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Japan's shift to be 'normal'



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A RECENT Washington Post article about Japan flexing its military muscle has been cited – with considerable alarm – across many media outlets.

The thesis of the piece was straightforward: Amid China's rise, Japan is shifting to the right and "acting more confrontational" than any time since World War II.

Such a view is not really new. In the past two decades, Japan has seen its security situation deteriorate. To the west, it eyes the development of North Korea's nuclear weapon programme with worry.

In addition, recent territorial spats with China and South Korea – coupled with the former's strong growth in military spending – have made Japanese officials jittery.

Recently, a Japanese official told me that Tokyo's recent altercations with South Korea over the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands were actually a blessing in disguise. After all, the dispute has helped Japan look away from China. He would only put on a sheepish grin when I asked him whether Tokyo's bureaucracy actually thought China was the country's biggest threat.

Faced with such a challenging neighbourhood, Japan's military has begun to flex its muscle in recent years.

Last year, the country lifted a 40-year ban on weapons exports. In a show of pique in April, Tokyo said it would shoot down any North Korean ballistic missile that flew across its territory.

Looking ahead, Tokyo's political landscape will also see a move to the right.

Recently, Mr Shinzo Abe, who

was prime minister in 2006 and 2007, grabbed the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

According to analysts, the nationalist leader might restore Japan's right to collective defence. This means that Japan could theoretically aid the United States, its ally, in a military conflict – an unprecedented move for Japan's postwar pacifist stance.

Mr Abe's view is shared by Mr Toru Hashimoto, the 43-year-old Osaka Mayor who heads the Japan Restoration Party, a party on the up and up which could form a coalition government with the LDP after the next general elections.

All that said, it is important to see things in perspective. Japan's rightward shift does not mean that it will go all the way right and revert to its odious World War II-era aggression. Instead, Japan is moving right to the centre.

In the long run, Japan will become a "normal" country – it will retain the right to wage war, assemble a standing army (as opposed to self-defence forces), and contribute substantially to the provision of regional and global security.

The more conservative views of an LDP/Restoration Party government would likely be dampened once their policies get filtered through Japan's bureaucratic framework, says Professor Christopher Hughes, a Japan watcher at the University of Warwick. "In this sense, I do not see a radical shift, but just the incremental moving along the path to

so-called 'normality', with a great disposition for Japan to defend itself and work with the US."

The Japan Self-Defence Forces' (JSDF) enhanced ability to operate together with US forces is not a cause for alarm, writes Prof Yoshihide Soeya, a respected Japanese scholar, in an edited 2011 volume, Japan As A "Normal Country"?. "It should be obvious to all that this is evidence neither of the remilitarisation of Japan nor a shift towards the ideological right."

Agreeing, an Asian diplomat notes that talk about Japan's rightward shift has been around for a long time. It will take many years before it turns "normal". "I don't think we will wake up one morning to see an amended Constitution and replacement of the JSDF with a standing army," he said.

No matter how "normal" Japan's rightward shift is, it would still be worrying for China and South Korea – two countries which suffered heavily under Japan's wartime aggression.

There is, however, a way forward if Japan does turn "normal".

For some time, China's Japan scholars and analysts have accepted "new thinking" that a "normal" Japan is inevitable – that is, Japan would need to close the gap between its economic weight and its status in global affairs.

They disagree, however, on what China's exact response should be, writes University of Macau professor of government Wang Jianwei.

Some, for example, argue that

the acceptance of Japan as a "normal" country should not be given as a free lunch.

Rather, Japan should sign a formal statement of apology for its wartime crimes, ban visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by its prime ministers, relinquish its bid to control the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and resolve the dispute through negotiation.

If Japan were to agree to such conditions, China could, writes Prof Wang, recognise Japan's "normal" country status and even support Tokyo's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council.

In the end, Japan's move to become a "normal" country would not be problem-free.

Widespread anti-Japanese protests in China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute recently only underscore that any move to the right would be viewed with suspicion in China and the region.

That said, there is enough reason to stay calm over Tokyo's shift to the right – a move to be "normal" is not abnormal.

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Japan Ground Self-Defence Force tanks flaring up a smoke screen in August during an annual live-firing exercise and demonstration at Higashi Fuji training range in Gotemba, south-west of Tokyo. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS