

Will rising tensions in Asia push Japan toward a full-fledged military?

Prime Minister Abe is proposing small steps, such as renaming the Self-Defense Forces, with an eye toward moving away from the legal restrictions that have governed Japan's military since World War II.

By [Peter Ford](#), *Staff Writer* / February 21, 2013



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe waves before his departure for Washington at Haneda International Airport in Tokyo, Thursday.

Shizuo Kambayashi/AP

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Japan is governed by a famously “pacifist” Constitution, imposed by the [United States](#) after World War II, whose ninth article declares that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.”

Yet military experts here and abroad are confident that should the current crisis degenerate into an open fight with China, Japan would win.

“Japan’s Self-Defense Forces could easily repel Chinese forces from the Senkakus,” says **Takashi Kawakami**, a defense expert who advises leaders of the ruling [Liberal Democratic Party](#) (LDP), using the Japanese name for the islands that China calls the Diaoyu.

That is because for half a century successive Japanese governments have interpreted – or ignored – the Constitution in such a way as to build the most sophisticated armed forces in [Asia](#).

They may have limited themselves to spending less than 1 percent of Japan’s gross domestic product on defense, but even 1 percent of the third-largest GDP in the

world buys a lot. Japan ranked sixth in global defense spending last year, just behind [France](#) and Britain.

Full-fledged Japanese military?

Now, new [Prime Minister Shinzo Abe](#) is moving to fulfill a dream that right-wing Japanese nationalists have long nurtured – to amend the Constitution in ways that would loose the nation’s soldiers from some of the legal constraints that bind them.

He is moving slowly, his aides say, and not only so as to avoid spooking Japan’s neighbors, who still harbor ugly memories of Japanese aggression. Japanese public opinion, too, is nervous about steps that could lead the country down familiar, and much feared, paths.

One proposal Mr. Abe has made is to rename the “Self-Defense Forces” the “National Defense Forces.” Even that apparently minor tweak worries some.

“People are convinced it would not just be a name change, but would really be turning [the SDF] into a full fledged normal military, allowing them to get offensive weaponry. I don’t think the Japanese are ready for that,” says a Western diplomat.

But China’s incursions into Japanese territorial waters around the [Senkaku/Diaoyu islands](#) and [North Korea](#)’s recent tests of a nuclear device and missiles to carry it are prompting a rethink here.

“People’s mind-sets have greatly changed with the North Korean tests and Chinese intrusions,” says Akihisa Nagashima, a former vice Defense minister and member of Parliament for the opposition [Democratic Party of Japan](#). “Support is widening for the idea that Japan should assume a bigger security role.”

Indicative of that trend, says Masaru Kohno, a professor of politics at [Waseda University](#) in [Tokyo](#), is “an across the board tidal shift in favor of strengthening the SDF.” Abe’s proposal to increase Japan’s defense budget for the first time in more than a decade “is in line with public opinion,” says Professor Kohno.

This mood is spurred in part by alarmist media reports of the way in which Chinese military vessels had “locked on” their missile-guidance systems to a Japanese helicopter and ship. “China-Japan War Starts: Their Target – Metro Tokyo” blared last week’s cover of *Shukan Gendai*, Japan’s biggest-circulation weekly magazine.

The other trigger

It has also been triggered by a widening realization that the current Constitution does not allow Japan to forge military alliances with other nations except the US, or even exercise a right to “collective self-defense,” meaning that Tokyo cannot militarily help its allies.

Were North Korea to launch a nuclear missile aimed at [San Francisco](#), for example, Japan would be legally barred from shooting it down en route.

Nor can Japanese troops pull their weight in international peacekeeping operations, during which they are embarrassed by the need to have “minders” from foreign armies to protect them. The Japanese contingent withdrew recently from the [United Nations](#) force in the [Golan Heights](#), for example, because the civil war in [Syria](#) was making the situation too dangerous for them.

The right to collective self-defense is likely to be enshrined in legislation that the government hopes to pass by the end of this year, assuming that the LDP wins the Upper House elections this summer and takes full control of parliament.

Article 9 of the Constitution, however, as a barometer for Japan’s potentially aggressive intentions, is much more sensitive at home and abroad, and much harder to amend: It would take a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament and a referendum.

The article has traditionally been a hot-button issue for nationalists dreaming of a return to Japan’s Imperial glory days, who find the Constitution’s restrictions humiliating. But the idea of rewording the article is now finding support in more moderate quarters.

“We should revise” the paragraph saying that Japan will not maintain armed forces, says Mr. Nagashima. “It is hypocrisy ... and we need to straighten out the conflict between the ideal of the Constitution and reality.”

“We need to clarify Article 9,” agrees Taro Kono, a moderate LDP legislator. “The same wording both banned military forces after the war and allowed us to send forces to [Iraq](#). We need to change the wording so that if the Chinese read it they understand what it means.”

But if the government moves too quickly, warns **Mr. Kawakami**, “public opinion won’t keep up, so they want to go step by step in parliament” to lay the legislative groundwork for an eventual constitutional revision.

'Japan will become a normal country'

It could be several years before Japan trusts itself with a conventional military force, some observers here believe. In the meantime, Abe's bold words about the nation's readiness to defend itself ring a little hollow.

In parliament, just after North Korea's most recent nuclear test, the prime minister said he believed that "under the precondition that no alternative exists," the Constitution allowed Japan the right to preemptively strike "enemy bases that hold guided missiles and other weapons."

But Japan does not have the means to launch such a strike. It has no bombers, no offensive missiles, "not even any maps of where the targets might be," points out Nagashima.

That is the kind of situation that ordinary Japanese are finding increasingly unacceptable, says **Kawakami**. "The harsher China is on Japan, the less the Japanese public worries about revising or reinterpreting the Constitution," he says. "Thanks to China and North Korea, Japan will become a normal country."