Time to take hard look at Article 9

July 28, 2004

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For one with a reputation in Washington as a straight talker, it must be somewhat baffling for U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to contemplate all the commotion his words have caused in Japan over the years.

First, there were the elaborate interpretations of Armitage's request that Japan "show the flag" after Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. Then, there was the fuss about his call for Japan to "put boots on the ground" in Iraq. And now there is brouhaha over Armitage's reported remarks last week that Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution is impeding the Japan-U.S. alliance.

According to reports, Armitage made the latter remarks to Liberal Democratic Party member Hidenao Nakagawa and other Diet members who were visiting Washington last Wednesday. Other accounts suggest that Nakagawa took Armitage's remarks out of context and they were not accurately described to the press.

In any case, the damage has been done. Lawmakers in Tokyo are furious that a senior U.S. official would pass judgment on a country's Constitution. In the world of diplomacy, such interference in another country's domestic affairs is more than a breach of protocol--it is an insult to one's sovereignty.

That is certainly the way the remarks are being taken in Tokyo. And if Armitage indeed made those comments in an official capacity, then lawmakers in Japan have a right to be miffed.

Ironically, one of the U.S. government's least diplomatic officials, Undersecretary of State John Bolton, was on hand in Tokyo to smooth things over. Bolton, a specialist on trading insults with North Korea,
reassured Japanese reporters at the U.S. Embassy that amending the Constitution is "a matter entirely for the people of Japan."

What appears a bit disingenuous, though, is the disbelief among some Diet members that Article 9 stands in the way of the bilateral alliance. "It is hard to believe that Article 9 as it is currently interpreted is a source of hindrance to the Japan-U.S. alliance," stated Hirohisa Fujii, secretary general of Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan). Even members of the LDP, who favor a constitutional revision, expressed disbelief that Article 9 is an obstacle in the bilateral alliance.

Yet as with straight talkers there is an element of truth in what Armitage apparently insinuated. Contrary to the common wisdom in the Diet, Article 9 is in fact something of an impediment to the Japan-U.S. alliance--particularly as seen from the U.S. side.

That is not to say that Article 9 nullifies the legitimacy of the alliance or renders the bilateral security treaty dysfunctional. (If that is what the Diet members find so incredible, then I apologize for my misunderstanding.)

But Article 9, after all, is the reason Japan gives for not being able to defend the United States from attack, even though the United States is obliged to defend Japan. Article 9 is the reason why Japan cannot take part in international contingencies by exercising collective self-defense. And Article 9 is the primary reason why Japan cannot stand shoulder to shoulder as an equal partner of the United States in the bilateral alliance.

If such restrictions are not impediments to the alliance then what is? More importantly, if Japanese lawmakers do not see the inherent problems of constitutional restrictions on the bilateral security treaty, then the alliance really is in peril--it cannot be sustained if the constitutional status quo lasts forever. If Armitage's comments had any deeper meaning, it was surely to drive home that point.

But Armitage's remarks, intentionally or unintentionally, should spark a more profound security debate in Japan. It is time that Japanese leaders take a realistic look at Article 9 and its impact on the alliance--not just from the vantage point of Japan's national interests but also from the point of view of its alliance partner. Hard questions must be asked about Japan's willingness to defend another ally and engage in collective security operations.
Indeed, as Armitage also apparently suggested to Nakagawa, Japan cannot viably become a permanent U.N. Security Council member unless it is willing to send its own forces on dangerous U.N. missions. Article 9 is therefore not just an impediment to the bilateral alliance but also to Japan's aspirations for a permanent seat on the Security Council.

Yet debate in Japan generally skirts this point in much the same way it avoids mentioning constitutional impediments to the Japan-U.S. alliance. The debate is conducted almost as if the problem and the source of the problem are mutually exclusive. Nor is this an issue of what came first, the chicken or the egg--Japan cannot be a full-fledged ally or leader in international security affairs before either amending Article 9 or altering its interpretation.

Clearly, Japan's security debate continues to be mired in self-imposed taboos--even though the nation has in recent years loosened the pacifist grip on discussions of defense issues. But in order for Japanese lawmakers to transform Japan into a more "normal" nation--with a greater role in the U.S.-Japan alliance and international security affairs--they will have to confront the issues headon. If Armitage's remarks spark such a candid debate, then it will have been worth all the trouble.

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