Asia-Pacific Research

The Constitution Japan Cannot Afford to Break

Takaichi's push to rewrite Article 9 risks trading a hard-won peace for an uncertain security.

By Alan Callow
Asia-Pacific Research, May 14, 2026

Region: East Asia
Theme: Defence, Law and Justice

On Constitution Day last week, ***Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi*** *stood before a pro-revision forum and issued what amounted to a quiet ultimatum to Japan's postwar identity. "Debate cannot be for debate's sake," she declared, calling for parliamentary discussions that "lead to decisions" — signaling a renewed push to amend Article 9, the pacifist clause renouncing war that has defined Japan's moral standing since 1947. After nearly eight decades of constitutional continuity, Japan now stands at an inflection point, and the consequences of getting it wrong could be severe.*

Article 9 states that the Japanese people "forever renounce war as a sovereign right" and will not use force or the threat of force to settle international disputes. Drafted during the American occupation after Japan's defeat in World War II, it became more than a legal provision; it evolved into a national ethos and a collective repudiation of imperial militarism. For generations, it has served as Japan's defining promise to itself and to its neighbors.

Takaichi, a protégé of the late **Shinzo Abe**, is now the most powerful advocate for dismantling that promise. Her Liberal Democratic Party secured a landslide victory in February's lower house election, winning well above the two-thirds threshold required to advance constitutional revision to a national referendum. Politically, the opportunity for revision has rarely been stronger. But political opportunity and strategic wisdom are not the same thing.

The domestic picture is more complicated than Takaichi's supermajority suggests. In April, a rally titled "Emergency Action to Protect the Peace Constitution" drew roughly 30,000 participants — many of them young people and women — outside the Diet, chanting, "Peace cannot be built through military force." These were not fringe voices. A Kyodo News survey found that while 75 percent of respondents supported constitutional revision in general, opinion was nearly evenly divided on revising Article 9 specifically, with 51 percent in favor and 46 percent opposed. Japan's public is more pragmatic about defense than in previous decades, but also more constitutionally cautious than election results alone imply. A government that mistakes electoral dominance for national consensus risks fracturing the unity necessary for coherent security policy.

The regional implications are even more serious. China has watched Japan's military evolution with growing alarm — and with some cynicism. Beijing benefits politically from portraying any expansion of Japanese military power as a revival of militarism. Yet behind the propaganda lies a genuine strategic calculation. Japan has already deployed long-range missiles, loosened restrictions on weapons exports, and sent troops to participate directly in

joint exercises in the Philippines. For China, which views the Taiwan Strait as a core national interest, a formal revision removing the last textual constraints on Japanese military power would not appear to be a mere legal adjustment. It would represent a strategic red line. The risk of miscalculation — of Beijing reacting not to Japan's intentions but to the symbolism of revision itself — is real.

There is also a deeper irony at the center of this debate. The Self-Defense Forces already function as a military in everything but constitutional designation. Their helicopter destroyers operate F-35 fighter aircraft, long-range strike weapons are entering procurement, and Japan fields one of the most capable naval forces in the Western Pacific. In practice, Japan has already achieved much of the military normalization its revisionists seek. The debate over Article 9 rests partly on a misunderstanding of what the clause has actually done: institutional adaptation has mattered far more than textual revision.

What constitutional revision would truly change is not Japan's military capability but its political symbolism — and symbols carry enormous weight in East Asia. For China, South Korea, and other nations that experienced Japanese imperial expansion, formally abandoning Article 9 would not register as a technical adjustment. It would be interpreted as a declaration of intent. The resulting spiral of defensive posturing, arms racing, and diplomatic deterioration could make the region less stable and Japan itself less secure.

Japan's most pressing strategic challenges — managing its alliance with the United States, deterring North Korea, and balancing relations with a rising China — would not become easier through constitutional revision. These challenges require diplomatic dexterity, economic leverage, and credible deterrence built steadily over time. They do not require a constitutional bonfire that signals revisionism to neighbors already on edge.

Japan's national interest is not necessarily the same as the LDP's constitutional ambition. A nation that has remained at peace for eighty years, built extraordinary prosperity, and earned international respect through restraint should think carefully before trading that inheritance for the uncertain dividends of legal normalization. Japan is already capable of defending itself, and the public understands that reality.

The question Takaichi must answer is not whether Japan can amend Article 9. Clearly, it can. The real question is whether it should — and whether the momentum provided by her supermajority represents wisdom rather than simply power. History's verdict on Japan's postwar pacifism has, by almost any measure, been favorable. The burden of proof lies with those who would abandon it.

*

Alan Callow *graduated from Western Mindanao State University (Philippines). He is a freelance journalist with experience in writing about the Asia-Pacific region.*

Featured image: Takaichi giving a speech for LDP presidential election in Nagoya, September 2025 (CC BY 4.0)

Global Research is a reader-funded media. We do not accept any funding from corporations or governments. Help us stay afloat. Click the image below to make a one-time or recurring donation.

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: **Alan Callow**