

PM: Japan: Can Pacifism Survive in the Pacific?

By Polly Mann

On June 30, 2014, several thousand people in Tokyo protested against their government's proposal to allow its military a larger international role by reinterpreting the country's war-renouncing constitution—the biggest change in Japan's security policy since World War II. Japan had decided to deploy 100 soldiers and radar in the spring of this year, to its westernmost outpost—the island of Yonaguni in the Okinawa island group, a mere 93 miles from China. The deployment was considered justified as a mission of the Japan Self-Defense Force established in 1954.

But because Yonaguni is closer to China's shores than Japan's main islands—a mere 93 miles—it increased tensions between the two countries. Why do it then? In December of 2013, Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines expressed “great concern” over China's rapid military buildup. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe argues that China's military budget has become 30 times greater in the last decade whereas Japan's has remained relatively flat for the last 20 years.*

However, Article 9 of the present Japanese constitution, enacted in 1947 in the wake of World War II, states that the Japanese people would “forever” renounce war as a “sovereign right” as well as the “use of force” as a means of settling international disputes. The Japanese people liked Article 9. An April, 2013, poll in the liberal-left Asahi newspaper reported that 63 percent of the respondents opposed the prime minister's plan for remilitarizing. Opposition has taken novel forms. One group, Women Who Don't Have Sex With Men Who Love War, has even vowed to withhold sex from any husband backing a revision of the constitution.

But true to form, the U.S. government takes a positive attitude toward the proposal of remilitarizing its ally Japan. Meanwhile, the threat of China has been cited by Japanese officials as a reason to modify the constitution, China's official news agency, Xinhua, claimed that modifying the nation's pacifist identity serves to endanger the lives of China's citizens. As for the 1,500 Japanese inhabitants of Yonaguni, they have mixed feelings about having military stationed there. “Opinion is split down the middle,” said Tetsuo Funamichi, the head of the island's branch of the Japan Agricultural Association.



Bridge in the Lyndale Peace Park, Minneapolis, incorporates inlaid Minnesota granite and relic stones from the 1945 U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Photo: Homesmsp.com

The present constitution, enacted in 1947 in the wake of World War II, demanded Japan's unconditional surrender. The Allies sought not only reparations but also fundamental changes in the nature of Japan's political system. The wording suggests that neither General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander for the Allied Powers, nor his superiors in Washington intended to impose a new political system on Japan unilaterally. Instead, they wished to encourage Japan's new leaders to initiate democratic reforms on their own. Under the treaty both parties accepted an obligation to assist each other in case of an armed conflict. The peace treaty between Japan and the Allied Powers, known as the Treaty of San Francisco, was signed in 1951.

However, all has not always been rosy between the two countries since then. In 1971, the United States imposed a 10 percent surcharge on Japanese imports that hindered Japan's exports to the U.S. and strained relations between the two countries. This was further exacerbated by a reevaluation of the Japanese yen in December of that year.

Additionally, the U.S. has recently made efforts to induce Japan to contribute more to its own defense and to regional security, although in the years after World War II, the U.S. established military bases on the four main islands of Japan and in Okinawa Prefecture. At the same time the Japanese sought greater independence from the U.S., and subsequently the island of Okinawa was returned to Japan. But as of June 2014, there were a reported eight U.S. Marine Corps bases in Okinawa, six Air Force bases, three U.S. Army facilities, and one U.S. Air Force base.

Today the Japanese government does not specify an enemy when discussing its defense strategy but it makes no secret that it perceives China generally as a threat. Reuters reported that Japanese and Chinese navy and coastguard ships have played “cat and mouse” around some small disputed islands (known as the Diaoyu in China and the Senkaku in Japan) in the East China Sea since Japan announced it had nationalized the formerly privately-owned territory in 2012. There have been 415 incidents between Japanese fighter jets and Chinese planes reported in 2013, up 36 percent from the previous year according to the Japanese Defense Ministry. This was the rationale Prime Minister Abe used to raise Japan’s military spending last year for the first time in 11 years.

In the meantime the Nobel Peace Prize Committee had nominated Article 9 (the original) of the Japanese constitution that stated that the Japanese people would “forever” renounce war as a “sovereign right” and the “threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.” If Japan received the award, do you suppose that a conference composed of Japanese and Chinese designated legislators could possibly meet and come up with a plan that could be submitted to the affected people of Yonaguni that could mean peaceful relations instead of heightened militarization?

The culture of Yonaguni—as of all of the Okinawa Prefecture in which it lies—already has some cultural characteristics emblematic of China in its textiles, lacquerware, potteries, performing arts, and customs, reflecting its proximity to China and trade conducted between the countries in previous centuries. If Japan and China could rebuild their relationship now, there would be economic and other advantages; language schools where both Japanese and Chinese could be taught; medical facilities for both Japanese and Chinese, and elections for city offices, including police, where candidates were both Japanese and Chinese; cooking classes where both Japanese and Chinese dishes could be taught. The world needs a new model. Where better to begin than Yonaguni?

* Japan does, however, have some armaments which it had been using for peacekeeping, rescue and other nonaggressive operations--by the late 1970s the Japanese armaments industry had developed and produced a range of modern equipment, including aircraft, tanks, artillery, and major surface and underwater naval equipment. But expenditures were limited to 1 percent of the Japanese GDP.

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