

# opinion

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# Government and society at odds on national security

As Japan ramps up its military, polls show that many citizens are on a different page

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In recent years, Tokyo has strengthened its military capabilities in response to an unstable regional security environment.

Japanese people have long maintained their identity as a pacifist nation, but as the country's stance on defense and national security shifts, how accepting is the public of these changes?

After Japan's defeat in World War II, "exclusive defense" became its basic security policy and the country has since possessed only the minimum military force necessary for self-defense, as established by the post-war peace Constitution.

However, several policy changes have signaled a major shift. In 2014, the Cabinet approved the right to collective self-defense — meaning that the Self-Defense Forces can take action to support an ally under attack. Furthermore, in 2022, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's administration revised the National Security Strategy to equip Japan with a counterattack capability and double its defense budget.

When Kishida visited Washington last month, Japan and the United States



A peace rally on Constitution Memorial Day in Tokyo on May 3. Japan's identity as a pacifist nation is shifting as the government strengthens its military, but many don't agree with the policy. AFP-JJL

items strongly related to defense rather than the capacity to intervene in other countries.

Over the past few years, the government has consciously avoided debating security policy changes in the Diet, with reforms adopted mainly by the Cabinet. This has deprived lawmakers and citizens of the opportunity to reflect on these issues and express their views, including dissenting ones.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party still wants to amend the Constitution and the number of those in favor of such a change has grown. However, what people support is not necessarily aligned with the LDP's main target, which is to change Article 9 on the "renunciation of war."

Another Yomiuri Shimbun poll, published this month, asked people what Japan should do about Article 9. The combined proportion of respondents who supported the interpretation of the Article and abiding by it without amendments exceeded those who supported its amendment by 8%.

And a May poll, this time by the liberal-leaning Asahi Shimbun, found that 61% of people opposed Article 9's amendment — almost double the percentage of those in favor.

On May 3, large rallies were held throughout Japan for Constitution Memorial Day. In Tokyo, organizers stated that 32,000 people — a number exceeding expectations — gathered to show their support for protecting the peace Constitution and against amending Article 9.

I was one of two main speakers at the Tokyo rally. From the large stage in a park in Yamanote Park in front of some of the