

LDP "Take(s) Back Japan": The creation of a national military is on Abe's agenda

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Summary

Japan's general election held on December 16, 2012, has many surprises. It has not only brought the LDP back to power with an overwhelming majority but also sent so many nationalists for the first time to the Lower House of the Diet. Before the election, nuclear energy was being considered the main poll plank and the national security issues were ranked lower among the key poll issues. But with China taking its military assertion to the sky by intruding into Japan's air space on December 13 for the first time after the Senkakus' nationalization and North Korea launching a long-range rocket the next day, security became the major issue of the poll campaign. Although the LDP realizes that it has won the election because of "public dissatisfaction with the DPJ", it is seizing the opportunity for realizing its agenda of augmenting Japan's military capability by revising the Constitution to create a national military. The LDP also wants to provide the Japanese defence force the right to exercise "collective self-defense." It wants to lift the ban on exercising this right to help its US ally in emergency situations and believes that these measures would strengthen US-Japan security relations, which is key to deal with China and North Korea. However, the LDP's pacifist ally, the New Komeito, remains opposed to Abe's agenda, arguing that a Constitutional revision to create a "national military" will change the "nature and duties" of the Self Defense Force. This Issue Brief assesses Abe's national security goals and the hurdles the new Prime Minister will face in achieving his agenda.

Introduction

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is back in the saddle with a land slide victory and has ousted the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the general election held on December 16. This was a snap election that took place almost three years after the DPJ dethroned the LDP in August 2009 and was necessitated by circumstances created by the opposition parties. The opposition parties, which hold a combine majority in the Upper House of the Diet, had blocked various measures taken by Prime Minister Noda including the consumption tax. In a bargain with the LDP to help pass the consumption tax hike bill, Noda has agreed to call a fresh poll.¹

Apart from political gridlock, the DPJ had been facing various challenges on the domestic front including the situation arising from the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, which crippled the Fukushima nuclear power plants. The party has failed to come up to the public expectation as the reconstruction work in the devastated area was slow and more than 100,000 people evacuated from Fukushima could not be rehabilitated and have been living in temporary shelters.

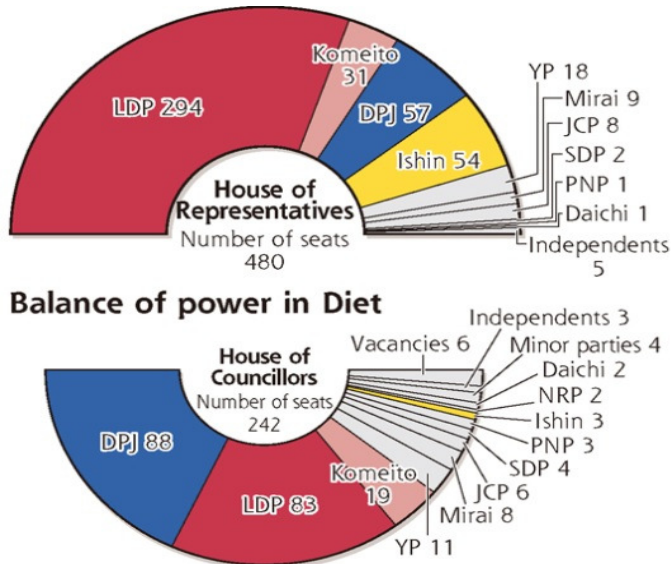
On the foreign policy front, Japan has been facing territorial assertions from China and South Korea over Senkaku and Takeshima, respectively, which surfaced in quick succession and soured ties with Beijing and Seoul. The Japanese people viewed the DPJ's response to Chinese and South Korean territorial assertions as "weak-kneed" as a result of which the Noda cabinet's public approval plummeted. North Korea's rocket launch on December 12 (which also meant a demonstration of its ability to launch a long range missile) and Chinese air intrusion into Japanese airspace on December 13, which came a few days before the December 16 election, also provided an opportunity for the opposition parties to criticize the weak DPJ government. The public also perceived that their country is under increasing threat from belligerent neighbours.

Sensing the public mood, the main opposition LDP announced a number of pledges including revival of the Japanese economy, revision of the Constitution and dealing with China strongly. The "swing voters" and nationalists found these pronouncements appealing. Thus the public dissatisfaction with the DPJ and manifestations of external threat helped the LDP wrest power.

Under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, the LDP presented a distinct set of foreign and security policies during the election campaign. It is expected that the new government under Abe's primeministership would aggressively push to realize these policy goals following the formation of the new cabinet on December 26. This Issue Brief attempts to analyse national

¹ "Noda dissolves Lower House for election", *Japan Times*, November 17, 2012.

security issues in the LDP’s agenda especially the creation of ‘national defense force’ through constitutional revision and lifting the ban on exercising the right of collective self-defence. The Brief also looks at the hurdles the Abe cabinet will likely face in implementing its agenda.



DPJ: Democratic Party of Japan; **LDP:** Liberal Democratic Party; **Komeito:** New Komeito; **YP:** Your Party; **Mirai:** Nippon Mirai no To (Tomorrow Party of Japan); **JCP:** Japanese Communist Party; **SDP:** Social Democratic Party; **PNP:** People’s New Party; **Ishin:** Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party); **NRP:** New Renaissance Party; **Daichi:** New Party Daichi

* Mirai seats include those for members of People’s Life First party. The president and vice president of the upper house are included in the figures for the party or group they belonged to when elected.

Figure 1: Strength of Political parties in the Lower and Upper house of the Diet

Source: Yomiuri Shimbun, December 18, 2012, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T121217004057.htm>

A new political push for the creation of a national defence force

Constitutional revision, particularly amending Article 9 of the Constitution which bars Japan from possessing a full-fledged army, has been one of the pet agenda of Shinzo Abe. During his previous stint as Prime Ministers in 2006-07, he had enacted a bill to hold a referendum² on Constitutional revision and upgraded Japan’s Defense Agency as Ministry of Defense. During the December 2012 election campaign, the LDP pledged to upgrade the

² The Constitutional Referendum Bill adopted in April 2007 by the Lower House of the Japanese Diet came into effect in 2010. But by then a new government had taken office and held no deliberation on how to hold a referendum over the issue.

status of the Self Defense Force to a "National Defense Force".³ The LDP and other nationalist parties want to end the Constitutional prohibition for Japan's possession of "land, sea, and air forces", which they see as an insult to a sovereign nation. In fact, even the Self Defense Force had been created in 1954 by citing the external security situation and arguing that an independent nation has a right to "self-defense". The LDP also promises to revise the interpretation of the Constitution which prohibits Japan from exercising the right of "Collective Self Defense". The debate to lift this self-imposed prohibition by the Cabinet Legislation Bureau is gaining momentum; the aim is to come to the aid of Japan's ally the United States. The LDP is considering various contingencies in which the SDF should come to the help of the United States including in case the US Navy comes under fire near the Senkaku Islands. Opponents of this move, however, argue that exercising the right of collective self defence would "open way for Japan's involvement in military conflict not directly affecting it."⁴

During the recently concluded election campaign, Shinzo Abe aggressively canvassed for revising the Constitution and upgrading the SDF into a military. His argument was:

"To outside world we call it a military force and to domestic audience, we call it the SDF. The LDP is calling for a halt to such sophistry."⁵

LDP officials are using the ongoing stand-off with China over the sovereignty of Senkaku and North Korea's rocket launch to propel a debate on constitutional revision. Linking these issues with the inadequacy of the Constitution, Shigeru Ishiba, LDP's Secretary General and former Defence Minister, has argued the need for providing constitutional legitimacy to the SDF.⁶

The Key partners who can help achieve the goal

Similar pledges to revise the Constitution has also been made by Shintaro Ishihara, whose newly formed *Nippon Ishin no Kai* (Japan Restoration Party)⁷ has won 54 seats and emerged as the third largest party in the new Diet. It is expected that the Japan Restoration Party

³ "Nippon O Torimodosu" (Take Back Japan), Election pledge of the LDP for 2012 election, p. 26. Author's copy received from an activist canvassing for the Party in Tokyo.

⁴ "Dangerous move on supreme law", *The Japan Times*, December 5, 2012.

⁵ "Why Change the Self Defense Force to a national defense force?" *The Asahi Shimbun* November 29, 2012 available online at <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/views/editorial/AJ201211300036>, accessed on December 17, 2012.

⁶ "LDP, Japan Restoration Party leading momentum for Constitutional revision", *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 6, 2012, available online at http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/AJ201212060050, accessed on December 7, 2012.

⁷ Ibid.

will vote for the revision of the Constitution, if the Abe cabinet were to put the agenda before the Diet. Following the election, Abe has hinted that he would seriously pursue his “unfinished agenda” of revising the Constitution for which he will seek support from the Japan Restoration Party and Your Party. Your Party, yet another nationalist party, won 18 seats this time around. Days after winning the election, Abe was quoted by *Asahi Shimbun* as saying that “we built a bridge to change the Constitution. The first thing we will do after crossing the bridge is to revise Article 96.”⁸

The LDP wants to change Article 96 first which it sees as the biggest bottleneck in amending the Constitution. Article 96 stipulates strict conditions to amend the Constitution including a “two thirds majority” approval in both the houses as well as a “concurring vote” in both houses. Thereupon, it should be submitted to the people for “ratification” in a referendum. Because of this strict condition, no amendment to the Japanese Constitution promulgated in 1947 has taken place so far. Therefore, the LDP wants to change the procedure of Constitutional amendment through a “simple majority”⁹ instead of two-thirds majority as spelt out in Article 96.

Be that as it may, the post poll mood of the lawmakers suggests that even the two-thirds majority could be achieved for revising the Constitution. A Kyodo news opinion poll found that a total 343 lawmakers in the newly elected Lower House want an amendment to Article 9 of the Constitution.¹⁰ Another survey conducted by the *Mainichi Shimbun* found that around 72 per cent of lawmakers elected to the Lower House would support amending the peace clause.¹¹ A similar survey conducted by *Mainichi* in 2009 had found quite the opposite result: only 34 per cent of the parliamentarians then had wanted to revise Article 9, while 51 per cent were opposed to the revision.¹² It can be said that the ongoing territorial assertions by Japan’s neighbours and the volatile security situation in the region have led to a change in thinking among the people’s representatives.

Nevertheless, given the present strength of the upper house of the Japanese Diet and the Constitutional requirement of a “concurring vote” in both the houses, Abe would find it difficult to place the issue in the Diet in the near future. It is likely that he will go slow in

⁸ “Abe Seeks partner to pave way for Constitutional revision”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 18, 2012, available online at http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201212180064, accessed on December 19, 2012.

⁹ “Nippon O Torimodosu”, note 3, p. 26.

¹⁰ “76% election winner support revising in Article 9”, *Kyodo news/ Japan Times*, December 9, 2012.

¹¹ “72% of the newly elected lawmakers want to revise war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution”, *The Mainichi Shimbun*, December 18, 2012 available online at <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20121218p2a00m0na011000c.html>, accessed on December 19, 2012.

¹² Ibid.

realizing his campaign pledge to revise the Constitution. The LDP would have to wait for next summer when election for some 80 seats of the upper house is due.

The Opponents

The LDP faces a number of impediments in realizing its goal of creating a National Defense Force. The New Komeito, supported by lay Buddhist Sokagakkai, has been the LDP's coalition partner for the last decade and is opposed to amending the Constitution. This time again, the LDP is forming a coalition with New Komeito despite having a majority (294 seats) in the Lower House. This is because a combined strength of 325 (two thirds majority) in the Lower House will give the ruling coalition an upper hand to overrule the upper house. As per the Japanese constitution, in case the Upper House votes down a bill passed by the lower House, the Lower House can overrule the house of peers by passing the bill again with a two third majority.

Given this requirement, the LDP would be in a fix. All the decision has to be passed through the cabinet first and it has to be vetted by the New Komeito representative in the cabinet. New Komeito President Natsou Yamaguchi has already made his stance clear on the issue of Constitutional amendment. In an interview to the *Japan Times* he said:

“The people are most concerned about the economy and social welfare, and they are not asking us to immediately amend the Constitution. It is an important issue that needs to be discussed thoroughly.”¹³

On the issue of revising the ban on exercising the right of collective self-defence also, Yamaguchi is at odds with Shinzo Abe. He enunciated his views as follows:

“If the exercise of the right of collective self-defense is recognized and the Constitution revised to create a national military, there would be no constitutional restraints on the use of force. The nature of the SDF's duties would also change. We cannot agree to that.”¹⁴

During the post poll coalition talks as well, New Komeito has opposed Shinzo Abe's efforts to boost Japan's military status.¹⁵ The Left parties, including the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) have also voiced their concern over the nationalist parties' push to amend the Constitution. SDP President Mizuho Fukushima

¹³ “New Komeito not necessarily on same policy page as old, hawkish ally”, *Japan Times*, November 30, 2012.

¹⁴ “LDP, Japan Restoration Party leading momentum for Constitutional revision”, Note 6.

¹⁵ “LDP's nuclear, Constitutional stances not ally's”, *The Japan Times*, December 20, 2012.

had also voiced her opposition to the move during her election speeches. She said that “I am afraid that we will be rapidly moving toward changing the Constitution for the worse.”¹⁶ The JCP has also opposed the Constitutional revision terming it a “dangerous trend toward a major chorus calling for a tilt to the right.”¹⁷

However, the SDP and JCP would find it difficult to turn the tide to revise the Constitution in the Diet since their strength has been reduced to 10 in the lower house. But it is expected that they will join the pacifist groups in mounting pressure on the government through public rallies to preserve the Constitution. The role of the centre-left DPJ would also be critical. Some of the DPJ leaders including Seiji Maehara have been in favour of lifting the ban on exercising the right of Collective Self Defence. During his term in office, Yoshihiko Noda had shown willingness to review the right of collective self-defence. He has been quoted by the Japanese media as saying that “one opinion holds that the minimum right of self-defense includes elements of the right of collective self-defense”, adding that he would like to “deepen discussion” (on the issue) within the Government.”¹⁸ In its election manifesto for the 2010 election, however, the party called for “adhering to pacifism”.¹⁹ DPJ President Yoshihiko Noda has criticized Abe’s move to make Constitutional revision a “poll plank.” It is therefore uncertain whether the DPJ will take a clear position when the issue is tabled in the Diets.

Opposition from the Media

A group of liberal media has also opposed the LDP’s stance to give greater power to the Japanese SDF by upgrading it to a “National Defence Force.” Questioning the LDP’s efforts to change the status of the SDF to a national defence force, *The Asahi Shimbun* stated that “the LDP wants to make the SDF closer to an ordinary force” by amending the Constitution. It noted that the SDF is recognized as an organization with a “restricted use of force” to defend the Japanese territories and added that “if this restriction is removed, Japan could cause the international community, in particular neighbouring countries, to harbor the suspicion that it is reviving its military forces.”²⁰

¹⁶ “Two liberal Parties face uphill fight on December 16”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 13, 2012, available online at http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201212100087, accessed on December 14, 2012.

¹⁷ “LDP, Japan Restoration Party leading momentum for Constitutional revision”, Note 6.

¹⁸ “Review top law to exercise right of collective self defense” (editorial), *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, July 17, 2012.

¹⁹ *Our Responsibility for Now and the Future*, (Democratic Party of Japan’s manifesto), Issued on November 26, 2012, Nagata-cho, Tokyo, p. 3.

²⁰ “Why change the Self Defense Forces to a national defense force?” Note 5.

The Japan Times has also written a series of editorials criticizing Abe's pledge to revise the Constitution. One of its editorials stated that "[a]ttempting to change the no-war principle of the Constitution without holding thorough public discussion is highly dangerous."²¹ In yet another editorial, it opined that changes to Article 9 and the government's interpretation of the right to collective self-defence would "shatter the trust Japan has gained from the international community through its adherence to its constitutional no-war principles." It added that such changes would contribute to the "destabilization of East Asia."²² In an editorial analysing the post poll situation, the daily opined that while the LDP wants the proposed NDF to participate in international activities to help maintain peace and security in the international community, but also pointed out that this concept can be used to "justify Japan's participation in virtually any type of military mission abroad". It concluded that people must therefore keep a strict watch on the new administration's behavior."²³

In a similar tone, the *Mainichi Shimbun* has cautioned that "political demand is not sufficient to override the established interpretation of the Constitution", adding that any change in the interpretation of the Constitution, "needs careful consideration."²⁴

The move to change the SDF into a normal military force, however, received backing from the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, which has been advocating such a change through its proposals on national security since 2004. In a recent editorial, the Daily urged the need to "step up Constitutional debate" and reiterated the need for the creation of a "military force for self defence."²⁵ Much before the LDP could propose the amendment of Article 96, the *Yomiuri* had suggested to all the parties that the two-third majority requirement for Constitutional revision be relaxed. It argued that "relaxing this requirement by revising it to a majority would be the first step to reviewing the Constitution based on the changes of time."²⁶

Conclusion

The mood in Japanese political circles over transformation of the SDF to a military force and easing the restriction on allowing the exercise of collective self defence suggests that

²¹ "Dangerous moves on supreme law", *The Japan Times*, December 5, 2012.

²² "An election that really matters", *The Japan Times*, December 15, 2012.

²³ "LDP back in the saddle again", *The Japan Times*, December 17, 2012.

²⁴ "Constitution should put brakes on collective self-defense", *The Mainichi Shimbun*, December 10, 2012, available online at <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/perspectives/news/20121210p2a00m0na005000c.html>, accessed on December 11, 2012.

²⁵ "Step up Constitutional debate on 'national defense force'", *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, November 29, 2012.

²⁶ "Relax two-thirds rule for Constitutional revision", *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 16, 2012.

the push to change the Constitution has gained momentum and cannot be rolled back. It is the external security situation marked by China's territorial assertions and aggressive behaviour as well as North Korea's rocket launch that has propelled the case forward for a stronger military. However, Abe can realize his dream of amending the Constitution only if he is able to convince his pacifist ally, the New Komeito. Had he aligned with the Japan Restoration Party, instead of sticking to the LDP's traditional coalition partner, this goal could have been achieved swiftly.

Another problem that Abe faces is whether to give priority to economic and fiscal issues or national security issues. The general public sentiment is to give priority to fiscal health and help the country come out of the slump.

Abe is also likely to confront another problem: criticism from neighbours, if he pushes too aggressively to revise the Constitution and give more power to the military. In the past he has been blamed by neighbours for pushing Japan towards the right, which reminded them about Japan's militarist past. Much would depend how he balances his priorities in the near future to realize his goal of a "normal" Japan.