

## Is Japan Serious about a New Security Role?

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June 5, 2014

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue (also known as the Asian Security Summit) has attracted considerable attention in both East Asia and the United States. In that speech, Abe stated that Japan "intends to play an even greater and more proactive role," thereby "making peace in Asia and the world more certain." Under this new security strategy, he pledged that Tokyo "is determined to spare no effort or trouble for the sake of the peace, security and prosperity of Asia and the Pacific."

The underlying motive for the tone of the speech was not hard to discern. Japanese leaders have become increasingly upset about China's growing assertiveness in the region. Tokyo is most concerned about its own territorial dispute with Beijing involving the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea, but the worry is broader than that.

The Abe government is also alarmed by the breadth of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and the rise of tensions between China and several of its neighbors, most notably Vietnam and the Philippines. Indeed, Abe praised the latter two countries for their supposed willingness to resolve the disputes through dialogue. Although he did not mention China by name, Abe denounced efforts to change the status quo through "one fait accompli after another"—an unsubtle reference to Beijing's recent actions.

It was an impressive speech, but only time will tell whether Japan is willing to back-up its new security rhetoric with meaningful substantive measures. It also remains to be seen whether smaller East Asian nations are willing to move beyond their historical fears of Japanese aggression and view Japan as a useful strategic counterweight to a rising China. If it is serious about wanting to play a more extensive security role, Tokyo must take several steps to give substance to its new policy declaration.

Three measures are especially important. First, Abe must succeed in his campaign to modify Article 9 of Japan's constitution, which even given increasingly expansive interpretations over the past six-and-a-half decades, confines Tokyo to purely self-defense military measures. If Japan is to be taken seriously as a regional security player, it must have the flexibility to adopt more proactive steps and to enter into collective defense arrangements. But there is still tenacious domestic opposition to changing Article 9, and it is by no means certain that Abe will succeed.

Second, even if Japan becomes able to negotiate collective defense agreements, it must overcome the suspicions and fears of potential partners. The Abe government's conduct on that front often has been clumsy and counterproductive. Abe and his associates need to avoid actions that needlessly alarm the East Asian neighbors that Tokyo seeks to entice as allies. Above all, that means Abe and other high-level officials must cease their visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors prominent war criminals from the World War II era. Officials also need to apologize for such gaffes as the cringe-worthy excuses about the use of "comfort women" (sex slaves from Korea and other countries) during World War II. Such insensitive blunders have made South Koreans and other East Asian populations uneasy about a more assertive Japan.

Finally, Tokyo must abolish the self-imposed limit of spending no more than one percent of the country's annual gross domestic product on defense. Abe has expressed the desire to do so, but given domestic resistance it is unlikely that Japanese military spending will rise much above the one-percent level. Although Japan's "Self Defense Forces" are technologically sophisticated, they remain modest in size. To become a serious strategic counterweight to China, military spending would need to rise to at least two percent of GDP—and do so within five years.

These issues should be of more than academic interest to the United States. The danger of Tokyo's current approach is that Japan will take a more confrontational stance toward China, and encourage Beijing's smaller East Asian neighbors to do so as well, but will be unable to back-up such policies with sufficient military capabilities and effective alliances. Tokyo's decision to transfer 10 Japanese-made patrol boats to the Philippines, and the apparent intention to adopt a similar sale to Vietnam, is already significantly increasing Japan's involvement in the South China Sea disputes—much to China's annoyance.

It is in the best interest of the United States to lower its own military profile in East Asia and see an indigenous regional balance of power emerge. That change necessitates a greater Japanese role in security affairs. But it is not in America's interest to see a bolder Japan create confrontations with China based on the expectation that, if trouble arises, Washington will come to the rescue. If Japan wants to play a more serious, extensive security role, it must back it up with a larger, more credible military and overcome its own historical legacy of antagonizing neighbors. It is not at all clear whether the Japanese political system is capable of making the hard (and expensive) choices needed to implement such a policy change.

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