Putting Japan’s Constitutional Changes into Perspective: Preventing Conflict through Military Interoperability?

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Abstract: Japan has recently lifted its self-imposed ban on arms imports and exports and reinterpreted its pacifist constitution to allow its armed forces to engage in military operations. This is in line with the Japanese government’s readjustments of its foreign policy over previous decades, in response to various geopolitical conflicts and disputes, particularly with China. Japan’s shift away from a “pure” form of pacifism is unique in modern history. What remains unclear are the future implications of this shift in shaping strategic and military relations in the region. In this article, I argue that Japan’s reinterpretation of texts of its constitution, in tandem with its economic influence, has drawn many countries in the region closer to a mutually beneficial opposition to China’s territorial claims. I also argue that Japan’s shift has sparked the beginning of an informal military coalition and initiated a “safety in numbers” response to China, though this is being held back by unhealed political disputes. Additionally, I examine some implications for the emerging military relationships in the Asia Pacific, particularly with regards to unrestricted access to the South China Sea.

Keywords: Japan, China, ASEAN, defense, technology, interoperability, Japanese Constitution, South China Sea

Introduction

The South China Sea is of significant importance for the world economy, accounting for US$5.3 trillion of trade per year (“The Importance of the South China Sea”). China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea have led to major shifts in the foreign policies of its neighbors. In particular, China and Japan’s dispute over the Senkaku Islands has instigated the latter to reevaluate its domestic laws. In 2014, Japan’s government initiated a process leading to the reinterpretation of Article 9 of its constitution, which liberalized the role of its Self-Defense Forces (SDF). Having previously relied on its domestic defense industry to supply its armed forces, Japan now permits its military to acquire weapons for both offensive and defensive purposes from foreign companies and engage in overseas military operations. Japan also lifted the ban on arms exports in 2014. Its defense industry is now able to sell weapons systems abroad, provided that they contribute to the country’s national security.

While changes in the pacifist principles of Japan’s constitution raise many moral questions, what deserves particular attention is the ways these alter the status quo in a region that is heavily militarized and politically diverse. This article attempts to identify political and military strategies that have become possible for Japan and other states in the Asia-Pacific region. It focuses on the opportunities created for and by Japan’s niche defense industry, the country’s soft power and alliance opportunities. The article attempts to understand how these have contributed to, or impeded, peace and security in the region. As evidence shows that there is a growing informal military alliance developing, this article explores whether this has led to a more fragile or balanced situation, especially in light of China’s continuous and firm military and political assertions. Specifically, the article explores the reasons why Japan’s government decided to reinterpret its constitution and lift its arms export ban. Following these changes, it identifies shifts in rhetoric in the region by major leaders, especially those seeking to build defense relations with Japan. It then explores how Japan’s own capacity building since 2014 and the ways these developments have created new opportunities and limitations for Japan to build alliances and capability abroad.
My analysis draws upon notable changes in alliance formation and, specifically, explores the future implications of the shift in terms of prolonging peace and security in the region.

The questions and concerns examined in this article draw on dominant notions of political realism and Neo-Gramscianism in International Relations. Referring to the former, and judging by the rhetoric of the regions’ leaders since the Senkaku crisis, there is no overarching non-state authority that has sufficient influence in ensuring the survival of Japan and other states in the Asia-Pacific region. In simple terms, the primary position of Japan’s government is that it cannot rely solely of the United States to ensure its survival. Nor can Japan rely on international bodies, such as the United Nations, to settle territorial disputes with China. Japan’s constitutional changes move its survival strategy closer to its opponents and military allies, allowing the government to make new alliances in pursuit of “collective self-defense,” like those initiated by Japan’s National Security Strategy in 2013. Within the framework of the “balance of power” theory, Japan’s attempt to enhance its capacity to defend itself and “modernize” its neighbors’ militaries is a way of distributing capability to achieve some form of collective equilibrium and, thereby, strengthen deterrence (Japan’s Security Policy). This links with the broader concept of military interoperability.

NATO describes interoperability as “the ability of different military organisations to conduct joint operations,” making it possible for “forces, units or systems to operate together. It requires them to share common doctrine and procedures, each other’s infrastructure and bases, and to be able to communicate [effectively]” (“Backgrounder” 1). Indeed, “balance of power” theories are consistently tied to Russian and NATO military and strategic thinking. This article argues that Japan’s push for military cooperation in the region reflects the growing tensions with its neighboring states. Certainly, following the release of the Strategy on Defense Production and Technological Bases by the Japanese Ministry of Defense in June 2014, Japan’s ambition has been to “inaugurate strategic ties with regional allies” (Ministry of Defense).
The South China Sea and rising regional nationalism

The South China Sea and the straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok and Makassar are vital to the broader symbiosis of trade and economic stability, both in the region and the world. More than half of the world’s annual merchant fleet tonnage, and a third of all maritime traffic worldwide, pass through these channels (Kaplan). Countries bordering the sea account for nearly twenty percent of the global economic output, which will rise significantly over the next years (“The Importance of the South China Sea”). The oil trade which passes through the South China Sea is significantly higher, in comparison, than that which runs through the Suez and Panama Canals (Kaplan). The South China Sea is also known to contain significant oil reserves. This is particularly attractive to China, which consumes over ten percent of the world’s oil production. Consumption of energy in other countries is also said to potentially double by the 2030s (Kaplan). Although the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and associated international tribunal ruled out China’s historic claims to resources in the sea (Fravel), China still asserts its position that the South China Sea has been its territory since “ancient times” (Mitchell and Dyer). While other states in the region have their own overlapping claims, they generally work together to counter China’s more sweeping claims and militarily operations in the sea.

While having its own diplomatic calamities with states in the region, Japan finds itself geographically and strategically in the middle of escalating hostile relations among China, North Korea and the United States. North Korea, a traditional ally of China possessing one of the largest armed forces in the world, has also been central to Japan’s strategic thinking. Contrary to the expectations of numerous military experts, North Korea has demonstrated that it is capable of firing nuclear weapons to as far as the continental United States. Since Japan-North Korea relations have always been strained, North Korea’s 2017 test-launch of two nuclear capable ballistic missiles into Japanese waters (BBC), which triggered a wave of panic in the country, comes hardly as a surprise.
In tandem with regional escalations, Japan has experienced only little change in national ideational politics, with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) ruling for the majority of the post-World War II era and the country maintaining a consistent cautious stance toward China and North Korea. While the Democratic Party of Japan—a party seeking to orient towards China and other Asian states—won the 2009 election, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama resigned within nine months of taking office, following failed promises and unpopular polls. Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda (succeeding Naoto Kan) continued the country’s cautious stance towards China. The landslide win of LDP’s Shinzō Abe in 2012 reflected emerging global trends in the rise of nationalist ideologies in the face of global recession, which included austerity measures and a militarist agenda for securing alliances. Abe’s stance on the country’s official response to its World War II violations invites considerations of whether to revise, or even overturn, its Kono Statement. On several occasions he also visited the Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japan’s war dead, provoking widespread anger in China and South Korea, in particular.

Abe’s foreign policy clashes perilously with China’s “core” leader Xi Jinping’s, who exercises assertive national and territorial ambitions, unlike the soft power approaches of his predecessor Hu Jintao (2002-2012). Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un, having assumed the role of supreme leader of North Korea following the death of his father Kim Jong-il (in office 1997-2011), tarnished the global community’s hopes for a more progressive, outward-looking communist state, by continuing the country’s internationally condemned oppression of its people and accelerating its nuclear weapons development. U.S. President Barack Obama’s (in office 2009-2017) economic

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1 The Kono Statement, released in 1993 by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono following a study initiated by the Japanese government, recognized that the Japanese Imperial Army had established military-run brothels, or comfort stations, during its military campaigns. The statement acknowledges that women, primarily from countries occupied by Japan during the Pacific War, were coerced into working in these brothels. On a number of occasions, Shinzo Abe (and other conservative politicians) has questioned whether such coercion did indeed happen.
and military “pivot” to Asia provided some reassurance —and friction—in a continent that has become increasingly interlocked with China, both economically and politically. The newly elected President Donald Trump, however, with a campaign slogan of “America First,” and a strong reluctance to build upon the legacy of Obama’s pivot, has cast some doubt over the region’s interstate security. Nevertheless, heated tensions between the U.S. and North Korea have since demonstrated the former’s military resolve in the region, as emphasized in its military exercises with Japan and South Korea in the Western Pacific in November 2017. In summary, the changing politics of the region reflect the growing state of insecurity and uncertainty surrounding China’s meteoric rise, North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and the military pivot of the United States.

Japan’s constitutional changes

The focus of this article is to identify some political and military strategies that have become possible for Japan, following its government’s reinterpretation of Article 9 of the country’s constitution and loosening of its arms export ban. In this article, I broadly refer to this process as Japan’s “constitutional changes.” The reinterpretation of Article 9, which outlaws war as a means of settling international disputes (Constitution of Japan), arguably came about from the Japanese government’s National Security Strategy in December 2013. This was rooted in Abe’s emerging concept of Japan as “a proactive contributor to peace based on the principle of international cooperation,” which was based on national security challenges identified in the document (Ministry of Defense). After receiving a report from the Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security (Nippon), Abe called for a review of Japan’s interpretation of its pacifist constitution to allow military participation in conflicts beyond its borders (McCurry). This came about following tensions with China in the South and East China Sea in 2014. With LDP supremacy and support within both the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament, the reinterpretation became official in September 2015. A major contributing factor was also Abe’s re-election as Prime Minister and his insistence that the
reinterpretation should be carried through a cabinet decision, rather than a lengthy amendment procedure. Abe continues to have pro-revisionist support through a LDP-Komeito alliance, making official constitutional reform of Article 9 very likely. While Japan’s previous arms export restrictions were not covered by its constitution, the ban was in the spirit of its pacifist preamble and national identity following World War II.

Japan’s constitutional changes came at a time of great unease, both regionally and internationally. China’s territorial claims to the South China Sea, covering both the country’s geological features and its self-declared air defense zone, position the Chinese government in direct dispute with states in the region, holding their own, less sweeping claims. The U.S. and other countries have since exercised their rights to freely navigate the region’s waters and fly in the air-zone, which is an upfront challenge to China’s claim of ownership. Diplomatic quarrels over the Senkaku Islands, owned by Japan, but claimed by China as historically hers, almost led to an armed conflict between the two states in 2014. This, among other factors, has given Abe the rationale to propose the reinterpretation of Article 9 and to lift arms export restrictions, despite protests from opposing parties and strong public dissent.

In a region that accounts for a large share of the world’s arms imports, many states in China’s periphery are intensifying their efforts to ensure they can maintain unrestricted access to the South China Sea. Additionally, in the contexts of Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and its long-term dispute over the Kuril Islands, as well as the unpredictable actions of North Korea, Japan’s need to share America’s “burden” of ensuring security in the region contributes to the broader motive for the reinterpretation. This, along with growing nationalism under the cloud of a post-2008 financial crash, provides further justification for the Japanese government to push its agenda. Many have argued that Abe exploited these circumstances to get approval from the Diet, while others believe that the government’s measures were absolutely necessary, given the growing assertiveness of China, the rise of groups, such as ISIS, and Russia’s changing the status quo in Europe.
There are many instances of heated confrontations between China and other neighboring states. In 2014, China introduced a second amendment to its fisheries law in Hainan, which put more restrictions on the freedom of movement of foreign fishing vessels, particularly those from Vietnam (Heydarian). Additionally, China’s territorial claim over the Second Thomas Shoal has led to military standoffs with the Philippine government. China’s construction of an oil rig in Vietnamese-claimed waters also led to a major diplomatic crisis. While attempts have been made by the Philippines, in particular, to establish joint actions to counter China’s territorial claims through ASEAN, The Hague and the UN, there remains a lack of cohesion within ASEAN.

The opportunities created from Japan’s constitutional changes

Having obvious mutual-gain benefits with regional neighbors, Japan’s Strategy on Defense Production and Technological Bases seeks partly to “inaugurate strategic ties with regional allies.” It states that the development and enhancement of the technological base aims to enhance deterrence through the development of a strategic and highly effective joint defense force and to realign with the European and American defense industries to improve competitiveness (Ermitō). Thus, Japan’s constitutional changes provide an opportunity to balance the scales of power in the region by opening political and military prospects to counter China’s claims with help from other states.

Before the reinterpretation, many countries in the Asia-Pacific region were arguably unable to establish an effective political or military counterweight to China’s assertive behavior and thus, apart from turning to multilateral institutions and the United States for help over territorial disputes, states in the region were effectively submissive to China’s moves. Japan’s constitutional shift has significantly changed the options of Southeast Asians states’ in terms of building capacity through military cooperation and acquisition of defense equipment. As a consequence, Japan can potentially employ its military to prevent its interests, or its allies’
interests, from being threatened, thereby using (or having the power to use) hard or coercive power to achieve particular aims.

**Changing rhetoric**

The U.S. was first to express appreciation for a Japan that was willing to play a more active military role in Asia. “We believe this is a good step,” then U.S. State Department Spokesperson Marie Harf said in June 2014. “What the change really does is allow Japan to modernize its defense industry and processes so it can participate in the 21st-century global acquisition marketplace” (McNeill). The timing of the ban’s removal was also perfect for Japan’s promotion of its Soryu-class diesel-electric powered submarines to Australia, a long-ranged and stealthy vehicle which, allegedly, was capable of effectively countering Chinese submarine technologies and of meeting Australia’s long-range operational needs. Former Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, an adamant supporter of buying Japanese submarines, also stated that Japan was now more “determined to do more to enhance peace” (“Remarks by Prime Minister Abe”).

Similar diplomatic assurances were expressed days later by former Philippine President Benigno Aquino, who conveyed “his support for Abe’s proposal to reinterpret Japan’s pacifist constitution.” Aquino reportedly said:

> We believe that nations of goodwill can benefit only if the Japanese government is empowered to assist others and is allowed to come to the aid of those in need, especially in the area of collective self-defense ...
> We therefore do not view with alarm any proposal to revisit the Japanese constitution ... especially if this enhances Japan’s ability to address ... our shared goals of peace, stability and mutual prosperity. (Dizon)

Similar sentiments were conveyed about military interoperability in Aquino's statement to Japanese press: “(W)e would really want to enhance our partnership with Japan to be able to ensure there is that effective interoperability.” He added: “There is really a need to be able to work with each other” (Dizon). His views echo Tony Abbott’s statement, reported by Australia’s national broadcasting corporation: “We want to see more interoperability between our militaries, we want to see more exercises between our
militaries, we want to see over time more significant intelligence cooperation” (Uhlmann). Reflecting on a speech delivered by Abe, one commentator argued that it was significant that he linked the government’s reinterpretation to what he called a “new” and “special relationship” with Australia (Placek). In response to Abe’s visit to New Zealand, before considering “steps to develop their security and defence relationship,” Prime Minister John Key expressed appreciation for Japan’s policy of “proactive contribution to peace” (“Japan-New Zealand Summit Meeting”).

Since 2016, further steps have been taken between the present Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Abe in boosting logistics cooperation between their defense forces. Similarly, analysts have noted the active push for states, such as Australia, to consider diplomatic and military challenges to China's territorial claims (Hurst). Japan’s constitutional shift has thereby initiated a ‘safety in numbers’ response to China, both diplomatically and potentially militarily.

**Building Japan’s own capacity**

With lasting links with the U.S. defense industry, Japan’s industry had already proven that it could attract interest from the world’s major defense importers, including the United Kingdom and France. Japan’s high-tech industry and advanced, dual-use defense technologies are highly sought after and internationally regarded. The French government, for example, has gained access to Japanese military procurement and committed to cost-sharing and joint projects, particularly in underwater technologies with Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. Japan and the United Kingdom also signed an armament cooperation agreement in 2013 (U.K. Government); in addition, Technical Research and Development Institute has been working in partnership with U.K. companies in the development of military chemical and biological protective suits. Current U.K.-Japanese collaboration is largely maritime in nature, which includes research into the production of helicopters and fast patrol boats, as well as engaging in a Joint Missile Research program (Ermitō).
In the past, such developments were too politically sensitive under previous Japanese restrictions.

There is also an economic basis for lifting the arms exports and import restrictions. While the ban was in place, Japan’s defense industry missed out significantly from increases in world military spending and saw emerging competitors (particularly China) raise their market share in the defense sector. Independently from the United States, Japanese defense companies also failed to benefit from opportunities presented by supplier networks, mergers and knowledge exchange agreements. Now Japan’s defense industry agenda is part and parcel of Abe’s global tours, embroiled within Japan’s soft power and high-tech appeal. This helps Japan’s government improve ties with states in the region, thus lessening its reliance on defense deals with the United States. As mentioned in its *Strategy on Defense Production and Technological Bases*, the shift would “ensure sovereignty of security,” “enhance deterrence,” “enhance bargaining power” and “advance domestic industry” (Ministry of Defense 5).

The constitutional changes also allow Japan to engage in military exercises with its allies that would help to plan and test its capabilities more effectively. Only days after Abe’s announcement of his Cabinet’s intention to reinterpret Article 9, sizable Japanese land, sea and air forces, testing recently acquired military equipment, joined effort in simulating the recapture of Eniyabanarejima (Villar), an islet part of an island chain in Kagoshima Prefecture, between Kyushu and Okinawa. Analysts observed that this exercise was in preparation to capture disputed islands from Chinese forces (Villar). It preceded recent operations conducted with the United States in naval maneuvers to gain capability in knowledge and operational know-how (McNeill). Such tactics, along with interest in naval drills, expressed by many Asia-Pacific states, is a notable shift from previous years in confronting China’s assertive behavior. Earlier, many states, including Japan, chose not to take part in naval maneuvers with the U.S., lest they antagonized Beijing. Since 2014, however, Japan has taken part in a number of bilateral and multinational naval drills. Japan’s SDF are also adapting their capabilities for maritime conflict,
for example, by establishing a new unit similar to the U.S. Marine Corps.

Japan’s constitutional changes also allow its military to access a range of bilateral and multilateral training areas, for instance, in joint U.S.-Australian military exercises (Blaxland and Kersten). Likewise, Vietnam has allowed Japan to use a military base near the disputed Spratly Islands. And, in times of conflict, Japan could use U.S. bases in Okinawa, Singapore in countries near China’s far western border, and in the Philippines, where the United States have been granted use of local bases. However, military “muscle flexing” is still considered too sensitive politically at the domestic level. Abe ruled out any military involvement in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars, choosing not to join the Western allies in their fight against ISIS, despite Japanese nationals being publicly executed by the group. One can see justification for such a decision in Japan’s desire to gain knowledge in offensive military capabilities, intrinsically tied to its need to make its weapons more marketable in the interest of maintaining a healthy and profitable defense industry. Decades of pacifism have meant that Japan’s weaponry is not battle tested, which is, by comparison, a major selling point for U.S. and Russian military contractors (McNeill). Engaging in joint military exercises encourages states to buy equipment to improve interoperability and cooperate more frequently (Blaxland and Kersten).

While Japan’s government has recognized the need to build its capability, Japan’s SDF are not at any significant disadvantage should an armed conflict arise. Based on its arms accumulations prior to its constitutional changes, Japan has arguably been able to transform its flexible dual-use forces to an effective defensive and offensive force. For example, the Japanese sea forces possess three large carrier ships intended for humanitarian missions, which are capable of carrying helicopters and a small number of the country’s new F-35 jets (McNeill; Kelly). Additionally, some analysts see Japan’s launch of its Izumo-class helicopter destroyer “as the first step in the build-up of an eventual battle carrier group” (McNeill).

Despite its lengthy economic stagnation, Japan has increased defense spending and acquired the latest range of advanced
defense equipment. Abe’s Cabinet increased its defense budget by 1.3 percent to nearly 5.2 trillion yen ($45.76 billion), the sixth consecutive increase under an administration led by Abe (Kelly). This was to counter China’s growing military spending “which rose 12.2 per cent to $132 billion in 2014, and has increased 7 per cent in 2017” (Yamaguchi and Kurtenbach). The military budget increases serve to reassure “Japan’s partners in Asia that its defensive military posture remains unchanged” (Fritz). With its largest ever defense budget, Japan plans to buy P-1 surveillance aircraft, Global Hawk drones, F-35 fighter jets, twenty-eight stealth bombers, five submarines, two anti-missile destroyers, more than fifty amphibious vehicles (Fritz), and two Aegis radar-equipped destroyers. It will also carry on its missile defense system development with the United States (Yamaguchi and Kurtenbach).

Alliance and capability building

Building on previous arguments, I ought to point out here that the defense lift also presents opportunities to assist in building the capacity of Japan’s neighbors. Abe visited Australia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand to strengthen existing military ties, while he was actively pushing for Article 9’s reinterpretation in 2014. His efforts resulted in Japan and Australia’s signing a defense deal to share information, technology and equipment during this time (Satake). Many Southeast Asian states, particularly those in need of diversification and foreign investment, expressed interest in establishing links with Japan’s high-tech industry. The country’s Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera and his Vietnamese counterpart Gen Phung Quang Thanh, Vietnam having had similarly turbulent relations with China, agreed to strengthen defense ties. Following a revision of Japan’s Official Development Assistant Charter, the Philippines and Vietnam, with comparatively smaller defense budgets than Japan’s, have also endorsed low-cost defense deals. Among other agreements, Japan provided the Philippine government with a low-interest loan to purchase ten Japanese high-speed patrol vessels; it provided Vietnam with six vessels and other boats (Mazza). Likewise, Japan donated three patrol boats to Indonesia, transferred
high-tech equipment to the Philippines and assisted its neighbors in various coast guard training programs (Hornung).

Following Abe’s proposal to have Article 9 revised, the first major political figure to visit Japan was Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The two heads of state reached an agreement to strengthen defense and business ties and to accelerate talks on the sale of Japanese-made amphibious aircraft (Takenaka), which was eventually finalized. India also has long-term territorial disputes with China, which make her suspicious of China’s growing military ties with Pakistan (Lamont and Bokhari). Modi reiterated his country’s commitment by stating that “(w)e intend to give a new thrust and direction to our defense cooperation, including collaboration in defense technology and equipment, given our shared interest in peace and stability and maritime security” (Takenaka). One Indian military source affirmed that the deal was “a strategic imperative for both sides” (Miglani). The two Prime Ministers also agreed to engage in future security talks by bringing together their foreign and defense ministers to work towards defense and technology cooperation (Takenaka). The Indian armed forces have since expressed interest in acquiring Japanese patrol vessels, submarines and electronic warfare equipment.

Indeed, U.S. defense officials have been encouraging Japan to export its defense technology to improve the military edge of its allies and ensure greater interoperability (McNeill). Conveniently, this also allows U.S. and Japanese corporations to engage in joint sales. Japan’s submarine bid to Australia, for example, involved U.S. weapons systems (Sheridan). Part of the evaluation process for the submarine contract involved capability, cost, schedule, risk and interoperability with the United States. The installment of a U.S.-made Patriot missile system in South Korea also incorporated Japanese-made sensors and rocket motors. Further afield, the Japanese government approved the re-export to Qatar of an American Patriot PAC-2 surface-to-air missile defense systems, which included Japanese-made sensors (Nikkei). Therefore, while enhancing the capability of its allies, Japan has benefited economically from the insecurities of its neighbors and other states around the world.
Notable changes in alliance formation

While Japan has so far exported predominantly less-lethal defense equipment, given the strategic and military changes resulting from its constitutional shift, it can be argued that Asia-Pacific states have established an informal military coalition. The tone has changed within ASEAN since Article 9’s reinterpretation; the organization now has more leverage in regional affairs, particularly against China’s territorial claims. Shiraishi argues that if “ASEAN cannot provide the leverage they seek, not only the Philippines and Vietnam but also countries like Indonesia can be expected to seek it elsewhere, turning to the United States, Japan, Australia, and India for balance against China” (“China’s Diplomatic Offensive”). Indeed, at a 2015 regional summit in Tokyo, the group expressed its support in a joint statement for unhindered air and maritime traffic in Asia and agreed to enhance cooperation in ensuring freedom of overflight and civil aviation safety (Sukma and Soeya 20).

Japan’s established and developing strategic and economic partnerships with Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, which include all but one of the six major economies of the region, if exercised with much more conviction, undoubtedly will have sufficient political clout in the region in the future. Adding Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and India to this mix strengthens its strategic and hard power dynamic even further. Japan’s Ministry of Defense has signed memorandums on cooperation and exchanges with Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia and has “paved the way for joint training and the transfer of materiel” (Mazza). Japan-Philippines defense ties are reportedly growing more robust, especially due to the latter’s interest in acquiring used Japanese P-3C Orion surveillance aircraft. The two countries also held their first-ever joint naval exercises in May 2015 (Mazza). Additionally, the Philippine and Vietnamese navies have agreed to conduct joint exercises in the South China Sea and, alongside Brunei and Indonesia, are considering coordinated naval patrols to counter poaching (Shiraishi).
Meanwhile, the U.S. has recently allocated more of its naval forces to the Pacific (Shiraishi). Alongside Japan’s growing military relationships with states in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has made noteworthy militaristic agreements with the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia, including sharing bases and enhancing defense capabilities and stepping up joint exercises (Shiraishi).

Military interoperability and capacity enhancement, however, has a long way to go to reach current NATO achievements in bringing its multiple forces together. The long-established organization, which has operated (and still operates) in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, has demonstrated “glaring” transatlantic capability gaps during military exercises and campaigns that “limited the interoperability of multinational forces and the efficiency” of its fighting forces (Nolin). These have led to a number of initiatives, including a Defence Capabilities Initiative (1999), the European Security and Defence Identity and the Prague Capabilities Commitment (2002), among others (Nolin). European and American defense industries have also been engaged in numerous joint projects which involve the harmonization of defense and offensive capabilities. Through its alliances with the Western states, Japan has shown interest in joining a NATO missile building consortium, which is a multinational, cost-sharing defense project. Japan’s interest in the project, which works on advanced ship-borne missiles, is allegedly encouraged by the U.S. Navy “because it could pave the way for Japan to lead similar partnerships in Asia” (Kelly and Kubo).

The Achilles heel of the informal military alliance in Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific can be identified in the disparities in defense budgets. There are vast technological differences among NATO forces (Derleth), and these are even wider in the Asian region. Many ASEAN countries are heavily dependent upon Russia for sophisticated military equipment (Crowell) and, while this does not seem a major disadvantage, Chinese defense technology is set to overtake Russia’s (Farley). While only a handful of NATO members meet defense spending requirements, the organization still consists of the world’s major economies. In contrast, as Table 1 demonstrates,
Future implications

Many commentators have argued, particularly in the context of U.S. and Japanese collaboration, that further militarization could trigger an arms race in the region and, therefore, potentially exacerbate the situation. James Schoff argues, however, that a qualitative capability race may make a regional quantitative arms race among China, the U.S. and Japan seem both unappealing and unnecessary to Beijing. Thus, Japan could maintain a comfortable military edge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total expenditure and percentage of GDP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>24,617 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>405 (3.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>370 (1.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>225,713 (1.9%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>8,183 (0.9%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>46,126 (1%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>4,295 (1.4%)</td>
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<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>2,067 (1.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
<td>87 (0.6%)</td>
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<td>Philippines</td>
<td>3,990 (1.3%)</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
<td>9,986 (3.4%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>37,265 (2.7%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>9,962 (1.9%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>6,047 (1.5%)</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1: Total military expenditure in 2016 by country in US$ million (percentage of GDP)

Countries chosen based on availability of data (SIPRI, “2003-2016” and “1997-2016”).
without being too threatening and, potentially, without escalating tensions (Schoff). He substantiates his views by pointing out that “the main purpose of this new enterprise should be to reduce allied vulnerabilities and demonstrate clearly that military coercion or adventurism against their interests in the region cannot succeed.” Thus far, many sources indicate that China is taking a more assertive stance by modernizing its military and increasing arms spending. Military skirmishes in the South China Sea still remain heated and tense.

Improving military cooperation, however, may also ease tensions within ASEAN. There have been disputes between members, including the 2003 anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh, Malaysian threats to cut off Singapore's water supply and ongoing disputes over the territories of Pedra Branca (claimed by Singapore and Malaysia) and the Ambalat sea block (claimed by Malaysia and Indonesia) (Potts). Such tensions may create political opportunities for China. However, China's soft power has ample influence on some ASEAN members. Cambodia and Laos, for example, tend “to side with Beijing because its members are geographically close to China and receive a lot of economic aid” (Akita). Thailand, which has been hit by sanctions from the United States and Europe after the 2014 military coup, has recently been tilting toward China, according to a Thai security analyst (Akita).

Additionally, China is supposedly stepping up collaboration with the Thai military and has considered securing defense and technology contracts with the country (Akita). Malaysia has previously conducted large military exercises with China, which raised eyebrows in Japan and the United States (Ou). Additionally, the current Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, well-known for his controversial statements and human rights violations, has recently expressed his wish for U.S. forces to withdraw from the country’s bases and has softened his country’s stance on China (Rich). Outside the ASEAN sphere, despite improved Japan-South Korean military cooperation, there remain diplomatic tensions over Japan’s handling of its World War II past in South Korea, particularly regarding the issue of comfort women. Additionally, there are major
setbacks in the Trans-Pacific Partnership initiative after the U.S. withdrawal in January 2017, which is seen by some analysts as a missed opportunity to bring Asian states together economically and politically.

Other, more surprising, developments see ‘neutral’ Indonesia and Malaysia tilting toward the United States (Akita). Taiwan remains protected by the U.S. under President Donald Trump and is now developing its own submarines. Japan is also a major financer in the region, particularly in infrastructural projects, and joins China in being one of the largest sources of foreign investment. Japan’s investments in Myanmar, a country that is traditionally pro-China, have surpassed China’s total expenditure. Japan’s government, for instance, wrote off the country’s $2.7 billion debt (Fritz), resulting in China’s loss of influence in Myanmar, according to some analysts. China’s Silk Road initiative and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, however, make this race for hearts and minds much more competitive (Mazza).

Conclusions

This article has explored some of the reasons why Japan’s government decided to reinterpret Article 9 in its constitution and remove its arms export ban; discussion above has also identified noteworthy changes in the rhetoric of the region’s major leaders, specifically those seeking to build defense relations with Japan. It has traced significant measures in Japan’s capacity building since 2014 as well as subsequent opportunities and limitations for Japan creating alliances and developing capability abroad.

Overall, Japan’s reinterpretation of Article 9 and lifting of the arms export/import ban have undoubtedly led to significant shifts in alliances in the region, although tensions remain among a number of Asian states. There is also significant lingering resentment over Japan’s World War II violations and their handling by postwar governments which is a major barrier to further inter-Asian cooperation. Nevertheless, judging from major regional leaders’ reactions to Japan’s constitutional shifts, Japan’s high-tech appeal
creates many diplomatic, economic and military opportunities for both the country and for its allies. Japan’s shift has also initiated a “safety in numbers” response to China, diplomatically and, potentially, militarily.

To a certain extent, Japan’s government has achieved what it set out to accomplish through the Strategy on Defense Production and Technological Bases and by building the capacity of its neighbors, though this falls far short of ensuring regional stability. In other words, the shift to military interoperability in the region is slow-moving in material terms, but bold and fast-moving rhetorically and performatively. While China is steadily building its defense technological base, increasing both spending and its market share in the defense industry, defense budget disparities and major qualitative and quantitative differences among the Asian states are not likely to strike any balance in the near future. Japan’s constitutional changes are, therefore, not a panacea to regional instability. Actually, they may be accelerating a regional arms and capability race and, generally, encouraging arms accumulations. Thus far, many sources indicate that China is taking a more assertive stance by modernizing its military and increasing arms spending, China is also stepping up its investments in neighboring countries and pushing through with defense agreements, notably with Thailand.

Thus, the success of Abe’s “proactive contribution to peace” is difficult to measure. If interoperability with other states and heightened capability are intended to prolong peace in the region, then significant increases in defense spending, as well as basic foundations for an organization based on collective self-defense, need to be put in place. Whether this is a realistic and advantageous option for most Asian states is the overriding question.

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