



NATO Foundation
Defense College

NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

October 2015

CHINA

After 70 years of pacifism Japan has decided to rearm

Despite widespread popular opposition and vigorous civilian protest, the Japanese parliament has approved a set of controversial security laws which, for the first time since WWII, allow the nation's rearmament and the use of troops in conflicts outside Japan.

The new laws effectively overrun Article 9 of the Japanese constitution which proclaims 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*" and also prescribes that "*land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained*".

The most apparent reason for Japan's rearmament is to counter the growing Chinese military power but it is not just about China. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) believe that Japan's security cannot rest anymore on the protection provided by the United States. Washington has been putting growing pressure on Japan to assume a greater role in the Pacific region implicitly admitting that, for all its naval and air power, it would be hard pressed to contain China in full scale hostilities.

The rearmament is inevitably causing concern amongst all major regional power in East Asia. Even before the new Japan security laws had been approved, South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se pointed

out that “*there are many countries including us that are worried about Japan’s rearmament. A situation where [we] overlook Japan’s rearmament will not come.*” Having suffered from Japanese aggression and brutal colonialism in the early 20th century, the South Koreans maintain a strong disfavour towards any Japanese military capabilities. The closest effect of Japan’s rearmament may therefore be a significant decrease in relations between the two previously allied countries.

Earlier this year, China’s foreign ministry condemned Japan’s intention to rearm as a “*kind of action [that] completely lays bare the two-faced nature of Japan’s foreign policy and has a detrimental impact on peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region*” and asserted that China’s readiness to implement a “*necessary reaction depending on the situation*”. Beijing has reiterated this threat multiple times, most recently with a speech by President Xi Jinping during a massive military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of World War II.

Looking at South Korea and the United States as key advocates for Japan’s rearmament, North Korea entered the fray with threats of escalation as well. Although both China’s and North Korea’s hostile reactions may seem mere rhetoric, their credibility should not be underestimated. The backlash from China and the rogue military state of North Korea may potentially lead to a serious deterioration of regional tensions that already lie on the brink — ultimately doing more harm than good to Japan’s security.

As Japanese military power grows, something else is likely to happen. Japan’s government might increasingly, and with increasing loudness, dissent from American policies and, like Germany has been quietly doing, press for a permanent seat, and veto, on the UN Security Council. A possibility that might, in turn, encourage the now mostly silent European leaders to criticize more openly their American “partners”. In other words, despite the reassurances from Mr. Abe’s government that Japan is only seeking to aid its American ally, the reality of East Asia is becoming a lot more problematic and the world is a lot less safe.