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Japan's defense policy – A new 'normal'?

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When it comes to security in the Asia-Pacific, China's strategic rise is often the first thing that comes to mind. But Japan's changing security role both in the region and internationally is also of great significance. On 16 July 2015, the lower house of the Japanese Diet approved two bills that pledge to bring about the most substantial shift in Japanese security policy since the end of the Second World War. One of the bills eases current restrictions on the Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF) in so-called collective self-defense contingencies; the other promises to make it easier for the JSDF to engage in international peacekeeping.

This legislative package, backed by Prime Minister Abe, will continue to be debated by Japanese lawmakers until mid-September, as it requires the approval of the Diet's upper house. Even if the bills become law, the JSDF will continue to be constrained by important legal caveats, owing to Japan's pacifist constitution.

When it comes to collective self-defense, the JSDF would only be able to use force in response to a third party attack against an ally (e.g. the US) if that ally is performing duties deemed to be essential to Japan's own survival. With regard to international peacekeeping, while the new legislation expands the remit of supportive functions the JSDF can play, their engagement will remain contingent upon UN approval – and armed combat will continue to be off limits. Those caveats notwithstanding, the proposed bills are an important boost to Prime Minister Abe's plans to turn Japan into a more "normal" country in terms of its defense policy, and increase the country's contribution to international security.

Perhaps most importantly, the proposed security legislation is likely to invigorate the US-Japan Alliance. The timing could hardly be better, given mounting strategic tensions in the Asia-Pacific, a region where Japan and the US see pretty much eye to eye. One key concern for Tokyo and Washington is the growing nuclear and missile threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This has led to increased US-Japan cooperation on Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) in recent years.

More broadly, the US and Japan worry about China's military rise, and ongoing efforts to strengthen its position in the East and South China Seas. A more specific concern for the US-Japan alliance is China's development of so-called Anti Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, by way of an expanding fleet of cruise and ballistic missiles, attack submarines and offensive cyber-weapons. These capabilities pose a risk to US naval assets in the Western Pacific, but also threaten the security of US military bases in Japan, which constitute the cornerstone of US force and defense strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. In this regard, the recently revised US-Japan defense guidelines mention the Alliance's need to address China's A2/AD challenge, and call for greater US-Japan coordination in areas such as Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, BMD, undersea warfare or cyber-security.

Moreover, Tokyo and Washington have recently decided to expand the geographical scope of their military cooperation. The old US-Japan defense guidelines, dating from 1997, allowed the JSDF to provide "rear area support" to US forces in "situations in areas surrounding Japan" (SIAS-J) – generally understood as relating to the Korean peninsula. However, the 2015 guidelines have removed the SIAS-J clause, to allow greater operational flexibility, and emphasize the "global" nature of the Alliance. This, for instance, will make it easier for the JSDF to engage in patrols over the South China Sea, where China's construction of artificial islands has led to heightened tensions with surrounding countries. This would represent a boost to Abe's efforts to expand Japan's diplomatic and strategic ties in South East Asia. Vietnam and the Philippines stand out in this regard, in that they have both repeatedly called for greater Japanese engagement in South East Asia.

In addition, the prospect of easing restrictions on the JSDF would clear the way for a more meaningful strategic relationship with Australia and India, both bilaterally and in the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which also includes the United States. This, in turn, would help consolidate Japan's position

in the broader Indo-Pacific maritime corridor – a geographical space that is key to its energy security and economic prosperity.

As far as the EU is concerned, the promise of a more "normal" Japan also opens up a number of opportunities. In the context of their broader negotiations of a Free Trade Agreement and a Strategic Partnership Agreement, the EU and Japan are currently discussing a framework agreement that would allow Tokyo to participate in EU-led military (and civilian) operations. So far, existing legal restrictions on JSDF deployments overseas have constituted an obstacle to the negotiations – albeit one that might well be removed soon. In fact, the EU could prove to be an ideal partner for Japan to take its first peacekeeping steps as a more "normal" country – given its emphasis on transnational threats and low-intensity, policing operations, as well as the UN-friendly nature of its engagements.

The Indian Ocean is the most obvious target for EU-Japan security cooperation. That ocean straddles the Euro-Mediterranean Basin and the Asia-Pacific geopolitically, and is therefore of vital economic and strategic importance to both the EU and Japan. In fact, Japan is already contributing to global maritime security in the western Indian Ocean, through its participation in UN-sanctioned Combined Task Force 151, aimed at fighting piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Easing restrictions on the JSDF is likely to spur greater activity across the Indian Ocean.

Increasing Japanese involvement in the EU's own anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia could represent a stepping-stone for EU-Japan cooperation at the operational level. Eventually, however, such cooperation should expand beyond the Gulf of Aden to cover other areas of the Indian Ocean. The strait of Malacca and the broader South East Asian maritime space stand out in this regard, given their vulnerability to piracy, their strategic importance to Japan – and the EU's increasing interest in the area.