Japan Enters a New Phase in Its History

by George Friedman - July 12, 2022

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated last week. Days later, his political party won an overwhelming majority in parliament. The Liberal Democratic Party certainly saw a bump from sympathy votes, but the election result was for the most part a statement about where the Japanese public stands on the major issue of Article 9, which was written into the Japanese constitution under the supervision of Douglas MacArthur, commander of the U.S. occupation force in Japan. Article 9 forbade Japan from having any military force. It was a decision Washington came to regret.

Japan changed dramatically after World War II. It became a democracy and saw remarkable economic growth. The United States needed allies against the Soviet Union in the Pacific, and Japan was in a critical geographic position. The main Soviet port on the Pacific was Vladivostok, but Soviet ships couldn't reach the wider Pacific without traversing the narrow passages between Japan's major islands.

During the Cold War, the Soviets sought a number of ways to put a major naval force in the Pacific. The U.S. was afraid that unrest in Japan might open the door and that Japan, lacking significant naval and air forces of its own, could not hold the narrow path that the Soviets would have to navigate. The U.S., meanwhile, had the requisite air and naval forces, but given the Soviet challenge in Europe and the Atlantic, it didn't want to have to divert forces to Japan. Washington sought to have Japan rearm. It was no threat to the United States, and it would be helpful if it could have a blocking force in place.

But the Japanese refused, standing on Article 9 – which, Tokyo noted, the Americans themselves had written into Japan's constitution. The Americans sought to use Japanese resources to support U.S. goals. The Japanese stood by a constitution that was anathema to Japanese history. Tokyo had no desire to invest in a navy, preferring instead to invest heavily in, for example, an auto industry that would eventually challenge American car manufacturers.

Successive Japanese governments from different parties defended Article 9, until the Japanese supreme court ruled that Tokyo could not fail to have a military force for the defense of Japan. It said that a government, as a matter of nature, is obliged to protect its people, and that a force limited to the defense of Japan had to be created.

Japan has since developed a meaningful military capability, but it retained the principle of Article 9 and limited the amount of support it would give the U.S. in the Pacific. As the world's third-largest economy, Japan has the resources for a substantial force, but such a force might draw it into supporting American military interests in the region. Recently, though, Tokyo stretched its commitment to Article 9's principles when it said Taiwan's security was essential to the defense of Japan. Were Taiwan to fall into Chinese hands, China could threaten southern Japan.

This brings us to the present and the weekend's election. The late prime minister's Liberal Democratic Party has strongly favored amending the constitution to eliminate Article 9. This would enable Japan to maintain a military. It would also allow Japan to put World War II behind it, by abandoning a limitation that has made it different from all other countries. Finally, it would make Japan a great power, something it has had the potential to be for decades but which it has avoided, both because of the memory of its previous attempt and because it wants to sidestep the risks and challenges of being a great power.

Dropping Article 9 is attractive to Japan now that China has become more aggressive – rhetorically, at least. As a significant power, Japan could deter China, or even intimidate it if it works in alliance with the United States. A rearmed Japan would be a more valuable partner for the United States, but it would also give Tokyo options if Washington chooses not to send sufficient forces to protect Japan.

Japan's economy trails only the U.S. and China in size. It has the advantage over China of being a far more socially stable and homogeneous society. China, by contrast, must dedicate security forces toward domestic policing, meaning the actual size of China's conventional military force is smaller than it appears. Japan doesn't need its military to serve internal police functions, so its investments in security could be directed toward national defense and power projection. This would not necessarily make it larger than China's effective force, but it would give it a force that could resist China.

China is in the midst of an economic crisis. In my view, this will generate internal political tensions of some significance. Japan is less likely to have a transformative economic crisis. It faced one in the 1990s and overcame it with what American investors call its "Lost Decade," for reasons I don't

understand. But what is clear is that Japan survived a major crisis without significant social unrest. Japan's internal social discipline adds to its ability to build a comprehensive military force and grow its economy.

A Japanese decision to build upon what is already a not-insignificant self-defense force will change the geopolitical reality of the Pacific. China is already confronted by the United States, operating at an extreme distance from its homeland. Washington can do this, but if Japan remains an ally, then the Japanese can assume an equal or even a leading role. The cost and risk of containing China would then decline for the United States. It would strengthen the informal Quad alliance, which comprises Australia, India, Japan and the United States. American control of the Western Pacific would depend on American guarantees but not a continual, large-scale presence.

Key to this is that the U.S. and Japan maintain their alliance. It endured since World War II as a relationship of unequals. Japan's military will not surpass the American force, and the U.S. guarantees open global waterways. Japan would not have the ability to do that, and as a major exporter and an importer of raw materials, Japan relies on the U.S. global presence. Therefore, unlike before World War II, the U.S. and Japan share crucial interests within a relationship crafted over several generations. An alliance of the world's largest and third-largest economies, in which Japan builds a significant military force as well as growing its economy, would redefine the balance of power in the Pacific with minimal danger of discord, at least for the foreseeable future.

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