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Let's help Japan play Asian role

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Japan's 600-strong troop deployment to Samawa, in southern Iraq, has largely escaped notice outside Japan, but it has generated considerable controversy at home. Mirroring anti-war sentiment among other members of the US-led coalition of the willing, nearly two-thirds of Japanese oppose having troops in Iraq and do not want the Government to replace them when their tour of duty concludes next month.

All very predictable, some might say, for a nation where pacifist sentiment runs deep. After all, no other country explicitly renounces war as a sovereign right; or eschews the threat, or use of force, as a means of settling international disputes; or proscribes land, sea and air forces as well as other warpotential.

Why, then, are Japanese troops in Iraq? The answer is that the Koizumi Government is determined to loosen the long-standing constitutional and normative constraints on the use and deployment of the Self Defence Force. In Junichiro Koizumi's eyes, it is time for Japan to become a "normal country", meaning that he wants Japan to play a more constructive and influential role in regional and global affairs, free of its self-imposed constitutional shackles, by shaping institutions and norms according to Japanese values and interests.

This shift towards a more activist and hard-headed approach to foreign policy and national security is evolutionary, not revolutionary, having preceded Koizumi's stewardship, but it is clearly gaining momentum. There is no doubt that the Iraq deployment and the earlier commitment of frigates to support coalition operations in Afghanistan represent a defining watershed in Japan's post-World War II security policy.

The chief cause is that a once apathetic public is becoming increasingly concerned about the deterioration in Japan's security environment, mainly because of the spread of transnational terrorism, continued North Korean hostility and China's burgeoning economic and military power. Recent polls show that a clear majority of the Japanese people and parliamentarians, particularly the younger generation, are in favour of constitutional revision.

Far from being a pacifist state, Japan is once again a leading military power with a formidable navy, the third largest defence budget in the world after the US and China, and a quarter of a million men and women under arms.

Does this mean Japan is intent on returning to its militaristic past, as some of its neighbours worry? Although these fears are real, they are misplaced. There is no domestic political constituency for transforming the SDF into the kind of expeditionary force that would be necessary to sustain a new Japanese hegemony in Asia.

Furthermore, the country's ageing population and the existence of a resilient, mature democracy work against a revival of militarism. Given its geo-strategic vulnerabilities, energy dependence and declining birthrate, Japan is hardly in a position to embark on a policy of military adventurism or expansionism, not least because it would be vehemently opposed by China, Japan's principal competitor for regional influence, as well as its main ally, the US.

It is more likely that Japan will become a more complete power, complementing its existing economic clout with greater foreign policy activism. There is nothing to fear from this new internationalism, which Australia should support as a fellow democracy, ally and leading trading partner.

After nearly six decades of quasi-pacifism, it is time for Japan to move beyond the ideals of its peace constitution and to participate more fully in building and sustaining regional order and combating the emerging threats to security.

There is considerable scope for Japan to do so in partnership with Australia, to mutual benefit and in the interests of the wider region. Japan already ranks among Australia's most important regional defence relationships, while Australia is a significant and increasingly useful security interlocutor for Japan. Both countries are working effectively together to contain the spread of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

But much more could be done. There is still no long-term vision or strategic framework agreement in the defence arena that compares with the 1957 Agreement on Commerce, and there needs to be a clear understanding of the political limits to closer defence co-operation. An example is China, which fears that Tokyo's more muscular security approach foreshadows an aggressive and possibly adversarial Japan.

Australia can play the role of honest broker by reassuring China of Japan's benign intentions. However, words are not enough. At a time when Japan and China are both powerful states with growing military capabilities, strategic dialogue alone is unlikely to mitigate conflict and rising tensions between them without a supporting security architecture.

Unfortunately, northeast Asia lacks a forum for discussing and resolving the subregion's security problems. So the Howard Government must encourage Japan and China to think positively and creatively about developing a prototype security arrangement for northeast Asia. A good start would be to institutionalise and broaden the scope of the six-party talks on North Korea.

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