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Opinions

Hiroshima G7 summit: A pivotal moment for Japan's diplomacy

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By Arbenita Sopaj

KOBE — As a nation committed to pacifism, Japan has enjoyed an enviable position under the U.S. safety net. This is partly due to the U.S.-Japan Mutual Agreement of 1960, which granted U.S. military bases with reciprocal defense duties on Japanese soil. Once considered an alternative, it has fallen out of favor as conflicts have grown, making a robust defense strategy even more crucial, something Japan has been criticized for.

For the most part, Japan has referred to its constitutional limitations as the sole explanation for its inability to participate in standards-setting activities. A prime example is its participation in the Gulf War in 1990, by contributing \$13 billion in lieu of deploying the Self Defense Forces (SDF). Having failed to earn U.S. commendations, a new strategy was implemented by Japan in response to the latter's rebuke. Consequently, in 1992, Japan passed the PKO law aimed at supporting nation-building overseas in the event of war, including the deployment of SDF to Cambodia (1992), East Timor (1999) etc.

While this marked a significant turning point in Japan's foreign policy, constitutional constraints still hindered its efforts, primarily because of the SDF's role in the overseas missions was still limited. Its efforts included assistance on peacekeeping missions and disaster relief efforts, as well as prevent conflict and terrorism. While it can be argued that in the absence of such a challenge, the limited role of SDF on the ground is justified at the moment.

However, the growing threat posed by the regional powers like China and North Korea has been the subject of many discussions. As a party that dominated the postwar period in Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has advocated for constitutional reforms of Article 9 for quite some time. Regardless of its efforts, neither the

public nor the opposition parties like Japanese Communist Party, have endorsed such a change, alleging that it would provoke Japan to enter war.

One could argue that regional stability contributed to the lack of public support for Article 9 revision. However, this no longer holds true. Following the collision of a Chinese boat with Japanese coast guard vessels near the Senkaku islands in 2010, and the subsequent deployment of North Korea's missiles, Japan became increasingly inclined toward militarization. Yet, while Japan's foreign policy has evolved in tandem with the international order toward conflicts and hostile events, its domestic policy has remained relatively unchanged. In large part, it can be attributed to its pacific nature that has been imbued within its people.

In a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2018 seeking the opinion of Japanese citizens on strengthening SDF forces, 29.1 % responded in favor, 60.1 % preferred not to change, 4.5% to reduce and 6.2 % don't know. The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, however, has prompted many nations to become more active in the NATO ratification process. Simultaneously, a number of democratic countries have also increased their defense budgets in response to Russian aggression, in an effort to contribute to the cost of the war.

In the same vein, Japanese are concerned about Russia's foreign policy, which has led to the ever lasting war with Ukraine. This concern makes it more likely that an East Asian conflict will unfold similarly. In light of this, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has placed a high priority on finding a comprehensive solution to the conflict through increased contributions. In the 2022 Upper House elections, the LDP retained its majority of 248 seats along with its coalition partner, Komeito. This effectively opened the door to constitutional reform since the LDP, Komeito, Nippon Ishin and DPFP all support amending the constitution.

However, Komeito's decision to support LDP and proceed with reform will have a major impact on this which often doesn't align with the latter's objectives. According to a Mainichi Shimbun survey conducted in July, 2022, 87% of LDP winners and 92% of Nippon Ishin candidates support revising Article 9, while 69% of Komeito candidates oppose revising Article 9.

In to the persistent tensions, in December 2022, Kishida announced a record budget for military expenditures, a crucial decision of his leadership at important timing. Kishida's decision underscored Japan's commitment to contribute more to the international community not only economically, but also militarily, a request that has been echoed by the U.S. for some time. While Kishida's decision was much commended by the U.S., China regarded it as the

provocation of "regional tensions," owing to Japan's stance supporting Taiwan in the event of intensified hostilities. With a commitment to supporting democratic countries, Japan is currently considering sending more weapons to Ukraine than it has sent to date which has consisted mainly bulletproof vests, and nonlethal weapons. This is predominantly due to Ukraine's position that they are defending their territory and people, and not a party at war.

During his recent remarks on the Ukrainian war, Kishida called upon lawmakers to revise the laws that regulate weapons exports. Taking into account Kishida's position at the forefront he vowed that such an action should be utilized to provide assistance to nations facing international law violations. Although Kishida's leadership has shown resilience, Japan's golden hour to demonstrate its status as a major global player is still some months away.

The G7 Hiroshima Summit will take place in May. This is considered as a timely event for Kishida to make this call by exhibiting its diplomatic and power credentials to the participating leaders. With that in mind, it is imperative that the people of Japan comprehend Kishida's assertion that East Asia may become the next Ukraine.

Although Kishida advocates Japan's stronger participation in international condemnation of Russia, not everyone concurs with his views. In a recent statement released by the Japanese Communist Party leader Kazuo Shii Kazuo asserted that "military alliances and military blocks are not conducive to peace", calling for Japan to work harder to build stronger ties with ASEAN countries instead under its pacifist constitution as it is. However, having experienced the necessity of multilateral cooperation between the allies when confronting a big power like Russia, China, or North Korea, Kishida has a clear understanding of what is at stake if tensions between China and Taiwan escalate. Consequently, in light of this, the government plans to host a discussion on weapons exports following the April local elections in advance of Hiroshima's summit.

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