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Japan's New Security Laws: Pragmatic or Revisionist Move?

By Tan Ming Hui

Synopsis

Japan's controversial security bills signal its move away from pacifism. However, Shinzo Abe needs to show pragmatism to avoid aggravating fraught relations with its East Asian neighbours.

Commentary

JAPAN'S PRIME Minister Shinzo Abe has managed to push two controversial security bills through the lower house of the parliament, in spite of overwhelming public disapproval and several large-scale protests. The proposed legislation, if passed, would expand the Japan Self Defence Forces' range of activities, including the ability to send troops overseas for "collective defence".

The new security legislation is likely to pass despite enormous public dissatisfaction. A rejection or inaction from the upper house within 60 days would return the bills to the lower house, where the bills can be enacted by the LDP-led coalition, which holds a comfortable two-thirds majority.

Impact on regional relations

The Japanese cabinet has insisted that the bills are defensive in nature and that illegal pre-emptive strikes would not be permitted. They cited the changing geopolitical environment and increasing security challenges, such as the rise of non-state actors, cyber risks, and terrorism, as justifications. The opposition parties, however, are not convinced. They assert that the conditions for the JSDF's expanded roles have been deliberately left vague, allowing the current and future governments too much freedom to interpret them at their own discretion.

Consequently, Abe and his team are accused of violating the country's pacifist constitution, particularly Article 9. The Japanese public is also concerned that the new legislation may drag Japan into distant U.S.-led wars, such as in the Middle East. The security bills cast a dark cloud over the already chilly relations in the region.

East Asian regionalism has been impeded by two factors. First, the presence of several bilateral security alliances with the United States, a legacy of its Cold War containment policy, has led to a preference for a bilateral "hub and spokes" system in the region. Japan has also been hesitant to

participate in regional initiatives without the involvement of the US. The new legislation suggests a deepening of the US-Japan alliance as it would also remove the prohibition on Japan's right to exercise collective self-defence, meaning that the JSDF could possibly go to the defence of the US military.

Second, East Asian relations have been characterised by mutual economic interdependence, but inhibited by mutual distrust over security issues. The deeply rooted memories of Japanese wartime aggressions have spawned criticism towards any inclination or movement by Japanese leaders to the right. Not unexpectedly, the new security bills are viewed with suspicion by Japan's neighbours. China's state news agency, Xinhua, reported the Chinese defence minister Chang Wanquan's concern over the bills, warning that they will have a "complicated influence on regional security and strategic stability".

"Normalising" Japan's status

On the other hand, Article 9's reinterpretation could also mark the beginning of Japan's autonomy over its own security. The change reflects Abe's desire for Japan to "normalise" its status from its defeat in the Second World War, play a more prominent role in international and regional affairs and become a "proactive contributor to peace". The country has relied on the US to maintain its peace and security in the last 70 years.

However, the US' commitment and interests in the region may not be permanent. With the unpredictability of North Korea's belligerence and the rise of Chinese assertiveness, it is not surprising that Japan would seek to develop its own reliable deterrence. Japan has also learned the hard way during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War that chequebook diplomacy does very little to gain international status and respect.

Potential conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and over disputed islands in the East Sea put the region in great need of multilateral solutions. This would first require the cooperation of the two regional giants. In recent months, the extremely chilly relations between Japan and China have shown signs of thawing. Abe and China's President Xi Jinping have met on the sidelines of multilateral meetings and in March, their foreign ministries held their first security meeting since 2011.

There are also hints of a possible bilateral summit in September this year. However, Chinese negative reactions to the security bills suggest that Abe's bold move may impair the success or even delay the possibility of the summit.

Pragmatism over personal convictions

For Japan to successfully reinvent itself as a "proactive contributor to peace", Abe needs to be more persuasive that the new legislation is a pragmatic, rather than a revisionist, move. In fact, he can blame his own rash conduct and right-leaning opinions for prompting suspicion and criticism from external watchers. Actions, such as his attempt to file for a revision of the 1996 UN report on comfort women and his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in 2013, have helped fuel heavy criticism from Tokyo's neighbours and unfavourable portrayal in the foreign media.

To cushion the negative impact of the security bills on regional relations, Abe should put aside his personal convictions and increase his diplomatic outreach towards China and South Korea. The upcoming statement to mark the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II presents an opportunity for Abe to re-establish himself as a pragmatist and to initiate a momentum for reconciliation over historical issues.

He needs to issue a new apology that includes essential keywords like "colonial rule" and "aggression" in his statement - both key features of the 1995 Murayama statement and the 2005 Koizumi statement. Merely expressing gratitude to the international community for Japan's re-acceptance would inevitably incur the ire of China and South Korea. Also, a satisfactory resolution of the comfort women issue with South Korea would provide less ground for China and South Korea to continue their harsh censure of Japan.

To be sure, even if Japan is willing to make a peace offering, China may not be ready to bury the

hatchet. The Chinese government has had the tendency to capitalise on anti-Japanese rhetoric to distract its increasingly restive public from internal issues and to bolster nationalism to maintain its popular support. For the sake of regional peace and stability, however, China needs to be pragmatic as well and accept the olive branch, if extended.

Still, it remains a possibility that Abe's statement will not extend beyond his usual "remorse". Along with the controversial security bills, these actions may seriously reverse any recent progress in regional relations. The long overdue bilateral summit may still occur, but at the expense of concrete results.

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