

Japan's Peaceful Foreign Policy Is Under Siege From Right-Wing Militarism

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Seventy-five years ago today, Japan adopted a constitution that ruled out ever using war as a tool of state policy. The country's conservative leaders now want to ditch that commitment as they embrace the dangerous role of a militarized US client state.

Uniquely among the world's constitutions, Japan's was drawn up in 1946 at the behest of a foreign, occupying force. Having come into force in May 1947, it now celebrates its 75th year, unrevised.

US general Douglas MacArthur, who then ran the country, resisted global demands that Japan's wartime commander in chief, the emperor Hirohito, be indicted for war crimes and instead insisted he remain "at the head of the state." Since this provoked great suspicion in the countries to which Japan's forces had laid waste throughout the Asia-Pacific region between 1931 and 1945, the constitution's first eight clauses, devoted to defining Hirohito's position and powers, were followed by the famous Article 9.

Its wording spelled out the principle of state pacifism:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force in settling international disputes. To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air, forces, as well as other war potential, will not be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be maintained.

With Article 9, Japan assured the people of its neighboring countries that they need not fear any resurgent emperor-centered Japanese militarism. Japan would, instead, be a unique state based upon peace.

The rest of the document set out the principles of popular sovereignty, fundamental human rights, and division of power. The question was how such democratic principles would relate either to the first eight articles concerning the "symbolic" emperor-system, or to Article 9's abhorrence for war and declaration of permanent peace upon the world.

Three quarters of a century on, the Japan that declared it would never maintain "war potential" has in fact built up a formidable one, becoming the world's fifth highest military spender. The Japanese government is now intent upon doubling that figure in the coming five years, to at least 2 percent of GDP, elevating Japan to third place on the global list.

It also plans to develop the capacity to strike enemy bases preemptively, and it is considering whether to invite the United States to place "shared" nuclear weapons on Japanese soil. The Ukraine war is likely to reinforce the momentum of Japanese militarization and the country's dependent incorporation into the US-designed global order.

Washington's Manchukuo

In 1951, the United States held a position of unquestionable economic, political, and military might. It had also become a repository of hope for those who loathed fascism and militarism and wanted a democratic peace. Japan's submission at the time, following a crushing military defeat and six years of occupation, was near complete. The reality of its status as a defeated, subordinate country was plainly at odds with the principle of popular sovereignty that the constitution declared.

As preparations got underway for the San Francisco Treaty which formally ended the state of war between Japan and the Allied powers, the chief US negotiator, John Foster Dulles, put the central issue with brutal frankness on his arrival in Tokyo: "Do we get the right to station as many troops in Japan as we want where we want and for as long as we want? That is the principal question."

The Japanese answer, then and now, was yes. The US-Japan Security Treaty of 1951, renewed in 1960, formally "ended" the US occupation of Japan, while in fact continuing it and making it permanent, as a kind of super-constitution. The incompatibility of the two institutional frames — the 1946-47 constitution and the security pacts of 1951 and 1960 — was clear.

Once MacArthur had absolved Hirohito of responsibility for the war and placed him "at the head of the state," the emperor proved to be a major US asset. At an early stage in the war with Japan, the United States had already decided that it would retain the emperor and make use of him as linchpin of a conservative order.

Edwin Reischauer was then a young Harvard lecturer who went on to become US ambassador to Japan under the Kennedy administration, as well as doyen of Japan scholars in the United States. He penned a memo for the State Department calling for Japan to have a similar relationship to the United States that the northern Chinese puppet state of Manchukuo had to Japan itself. In this framework, the role of puppet would be assigned to Hirohito, who could serve the United States in much the same way that Pu Yi, the puppet emperor of Manchukuo, served imperial Japan between 1932 and 1945.

Imperial Perspectives

Hirohito understood the opportunity presented to him by US policy and grasped it with both hands. He pressed hard, mostly in secret, to secure a long-term US military presence on both mainland Japan and the island of Okinawa. He opposed the vaguely idealist motives that had briefly led MacArthur to think of Japan's future as a possible "Switzerland of the Far East," an unarmed, neutral state protected by international guarantees under the United Nations.

Hirohito greatly impressed MacArthur, in part at least because of his negative view of his own people. In a secret message to MacArthur, passed on by an intermediary in April 1946 and only discovered in the US archives more than fifty years later, Hirohito claimed that the Japanese people were "lacking in education" or "real religious feeling," which left them with a "willingness to be led" and made them "easy to sway from one extreme to the other."

The main example of these supposed "feudalistic traits" that Hirohito cited was the strike wave in postwar Japan: the workers demanding better wages and working conditions were "selfishly concentrating their attention on their rights and not thinking about their duties and obligations." The emperor expressed the hope that a coal strike in the United States would be settled soon because it was setting a bad example for Japanese workers, "in their imitative way and in their selfish seeking of their rights without regard to their obligations."

This evaluation led Hirohito to think that "the Occupation should last for a long time." In another

message, he informed MacArthur that Japan's security depended on "initiatives taken by the United States, representing the Anglo-Saxons." As for Okinawa, he urged that the United States should maintain its military occupation for "25 to 50 years or longer, under the fiction of a long-term lease" — precisely the formula that was in due course adopted at San Francisco (a trusteeship with the United States as sole administering authority).

In short, there was no more enthusiastic supporter of the United States cause in postwar Japan than Hirohito. The emperor system henceforth depended on the support of the US military.

Above the Law

Japanese leaders have rarely spoken positively about Article 9. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has ruled the country for most of the period since its foundation in 1955. Throughout those years, the LDP has been committed to the fundamental revision of Article 9, especially to remove the constraints on military development.

When the Japanese state set up a National Police Reserve in 1950, followed by the land, sea, and air Self-Defense Forces four years later, many considered these moves to be unconstitutional. Indeed, many still do.

However, Japan's supreme court dismissed a major judicial challenge to the constitutionality of these government actions in December 1959. Following a secret intervention by US ambassador Douglas MacArthur II, who was the nephew of Hirohito's patron, the court ruled that matters pertaining to the security treaty could not be subjected to judicial review because they were "highly political" and concerned Japan's very existence. That judgement had the effect of elevating the Security Treaty above Japan's own constitution and immunizing it from any legal challenge.

In 2008, the Nagoya High Court, one of Japan's eight regional high courts, ruled that the dispatch of the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) to Iraq between 2004 and 2006 had been both unconstitutional and illegal. LDP prime minister Junichiro Koizumi had embarked on this supposedly "humanitarian" mission in response to a US directive for its allies to "show the flag" and put "boots on the ground." Koizumi's successor, Yasuo Fukuda, declared his intention to ignore that judgement, as did his chief cabinet secretary, minister of defense, and the ASDF chief of staff.

As the government concentrated on manipulating and circumventing the constitutional peace clause to accommodate steady military expansion, so too has it ignored inconvenient interpretations, as it did in 2015, when constitutional law specialists — including three that the government itself had nominated to advise the Japanese parliament, the Diet — declared the package of security laws then under consideration (and in due course adopted) to be unconstitutional. In 2017, when opposition parties in the Diet demanded a special sitting under the constitution's Article 53 to debate government corruption, the government, prime minister, and ruling party simply ignored it.

Principles and Practice

With questions of war and peace secure against constitutional challenge behind the defenses erected by the Supreme Court, the US government steadily pressed Japan to either delete Article 9 or simply ignore it and develop its armed forces. Yet Article 9 has enjoyed consistent public support in Japan, so governments have had to adopt various formulas in accordance with it.

In the late 1960s, the government of Sato Eisaku declared its adherence to three nonnuclear principles: Japan would neither possess nuclear weapons, nor manufacture them, nor allow them to be located on its territory. Other policy formulas have committed Japan not to export weapons to other countries, not to allow direct SDF involvement in multinational (US-led) coalitions, and not to

spend more than 1 percent of GDP on the military. Since Japan is the world's third largest economy, the last of these conditions still permits the country to maintain a large military budget in absolute terms.

However, such concessions to public sentiment in Japan have not prevented the constitutional peace state proclaimed in 1946 from gradually morphing into a client state of Washington's lawless militarism. This process of transformation has been especially striking under the cabinets of Abe Shinzō (2006–7, 2012–20), Suga Yoshihide (2020–21), and Kishida Fumio (2021–22). Japan's leaders describe this policy of subordination to the United States as "positive pacifism."

Japan grew enormously in stature, wealth, and power even while the United States retained bases up and down the country and much of the airspace above Japan's capital remained under the control of the US Air Force. US military installations are scattered throughout Japan, along with military-related housing, hospitals, hotels, schools, and even golf courses (two in Tokyo alone). The Japanese state covers about 70 percent of their costs under the rubric of "Host Nation Support" (also known as the "sympathy budget").

The San Francisco Treaty was nominally a system for the defense of Japan. It has served instead as a system for the defense (and expansion) of the United States. Of the eight hundred or so US bases that now ring the world, none are more important than those in Japan. More than two-thirds of the land occupied by these bases is concentrated on Okinawa, which makes up just 0.6 per cent of the national territory.

Today, all of Japan's major national parties agree on the need to confirm and reinforce the US-Japan relationship based on the San Francisco Treaty. The significant exception to this conformist rule is Okinawa, where there is a long-running and continuous struggle against the bases and their expansion, supported at all levels of society up to and including its governor. Fifty years after the so-called reversion of Okinawa to Japanese sovereignty, it remains burdened with both US and Japanese military bases. Major new developments are in progress, such as the construction of the Henoko base for the US Marine Corps, and of new missile and anti-missile facilities for the SDF.

East Asia's Future

The postwar managers and planners of the Japanese state built it on the assumption that the world would continue to spin on a US axis. Gradually, however, as East Asia became the center of world economic dynamism, the institutional framework established at San Francisco came to be increasingly at odds with underlying economic realities.

China's share of global GDP has risen vertiginously, from approximately 2 percent in 1990 to just below 22 percent in 2018. It is predicted to reach 28 percent by 2030. Meanwhile, Japan's share has correspondingly declined from 15 percent in 1990 to less than 10 percent in 2008 and about 4.3 percent in 2015. As late as 1990, China's economy was approximately half the size of Japan's. By 2020, it was three times greater in PPP (purchasing power parity) terms.

In the course of its rise, China became the principal economic partner for much of the world, including Japan. It receives 27.1 percent of Japanese exports — compared with 18.4 percent for the United States — and contributes 25.7 percent of imports. More than thirteen thousand Japanese companies operate in China.

Yet the militarization of Japan's Southwest Islands (Mage, Amami, Miyako, Ishigaki, Yonaguni), egged on by the United States as part of a confrontation with China across the East China Sea, contradicts the economic logic of closer and more cooperative relations. It carries the risk of

catastrophe. Further north, across the body of water that is known in China and Korea as “East Sea” (Donghae) and in Japan and Russia as the “Sea of Japan” (Nihonkai or Yaponskaye More), China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas, North and South, all face one another.

Proponents of an East Asian community want to revise the San Francisco Treaty formula and construct in its place an East Asian political and moral order with the potential to become a kind of twenty-first-century world center, following in the line of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific in earlier centuries, with war between its members unimaginable. However, the realization of that vision will depend on the attainment of peace and stability in the Sea’s environs.

For now at least, things are moving in the opposite direction. Over and under the East China Sea, battleships and aircraft carriers, missile and counter-missile systems, fighter jets and submarines are all proliferating. British, French, German, and Australian vessels join with those of the United States and Japan to rehearse war with China.

It is more urgent than ever that the Japanese people insist on the peace commitment of their constitution and resist the efforts of their rulers to water down that commitment or delete it altogether. Japan’s government must return to the spirit of Article 9, not only in Japan itself (especially Okinawa) but beyond its borders, especially around the East China Sea. There has never been a greater need for a country on the world stage committed to the avoidance of conflict.

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