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Japan Militarizes and Worries Russia and China

In recent years, Japan has started a new wave of militarization, which has surprised experts worldwide. Its closest neighbors, China and Russia are the countries that are most concerned with this new Japanese militarization.

After World War II in which Tokyo was allied with Nazi Germany and was the last country to surrender, Japan renounced military force as a means of conflict resolution. After its surrender, in 1947 a new Constitution came into force, which in its ninth article vetoes the use of military power:

“Article 9. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized”.

In 1954, Tokyo received authorization to create an extremely limited military self-defense force, whose aim was simply to guarantee national security in a global context of Cold War and bipolarity, in which Japan – a westernized, capitalist and pro-Washington country – found itself constantly “threatened” by the growth of the Soviet and Chinese empires. This decision, although it relativized the Japanese renunciation of military power, still preserved the national choice for the total abdication from war as a legitimate instrument of conflict resolution, serving only as a self-defense resource in case of extreme possibilities.

However, since then, the resurgence of a Japanese military project has gradually begun to gain force. Within the country, rhetoric has been strengthened in favor of relativizing Article 9 of the Constitution, in order to expand the Japanese military potential. Contrary to expectations until then, the end of the Cold War did not diminish the Japanese military but opened space for other justifications for its growth. North Korea’s progress, seen as a threat by both Seoul and Tokyo, was the main reason why rhetoric in favor of continuing the militarization process grew. But the pillar of the Japanese military resurgence was international cooperation with the US. Japanese and Americans started joint activities thanks mainly to the efforts of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who in the past eight years promoted a true historical reversal of the Japanese state’s pacifist ideology, allowing for an extensive militarization, reducing Article 9 of the Constitution to a purely decorative figure.

In any case, Tokyo is currently actively investing in the development of its military capabilities and this work has been remarkably successful. Japan is famous for being one of the biggest industrial giants in the world, so it is not surprising that the country manages to

develop modern and efficient war equipment. The current Japanese military industrial complex is formed by a group of several companies, among which Mitsubishi Heavy Industries stands out, specializing in the production of tanks, combat vehicles, military aircraft, warships, missiles, and other military equipment.

According to a study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published in April 2020, in 2019 Japan ranked ninth in military spending – about 47.6 billion dollars. The Japanese agency Kyodo reported that the Japanese military requested 51.7 billion dollars for the next fiscal year, which begins April 1, 2021. Spending has been steadily increasing, corresponding to 0.9% of Japanese GDP. This percentage is not so large compared to other military powers on the planet, but they are impressive when we consider Japan in all its context of recent militarization.

A recent factor that has also motivated Japanese militarization is the controversy surrounding the Senkaku Islands, claimed by China. The dispute led Tokyo to modernize its class of destroyers and to request Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to produce a new generation of tanks. As for the Air Force, Japan ordered more than 100 F-35A and F-35B fighters. It has also developed a fifth-generation fighter prototype and plans to use these technologies to create a sixth-generation fighter in the near future. This worries Beijing enormously, as it signifies the radicalization of a dispute that has so far been peaceful.

However, isolated factors such as North Korea, the Senkaku Islands, or the intention to participate in humanitarian missions are not sufficient to explain Japanese militarization. In fact, what Tokyo wants is simply to raise its geopolitical importance and its role as a regional power and bet on increasing its military capacity for this purpose. The problem is the extent to which this process seems interesting to Japan itself. The US still maintains active military bases in the Asian country and guarantees its security against possible threats, which makes extreme militarization a questionable strategy.

Russia and China do not see Japan as a current threat, but they are beginning to take precautions. Russia recently deployed T-72B3 tanks armed with missiles in the Kuril Islands. Moscow thereby sent a clear message to Tokyo. By sending tanks, Russia shows that it is ready to defend its territory in case of any aggression.

In the end, will it be useful for Tokyo to have a predominance of a military project on the Japanese political agenda? If Japan's intention includes getting rid of the American presence in the country and ensuring the consolidation of a militarily sovereign National State, the strategy may be fruitful. However, if the intention is simply to increase its military power, maintaining an alliance with Washington and rivaling its neighboring states, it seems like a big mistake.

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