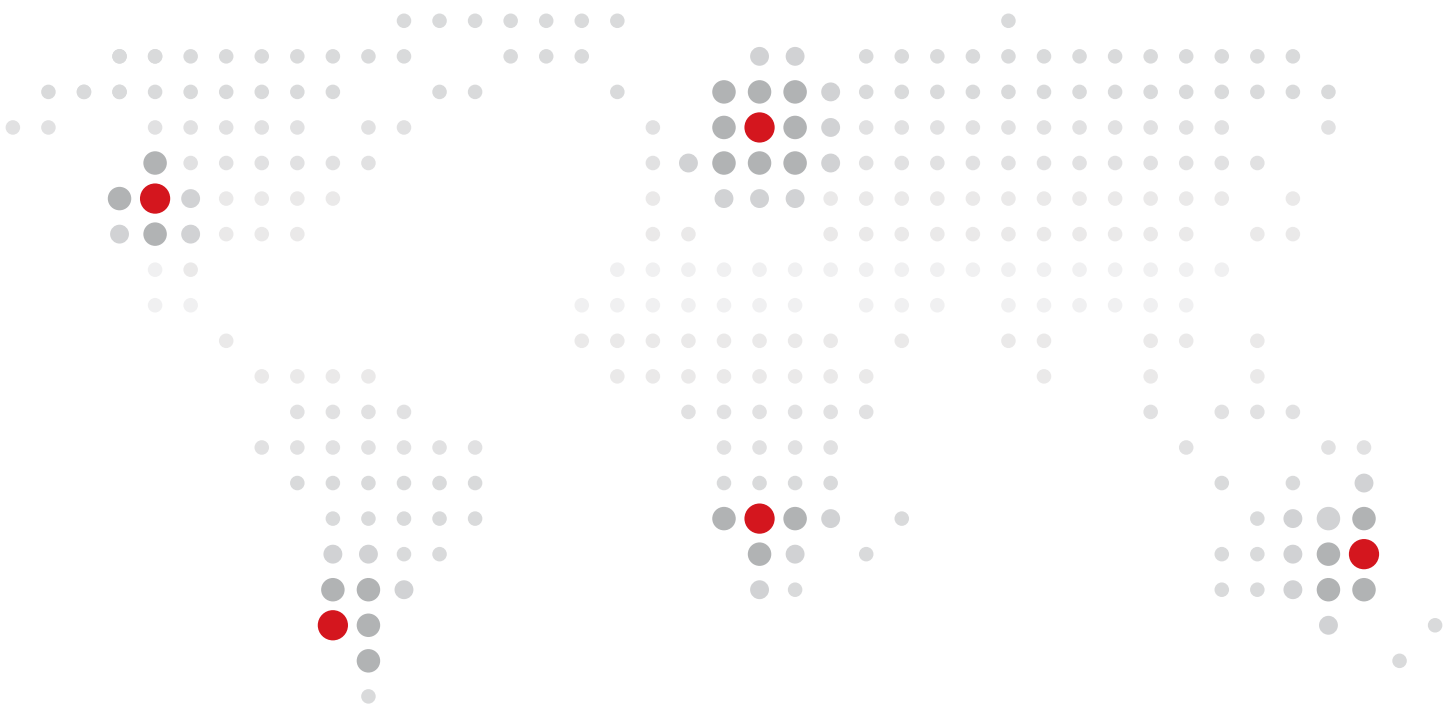


PM Abe Overturns Japan's Pacifist Postwar Order

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On 29 June 2014, a man set himself on fire in Tokyo to protest PM Shinzo Abe's bid to lift constitutional constraints on Japan's military forces. In subsequent days, tens of thousands of citizens gathered outside the prime minister's residence to loudly protest this initiative.

In Tunisia at the end of 2010 a street vendor's self-immolation sparked a national revolution that inspired the Arab Spring. A Japan Spring seems unlikely even as protests mount against Abe's ideological agenda and moves to circumvent democracy through the 2012 special secrets law, the ending the arms export ban, the evisceration of Article 9, and plans to restart nuclear reactors, all in defiance of majority public opinion.

Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9 is a game-changer because he has eradicated the constitutional ban on waging war. In doing so, he has overturned the postwar pacifist order that has become a touchstone of Japanese national identity.

Article 9 states: "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. (2) To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."

Japan's Supreme Court has ruled that its armed forces are constitutional because they are for defensive purposes only. In 1981 it was decided that Japan has the right of collective self-defense (CSD), but due to Article 9 it could not exercise this right. Since then successive conservative governments led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have endorsed this interpretation. Abe has long wanted to revise the Constitution, because he feels the US imposed it to keep Japan weak and subordinate. But reinterpreting it by diktat is easier so Abe has done so, invoking the need to protect US forces in the event of an attack as one of the principle justifications for doing so.

Most Japanese oppose PM Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9 and the renunciation of pacifism because it is a touchstone of national identity. Moreover, gutting Article 9 by decree bypasses established procedures for revising the

Constitution that require two thirds approval in both chambers of the Diet and majority support in a national referendum. Reinterpretation is thus seen to be a backdoor move to sidestep these procedures that flouts democratic principles and makes a mockery of the Constitution. As such, Abe is portrayed as a thief in the night stealing the heart and soul of Japan's pacifist Constitution.

Team Abe has branded his militarist agenda 'proactive pacifism', but such sugarcoated sophistry has bamboozled nobody. Polls indicate that support for CSD remains low and has not budged even after three months of political theater and endless promotion of his scheme.

The conditions for engaging in CSD are so vaguely defined that they amount to a carte blanche. The public is apprehensive that Abe is frog marching the nation down what everyone understands is a slippery slope. What may start as a limited action to protect allies can easily escalate out of control while the fog of war obscures the exit sign.

The bottom line is that the Japanese public thinks that Abe is more of a threat to Japan than China or North Korea. Advocates justify reinterpreting the Constitution because Japan lives in a dangerous neighborhood with China militarizing its territorial disputes and Pyongyang punctuating bellicose rhetoric by launching missiles. But even as the Japanese public understands these threats, it appears that by a vast margin they fear Abe even more. Essentially, the public is worried that Abe or some successor will somehow drag the nation into war somewhere, sometime at Washington's behest.

Team Abe's political theater over reinterpreting the constitution has not managed to convince anyone who was not already convinced of the wisdom of doing so. Abe move to unleash the nation's formidable military forces tramples on Japan's postwar norms and values. Schoolchildren learn about the horrors of war in their textbooks, focusing mainly on the dreadful wartime suffering of the Japanese population. Many also visit Hiroshima and Okinawa on school trips where they encounter graphic anti-war messages that bolster support for Japan's war renouncing Constitution.

Internationally, Washington has welcomed Abe finally achieving what it has been pressuring Japan to do for the past half century. There is little concern that Abe's underhanded methods discredit his action and demean democratic principles; the ends justify the means. The regional reaction has been relatively muted as South Korea is under pressure from Washington to tone down its criticism of Japan. China, however, didn't miss the opportunity to draw attention to Japan's resurgent militarism and accuse Abe of fabricating a China threat. With considerable chutzpah leavened with hypocrisy, Beijing accuses Abe of steamrolling the opposition and hawkishness, this from a nation that stifles all dissent and has increased defense spending by double digits annually for two decades.

1 July 2014 will go down in history as a watershed in Japan's postwar history, a twenty-first century "day of infamy" when Abe hijacked democracy by renouncing Article 9 and the nation's pacifist postwar order in an unscrupulous manner, achieving by fiat what he didn't dare try through established constitutional procedures. Apparently Abe fears the people as much as they fear him.

About the author

Jeff Kingston is Director of Asian Studies at Temple University Japan and author of *Contemporary Japan* (2013) and *Critical Readings on Contemporary Japan* (2014) and *Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan* (2012).