
Luke Josey
Western Illinois University
After the Japanese surrendered to the Allied Powers at the conclusion of the Second World War, Japan created its own constitution which included an anti-war clause under Article 9. Article 9 established Japan as pacifist nation, explicitly stating that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.”1 Since the end of the Second World War, the world’s political and economic climate has changed drastically, and Japan has grown into a major player in global affairs with a 4.4 trillion-dollar economy, the third largest in the world following China and the United States.2 Japan’s success has not come without threat however, as they faced Soviet aggression during the Cold War, followed by aggression from the Chinese and North Koreans into the twenty-first century. For years the safety and security of Japan has been viewed as entirely reliant on the United States’ military which still maintains military bases in the country. Due to the U.S. presence in Japan and Article 9, Japan has been criticized for being a free rider of U.S. tax payers, however this is not the case.

Since 1954, self-defense forces have been maintained, including their Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF), which has evolved from a regional force focusing on the waters immediately surrounding Japan, into a global force with operations reaching as far as Africa, as well as training around the world. The question arises as to how Japan can maintain such naval power if Article 9 states such forces cannot be maintained? This question has caused much debate within Japanese politics. Ultimately, as regional and global threats surrounding the security of Japan and its citizens have changed and developed during the post-war period, and as

---

Japan has continued to gain a larger role in the global economy and politics, the Japanese government has continually adopted more liberal interpretations of Article 9 of their constitution in order to justify the actions and existence of their Maritime Self Defense Force.

**Historiography**

Scholarship on the subjects of Article 9 and Japan’s MSDF have been diverse, being researched in various academic disciplines and focusing on different periods of time. Historian James Auer’s 1973 book, *The Postwar Rearmament of Japanese Maritime Forces, 1945-1971*, is one of the earliest works on this subject, and it examines the creation of the Constitution of Japan and explains the significance of Article 9 and its intended meaning, both for Japan and the United States, which was occupying Japan at the time. Auer also tries to dispel misconceptions over the role that Japan plays in its own defense and explains the regional tensions that created a need for post-war Japanese rearmament.³ Political scientist James Wooley’s 2000 book, *Japan’s Navy: Politics and Paradox, 1971-2000*, takes off where Auer’s writing left off, further dispelling misconceptions over Japan’s role in its defense and the false narrative of the Japanese as a “free rider” on the United States military. Wooley does this by describing the expansion of the MSDF’s capabilities, reach, and coordination with partner nations during the Cold War, and explains how Japan’s actions not only helped ensure its own national defense, but also the defense of partner nations by detailing Japan’s expanding roles in United Nations efforts. Wooley also outlines the justifications Japan has used for expanding the MSDF while staying within the legal limits of Article 9.⁴ Japanese security policy researcher Bhubhindar Singh’s 2002 article, "Japan's Post-Cold War Security Policy: Bringing Back the Normal State,"

---
describes MSDF’s continued post-Cold War growth, detailing Japan’s response to shifting geopolitical threats and the steps taken to take on a greater role in international security. Singh also discusses the efforts of the Japanese government to normalization of the MSDF amongst the Japanese public as Japan tries to become a normal state and possibly revise Article 9 of its constitution to include a normal military.  

Research over Japanese security and Article 9 has continued to develop during the twenty-first century. Global security researcher James Manicome describes in his 2008 article, “Sino-Japanese Cooperation in the East China Sea: Limitations and Prospects,” the regional disputes over natural resources between Japan and China, and the prospects of Sino-Japanese cooperation as both countries continue to flex their maritime power in order to defend their territorial claims and secure natural resources, explaining the further development of regional territorial threats to Japan into the twenty-first century. Defense and security experts Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter’s 2015 book, The Tools of Owatatsumi: Japan’s Ocean Surveillance and Coastal Defence Capabilities, describes the necessity of secure and open sea-lanes for the economy of Japan, and the unique challenges that pose Japan as a maritime country. Ball and Tanter provide a study of Sino-Japanese maritime relationships and bolstering of Japanese maritime surveillance and electronic warfare as possibilities of a maritime conflict with China increase over continued regional disputes. Collectively, these sources show the complex nature that a pacifist Japan faces in the wake of geopolitical forces that threaten the stability of its

---

economy and safety of the Japanese people. The goal of this paper is to add to the field of study by explaining how the various regional and international threats to Japan since the conclusion of the Second World War have resulted in the Japanese government’s more liberal interpretations of Article 9 in order to maintain its sovereignty and influence.

Public Perception

Throughout Japan’s post-war history, little has been said about Japan’s MSDF in popular culture, as public dialogue regarding Japan has usually centered round its economy, which has largely overshadowed its military endeavors. The public focus on Japan’s economy has resulted in little being known about the MSDF amongst both Japanese civilians and Westerners.8 Furthermore, Western discussion of Japan has usually focused on cultural differences as opposed to similarities, focusing on Japan’s stance as a pacifist nation instead of shared military endeavors, such as the MSDF’s involvement in the Cold War.9 This lack of conversation in the public arena regarding Japan’s military is what has led to Japan to being viewed as a free rider which has only sought autonomy in the name of internal security, relying on the United States for external security.10 Ultimately, Japan has been put into a lose-lose situation in trying to combat this free-rider appearance; increased military spending would suggest unconstitutional rearmament and stir up fears from countries who suffered at the hand of Japan during the Second World War, while decreasing spending reinforces Japan’s appearance as a free-rider.11

Japan has been trying to find a healthy balance surrounding this issue as it has wanted to take greater responsibility of its own defense since the 1951 U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty. The

---

8 Woolley, *Japan’s Navy*, xiii.
9 Woolley, *Japan’s Navy*, xiii.
prime minister at the time, Shigeru Yoshida, stated the importance that taking responsibility for
Japan’s own defense would have, stating that it would, “restore the Japanese people to full
sovereignty, equality, and freedom, and reinstate us as a free and equal member in the
community of nations.”12 This paper will confront the views of Japan as a free rider and
demonstrate how Japan has taken measures to build and use the MSDF in order to take
responsibility for its own self-defense, while at the same time adjusting Japanese interpretations
of Article 9 in order to stay within the limitations of their constitution.

**Geography as Justification**

The geography of Japan alone has served as justification for maintaining the MSDF. As
an island nation with few natural resources, Japan has relied heavily on the import and export of
goods to support its society. In 2016, Japan exported $605 billion in goods, making it the fourth
largest exporter in the world, while it imported $583 billion worth of goods, making it the fifth
largest importer in the world. The most recent imports are led by crude petroleum which
represents 8.69% of the total imports of Japan, followed by petroleum gas, which accounts for
5.88% of Japan’s total imports.13 With such reliance on sea lanes for its economic stability, the
defense of those sea lanes is quintessential to the defense of Japan. Securing its sea lanes not
only protects its economic security, but also Japan’s physical security. With Communist threats
of China, North Korea, and the former Soviet Union as neighbors across the Sea of Japan and
East China Sea, where disputes over island territories and maritime boundaries have been

12 Shigeru Yoshida, “Speech at the San Francisco Peace Conference,” Speech, San Francisco, CA,
September 7, 1951, Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations, accessed May 1, 2018,

mit.edu/en/profile/country/jpn/.
ongoing, the defense of Japanese territories in the periphery further secures the need for the MSDF. Prime Minister Yoshida recognized the regional threats of communism that persisted in 1951 with the signing of the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty, stating that, “Unfortunately, the sinister forces of totalitarian oppression and tyranny operate still throughout the globe. These forces are sweeping over half the Asiatic continent, sowing seeds of dissension, spreading unrest and confusion, and breaking out into open aggression here and there—indeed, at the very door of Japan.”

Japan is in a unique situation, both in regards to its geopolitical position as a maritime nation with hostile neighbors, as well as in its constitutional limitations. The complexity of Japan’s position has led to debates concerning its maintaining and use of the MSDF within Article 9.

**Constitutionality of the MSDF**

Since the creation of the Japanese Constitution and Article 9, Japanese ability to maintain any sort of military force had been debated. Article 9 states that Japan will “forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes… war potential, will never be maintained.”

Due to this wording, there have been arguments the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF), including the MSDF, constitute war potential. However, this may not be the case when taking into account the original draft of the article. The original draft of Article 9, then drafted as Article 8, stated that Japan would abolish its military, “even for preserving its own sovereignty.” This part of the article was ultimately taken out because General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers during the occupation of Japan, and who oversaw their reconstruction and drafting of Japan’s

---

14 Yoshida, “Speech at the San Francisco Peace Conference.”
15 Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, “The Constitution of Japan.”
constitution, had stated that he believed Japan’s war renunciation should and would not prevent, “any and all necessary steps for the preservation of the nation.”

MacArthur ultimately believed that self-defense of a nation was a right, and seemed to be strictly concerned with eliminating Japanese aggression, not sovereignty. Further reading of the Japanese Constitution also suggests the maintenance of a military force within Article 66, which states, “The Prime Minister and other Ministers of State must be civilians.” This distinction of civilians, as opposed to military members, suggests that the framers of the constitution intended to have a military force, or else there would not have been a need for distinguishing people as civilians because without a military everyone would be civilians. These constitutional interpretations within the Japanese government, in conjunction with United Nations Article 51, which states that every country has the right to self-defense, would eventually lead to the birth of the MSDF in 1954, along with its ground and air defense forces.

**Japan’s Post-War Naval Rearmament and Overseas Deployments**

After the MSDF’s birth, Japan started its naval rearmament with little international notice, creating a level of suspicion both within and outside the government. While the MSDF’s buildup may have gone by with little notice, Japan began to catch the eye of the international community when it began sending ships overseas for training with other countries. The Japanese Defense Agency announced the overseas deployment of MSDF vessels for the first time in 1957 when four ships were to be sent to Midway Island and Hawaii for training. These overseas training deployments were met with opposition from within the Japanese Diet, as

---

17 Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, “The Constitution of Japan.”
18 Woolley, *Japan’s Navy*, 43.
19 Woolley, *Japan’s Navy*, 44.
politicians argued that these deployments violated Article 9. However, with the Soviet Union successfully test launching intercontinental ballistic missiles and satellites that same year, arguments against the MSDF training abroad were put to rest as the regional threat from the Soviet Union grew.20

With these initial overseas deployments accepted by the Diet, further overseas deployments for the MSDF followed. The MSDF would go to Canada in 1959, Mexico in 1969, Western Europe, Thailand, Egypt, and Turkey in 1963, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina in 1965, and Mozambique and Kenya in 1970. The MSDF’s exercises in these foreign nations were met with little objection since they were limited to training, causing the overseas deployment for training purposes to become routine for the MSDF.21 Other overseas deployments of MSDF vessels stirred further controversy however. The MSDF’s deployment to Antarctica for research was met with criticism by the Japanese Diet for violating Article 9 since these vessels were not engaged in training, which was the only type of overseas operations that had been previously approved. The MSDF argued that this deployment was well within the limitations of Article 9 because the old understanding of Article 9 did not prohibit peaceful research. This understanding was accepted by the Diet and resulted in the dispatch of MSDF vessels to Antarctica, leading to research operations overseas to also become routine and justified.22

20 Woolley, Japan’s Navy, 27.
22 Ibid.
MSDF Expansion

The expansion in MSDF operations during this time continued to cause controversy within the Japanese Diet as some members were concerned if Japan was building up war potential, which is explicitly prohibited in Article 9. To address such fears, Prime Minister Miki’s government proposed in 1976 that Japan’s military expenditure not exceed 1% of the county’s Gross National Product (GNP).\(^{23}\) While this cap on military spending was designed to calm fears of military expansionism, it also allowed for growth in military spending as Japan’s GNP rose. This allowance of 1% of their GNP to military spending would result in Japan becoming the eighth highest military spender in the world, spending $41.6 billion on defense in 2016.\(^{24}\) With the deployment of MSDF vessels for training and research worldwide now considered routine and accepted within the Diet, as well as military spending now more regulated and viewed as having more government oversight, the stage was set for the future deployment and expansion of the MSDF.

With overseas training for the MSDF now considered routine and well within the realm of Article 9, and the ever-present threat of the Soviet Union going into the 1980s, the MSDF was now in a position to justify a larger role in the defense of Japan. With Japan’s economic reliance on sea-lanes for exporting and importing goods, the concern over sea-lane defense grew as the Soviet Navy continued to pose a threat with a presence in the Asian Pacific. Such disruption of sea-lanes by the Soviets would be detrimental to the Japanese economy. Prime Minister Nakasone openly embraced the policy of sea-lane defense between Guam and Tokyo, as well as in-between

\(^{23}\) Woolley, *Japan’s Navy*, 50.
the straights of Taiwan and Osaka up to 1,000 miles off the coast of Japan. Sea-lane defense became official policy and an official role of the MSDF that same year, in 1983. This policy of sea-lane defense not only was an expansion of the MSDF’s responsibility, but also served as justification for further expansion of the MSDF’s fleet. By 1985, the MSDF had thirty-one destroyers, with eight more that were in production, as well as eighteen frigates, which were more vessels than the United States Seventh Fleet had in Japan at the time. These more liberal interpretations of Article 9, which justified overseas training and responsibility of sea-lane defense, clearly lead to a buildup of MSDF vessels, as well Japan taking a larger role in its own defense, which would eventually take the MSDF’s scope of responsibility all the way to the African continent.

Establishing Global Presence

The Cold War had served as a justification for building and maintaining the MSDF in order to defend the nation from Soviet aggression. With the Cold War’s end in 1991 there was no longer the threat of Soviet aggression in the Asian region. However, with the Soviets now out of the Asian Pacific there was now a political void in the region. This void forced Japan to reassess its role within Asia. If Japan did not fill this void then its communist neighbor China would, which would likely bring less stability to the seas Japan’s economy relied on. With Japan continuing to grow as a world power, it not only had to fill the void in its region left by the Soviets, but there was also increasing international pressure to take a larger role militarily in global security. Since the Japanese Diet said that deployment of MSDF vessels abroad could only engage in training, the MSDF had not been allowed to aid in international peace keeping. Japan could however contribute financially to humanitarian aid and peacekeeping operations.

25 Woolley, Japan’s Navy, 29.
Criticism over Japan’s “checkbook diplomacy” came after the Gulf War in 1991, where, “despite Japan’s huge financial contribution to the war effort, their reluctance to dispatch non-combat personnel to the Persian Gulf exposed it to criticism from both the West and the Arab states.”

To counter such international pressure, Japan sent 6 MSDF vessels to conduct minesweeping operations in the Arabian Gulf. These operations were justified by the Diet for several reasons: the war had ended, the vessels would be in international waters, and that minesweeping was in support of the safe and peaceful navigation of water, which the Japanese economy relied on. Therefore, these operations were well within the limitations of Article 9 because Japan was not engaged in any sort of war and were in the name of sea-lane defense. These operations in the Arabian Gulf set the stage for expanding the global reach of the MSDF going into the 21st century.

**Threats from China**

Going into the 21st Century, Japan had already justified greater regional responsibility of the MSDF in the Asian Pacific Region, as well as internationally. The liberal interpretations of Article 9 that allowed for past expansion of MSDF roles have continued to allowed for the further evolution of Article 9’s interpretation as the threat from China continues to grow, both regionally and abroad. As China’s position in the global economy has continued to grow, so has its need for natural resources, which has fueled conflict in the East China Sea. In 2004, disputes arose between China and Japan when China began to produce gas from the Chunxia gas fields. Japan has claimed these gas fields are within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), while China has claimed that the fields are within its EEZ, causing regional tensions to escalate.

---

27 Woolley, *Japan’s Navy*, 49.
regional disputes between China and Japan over natural resources also developed as both countries have disputed ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Since 2012, China has been regularly sending its navy to sail near those islands in order to challenge Japan’s territorial claims. These island disputes have revolved around the hydrocarbon and fishing resources that these islands provide.\textsuperscript{29} Economically and strategically, these islands would be important for either country, and Japan has made moves to protect its claims.

These threats to Japan’s EEZ and territorial islands have led to the MSDF establishing surveillance to monitor Chinese activity in the Tsushimi, Tsugaru, and Osumi straits. As established in Japan’s \textit{National Defense Program Guidelines for Fiscal Year 2014 and Beyond}, the roles of the MSDF include that “The MSDF will maintain submarine units strengthened by increased numbers of them, in order to effectively conduct patrol and defense of the seas surrounding Japan, as well as regularly engage in broad underwater intelligence gathering and warning and surveillance in those seas,” as well as maintain surveillance aircraft.\textsuperscript{30} The MSDF’s surveillance architecture includes ground-based and electronic intelligence collection systems, high frequency direction finding systems for locating communications transmitters at sea, and airborne collection systems such as long-range maritime patrol aircraft and maritime surveillance helicopters, as well as an undersea submarine detection system.\textsuperscript{31} These measures have been justified by the Japanese government as essential for its self-defense. The \textit{National Defense Program Guidelines for Fiscal Year 2014 and Beyond} has justified surveillance as being in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter, \textit{The Tools of Owatatsumi}, 4.
\end{itemize}
name of self-defense, stating that the role of surveillance is “minimizing damage by effective response through achieving maritime supremacy and air superiority is essential in safeguarding the lives and property of the Japanese people, and the sovereignty of Japan’s territorial land, waters and airspace.” Such importance placed on surveillance for self-defense has led to the creation of a new surveillance unit to act as first responders in the island areas of southwestern Japan in case any disputes occur.

In order to further combat such Chinese threats, Japan updated the National Defense Guidelines to justify new regional roles of the MSDF stating that “while strengthening the integrated capabilities to seek to interdict any attack on Japan’s remote islands at sea, the SDF will newly develop sufficient amphibious operations capability, which enables the SDF to land, recapture and secure without delay in the case of an invasion of any remote islands.” This new MSDF role has allowed for the further expansion of the MSDF on April 10, 2018, when Japan activated its marines for the first time since the Second World War. Justifying such actions, Tomohiro Yamamoto, Vice-Defense Minister, said, “Given the increasingly difficult defense and security situation surrounding Japan, defense of our islands has become a critical mandate.” With these new marines, Japan is sending a message to China that it will use the MSDF to defend island territories and retake them if necessary in the name of self-defense.

---

China’s threat is not only regionally however, as Japan has also used the threat of China to justify international expansion of MSDF operations in Africa. In 2011, Japan opened its own Self-Defense Force Base in Djibouti, an economically strategic point in regards to shipping. Japan had initially opened its Self Defense Force Base in an effort to counter piracy in the Indian Ocean in order to protect Japanese vessels and citizens, as well as support peace keeping operations. Such operations had already been established as within the sphere of Article 9 through the policy of sea lane defense and participation in UN operations in the Persian Gulf after the Gulf War. Japan has also justified the maintenance of its base for self-defense because Japan does not have its own air strips or piers, and therefore rely on the infrastructure of American, French, and Italian bases in the region. This reliance on other countries’ bases suggest that Japan would not be able to carry out its operations unless those countries whose infrastructure Japan relies on supported its self-defense missions, acting as a check on Japanese military expansionism. In recent years, Japan as made plans for expansion of its base, citing the need for an airstrip to evacuate citizens in case of an emergency. The timing of these expansion plans suggest that Chinese involvement may have a role to play as well. In 2016, China began the construction of its own base in Djibouti and provide the state with $60 billion for development. This was same year Japan announced plans for expansion of its base. Sino-Japanese tensions have already been high from competition over natural resources in the

---


36 Walsh, “The Expansion of the Japan Self-Defense Force Base in Djibouti.”

37 Walsh, “The Expansion of the Japan Self-Defense Force Base in Djibouti.”

South China Sea and Sea of Japan and have grown in scale globally. The MSDF’s expansion in Djibouti has been used as a way to counter the growing Chinese influence in the region, as well as defend its access to resources and the sea-lanes that are used to transport those resources.

**Threats from North Korea**

As Prime Minister Abe has sought to normalize the overseas involvement of the MSDF, North Korea has also remained a regional threat to Japan’s defense in the twenty-first century. Japan’s 2014 National Defense Program Guidelines classified North Korea as a “serious and imminent threat to Japan’s security,” citing their nuclear programs and provocative rhetoric.\(^39\)

The National Defense Program Outline then addresses what actions Japan will take to secure its security, stating, “To counter North Korea’s improved ballistic missile capability, Japan will pursue comprehensive improvement of its response capability against the threat of ballistic missiles.”\(^40\) Japan’s *Medium Term Defense Program for fiscal years 2014 through 2018*, has used the previous assessment of North Korea as justification for expanding the capabilities of the MSDF. This expansion would not only increase the capabilities of its current destroyers, but also procure new Aegis-equipped destroyers which will be able to respond to ballistic missile attacks.\(^41\)

In 2017, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries was awarded a contract to build eight new destroyers, with production beginning in 2018. These destroyers are expected to enter service within the next decade.\(^42\)

---


between North Korea and South Korea, which will soon include Japan, it will be interesting to see if the justification for the expansion of the MSDF’s fleet changes at all.

**Regional Partnership**

Japan has also used the threat of North Korea and China not only to bolster up its MSDF but also to help other Asian countries bolster up their own navies through the policy of an active contribution to peace. Prime Minister Abe stated in a policy speech by to the Diet on January 22, 2018, that “Japan will further strengthen our collaboration with neighboring countries for our regional peace and prosperity.”

Through the justification of other regional military allies being crucial to Japanese security, Japan has been committed to providing the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam with military aid in the form of vessels and air planes in order to enhance their naval capabilities, as well as support MSDF operations continuing the policy of sea-lane defense. Furthermore, Japan adopted a policy of “collective self-defense” in 2015, allowing the SDF to legally assist allies if they are attacked. This policy change gave more power to the MSDF, as it not only expanded its role to help defend allies, but such a role also acts to deter aggression towards Japanese allies due to the consequence of facing retaliation by the growing MSDF.

**Amending the Constitution**

As the roles of the MSDF have been expanding outwardly under the administration of

---


Prime Minister Abe, so may the constitution. On March 15, 2018, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which is the party of Prime Minister Abe, proposed amending Article 9 so that it explicitly references the SDF. Such an amendment would refer to the SDF as “an armed organization with minimum strength.” LDP members believe such a change will create a clear constitutional basis for the SDF, which has been questioned throughout its existence. Some members of the Diet are concerned that such a change may increase Japan’s war potential, however Prime Minister Abe has asserted that this change will not change Japan’s post-war identity or role of the SDF. Abe also believes such an amendment would bring more respect to the members of the SDF, stating:

The SDF personnel risk their lives to achieve their mission in the event of a natural disaster … But many children grow up reading textbooks saying they may be unconstitutional…This is not me being emotional, but I really think this is a problem that affects our nation’s foundation. I want to put an end to a situation where the constitutionality of an organization that protects our nation and our people is being viewed with skepticism.

Greater public support of the SDF would be important because more positive public opinion may more easily allow for MSDF expansion. Some LDP members have been critical of Abe’s proposal, stating that the phrase “minimum strength” is too vague and may stir more controversy. Instead, some members of the LDP have suggested that such an amendment go

---


47 “LDP Divided Over Draft Plans to Amend Constitution’s Pacifist Clause.”


49 Mizun and Osaki, “Abe Explains Uncompromising Stance on Inserting ‘Explicit SDF Mention’ in Article 9.”

50 “LDP Divided Over Draft Plans to Amend Constitution’s Pacifist Clause.”
even farther to remove the renunciation of war and allow Japan to maintain a national defense army. This more drastic move would remove any debate over the legality of Japan’s SDF and MSDF. Some scholars have also been critical of Abe’s proposal, suggesting that such an amendment would have no effect in deterring aggression from geopolitical neighbors, specifically North Korea, since capabilities will not change. Although with current talks about to peace in the Korean peninsula, it will be interesting to see if Japan’s expansion of the MSDF has played a role in motivating North Korea to consider denuclearization and seek peace with its neighbors.

**Conclusion**

The evolution of Japan’s interpretation of Article 9 demonstrates the impact that changing regional and world political and economic climates have had on Japan’s MSDF. When Japan surrendered at the conclusion of the Second World War and was occupied by the U.S. there was no need for its own self-defense force, as the U.S. fulfilled that role and Japanese were focused on rebuilding their nation. However, once the Korean War broke out and Communist threats increased in the region with the USSR, China, and North Korea, Japan had interpreted the constitution as prohibiting war potential, not defense potential, in order to justify the creation of the SDF on the basis that Communism in the region threatened their self-defense. As the Soviet threat developed in the East Asian region going into the 1960s, Japan’s interpretation of Article 9 was further liberalized to allow the MSDF to deploy overseas for training and research on the basis that the operations were peaceful in nature and aided in the ability of Japan to defend itself adequately. As the Cold War carried on into the 1980s, and Japan’s economy expanded, the

---


52 Watanabe, “The Case Against Abe’s Constitutional Amendment.”
policy of sea lane defense was adopted on the basis that the defense of sea lanes was vital to the
defense of Japan due to the economic reliance of importing and exporting goods and services,
allowing MSDF defense operations to expands outside of Japanese territorial waters.

With the Cold War’s end in 1991, Article 9’s interpretation was further liberalized as
Japan competed with China to fill the void in West Asia once filled by the USSR, allowing the
MSDF to expand further and help promote Japan as a regional and global power. Japan’s
MSDF’s role now extends all the way to the African continent, conducting mine sweeping
operations and maintaining its own self-defense base in Djibouti on the basis of sea-lane defense
as threats to Japan’s economy and shipping have emerged in the African region, while
simultaneously challenging China’s presence in the region over natural resources. The MSDF
also expanded its roles closer to home to further challenge Chinese aggression and help stabilize
the region. As China has continually challenged Japanese island claims in the past twenty years,
Japan has increased the size of its MSDF fleet, and establishing surveillance units and the
Marines in order to effectively respond to any physical challenges to Japan’s island territories.
Such expansion has also been fueled by North Korea’s nuclear activity, which has threatened
Japan’s safety and have possibly helped towards the current denuclearization talks between
North and South Korea.

So, while Japan’s constitution under Article 9 has placed strict limitations on the
country’s military capacity, historically such limitations have been dependent on geopolitical
climates. Although Prime Minister Abe has stated such an amendment would not change the
roles of the MSDF, the debate between members of Japan’s Diet over whether to amend Article
9 in order to explicitly mention the SDF will undoubtedly affect the MSDF’s future roles and
responsibilities. Such explicit mention of the SDF will silence any debate of the MSDF’s
constitutionality. In addition to possibly removing the renunciation of war, these changes would likely the lead to Japan’s MSDF taking more aggressive military measures against a hostile China, and any other threats that emerge. Japan’s changing interpretations of Article 9 have allowed it to maintain the sovereignty of the nation and the safety of the Japanese, and such practice will likely continue as Japan and geopolitics continue to evolve.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


