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## The Rise of Japanese Militarism

By Brian Cloughley  
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On 19 September Japan's Asahi Shimbun newspaper reported a statement by China's foreign ministry to the effect that

“Japan's recent military buildup and drastic changes to its military and security policies are out of step with the trend of the times featuring peace, development and cooperation, making the international community question whether Japan is going to drop its exclusive defense policy and deviate from the path of peaceful development it has been following after World War II.”

China was joined by an unlikely supporter, South Korea, which echoed Beijing's sentiments by observing that

“Japan should firmly stick to the spirit of the pacifist Constitution it has consistently maintained since the end of the war, and implement its defense policy with transparency so that it will contribute to regional peace and stability.

These countries — otherwise markedly dissimilar in domestic governance and international policies — suffered appallingly, along with so many others, from Japan’s invasion and occupation in the 1930s and 1940s, and their fears of a resurgently militaristic Japan are far from being imaginary. They abhor any legislation that could result in a belligerent Japan again exerting its power to destroy other nations.

Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, adopted under American tutelage in 1947, is clear that “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. To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, *land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained* emphasis added). The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.” This was an admirable declaration but as with so many moral avowals was subjected to modification when it became inconvenient.

During the 1950-1953 Korean War the US encouraged Japan to form ‘National Safety Forces’ of some 100,000 armed uniformed personnel who in 1954 were renamed the Ground, Navy and Air Self-Defence Forces — the JSDF — which are in all but name the army, navy and air force of Japan.

No country in the world threatened Japan at that time. No country in the world threatens Japan, now. This is why it is intriguing that Japan’s ground ‘self-defense’ force of 150,000 soldiers is equipped with 700 tanks, 3,000 other armored vehicles, and 100 attack helicopters.

Further, it is questionable if Japan’s constitutional requirement to refrain from ever attaining “war potential” is altogether fulfilled by its 50,000-strong navy operating 120 ships including 16 attack submarines, 4 helicopter carriers, eight guided missile destroyers, and 30 other destroyers.

Similarly, the solemn undertaking to “renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation” cannot be said to be advanced by the air ‘self defense’ force of 50,000 having 800 aircraft including 130 multirole attack planes and 150 air superiority fighters, with an order having been placed for 42 of Lockheed Martin’s new F-35A stealth fighters for about 150 million dollars a copy.

Some commentators on the size and capabilities of Japan’s military forces point out that power projection is not practicable, given that there are no aircraft carriers, long-range bombers or missiles, and no nuclear weapons. This is true; but it is also true that these offensive capabilities, including nuclear weapons, could be produced in quantity by Japan within at most three years of a decision being made to do so. Production of nuclear bombs and warheads would take a year at the outside. Concurrent development of delivery systems would be speedy. As the BBC pointed out on October 15, “the JSDF at least have the potential to become a formidable fighting force. For one thing, the Japanese culture with its traditional emphasis on group cohesion, careful planning, and attention to detail — particularly important in today’s hi-tech military environment — is an ideal for modern soldiering.”

The worry for Asia is that a militarily resurgent Japan might have a government that is prepared to exert military pressure outside its borders.

China, especially, whose Manchurian region was invaded by Japan in 1931, is suspicious of any moves by Japan to assert itself by amending its constitutional obligation to “renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.”

China has a valid point, because in September the chipping-away at the Constitution’s Article 9 by the present government seemed to indicate intention by prime minister Shinzo Abe to extend the responsibility of his army, navy and air force to include operations not directly connected with defense of Japanese territory. As the Economist put it, “Mr Abe’s government argues that Japan should be permitted to engage in ‘collective defense,’ so that it can fight alongside a military ally — America — if that ally comes under attack. Until now, legal experts have interpreted the constitution as allowing Japan’s military to open fire only if directly fired upon. The government’s ‘reinterpretation’ is the most profound challenge to the pacifist constitution since 1947.”

The bills passed by Japan’s parliament on 19 September provide for Japan’s military forces to engage in operations in support of another nation even if Japan itself is not under attack. The guidelines appear to be reassuringly restrictive, in that such action is permitted only if

\*Japan’s survival is at stake;

\*all other non-military options have been exhausted; and

\*the use of force is limited to the minimum necessary to deter aggression.

But ‘survival at stake’ is an easily misinterpreted phrase, while interpretations of ‘exhausted’ and ‘minimum’ are far from legally precise. All it requires for Japan to go to war is for a malleable parliament to agree that a particular incident or series of incidents might threaten Japan’s survival and that following consideration of non-military options it became necessary to use military force.

Mr Abe’s signaled intention to extend Japan’s military capabilities was greeted with approval by the United States where on 27 April the US and Japan “agreed to a major update in their military relationship . . . that is expected to lead to a greater global presence for Japan’s military.”

On October 1, as reported by *IHS Jane’s*, “Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani officially launched the Ministry of Defense’s Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency, stating that the new body is aimed at lowering the costs of procurement and boosting Japan’s involvement in international development programs.” The Agency has an annual budget of 16 billion dollars and was formed only a few days after adoption of Mr Abe’s “Peace and Security Preservation Legislation” — and shortly before the Japanese navy joined with those of the US and India in exercise *Malabar* “in the Indian Ocean from 14-19 October, for which the Japanese navy’s

guided missile destroyer Fuyuzuki joined the five-ship USS Theodore Roosevelt carrier strike group, together with a destroyer, two frigates and a submarine of the Indian navy.”

The message about sea power was further conveyed on October 19 when Mr Abe “became the first Japanese prime minister to board a United States nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, when he flew aboard the USS Ronald Reagan at sea.” The US military journal *Stars and Stripes* continued that his visit “happened a few hours after an international fleet review in Sagami Bay, west of Yokosuka. The review featured [50] ships and [61] aircraft from Japan, France, India, Australia, South Korea and the United States . . . The carrier visit comes as Japan, in an effort led by Abe, seeks to broaden its role in global security affairs.”

Little wonder Mr Abe was given right royal treatment onboard the USS Ronald Reagan, as his city of Yokosuka is the headquarters of Japan’s large and expanding navy as well as being home base to the US Seventh Fleet, described as “the world’s largest forward-deployed naval force, with an area of responsibility that encompasses more than 48 million square miles, from Hawaii to the tip of India.”

On October 19 *USA Today* reported that “the Ronald Reagan arrived this month at its new homeport in Yokosuka . . . and is considered one of the most powerful ships in the U.S. Navy. Its recent transfer to Japan is part of the US ‘rebalance’ to focus more on Asia . . . Japan and the United States staged a naval show of strength off Tokyo Bay . . . as they flashed a pair of powerful, flat-deck warships perhaps just days before the US Navy plans to challenge disputed Chinese claims to territory in the nearby South China Sea” — which is what worries many countries.”

Asia is rightly wary of a militaristic Japanese government, and China’s apprehension that Japan intends to “deviate from the path of peaceful development” is understandable. Given Washington’s approval and abundant support of Japanese actions thus far, it is likely that Japan will accelerate its military expansion. Mr Abe’s October 19 speech on the Japanese navy destroyer Kurama referred to Japan’s policy as being “proactive pacifism” but there’s no comfort in that cloudy phrase. He wants Japan to develop power-projection, which is the road to military confrontation. Let’s hope the Japanese people see his ambitions as dangerous.