

By Rupakjyoti Borah

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## Commentary: Is Shinzo Abe ready for his moment of truth?

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been fixated on constitutional reform and amending Article 9, but the road ahead is rocky, argues political commentator Rupakjyoti Borah.



Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe speaks on the launch of a North Korean missile at his official residence in Tokyo in May (Photo: REUTERS/Toru Hanai)

SINGAPORE: When Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe released a video message indicating his desire to revise the country's constitution, it did not exactly come as a surprise to most observers, both within Japan and outside.

May 3 is celebrated as Constitution Memorial Day in Japan each year.

While doing so, he also announced a timeline, highlighting that he intends to amend the country's pacifist constitution by 2020, coincidentally the same year when Tokyo hosts the summer Olympics.

Abe thinks that the time is now ripe for such a move as the ruling coalition led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito has a majority in both the lower and upper houses of the Japanese Parliament.

The recent missile tests by North Korea starting in April may have also provided useful context for such a politically controversial move.

During his earlier term in office in 2006, Abe was in power for only one year and resigned ostensibly because of health reasons.

This time, he has already served a much longer stint, and could well end up being the longest-serving Japanese prime minister, following changes made to the LDP's party constitution allowing Abe to seek re-election for a third consecutive term as the LDP's head.

### WELL-PLACED TO MANAGE DOMESTIC FALLOUT

Now, that the constitution genie has been uncorked, it is worth pointing out that Abe is well-placed to manage any possible domestic fallout.

This does not appear to be easy on the surface, as any constitutional revision will require a two-third majority in both houses of the Japanese parliament, as well as a majority in a nationwide referendum.

Yet, barring a major political scandal, Abe is likely to make good progress on his promise. He is doing all right in the polls, and quite well with young voters.

What Abe also has going for him the most is that the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has been in complete disarray for a while now, largely because of confusion and infighting, and it will take a miracle for them to put up a credible fight.



The LDP's Research Commission on the Security of Japan submits a proposal on missile defence to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in early April. (Photo: Reuters)

Abe has also successfully taken the wind out of the opposition's sails. Even though there is a significant section of Japanese parliamentarians who favour retaining the constitution, they simply do not have the numerical strength to take on the Abe-led LDP-Komeito coalition.

On the flipside, Abe had come to power on the platform of reviving the Japanese economy and voters expect results. Japan's economy seems to be picking up on the back of stronger exports, with the longest stretch of growth in a decade, but there is still much work to be done on this front.

For one, structural challenges like Japan's ageing population and a worrying security environment may dampen growth. All these pressing challenges require Abe's time and attention.

#### ROUGH NEIGHBOURHOOD

It is in the immediate neighbourhood, however, that Abe faces his biggest test on constitutional reform.

To begin with, China has a territorial dispute with Japan and in the past, had criticised Abe for his visit to the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo in December 2013. Any changes to the Japanese Constitution is sure to lead to a lot of noise from Beijing and generate huge protests from the vocal Chinese public.

In South Korea, Moon Jae In has recently taken over as president and any changes to the Japanese constitution could result in greater tensions between the two countries and domestic turmoil in South Korea, testing the newly-elected president.

It is worth noting here that Japan and South Korea have been putting up a united front along with the US when it comes to facing the threat from the recalcitrant North Korea, so a strain in the Japan-South Korea relationship does not bode well for regional security in Northeast Asia.

It has been 50 years since World War II, and Japan has been a major trading partner to most ASEAN countries, but constitutional reform giving the Japanese Self-Defence Force (JSDF) a greater role may rouse old wounds in Southeast Asia.



A wooden sign which reads "Prime Minister Shinzo Abe" is seen on a ritual offering, a "masakaki" tree, inside the main shrine at the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. (Photo: REUTERS/Toru Hanai)

Perhaps the only silver lining to Japan's constitutional reform is the warm US reception it is likely to receive. The Trump administration has been in favour of Japan taking up a more active role in the security realm and paying a greater monetary contribution for the security cover which the US currently proffers it.

#### **NO REVERSION TO MILITARISM**

In September 2015, the Japanese Parliament passed a new law, which for the first time in the post-World War II era, allows the JSDF to mobilise overseas when three conditions are met: If Japan or its allies are attacked, if there are no other appropriate means to repel the attack and ensure Japan's security, and if the use of force is restricted to a minimum.

Abe's move towards constitutional reform is a step in the same direction.

Any changes in the Japanese constitution do not necessarily mean that Japan would revert to militarism. For instance, the new law was first applied to authorise the JSDF to aid UN and foreign personnel involved in its peacekeeping mission in South Sudan, if they come under attack.

The effect intended may also be psychological, and more in form than substance. Abe is mainly aiming to remove the ambiguity surrounding the status of the JSDF.

Article 9 of the Japanese constitution states that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes". The second part of Article 9 goes on to say that "in order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea and air forces, as well as other agencies with the potential for war will never be maintained".

Yet the JSDF is one of the most modern armed forces around the world and Japan spends a hefty US\$42 billion (S\$58 billion) on defence each year.

To be sure, the road ahead will not be easy. No other Japanese Prime Minister has tinkered with the constitution since it was first enacted in 1947. So amending the constitution has great public and international signature, and may rouse historical sensitivities.

Abe will have to expend tremendous political capital in order to push through the changes in the constitution. But if Abe is able to succeed, he may take away some pressure for him to deliver on Abenomics, and put his party on a better political footing.



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Given these considerations, and as the one policy that Abe has been fixated on as far back as 2006, Abe has much riding on his ability to deliver on this promise on constitutional reform.

*Dr Rupakjyoti Borah is a Visiting Research Fellow with the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore and author of the recent book "The Elephant and the Samurai: Why Japan Can Trust India".*

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