

Japan: Pressure from Populist Right to Scrap ‘Peace Constitution’ after 75 Years

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The relative success of the populist right-wing Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai or JIP), which increased its vote to emerge as the third-largest party [in the recent elections](#), has paved the way for the country to revise its 75-year-old Peace Constitution.

This constitution, which was drafted by US occupying forces under **General Douglas MacArthur** in 1946, bars the country from officially maintaining armed forces. The constitution’s key clause is [Article 9](#). This denies Japan the right to possess an army, navy or air force. It also makes Japan’s use of belligerence to resolve international disputes illegal.

Yet, driven by hawkish factions of the dominant ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), in recent decades Tokyo has increasingly ramped up its remilitarisation. In fact, Japan now ranks as the world’s [ninth biggest military spender](#). The next logical step, then, would appear to be constitutional revision. Something that could likely now be enacted, with recent election results having empowered the opposition JIP, who also [support such a move](#).

So how has this shift occurred and does it mean that [Japan’s pacifism is dead](#)? The simple answer to the latter is “no”. Japan’s constitution was drafted and imposed by the postwar occupying American authorities as a means to prevent Japan ever again becoming a military threat. But its pacifist thrust was embraced by successive generations of Japanese citizens who were keen to remake their country’s image and [reconstruct its identity](#).

Japanese school education still places a heavy emphasis on the virtues and merits of peace. Japan boasts some of the most active and longstanding pacifist NGOs and societies in the world. And more than half of its population remain not only opposed to war, but [in favour of retaining Article 9](#). These aspects of Japanese civil society are closely linked to Japan’s status as the only victim of nuclear warfare. As such, they work to recast Japan as a victim

of the horrors of war, rather than as a brutal wartime aggressor.

Recent changes

However, in the political sphere, the last four decades have witnessed a sea-change. Particularly following the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in 1991, Japan faced a crisis of national identity. As unemployment rose and standards of living fell, nationalist politicians looked for an external target towards which public discontent could be redirected. As a result, the government's anti-militarist approach to foreign policy, which had proved so successful during the boom years of the 1960s-1980s, was [questioned](#).

Conservative political actors began to target Japan's pacifism as a source of weakness. This was made easier by a sabre-rattling North Korea and a rising China, both of which were recalibrated as grave risks to [Japan's security](#). This narrative was led by Japan's two most successful recent prime ministers, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe. Both rose to power on the back of a hawkish foreign policy stance, including the proposed revision of Japan's constitution.

The result has been a substantive shift to the right across Japan's major political parties, to the point where promoting pacifism is no longer politically viable. The culmination of these winds of change is evident from the latest election results, which saw Fumio Kishida, who had assumed the prime ministership when he won control of the LDP in a leadership election just prior to the October general election, retain power for the party, albeit with a [reduced majority](#).

Kishida is considered more moderate and less hawkish than either long-serving Abe or his loyal short-term successor, Yoshihide Suga. But with an increased number of seats gained by the JIP, the newly elected prime minister is likely to be swayed by the growing momentum for legislative changes. The combined forces of LDP, JIP and – albeit reticently – junior coalition partner, [Komeito](#), now put those in favour of constitutional revision in a position to enact the necessary legal reforms.

Regional implications

This has serious implications. Domestically, it reflects the rise and dominance of revisionist conservatism, and the decimation of more progressive, liberal opposition forces. Internationally, it will send alarm bells ringing across the [Asia-Pacific](#). Any indication that Japan might revise its constitution is likely to spark angry reactions from Japan's former colonies and victims of militarist wartime aggression.

This risks worsening relations with two of Japan's biggest trading partners in China and South Korea, as well as damaging its regional image as a trustworthy leader of peaceful economic and [investment regimes](#). It could also further isolate Tokyo amid an already tense security environment. Japan's relations with both Koreas remain strained. And close alignment with its sole alliance partner, the United States, perpetuates tension with a more muscular China. This includes the issue of Taiwan. Meanwhile Japan, China and Taiwan all claim the disputed Pinnacle Islands, which are referred to respectively as [Senkaku, Diaoyu and Diaoyutai](#).

Recent reinterpretations of Article 9 already allow Japan to operate various forms of [collective defence](#) with allied countries in exceptional circumstances. Tokyo also regularly

dispatches the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) overseas. In this regard, with American backing and a flexible interpretation of “self defence”, there is little practical need to formally revise a constitution that has served Japan so well during peacetime.

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