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Is Japan Now Finally a Normal Country?

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What the recent changes to Japanese defense mean in the context of a return to "normalcy."

So is Japan now finally a normal country? The question has been asked and debated for about two decades, the answer quite naturally depending on the definition given to the concept of "normal country." A first step to address this question is to approach it in reverse, asking why Japan was seen as "abnormal" in the first place. The answer lies in the contextual reality that surrounded the emergence of the debate on Japan's "normalcy."

That debate began with the end of the Cold War, which marked the most important systemic change in international relations since the Second World War. Ichiro Ozawa's *Blueprint for a New Japan*, a book that pioneered the debate on Japan's normalcy, was written shortly after the bitter experience of the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Mainly because of constitutional and other legal impediments, Japan was able to offer only financial support to the multilateral war effort against Saddam Hussein, aid that went almost completely unacknowledged by the international community despite the huge amount of money it entailed.

Ozawa's book drew lessons from this experience and consequently called for the re-appropriation of Japanese politics by politicians at the expense of the slow and inefficient bureaucracy and for a more active role for Japan in international affairs, including through deeper participation of the Self-Defense Forces to U.N. peacekeeping operations.

Japan thus started being labeled "abnormal" because its legislation that framed the use of armed forces prevented the country from adjusting its foreign policy to a rapidly changing international environment and from playing an active role in the redefinition of the international order underway in the wake of the Cold War.

In other words, Japan was abnormal because of the discrepancy between the foreign policy tools at its disposal and the nature of the international system the country was dealing with. If a foreign policy almost exclusively based on economic power was judged adequate to cope with the relatively stable and slowly evolving East Asian environment during Cold War era, the early 1990s showed Japan that this policy could rapidly become outdated in the new, more flexible international environment. To return to normalcy, Tokyo had to find its place and redefine its role in the new international order, which implied a reorientation of its foreign policy and thus a diversification of the instruments for implementing this policy.

The next step to assess whether Japan is today a normal country is to look at what it might have been lacking in the post-Cold War era. The near consensus among scholars points to greater military power and an upgraded and independent military apparatus. The gradual modernization of the Self-Defense Forces, such as the development of an independent intelligence gathering system, new legislation to allow greater involvement in U.N. peacekeeping operations, and the 2007 decision to upgrade the Defense Agency to ministry status, are often cited as examples of Japan's drive to normalcy.

The recently released planned increase in the defense budget for fiscal 2014, the first such increase in 11 years and the biggest in the past 22 years, made headlines and will certainly be taken by some as further proof of Japan's normalization. Political initiatives to revise legislation related to military affairs, including the Constitution, are another aspect of Japan's alleged normalization. The current debate about the revision of the three principles on arms exports is a good example of this fact.

Yet none of these elements determine the normalcy of Japan as country. According to the definition of "normal country" proposed above and based on the historic debate in the Japanese case, the key feature that Japan needs to be considered "normal" is different in nature: It is the re-appropriation of the military as a tool of foreign policy by the civil executive. For Japan to reach a state of normalcy does not necessarily require more powerful and independent Self-Defense Forces, or amendments to the Constitution or other legal constraints related to the use of armed forces.

The re-appropriation of the military as an instrument of foreign policy is for Japan essential because of the nature of the post-Cold War East Asian regional system. This system is characterized by rapid economic development and growing interdependence, but also by historical, territorial, and political tensions, by exacerbated nationalism, and by rapidly changing military power differentials between the major countries involved in the region. Military power is an important component of all East Asian countries' foreign policy, except Japan's.

The end of the Cold War was soon followed by another systemic development that took place closer to Japan: The emergence of China as a major regional – some would say global – military power. The quantitative and more importantly qualitative improvements of the People's Liberation Army triggered the emergence of the so-called "China threat" theory in Japan and the U.S. The relative regional decline of the United States compared to China's growing military might and power projection capacities and the increasingly coercive stance adopted by China on security- and sovereignty-related issues have made it imperative for Japanese leaders to look for improved defense capabilities, and more importantly for a stronger grip on and a better use of their military establishment to address external challenges. It is this gradual adaptation of Japan's foreign policy to these regional developments that has returned Japan to a state of normalcy.

The question of whether Japan has become "normal" can now be positively answered. Japan has indeed recently evolved into a normal country in view of its surrounding environment by regaining control of the military instrument in international relations. This normalcy was

institutionalized by the recent establishment of the National Security Council, with the subsequent formulation of the new National Security Strategy being the first concrete consequence of the institutional reform on Japan's foreign policy.

The establishment of the Council, effectively putting the military establishment under the direct guidance of the executive for foreign policy matters related to national security, certainly represents the most significant change in Japan's civil-military relations since the creation in 1950 of the National Police Reserve and its 1954 reorganization into three distinct services.

The Council, attended by the prime minister, the foreign and defense ministers, and the chief cabinet secretary, is dedicated to reinforcing the influence of the executive on the formulation of national defense policies and the five- and ten-year defense buildup plans. Scheduled to meet twice a month, the Council will also serve as a decision-making forum to address external security issues and contingencies, with the new National Security Strategy explicitly referring to challenges in the East China Sea and to North Korea. In a statement to the Japanese Diet in late October, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made it clear that "the establishment of a National Security Council is absolutely imperative to strengthen the command functions of the prime minister's office on foreign and security policies."

The new National Security Strategy, which from now on will provide the baseline of the decisions taken by the Council, can be seen as the expression that the Japanese executive has recovered the ability to use the military as an instrument of foreign policy, a capacity lost in the wake of the Second World War during the U.S. occupation. If the strategy calls for a "proactive contribution to global peace," it also implies a more "proactive" security role for the Self-Defense Forces in this contribution. In other words, the Japanese executive now possesses two levers it can use simultaneously, one diplomatic through the ministry of foreign affairs and one military with the Self-Defense Forces, to give teeth to its foreign policy and adjust to the constraints imposed upon the country by the regional environment.

Taking China as an illustration, the Strategy recognized the challenges poses by its activities in the East and South China Seas. While reaffirming Tokyo's intention to foster mutually beneficial relations with China and call for restraint in handling bilateral disputes, the Strategy and the defense buildup plans that come with it aim at developing a flexible force structure allowing a swift response to contingencies. Referring to the situation in the East China Sea, Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera indeed emphasized that "Japan will prepare a defense power that is highly effective and responsive."

A last observation is worth making regarding the future development of Japan's foreign policy now that the National Security Council has been established: Under this new institutional framework, the military establishment will, *ceteris paribus*, play a more important role in and possess more influence on the formulation of foreign policy. This will be particularly true for policies toward East Asia, as the Council's activities and decision-making process are guided by the National Security Strategy that focuses primarily on regional dynamics.

The increased influence of the military on regional foreign policy comes from the fact that the National Security Council takes precedence over the Security Council of Japan, established

in 1986 and comprising nine ministers of state, as the main forum for discussing national defense policy. It can reasonably be assumed that inside the new Council, which has only four ministers, the arguments put forward by the defense minister will carry relatively more weight in the decisions taken by the prime minister than when nine officials sit around the table.

In other words, even though the Council is explicitly dedicated to increasing the leverage of the prime minister on the formulation of policy related to national security through better control and coordination of the activities of the defense and foreign ministries, it also creates a direct and more effective channel for the military establishment to influence the top of the political apparatus. In addition, it places the newly established defense ministry on an equal footing with the foreign ministry in the decision-making process, despite the fact that the latter is traditionally considered in Japan as one of the top ministries while the former has so far played a limited role in foreign policy. The defense and foreign ministries are the only two ministries of state permanently represented at the Council in addition to the prime minister and the chief cabinet secretary.

So yes, Japan has finally reached the state of normalcy in view of its surrounding environment, regaining control of the military as a tool of foreign policy. The Constitution and its legal constraints on the use of armed forces have not been serious impediments in this process of normalization. This reflects the fact that in today's East Asia, military operations forbidden by Japanese legislation, unprovoked military operations abroad and the threat or use of force to settle international disputes are totally unthinkable without proper justification. More precisely, these are unthinkable uses of armed forces if not undertaken under the cover of the right of self-defense, a right Japan possesses whatever the interpretation given to the Constitution. For a democratic regime like Japan to engage in military operations against another country, but also to resort to the threat of the use of force, requires convincing its public that the country's national security is indeed threatened by external developments, pacific constitution or not.

This does not mean that Japan is returning to its militaristic past. The world has changed and so have international and domestic dynamics. But if Japan still legally "renounce[s] war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes," it is nevertheless today in a position to use military power to achieve *democratically defendable* foreign policy objectives. And in view of the regional security challenges Japan faces, from North Korea's nuclear and missile programs to territorial disputes in the East China Sea, one has to admit that most of these challenges could in some way or another justify the threat or use of armed forces under the right of self-defense.