The Debate

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

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.

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.
Japan’s Plans for Collective Self-Defense Will Contribute to Peace
By Yuichi Hosoya

THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE is widely regarded as a “public good” for the security of the Asia-Pacific region. When he visited Tokyo on December 3, US Vice President Joe Biden clearly stated that “the United States looks to our alliance with Japan as the cornerstone of stability and security in East Asia.” No stronger alliance exists in this region, and it has many tasks to fulfill. Biden said the alliance has shown “new initiative to support disaster relief and recovery, training in Southeast Asia, building on the work that we’ve done together in the Philippines to respond to the deadly typhoon, stronger co-operation on maritime security throughout the Asia-Pacific.” This is an alliance between the world’s largest and third-largest economies. The two countries can contribute to fostering both peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Therefore, it was natural that many people were concerned over the damage done to the US-Japan alliance under the government of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama in 2009. Hatoyama wanted to steer Japan’s foreign policy away from a US-focused approach to one centered more on Asia. Since there is no effective multilateral security institution in the Asia-Pacific, US commitments to the region through its alliance with Japan have long been considered an indispensable basis for regional stability. Therefore, many governments in the Asia-Pacific welcome any enhancement of the US-Japan alliance.

Many security experts have seen Japan’s self-imposed ban on the right to exercise collective self-defense as a constraint to deepening the US-Japan alliance. A report by the US Institute for National Security Studies entitled “The United States and Japan: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership,” published in October 2001, said that “lifting this prohibition would allow for closer and more efficient security cooperation.” This is because the US “welcomes a Japan that is willing to make a greater contribution and to become a more equal alliance partner.” The terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, drastically changed the basis of Japan’s security policy. Since then, Japan’s security co-operation with other like-minded countries has become more necessary than ever. Globalization has also affected Japan’s security policy. In March 2007, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, then in office for the first time, and Australian Prime Minister John Howard signed the Australia-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Co-operation. Then, in October 2008, Prime Minister Taro Aso and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh issued the Joint Declaration on Security Co-operation between Japan and India. In October 2010, Prime Minister Naoto Kan and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung signed the Joint Statement on the Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the strongest military alliance on the planet, regards Japan as one of its “partners across the globe.” In short, Japan can no longer be isolated in international security relations.

Although Japan has developed security cooperation with its partners, its constitutional constraint on the right to exercise collective self-defense has been a barrier to wider security activities. Although the United Nations and other international organizations requested Japan’s larger commitment to international security, Japan’s Cabinet Legal Bureau has adamantly argued that Japan’s activities both in collective self-defense and in collective security would be constitutionally illegal without a special legislative arrangement. Therefore, security experts have argued that Japan needs to change its traditional interpretation of the exercise of collective self-defense and the use of the country’s Self-Defense Forces overseas. Otherwise, Japan cannot fulfill its international responsibilities.

In 2007, Prime Minister Abe commissioned an advisory panel to reconsider the right of collective self-defense. The Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security, published in October 2001, said that “The United States looks to our alliance with Japan as the cornerstone of stability and security in East Asia.” In short, Japan can no longer be isolated in international security relations.

Abe said: ‘Imagine that US vessels on the high seas were being attacked and an armed ship, say an Aegis-type destroyer from Japan, America’s treaty ally, was just passing by. The arrangement we currently have in Japan does not allow the destroyer to make any response whatsoever. That is insane.’

from his post as prime minister in September 2007, the recommendations of the report have not been implemented. When he returned to the Prime Minister’s Office, Abe reconvened the Advisory Panel in February 2013. His Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won both the lower house election of December 2012 and the upper house election of July 2013. With his domestic political foundation greatly enhanced, his belief in the necessity of reinterpreting the right to exercise collective self-defense is further reaffirmed. This is because “the responsibilities of the Japan-US alliance are becoming increasingly important, and more and more attention is turned to how Japan can cooperate in the creation of peace in international society.”

In an interview with the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Abe said: “With regard to the issue of the right to collective self-defense, imagine that US vessels on the high seas were being attacked and an armed ship, say an Aegis-type destroyer from Japan, America’s treaty ally, was just passing by. The arrangement we currently have in Japan does not allow the destroyer to make any response whatsoever. That is insane.” With his more secure domestic political position, it is now likely that the government will change the interpretation on the exercise of collective self-defense.

The issue is whether this change will make East Asia more secure or not. One point that needs to be underscored is that Abe’s security agenda is essentially internationalist in its character. On Nov. 13, 2013, at a meeting of the Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security, which I attended, Abe clearly stated, “I have presented the concept of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace,’ that is, Japan should become a country that makes active contributions to world peace and stability more than ever before based on a belief in international co-operation.” Japan has never been so willing to commit to international peace and stability.

At the same time, Columbia University Professor Gerald Curtis is right in saying that “the Japanese public remains risk-averse; nearly 70 years after World War II, it has not forgotten the lessons of that era any more than other Asian nations have.” Therefore, it is quite unlikely that Japan will return to militarism for the purpose of destroying peace and stability in Asia.

No other country in East Asia has a larger defense capability to support disaster relief and recovery and to assist in anti-piracy operations to secure international waters, than Japan. Abe is now willing to use these defense capabilities for “proactive contribution to peace.” Why should Japan be denied that?

Yuichi Hosoya is Professor of International Politics at Keio University, and a member of the Prime Minister’s Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security.