



# Japan Moves Closer to Defending Itself like a Normal Country

By Doug Bandow  
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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has begun to transform Japan into a normal country. Tokyo plans to take a more active role internationally. Eventually it should take over responsibility for defending itself.

As military occupier after World War II the U.S. imposed Article Nine of the Japanese constitution, disarming Tokyo. But in recent years the U.S. has pushed Japan to do more militarily. A serious debate has been percolating within Japan at least since the early 1990s, especially after North Korea and China reminded the Japanese that they faced potential threats.

So far Tokyo simply has revised its interpretation of Article Nine. Japan's "Self Defense Force" will be allowed to cooperate with other countries in combat. However, noted the Prime Minister: "There is no change in the general principle that we cannot send troops overseas."

Overseas the response was mixed. Naturally, the U.S. was pleased.

China was unhappy. The Republic of Korea explained it was "paying sharp attention to" the policy.

Other nations—in a break from the past—were supportive. Australia endorsed the move. So did the Philippines and Singapore.

Some critics still worry about Tokyo's ultimate intentions, as if the Japanese had a double dose of original sin. But Japan, with a stagnant economy, middling (and declining) population, and pacifist ethos, doesn't look much like the next global dominatrix.

Instead, Japan's well-established desire to do nothing has run aground because the world looks ever more dangerous. Moreover, basic economics suggests that Washington will have to reduce its role. As Prime Minister Abe recognized in 2012: "With the U.S. defense budget facing big cuts, a collapse of the military balance of power in Asia could create instability."

Thus, though the new interpretation is an important advance, it is not nearly enough. Over time, Tokyo needs to do much more.

For almost seven decades the U.S. has played the dominant role in protecting Japan. The justification for doing so is long over.

Instead of relying on America, Japan should defend itself, including contested islands under Tokyo's administration. The U.S. has an interest in preserving Japan's independent existence, but that suggests a backup role. The day-to-day business of advancing Tokyo's international interests should fall on the Japanese government.

Moreover, Japan should promote regional security. There's no reason for the U.S. alone to preserve open sea lanes, especially those critical for Japanese commerce.

Tokyo should cooperate closely with other democratic nations in Asia, such as South Korea and India. Japan also should continue building better relations with less democratic states that desire to maintain a regional balance of power, such as Burma and Vietnam.

Tokyo needs to spend more on its military. With outlays of only about one percent of GDP Japan now fields a technologically advanced armed forces. Japan should add missiles and missile defenses, as well as bolster its air and naval forces.

Tokyo's objective should be to create armed forces sufficient to deter Beijing from acting recklessly. China would have nothing to fear: even a Japanese-led coalition could not undertake offensive action against the nuclear-armed PRC.

Of course, it's not Washington's place to tell Tokyo what kind of military to field. What the U.S. should do, however, is inform Japan what the former will not do. America will not maintain forces in Japan to defend that nation. America will not get into a war with the PRC over contested territories claimed by Tokyo.

Japanese officials would be forced to debate their nation's security objectives, potential threats, and military requirements.

Retiring the U.S. security guarantee to Japan would be good sense, not "isolationism." Washington could continue to work with Tokyo in such areas as aid, environment, terrorism, proliferation, and more.

Americans and Japanese would trade even if the U.S. ended Tokyo's defense dependence. Also important would be preserving military and intelligence cooperation for both parties' benefit.

Of course, with or without the U.S., events in the region could go badly. However, the possibility of war should cause Washington to stay out absent a compelling justification otherwise. America shouldn't play games of naval chicken over worthless rock piles.

The U.S. would remain interested and involved in Asia, ready to act as an “off-shore balancer” if a dangerous hegemonic power threatened the region. But China isn’t there yet. And it might never get there.

After seven decades Washington should finally shift responsibility for defending Japan to Japan. The U.S. no longer can afford to play globocop. And it need not do so, since its prosperous allies, such as Tokyo, are able to take over.

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