved the draft proposing a full-scale rearmament of the country's military forces. Included in the proposal is the creation of the Japanese Marine Corp — the renaming and normalization, with limitations, of the SDF, and the upgrading of current military hardware. The move to revamp the country's security includes the creation of a new National Security Council on 4 December 2013, modelled closely after the US version, and the subsequent motion to reinterpret and amend Japan's constitution.

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Given the history of Japanese occupation as well as its aggression during World War II, it is not surprising that some of its closest neighbours are less than enthusiastic at any move perceived — real or not — as Japan taking steps towards militarisation. China and South Korea have been most vocal in voicing their concerns.

Japan-China relations have, in recent years, erupted into tensions stemming from various factors, including visits by Japanese prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine, Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and other disputed territories, comfort women issues, and the US-Japan alliance.

It has been observed that the state of Japan-China relations is more a function of Chinese domestic politics rather than a product of China's foreign policy. Japan-China relations often decline at the onset of leadership changes in China but once the new leaders are secure, relations tend to improve.

An empowered pacifist

Japan is fully cognisant of the growing economic and military power of China. Japan is in no position to fight China head on, let alone win any confrontation. Despite its strong relations with the United States and the prevailing Security Alliance, Japan knows that the United States will only extend assistance if Japan comes under attack, and not if Japan is doing the attacking!



Participants at the forum

When Japan embarked on World War II, it was an agriculture based and resource poor country. It was a feudalistic society with a strong and confident military force. Japan thought it needed to secure resources through territorial occupation to become developed.

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As Japan rebuilt itself from the ravages of war, it found a better alternative — international trade. Through trade, Japan can acquire the resources needed to become developed. Its current political makeup has changed as civil society now plays a greater role than it ever had in the past. In a society where peaceful coexistence is preached on a daily basis, it would be hard for the government to convince its people of the need to go to war.

Nevertheless, the changes in Japan's constitution reflect the realities of current security concerns as perceived by the government. Geopolitics still matter. The global financial crisis and continuous turmoil in the Middle East show the limitation of US power both on economic and security fronts. The uncertainties surrounding China's rise and its intentions as well as threats from North Korea, where advancements in war technology have made it easier for the country to acquire dangerous weapons such as nuclear missiles, lead Japan to reassess its security position. Regardless, Japan still holds steadfast to its pacifist nature. Despite all the changes that point to a stronger military force, the focal point of Japanese security strategy is the concept of international cooperation and its desire to contribute in a more proactive manner towards preserving peace.

On 16 March 2015, we were privileged to host Professor Shinichi Kitaoka, President of the International University of Japan, at our ISIS International Affairs Forum. Some of the issues highlighted in this article were drawn from Professor Kitaoka's lecture on "Diplomacy and Security Policy of Prime Minister Abe".