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Security bills' credibility hobbled by suspicious explanations and reporting: scholars

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As the Diet continues debate over a raft of contentious bills that would upend Japan's postwar security regime, some scholars and experts are noting the need for at least some changes to the nation's defense posture considering the security climate in the region — and a more transparent approach to these changes.

But these voices are being largely drowned out by those on the left and right of the issue, who have attempted to control the debate, as well as an unwitting media that has seemingly been co-opted by both sides, they say.

For the scholars and experts who at least acknowledge that Japan, facing increasingly fraught geopolitical considerations, must make a balanced shift commensurate with the times, this has been a distraction. With a nuclear-armed North Korea lobbing missiles into the Sea of Japan, a China that's making runs into Japanese-held territory, and a Japan reluctant to join U.N. peacekeeping operations, something needs to give, they say.

"I think there is no doubt that Japan's security policy should undergo some change because the security environment around Japan is becoming quite difficult with the rise of China, North Korea, and the relative decline of U.S. power and the quixotic nature of U.S. grand strategy," Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at Britain's University of Warwick, said in an email. "The former status quo is not tenable."

However, while backing some changes, Hughes believes Abe's push is "quite radical," as opposed to other scholars who see the administration's moves as highly limited and maintaining continuity.

"Personally, I would like to see Japan pursue a genuine path of proactive contribution to international peace — not the Abe brand — which means great efforts at multilateral diplomacy, human security and UNPKO (United Nations peacekeeping operations) . . . as well as some careful strengthening of JSDF (Japan Self-Defense Forces) capabilities."

Yuichi Hosoya, a leading Japan security expert and professor of international politics at Keio University in Tokyo, sees things differently.

“This is not a radical or a big change in Japanese security policy,” said Hosoya, who has served on several government panels. “The current security legislation is sort of the sum of small changes. There are many, many small changes, and if we combine all of these, maybe it seems like a big change.”

Hosoya said there have been a number of attempts at revising security policy. Some have been successful. Others have foundered spectacularly.

From the founding of the SDF in 1954 to present-day attempts at revision, including Japan’s involvement in U.N. peacekeeping operations after the Gulf War in the 1990s and former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s decision to expand SDF activities and upgrade the former Defense Agency to a formal ministry in the early 2000s, there have been a number of shifts in defense policy.

Still, Hosoya noted the difficulties of making any kind of grand shift in policy, citing the example of LDP heavyweight Shigeru Ishiba, currently regional revitalization minister, and his preference for a new basic national security law that clarifies the roles of the SDF instead of the Abe-favored piecemeal approach to policy changes. “The legal basis for changing (these) laws is extremely complicated,” said Hosoya.

“So, little by little, the government tried to add something new, a tiny bit. No radical shift. No philosophical shift,” he said.

“That’s why we have so many revisions, so many amendments in the SDF law and other (security-related) laws,” he added.

Corey Wallace, a Japan expert and security policy analyst at the Graduate School of East Asian Studies at Freie Universitat, Berlin, said that while the collective self-defense changes and revised U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines are significant in terms of symbolism, the actual practical nature of the changes fit nicely within the context of Japan’s incremental shifts since the mid-1970s.

“If you look at the history of security policy in Japan, it was never really ‘pacifist’ and Japan’s norms of military restraint have been evolving for some time.”

The reason behind the slow pace of change? A reluctance — politically and ideologically — to tackle perceived vulnerabilities in policy.

“No prime minister was ever brave enough to try to face these new security challenges,” Hosoya said. “But I think that prime minister Abe is quite willing, regardless of any loss of support, to do something to respond to these challenges.”

But the Abe administration has done a poor job of explaining to the public the need for the changes.

According to a Kyodo poll released May 31, the vast majority of the public finds the government’s explanations “insufficient.”

In that survey, a mere 14.2 percent of the respondents said they had been adequately informed about the details of the legislation, compared with about 81.4 percent who said they had not.

Some scholars and experts have echoed these charges.

“I think that so far, the administration has performed quite poorly in explaining the need for legislation,” said Wallace. “The answers to the questions in the Diet so far have been vague and a little unconvincing.

“The administration is trying to push the envelope as much as possible in terms of expanding the roles of the SDF and maintain some degree of ambiguity in the bills to allow strategic flexibility in the future,” Wallace added. “But this might backfire if it leads to too many doubts about the intentions of the government.”

On this, Hughes agrees, pointing to what he calls a continuing pattern under the LDP of obfuscating policymakers' true intentions and stifling debate.

“Abe will argue that the collective self-defense reforms have been conducted in a transparent manner, but it's pretty clear that normal channels and precedents have been overturned by purely political means, and the LDP-Komeito coalition is still attempting to pass a series of laws with key loopholes that will allow for larger Japanese military commitments in the future, the implications of which are not at all clear and not allowed to be debated fully,” Hughes said.

Abe's hawkish credentials have also been a lightning rod for even greater criticism and pushback than might normally be the case.

“I would say that 90 percent of the proposed changes, if they had been produced under, say, a DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan) government or a moderate LDP premier, would have been significantly less controversial,” Wallace said.

Hosoya, on the other hand, points to a shift in the public's focus and a general lack of understanding in the media — and even among some lawmakers — regarding the legal basis for the nation's security laws.

“Previously, security law was not at the center of public opinion because . . . ordinary people did not fully understand” it, Hosoya said. “So the debate was much more ideological.”

Until recently, these security issues were dealt with strictly by what Hosoya called “professionals” — security experts and defense bureaucrats. Now, with the ruling coalition's bills, the government has taken the reins. And it has not been easy, Hosoya said.

“We need discussions, we need to know more, but the government is not familiar with explaining the complicated structure of security law in simple terms,” he said. “This, I think, is one of the biggest problems, the biggest source of misunderstandings or mistrust . . . that ordinary people and legislators in the Diet have.”

Some of these misunderstandings may be due to media overreach, according to some scholars, many of whom describe themselves as “centrists” and realists rather than right-wingers or left-wingers, according to Hosoya.

“I think that journalists and intellectuals . . . should be much more familiar with security policy,” he said, noting that several of the centrist scholars have voiced concerns over a media environment where it is “quite fashionable to write that Japan is becoming similar to the Japan of the 1930s.”

Among the more contentious issues has been the security of SDF personnel who could potentially be deployed under the changes. But this, too, has often been co-opted by those to the left and right of the issue, scholars say.

For Hosoya, the issue is not about taking sides, but rather balance.

“We have to think about the balance between the necessity and safety of the Self-Defense Forces,” Hosoya said.

Taking on a large share of international duties, such as U.N. peacekeeping operations, is also a large part of the changes, amid a more intertwined world, the scholars agree.

In the years since the first Gulf War, Tokyo has been assailed for participating in what critics have derisively labeled “checkbook diplomacy.” While Japan ranks No. 2 among financial contributors, according to the most recent U.N. statistics, it has consistently been reluctant to participate in U.N. peacekeeping. Strict rules for dispatching the SDF for that, as well as a dearth of political will, have severely limited Japan’s contributions, April 2015 statistics show, with Japan ranking 55th among 122 nations with military and police contributions.

Hosoya favors less of a focus on risk and safety and more on these responsibilities as a member of the global community.

“We shouldn’t concentrate on just safety. . . . U.S. forces came to Japan soon after the Great East Japan Earthquake. They were actually risking their lives, their health to an extent due to the Fukushima nuclear disaster, but they came,” he said. “They prioritized the necessity of helping Japan.”

Whatever the focus, Diet discussion on the changes appears likely to be extended, and with the LDP on the defensive, the debate looks to become even more bogged down.

“Ultimately . . . this has to be a decision for the Japanese people, and there is often too much interference from the U.S. and other ‘experts’ in Japan’s security debate and telling their politicians and people what is good for them,” said Hughes. “Japan is a democracy and should act like it, and set an example on security to its neighbors.”

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