Why Japan's Rearmament Might Not Matter

Acrimony and elation erupted on opposing sides of a growing geopolitical rift in the Pacific following Japan's decision to sidestep its constitution and seek a more aggressive global posture.

AP reported that, "Japan's Cabinet on Tuesday approved a reinterpretation of the country's pacifist postwar constitution that will allow the military to help defend allies and others "in a close relationship" with Japan under what is known as "collective self-defense."

Those that remember when last Japan exerted military force beyond its borders are protesting the recent step which they see as yet another attempt to remilitarize the island nation and push it toward participating in yet another disastrous armed confrontation. This includes not only nations that were victims of Japanese imperialism during World War II, but even the Japanese people themselves who paid tremendously in blood and treasure during their ill-conceived attempt at achieving hegemony over the Pacific. Whatever lessons protesters may have learned from history appear lost on Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose English speech in Australia sounded suspiciously like various speeches penned for American politicians in regard to the US "Pivot Toward Asia."

But for all the posturing the announcement involved, does Japan's attempt to rattle its saber actually matter?

Why It Might Not Matter

Japan is a nation in decline. Its population is both aging and shrinking while its economy is mired in stagnation. Shifting toward greater militarization or cultivating adversarial relations with neighbors like China may be an attempt to rally its population around the flag, but that such a measure even seems necessary spells trouble for Japan. And Japan's military contributions to whichever nations is applies "collective self-defense" to are moot, considering many of these allies are likewise in permanent decline, including the United States itself. It is unlikely Japan's contributions will allow the US to break even in its Pacific calculus. America's attempt to "pivot toward Asia" has experienced many setbacks and delays including the ousting of allied regimes in the region and the ever expanding sphere of Chinese influence chaffing against waning US hegemony.

In fact, Japan's remilitarization may only distract it further from devising sustainable socioeconomic reforms necessary for the nation's recovery, let alone what it needs to thrive and expand.

The other possible motive behind Japan's saber rattling may be yet another collective effort by the West and its regional allies to force China's hand toward an overreaching Soviet-style arms race and subsequent missteps before the hoped collapse of Beijing's current political order. Should paranoia and bad intelligence get the better of Beijing, China may find itself overreacting to provocations, both political and tactical, along its borders and spheres of influence.
It should be noted that similar saber rattling from Japan has taken place for decades. Similar rhetoric could be heard in 1989, when Japan and the US were seeking their way out of economic recessions. More recently, Japan has made militaristic announcements similar to its most recent declarations, all accompanied by the same condemnation and celebrations along predictable political fault lines. It may be that Japan's socioeconomic condition is once again dire enough to warrant yet another round of distractions.

What China Should Do

For China, it must first invest wisely in intelligence, for it will be intelligence that tells China just how concerned it should really be regarding Japan's move and the greater alliances it alleges the move is supposed to foster. China must measure its own strengths realistically versus those of Japan and the US itself both at home, but more specifically, in the Pacific region.

China must also work internally to develop sustainable socioeconomic models that contrast and diverge from those that have repeatedly plunged its rivals into serial recessions. For China, it is both a matter of internal national stability, as well as establishing a bastion of strength against foreign aggression.

If China builds a socioeconomic foundation capable of outlasting the US and its Pacific partners, Japan's minimal contributions to an already receding American presence in the Pacific will be rendered irrelevant. While headlines and news stories touting the resurgence of "Imperial Japan" sell, the reality likely falls far short of this. If anything, this external act of "military might" from Japan appears to be telegraphing instead, socioeconomic weakness, both domestically, and within the various Western alliances it claims to seek a greater role.

For the Japanese

The Japanese gain no benefit from reminding the world of their dark past and menacing them with a potential reprisal of that role. Nor will they benefit from the diverting of national resources toward military adventures pursued in the dubious name of "collective self-defense." Regional tensions impede, not promote progress and economic opportunities. America's desire to see divisions across the region it can manipulate from afar will cost Asia just as America's meddling is costing Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The Japanese are already protesting the moves by a government that appears to represent the principles and interests of Washington more than the Japanese people themselves. The Japanese must continue to protest.

For Japan and China, there lies mutual interest in removing the United States' hegemonic role from the region. While the US claims its presence is necessary to maintain stability, peace, and prosperity, it appears the only threat to these three desirable outcomes is American meddling in the first place. Removing this element of instability, would be key for both China and Japan to pursue their own best interests, regardless of how divergent or compatible they may be. A real balance of power could be struck, minus the insidious meddling of nations that lie literally halfway around the globe.

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