The Debate

Will Japan’s Plan to Exercise Its Collective Self-Defense Right Make Asia More or Less Secure?

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By Yuichi Hosoya

Despite concerns in some quarters that Japan’s interest in exercising the right to collective self-defense will lead to a revival of Japanese militarism, nothing could be further from the truth. What Japan seeks is to be able to use its defense force capabilities to contribute proactively to peace.

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By Gui Yongtao

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s desire to assert the country’s right to collective self-defense is in no way driven by the necessities of its alliance with the US. Instead, it is part of Abe’s broader nationalist agenda and will unsettle Japan’s neighbors, especially China and South Korea.
Abe’s Push Toward Collective Self-Defense Is Alarming

By Gui Yongtao

THE MOVE BY SHINZO ABE’S administration toward lifting the ban on the exercise of the right to collective self-defense is, first and foremost, not driven by the imperatives of the US-Japan alliance, nor by Japan’s aspiration to contribute more to regional and global security. It is, rather, a central component of Prime Minister Abe’s nationalist agenda on security affairs.

Supporters of the alliance in the US over the years have encouraged Japan to lift the prohibition on collective self-defense. But in recent years, the US has achieved its goal of raising alli-
ance efficiency through enhanced operational integration between the two forces irrespective of Japan’s internal discussion on collective self-defense. Under former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Japan used ad hoc legislation rather than changing the interpretation of its constitution to justify deployment of its Self-Defense Forces in rear-area logistical support and non-combat activities in the American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. More recently, Japan participated in the international anti-piracy patrols off the Somali coast, a collective self-defense action in all but name.

Further, US-Japan co-operation during Operation Tomodachi in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami were carried out without heeding the legal constraints on collective self-defense.

It could be said, therefore, that although the United States would always welcome closer co-operation with Japan, the prohibition on collective self-defense has not been a real impediment to the actual operations of the alliance. This issue has become even less important for the US because of the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and Afghanistan as well as US President Barack Obama’s preference for diplomacy over war.

Hence, what Abe really intends to do is to give Japan a more muscular military posture and allow greater scope of action for its defense forces. It is part of his long-held ambition to break away from the post-Second World War system that restricts Japan’s military role. This naturally causes wariness among Japan’s neighbors, and should also be alarming to Washington, the architect and maintainer of that system.

Abe is likely to push his agenda by exploiting tensions between Japan and its neighboring countries. At present the Japanese public remains divided on whether to change the constitutional interpretation of collective self-defense. Within the Japanese government there are also cautious voices holding back Abe’s agenda. Facing these obstacles, Abe may be tempted to exaggerate external threats so as to justify his policy and prevail in domestic debates. The last time Abe attempted to reinterpret the constitution he played up the North Korean threat, this time it’s the China threat.

There is no denying that the Japanese public feels anxious about the growing uncertainties concerning China and North Korea. Abe is eager to translate such public feeling into support for his nationalist agenda. Whether he can realize that goal remains questionable, but for the moment he obviously sees no incentive to alleviate public anxiety by mending relations with China. This tactic can only exacerbate tensions in the region and mislead public opinion in Japan.

If the Abe administration were to successfully reinterpret the Constitution and enhance Japan’s military role through new guidelines for defense co-operation with the US, the hawks in Japan would be further emboldened to call for more confrontational positions vis-à-vis Japan’s neighbors. We remember that from 2000 to 2006 Koizumi justified his repeated visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine by arguing that there was no need to worry about Japan’s relations with its neighboring countries as long as Japan was in close co-operation with the US.

This time around, after some short-term success from his economic policies, Abe has quickly become complacent and begun making blunt statements on history and foreign relations. Success in promoting his political and security agenda would give him more confidence to assert Japan’s positions in its territorial and historical disputes with China and South Korea. On the North Korean nuclear issue, Japan is also likely to resort more to pressure than dialogue, given the perceived strong backing of the US-Japan alliance. None of these scenarios bodes well for regional stability.

One may argue that Japan is merely “normalizing” its foreign and security policies. The point here is that Abe’s security policy does not stand alone; it is part of a package charged with nationalist fervor. China and South Korea are unlikely to accept a Japan that expands its military role without coming to terms with its history.
of aggression and colonialism. In other words, a Japan with a “normal” military posture but “abnormal” views of history and international morality would only deepen mistrust among countries of this region.

The US is not unaware of the problems in Abe’s political positions. While Abe’s change in Japan’s approach to collective self-defense may be largely welcomed by American officials eager for greater military co-operation, the US has in various ways warned about statements that suggest a revisionist view of Japan’s imperialist history, which would jeopardize security co-operation between Japan and South Korea, two US allies in the region, and inflame relations with China.4

The US also takes a divergent view from Japan on collective self-defense, per se. While Abe’s advisory panel tasked to reconsider the legal basis for collective self-defense and other security matters clearly stated that the purpose of their study was to address the challenges posed by growing tension in Japan’s surrounding areas, the US sees the issue from a different perspective. When asked about her attitude on this question, the new US Ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy, replied that she hoped Japan would play a more active role in the international community, but the only example she gave for this was Japan’s participation in international peacekeeping operations.5

The gap between Japanese and American views seems more pronounced when it comes to their threat perceptions in the region. Japan names China as a top threat to its national security, while the US sees North Korea as its immediate security concern.6 Talking about America’s future in Asia, US National Security Advisor Susan Rice said that American and Chinese interests can and should be more closely aligned on many major challenges, which is most evident in confronting the North Korean threat.7

In sum, Japan’s security policy agenda under the Abe administration is not only alarming to its neighbors, but it also contradicts US security interests in the region. Abe is misreading regional trends and creating new obstacles to building trust.

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