

Islamist terrorism, a major test for Japanese diplomacy

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Japan has long thought that it was sheltered from the foul winds that swept across the Middle East. Its geographical situation would stand as a bulwark against the poison of Islamist terrorism which spread insidiously in the region. It now realises, in the most brutal manner, how this assumption is obsolete. On Saturday, January 31, the Islamic State (IS) announced the beheading of journalist Kenji Goto, who was abducted in Syria in the fall. A week earlier, another Japanese national, contractor Haruna Yukawa, had suffered the same disastrous fate, despite appeals for clemency from Tokyo.

“Outraged” by the barbarity of IS, Japan’s conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe showed absolute firmness. *“We will never forgive the terrorists. Japan is committed to taking responsibility in connection with the international community to fight them and bring them to justice,”* he said in front of the press, expressing his deep *“regrets”* to Kenji Goto’s relatives. But how to respond to the diplomatic challenge set by the bloodthirsty zealots of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed “Caliph” of IS?

Since returning to power in December 2012, after a first tenure in 2006-2007, Shinzo Abe has made no secret of his ambition to see his country free itself of the *“shackles of the imperial past”* to play a more important role on the international stage. In his eyes, Japan – the pride and power of which he aims to restore, as the proposed defence budget for 2015-2016 proves it (+ 2.8% to 4.980 billion yen or 42.4 billion US dollars) –, should not be over-cautious when its interests are at stake. So much so that the political sphere is widely in favour of a more proactive approach abroad in security matters.

“The military base in Djibouti, which has hosted the Japanese forces taking part in antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2011, was set up by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), now the main opposition party,” recalls Céline Pajon, researcher at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) and expert on defence issues in Japan. *“The political class is divided, however, on the conditions of this military engagement, in particular on the circumstances that may lead to a possible use of armed force,”* she cautions.

In little more than two years in office, Shinzo Abe, having visited fifty countries, has already given some substance to his new political design. Instead of launching a revision of Article 9 of the Constitution of 1946 (1) banning the “*use of force as means of settling international disputes*” – too onerous in terms of implementation, and too costly on a political level given the harsh resistance it has encountered – he has promoted a reinterpretation of the aforesaid article that paves the way for a broader involvement of the Self-Defence Forces outside of Japan.

“This new interpretation was at the core of a Cabinet decision in July. The next few months will be decisive as the laws necessary for the implementation of the right to collective self-defence [i.e. the ability to deploy overseas to assist allies or partner countries under attack] will be submitted to – and discussed in – the Parliament,” indicates Ms. Pajon.

In practice, however, Shinzo Abe appears timorous. He promised to grant 200 million US dollars to the countries which are at the forefront of the fight against IS (especially Iraq and Lebanon) during his recent tour of the Middle East – a region upon which his country has been highly dependent for its oil supply, especially since the closure of nuclear plants following the Fukushima disaster in March 2011. Yet he was careful not to provide military support to the coalition led by the United States, preferring to increase humanitarian aid allocated to victims of Daesh [Arabic acronym for IS], particularly refugees and displaced people.

There is some ambivalence too within the population, torn apart between conflicting emotions. *“If public opinion is more realistic about the threats that target Japan and the need for the country to better protect itself and prevent crises occurring abroad, it remains very committed to the pacifism enshrined in the Constitution”*, explains Céline Pajon. In fact, the project nurtured by Abe to extend the missions of the Self-Defence Forces – created in 1954 to defend the national territory – raises serious concerns.

Many fear that the country could be embroiled in an inextricable conflict. According to a Kyodo survey conducted on 1 and 2 July 2014, 54.4% of respondents were opposed to the reinterpretation of Article 9, against 34.6% who supported it. Furthermore, 61.2% said that Japan would be more inclined to be drawn into a war because of that decision.

Since the hostage-taking incident that took place in In Amenas (south-east of Algeria) in mid-January 2013 and for which “Those who sign with Blood” – a dissident faction of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar – claimed responsibility, Japanese officials have seemed to better gauge the perils that threaten their country. Thus, in the wake of this tragic event that resulted in the deaths of ten Japanese nationals, Tokyo decided to strengthen its cooperation in terms of intelligence sharing and to contribute financially to the development and stability of the Sahel region.

The gruesome deaths of Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto reminded the Abe government where its responsibilities lay. New measures should be taken in the months to come for a better protection of the Japanese territory and citizens against terrorist acts. But will it be sufficient to defeat the henchmen of the Islamic State?

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(1) The Constitution of Japan was promulgated on November 3, 1946, when the country was occupied by US forces led by General Douglas MacArthur, and came into effect on May 3, 1947. It is dominated by the fundamental principles of democracy, secularism, pacifism, welfare state, liberalism and individualism.