

Japan's Return to History?

by George Friedman - June 3, 2022

After World War II, the United States wrote a constitution for Japan that stated, in Article 9, that Japan would not maintain a military in the future. Over time, the article was modified to allow certain exceptions, which was fine by Washington. At the height of the Cold War, Japan blocked Russian access to the Pacific and as a result Japan may be attacked by the Soviet Union, or so the thinking went. Japan, then, could have a military, but one that was forbidden from acting beyond self-defense. The creation of its Self-Defense Forces meant that the United States was not solely responsible for defending Japan or for keeping Russia out of the Pacific.

The Self-Defense Forces grew into a significant military force. Though the constitution barred Japan from engaging in foreign wars, Article 9 itself was protected by Japanese public opinion. And the Japanese public had no interest in being a military ally of the United States. Washington gently pressed for amending Article 9 but gained no traction. Article 9 protected Japan from engaging in war, and the public wanted to keep it that way.

But things have changed, if not practically then at least psychologically, thanks largely to the war in Ukraine and the constant Chinese threats to invade Taiwan. The conflict in Ukraine showed that war is not unthinkable, whatever the Japanese people might wish. This, in turn, means that Chinese threats are taken more seriously. The possibility of China's conquest of Taiwan would increase the threat to Japan's south, and also might embolden China for further conquests. Japan has an interest in blocking this conquest, and the United States indicated that it expects Japan to share the risk.

Indeed, just last week at a press conference with U.S. President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said of an invasion of Taiwan, "Attempts to change the status quo by force, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine, should never be tolerated in the Indo-Pacific, above all, in East Asia." He also spoke ambiguously of the need to "strengthen the deterrence and response of the Japan-U.S. alliance." It's difficult to say what precisely he meant by the statement. In truth, Japan has been laying the groundwork to increase its capabilities, if it believes a war with China is imminent or that the U.S. could abandon it. It's also been procuring weapons systems that blur the line between offensive and defensive, spending more on defense, and trying to reinvigorate the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. If we take Kishida's latest statement at face value, then he has essentially said Japan accepts the possibility of waging war, without acknowledging that this in any

way violated Article 9.

This would be a notable departure for a country that has not been militarily active since World War II. A commitment to Taiwan requires (at least) the assurance of supply lines and access to Taiwan in the event of a conflict. That means China's navy must (at least) patrol the waters south of the Korean Peninsula along the coast of China to Taiwan. Both sides would vie for control of sea lanes, even as China might be pulled into waters farther away. In any event, all this creates another complicated dimension to an already complex Chinese mission to Taiwan.

Japan is not a weak country. Its economy ranks third in the world. And although China's gross domestic product is much higher than Japan's, China's per capita GDP is much lower. This means that the average Japanese citizen is much better off than the average Chinese citizen, and that Japan is more socially stable than China. The recent declines in China's economy will take time to reverse. Japan is more likely to stabilize its economy since the crisis has a lower impact on average Japanese.

Japan also has the advantage of social stability deriving not only from economics but also from cultural forces. Japan is built on both organizational principle and social obligation. It emerged from the catastrophe of World War II and the atomic bombings with a shaken but not broken sense of order, in which respect for authority, whether the government or teachers, is powerful. It survived the Lost Decade with a degree of social stability that would not be seen in other countries. As a measure of power, this social stability gives Japan the ability to weather reversals without breaking.

To accept the burden of defending Taiwan is to demonstrate the degree to which Japan can maneuver militarily. And that in turn makes the third-largest economy in the world, one with a growing military and social solidarity, go from a regional power to potentially a global power. I don't think it's there quite yet, but for many nations, global power is impossible. Not so for Japan.

I wrote a long time ago in my book "The Next 100 Years" that Japan would emerge as a major regional and perhaps global power. I see the decision to commit to the defense of Taiwan – if indeed that is Kishida's aim – as a major stepping stone in this direction. Japan avoided the game for many years, and this may well be its return to history. It will now face the painful price of being responsible.

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