



Japan expands role of its security forces: Assessing internal and external response

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Japan has decided to reinterpret its 'Peace Constitution' to expand the role of its security forces as well as to meet the changing security situation in the region. The decision has been welcomed by Japan's security partners including the US, but it has been opposed by China and South Korea. Interestingly, the decision has drawn criticism from a section of Japanese domestic constituencies.

Japanese government has since 1972 maintained that being a member of the UN, Japan possesses the right of 'collective self-defense' or provide military support to any country to repel aggression, but it cannot exercise that right given the limitation of the Japanese Constitution's war renouncing clause i.e. Article 9 which spells out that Japan cannot use force to settle international disputes and cannot send its troops overseas. Successive Japanese governments have maintained this interpretation.

For long, a section of Japanese establishment had pushed for revision of the pacifist clause of the Constitution to extend areas of actions of Japanese Self Defence Force (SDF), but it failed to muster two-thirds majority in both the houses of the Parliament, a pre-requisite to initiate a Constitutional amendment. Article 96 of the Constitution also stipulates a stringent

condition; an amendment to the Constitution would require a majority approval by the public through referendum.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, during 2012 general election campaign, called for revising the Constitution. But despite a huge victory in the lower house, the ruling coalition falls short of two-third majority in the Japanese Diet. The opinion polls conducted by various media agencies following the change of government have suggested that a majority of the Japanese remain wary of Abe's interpretation of the Constitution which allows the state to go beyond 'self-defense'. In view of the prevailing domestic situation, Abe was left with no option other than using cabinet decision and bringing out legislation to achieve his political ambition. After several rounds of deliberations, on July 1, 2014, the Japanese cabinet took a decision that Japan will be allowed to exercise the right of 'collective self-defense' when the following three conditions are met:

- (a) An armed attack takes place against a foreign country with which Japan has close relations and the country's existence is threatened and there is a "clear danger" that the people's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness will be fundamentally undermined.
- (b) There are no other appropriate measures to ensure the country's existence and protect the people.
- (c) The use of force is kept to the minimum necessary.

The three principles adopted by the Japanese government will certainly boost Japan's defence capability and help it remove the tag of "cheap security rider" on the US. However, the decision has received angry response from Japan's immediate neighbours. China criticised Japan for "deliberately fabricating the China threat theory" to serve its "domestic political purpose." Chinese Foreign Ministry warned that by re-interpreting the peace Constitution Japan "must not infringe upon China's sovereignty and national security nor undermine regional peace and stability." Similarly, South Korea asked Japan to maintain the spirit of its Constitution despite reinterpreting the supreme legal document. It urged Japan to be "transparent in its efforts" and not "undermine regional peace and stability."

A section of the Japanese people remains opposed to the move. The day Abe announced the decision, sporadic protests broke out in different parts of the country. A large number of people held protests outside the Prime Minister's residence. Public opinion surveys conducted by various national media regularly suggest that more than 50 per cent respondents opposed the lifting of the ban on exercising 'collective self-defense'. They suspect that constitutional reinterpretation could eventually allow Japan to wage war and return to the pre-war military adventurism that resulted in their economic devastation.

In addition to the public uproar on the decision, most of the Japanese newspapers, which help formulate opinion, have criticised the government's move. *The Japan Times* observed that "by simply changing the interpretation of the Constitution to achieve its policy objectives, the Abe administration is violating the status of the Constitution as the nation's supreme law to which all other laws and government decisions must conform." It further added that "the move will serve as a dangerous precedent for Japan's democracy that must be based on the rule of law under the Constitution." *The Asahi Shimbun*, terming it a "dangerous precedent", stated that "it is unconscionable that the roots of pacifism, one of the fundamental principles of the Constitution, have been distorted by just a handful of politicians." *The Mainichi Daily* has asked the people to "put the brakes on Japan's exercising of the right to collective self-defense." It also reminded the Japanese people that a similar pretext of "country's survival and self-defense" was used by the pre-war governments to send troops for participation in war which led to a "catastrophic defeat". The *Yomiuri Shimbun* has been the lone voice among the national media to support the government's move and termed it a "historic decision" that will "contribute to solidifying Japan's peace and security."

Prime Minister Abe was fully aware of the public opposition to the move, but took this decision to achieve the twin goals: first, to send a signal to the regional countries that he is determined to enhance the deterrence power of Japan in the wake of territorial stand-off with China and China's assertion in East and South China Seas; second, Abe wants to further strengthen US-Japan security alliance and thereby maintain its position as the key US ally in the region.

Ever since the US declared its pivot or rebalance to Asia, Japan has been most forthcoming to play a proactive role in this policy. Japan and the US have agreed to review 1997 US-Japan defense guidelines. The two countries, which through regular interactions have been assessing the regional security situation, want to finalise the revision by the end of this year to reflect the realities of emerging security situation in the upcoming guidelines. Abe is keen to give Japanese SDF a bigger role in the US-Japan security framework in East Asia. Following the decision to exercise 'collective self-defense', Japanese troops can defend US warships near Japanese waters, can intercept missiles targeted at the US, protect peacekeepers abroad, and undertake minesweeping activities. By broadening the duties of Japanese SDF in US-Japan security alliance, Abe wants to dampen US's criticism that Japan is not playing its due role for regional security. The US is happy with Abe's decision which is evident from US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's statement that the decision will "enable the Self-Defense Forces to engage in a wider range of operations and make the US-Japan alliance even more effective."

No doubt, Abe has been successful in conveying to the US that Japan is its reliable ally and is ready to shoulder responsibilities as expected by it in its 'pivot to Asia'. However, in this process Abe may have annoyed a large section of his own people. It must be noted that the decision to change the pacifist character of Japanese security policy has always been contested by the people and tweaking of pacifist policies by the government has been unpopular domestically. The Japanese people were on the streets when Japan revised US-Japan security treaty in 1960; they opposed despatch of troops for Peacekeeping Operations and resisted the recent move of easing restrictions on sale of arms and arms-related technologies abroad. But they have gradually adjusted themselves with the decisions taken by the government in the past. So it will not be surprising that they may come to accept this decision with the passage of time. However, in the near future, a tussle between the people and the Japanese establishment is likely to ensue over the decision on 'collective self-defense.'

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