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Japan's vanishing pacifism?

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Last month, the upper house of Japan's parliament approved legislation that shifted Japan's defense policy away from traditional self-defense towards collective self-defense. The new law enables the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to come to the aid of allies in the event of armed conflict. It is the latest in a series of measures that represent Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's drive to increase Japan's military power and burnish its status as a great power in East Asia.

Without a military capable of deploying abroad, Japan was seen as a kind of abnormal country, a second tier global player, despite its first-tier economy. In the wake of the recent legislation, it is tempting to believe that Japan will begin to exercise more power in its region. One optimistic commentator hopes by opening the door to collective defense, the JSDF might be used to shape and preserve international order. Taking a more aggressive and fearful tone, Chinese commentators warn against the resurrection of Japan's old war machine and lambast Abe as a hawkish historical revisionist who wants to destabilize East Asia.

Such rhetoric about Japan's growing military power paints a picture of a very strong country capable of exerting its will upon its neighborhood and beyond. Adherents to what I call the vanishing pacifism argument focus on how Japan's military could play a more active role beyond its borders, but their assessments ignore or downplay the myriad challenges and potential roadblocks that are likely to prevent Japan from becoming a serious regional military power.

Most notably, the Japanese public remains opposed to an expanded overseas role for the JSDF. Shortly before the legislation was adopted, a poll showed that 54 percent of voters opposed it. Abe's forceful support of the legislation has caused a nose-dive in his popularity, dropping his approval ratings to the lowest level since he became prime minister in late 2012. Abe had to expend considerable political capital on this controversial legislation. Public opposition could limit what the JSDF does in the field and make the use of military force unappealing as Abe tries to shore up popular support for his domestic policy agenda.

Additionally, demographic and military spending trends point to a JSDF that will be small and under-funded compared to its major rival, China. Japan's shrinking population is getting older over time. Some estimates predict that 40 percent of the population will be over the age of 65 by 2060. The military will have to compete with pensions and other social services for a shrinking pool of tax revenue. The aging of the population will also reduce the pool of individuals that are eligible for military service. In the short term, a five-year plan proposed by Abe in 2014 called

for the military budget to increase by three percent every year from 2016 to 2018. This would amount to a \$9 billion increase over three fiscal years, a drop in the bucket compared to China's defense spending.

It would be foolish to ignore the fact that the JSDF is a technologically advanced military that has the capacity to stand its ground in a conflict, but the recent legislation that enables the military to come to the defense of allies should not be seen as the harbinger of Japan's return as a great military power in East Asia. Japan's major challenges have deep, structural roots that will take a lot of time and political effort to change. Japan's supposed vanishing pacifism will do little to alter the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific anytime soon.

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