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A Push to End Pacifism Tests Japanese Democracy

ALEXIS DUDDEN

Japan's ruling coalition, headed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, forced a set of 11 controversial new security bills through the lower house of the National Diet (parliament) in July 2015. Upper house deliberation had just begun as of this writing and was following a similar playbook. Abe and his supporters want the bills enacted by the close of the parliamentary session at the end of September. The voting procedure makes passage likely even if all the opposition parties band together. Public opinion, however, is overwhelmingly opposed to the substance of the bills, which would effectively end the postwar constitution's ban on Japanese military forces engaging in war abroad. What unfolds in the coming months will clarify the strength and nature of democratic society in Japan today.

At the heart of the bills is the notion of “collective self-defense,” which a majority of Japanese politicians, legal experts, academics, and opinion makers has long held to be unconstitutional. The current debate has revealed that Abe's interpretation of collective self-defense as constitutionally permissible could lead to the involvement of Japanese troops in military operations with allies such as the United States, both within Japan's borders and abroad—all without amending the constitution. This could change the capabilities of Japan's armed forces in ways that go far beyond defending Japan or peacekeeping under United Nations command or participating in humanitarian relief efforts, which a majority of Japanese supports.

Even though American occupiers imposed Japan's war-renouncing constitution in 1947, US patronage since then has gradually encouraged

Japan to develop the nation's Self-Defense Forces into a world-class military. Today's debate, therefore, is not about starting from scratch; it concerns when, where, why, and how Japan's troops would fire their state-of-the-art weapons.

No amendment to Japan's current constitution has been approved in any form during its nearly 70-year existence. Its famous antiwar clause, Article 9, amounts for many to a definition of national identity. Nonetheless, Abe has made clear his determination to reshape Japan's place in the world by renegeing on this constitutionally guaranteed, internationally recognized commitment. His is a minority view, however, and the political difficulties of constitutional revision have compelled him and his supporters to try what some might call a backhanded parliamentary maneuver.

MAN ON A MISSION

Opposition to Abe's security legislation grew sharply after three prominent constitutional law scholars testified on June 4 about the bills on live television and unanimously asserted that they were unconstitutional. One of the three experts, Yasuo Hasebe—a widely revered law professor from Waseda University—had been invited by Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to testify, on the presumption that he would support the measures. Hasebe not only denounced the legislation, but in an interview with Reuters he said of Abe: “I think he hates the concept of modern constitutionalism, the concept that the powers of government should be restricted by the constitution.”

If only for a moment, the professors stopped the prime minister in his tracks. But the prime minister and his supporters quickly dismissed the professors' remarks as irrelevant and began to engage in damage control. This reaction was

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in keeping with Abe's deeper push to distort beyond recognition anything that disfigures his imagined "Beautiful Japan" and complicates his simplistic notions about "pride" in country—even well-documented historical atrocities committed by Japanese imperial forces, such as the 1937 Nanjing Massacre.

The effort to reconfigure Japan's military is not only driven by Abe. The main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan, has also supported such measures—provided that first there is open constitutional debate and a national referendum. But what is unique to Abe is his obdurate view that Japan's twentieth-century history of violence is divorced entirely from the present. At times it appears as if the devastation wrought by Japan across Asia and the Pacific is for him the stuff of legend—and even "honorable," as he has said—rather than an ongoing and painful part of daily life for its victims and their descendants who continue to make claims for atonement and reparations from the Japanese government.

Abe's own remarks, including his speech before a joint session of the US Congress in April 2015, make abundantly clear his mission to resurrect the legacy of his grandfather, Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (known colloquially in Japanese as "the monster of the Showa era"). He was charged as a Class-A war criminal for his role in leading industrial development in Manchuria in the 1930s and 40s. Abe has spoken and written regularly of the shame he felt as a child when friends would taunt him about his grandfather's imprisonment. But the United States found it expedient in the 1950s to rehabilitate Kishi and support his rise to power.

Now, during this fraught year of anniversaries of the events of 1945, Abe regularly gets away with provocative remarks about the war years. Washington has given him a long leash to treat Japan's modern history as a weapon to drum up domestic support, even as his words dangerously dislocate regional relations at a time when China is growing increasingly powerful.

With popular outcry against the security bills growing, on June 22 Abe bought time by extending the parliamentary session through September 27, making it the longest on record since 1945. Yet he was unable to quell his deep disdain for debate. After one session, the prime minister was forced

to apologize for yelling at an opposition member to "hurry up!" with her questions, though she had been speaking for only three minutes.

As his supporters rammed the bills through, opposition deputies shouted and held signs declaring, "End to Abe rule," "The ruling party is disgusting," and "No forced vote!" More Japanese would have been able to witness the spectacle had the state-controlled NHK television network, which had access to a live video feed from the floor of the chamber, not continued to air a pumpkin-cooking program until the end of the debate. Only when opposition members began to shout did the network begin broadcasting the historic event.

SLICING SALAMI

The bills' passage was assured because the LDP under Abe's leadership commands an overwhelming majority in the parliament. But describing it as a done deal would miss the significance of what is going on. While his popular support was eroding—it had dropped more than 15 points since early June, to well below 50 percent—the prime minister was confronted with growing opposition from prominent academics and politicians, some of them from his own party. Just two days before legislative committees took up the bills, a group of constitutional scholars and former high-ranking government officials—including many LDP members, all of whom are "conservative" by definition—held an emergency press conference declaring Abe's maneuverings a "triple insult: to the legislative process, to precedent, and to history." One of the three professors who testified on June 4 likened the entire process to something unimaginable "only in North Korea."

What's at stake is nothing less than transformational. Abe's desired legislation amounts to the final cut of what some call a "salami-slicing" approach to the clause in Article 9 renouncing the right to wage war. It is a way to gradually neutralize the pacifist provision, with a snip here and a snip there, without having to actually revise the constitution—which would require a two-thirds parliamentary majority and a national referendum.

Over the years, the "slicing" process has suited many in Japan who agree that Japanese soldiers should, for example, assist with UN peacekeeping operations in Cambodia and South Sudan,

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or participate in humanitarian relief efforts in Afghanistan, Rwanda, and other places. Since the early 1990s, parliamentary debate on whether to allow Japanese troops to participate in UN operations has been fierce at times. Never, though, has the debate been as intense as it is now, over the question of Japanese troops acting militarily in conjunction with specific allies. Most Japanese do not reject the idea of their nation's troops playing a Quaker-like humanitarian role in war; they do reject the notion of Japan waging war, especially under American leadership.

Throughout his political career, Abe, like his grandfather, has made clear his disdain for Article 9. As part of his backdoor assault on the antiwar clause, his cabinet issued a decision in July 2014 that "reinterpreted" Article 9 as allowing collective self-defense. The pending package of bills will complete the process, obviating the need for an amendment.

One of Tokyo's leading political scientists, Koichi Nakano, has been particularly scathing about this maneuvering: "Ask the Japanese people. . . . The vast majority are attached to [Article 9] and that's why Abe opted for a Trojan horse . . . he keeps on lying in parliament and the media that Article 9 remains unchanged . . . that the risks for Japanese troops are not increasing, and that Japan will be an even more peaceful country with collective self-defense." Foreign ministry officials have tried to dismiss Nakano by telling journalists and scholars that he is an "unreliable" source. That has only drawn increased attention to his criticism.

COLLECTIVE SELF-DEFENSE

Although many have long argued that the concept of collective self-defense is unconstitutional, it is at the heart of the legislation pushed by the Abe administration. As defined in the bills, collective self-defense would allow Japanese troops to come to the aid of an ally in situations that apparently could include wars in the Middle East or a contingency on the Korean Peninsula. When pressed for specifics, the prime minister and his supporters become discursive gymnasts, repeating with monotonous obduracy the need to "protect" Japan and the Japanese people, but promising that not a single Japanese soldier would be killed.

Supporters of the legislation have attempted to steer the debate toward a hypothetical attack on an American-flagged ship in Japan's territorial waters. A majority of Japanese rejects even that scenario as constituting an attack on Japan, though some are willing to consider the possibility, not least because of China's overt bellicosity in the region. (The dispute over possession of the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea has intensified since 2012, leading to repeated confrontations between Chinese and Japanese ships and aircraft.) But there is nearly universal opposition to the prospect of Japanese troops providing front-line assistance to American-backed campaigns against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq. According to an *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper poll published on May 2, 95 percent of Japanese are opposed to such action.

During Abe's tenure, more so than under any other Japanese leader in 70 years, a widening opinion gap has emerged over the legitimacy of Japan's postwar constitution. On the one

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hand, Abe and his supporters openly brand the entire constitution as a "masochistic" symbol of Japan's defeat—not only the antiwar clause but also the treatment of religion, the emperor, education, and family. Most Japanese,

on the other hand, share Keio University constitutional law scholar Keigo Komamura's view: The Americans imposed the constitution during the occupation, but just like women's right to vote, which it includes, it is elemental to Japanese society today and thus was a "legitimate imposition."

There is a further difference between what Abe hopes his bills will achieve—giving the Japanese military the ability to have what he calls "peace-protecting proactive" capability, whatever that means in practical terms—and what his key supporters in the United States seem to think they mean. Ignoring all but the bottom line, they have lent their critical weight to the legislation in hopes that the United States will gain a rich ally to fight on "our" side in wars around the world. For now, Abe's American backers dismiss anyone who raises doubts about the legislation with platitudes along the lines of "Japanese voters would decide where to send their forces." They are apparently unconcerned with—or unaware of—the debate unfolding in Japan.

RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY

In the course of the debate, a renewed determination to reclaim a meaningful democracy has arisen in Japan. It could lead to levels of civic engagement not seen in decades. In 1960, when Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Kishi, likewise railroaded security legislation through parliament to allow American troops and war materiel to remain stationed in Japan—a permanent state of occupation that continues to this day—protests erupted and forced his resignation. Similarities of style between the two men notwithstanding, the backdrop for today's protests could not differ more materially from Kishi's time, when signs of the war were still visible—such as former soldiers with missing limbs begging on street corners.

There is now a radically altered understanding of Japan's war experience. An anonymous Tokyo blogger captured the mood on the eve of the mid-July vote, contradictions and all:

When it comes to war, most of the people in Japan see themselves as victims—at least of their own awful government. Almost everyone except for a very few people of very exceptional background has stories of death and suffering from the war in their family. That is the difference between the people and the present administration. Apparently no one in [their] families died.

Sociologist Akiko Hashimoto explains this phenomenon on a broader comparative scale:

Over time, [a] kind of emotional socialization that taps into instincts for self-preservation turns into “feeling rules,” with which children learn to internalize how they are *supposed* to feel about war in a pacifist country. Clearly, this choice of strategy is not geared toward raising nascent critical thinkers who would assume responsibility for past atrocious deeds of their forefathers as in a culture of contrition like Germany, but focused instead on *not* raising the type of Japanese people who could perpetrate another abhorrent war in the future.

Beginning in the late winter months of 2014, a steadily expanding number of Japanese citizens began publicly protesting Abe's vision for Japan, while opposition parties worked to stymie his increasing reliance on brute-force tactics. One increasingly popular approach to countering the prime minister's security legislation built on a growing trend of letter-writing campaigns focused on related issues. The one that garnered most international media attention, an “Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan,” appeared in May

and was signed by nearly 500 scholars of Japanese studies around the world. It drew attention to the Abe administration's efforts to stifle academic and press freedoms, including overt and documented attempts at censorship of textbooks and broadcast content. (The present author was involved in coordinating the letter.)

The May letter—together with several others from Japanese historical associations, including one published on May 25 with thousands of signatures—encouraged further activism. Many Japanese academics, artists, and ordinary citizens have written or signed statements expressing concern about the nation's present and future trajectory.

Polls have repeatedly shown that an overwhelming majority of Japanese wants to “protect” the constitution—using the same word, *mamore*, that Abe and his supporters use to justify their desire for Japanese troops to fight. The director of the Kyoto Museum for World Peace and the honorary director of Ritsumeikan University's Peace Museum expressed growing social unease with the prime minister's notions in a joint statement:

When we view the current situation in Japan . . . we recognize that we are now once more standing at a serious crossroads in the furtherance of peace and democracy. . . . In particular, we are seriously concerned about impetuous political trends toward a modification of the constitution, the basic framework for peace in postwar Japan.

The Association of Scholars Opposed to the Security-Related Bills launched what would become the largest signature campaign of all. In June, the group's 61 organizers published a joint letter on the Internet; by the time Abe demanded a vote a month later, it had gathered over 10,000 signatures in the “scholars” column and nearly 20,000 more in the “general public” category, displaying names, affiliations, and addresses. It stated:

We bear a special historical burden in that universities collaborated with Japan's war of aggression and sent numerous students off to battle. . . . We cannot allow a situation to arise anew in which our young people are sent off to war to kill and be killed. In the name of scholarship and conscience, we most strongly protest this unconstitutional legislation's having been submitted to the Diet and are appalled it is even being deliberated by the Diet.

Beyond facilitating signature-gathering efforts, the Internet has also helped Abe's opponents fend

off the vitriol routinely hurled by his supporters at those who would raise even basic questions about the meaning of “self-defense” as defined in Article 9. It has also served as a refuge for bloggers who are apprehensive in the wake of recently enacted secrecy laws that grant far greater surveillance capability to police. Many spoke out online as Abe’s tactics became increasingly draconian, including one anonymous blogger whose parody of an LDP propaganda video went viral on YouTube days before the lower house approved the bills.

Articulate supporters of Abe’s policy are finding themselves in a difficult position. One of the most prominent is Narushige Michishita, a professor of security studies at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, who has long argued in favor of constitutional reinterpretation. He called it a “responsible decision on the part of Japanese leaders to go ahead and start sharing more burdens.”

Throughout the debate, opposition parties have fractured, highlighting the disproportionate American influence on Japan’s security discussions, and leading many to question the nature of Japanese independence. Civil society groups have filled the vacuum. Voters ushered Abe into office based on his promises to revive the economy, not on his historical revisionism or his determination to project military force. Now that he has revealed security to be his top priority, more citizens are willing to take an active role in publicly opposing him.

“I’M NOT ABE”

Over a year ago, after Abe made clear that he would push ahead with “collective self-defense,” a handful of protesters infrequently appeared in front of parliament. Some evenings, a lone voice resounded in the usually quiet streets with shouts of “No War!” through a megaphone. Subway station walls sported a few posters of Abe with a Hitler mustache, an image that seems to have appeared first in November 2013, when the prime minister forced through his secrecy laws.

This year, growing numbers of people from all walks of life began gathering regularly in front of parliament and in other well-known spots to protest the security legislation. In downtown Osaka, Nagoya, Kyoto, Sendai, Sapporo, and other cities, the demonstrations have spread while the message has stayed focused. “Peace Not War!” and “Our

Future, Our Choice!” are two commonly used slogans. As the protests have spread, the average age of the demonstrators has noticeably dropped. Greying stalwarts of past protest movements have been joined by students and families with young children. By midsummer, the demonstrations were drawing tens of thousands.

The protesters are expressing the view of the majority, presenting a vision of a future for Japan that is radically different from what Abe insists is the only way forward. Beginning last winter, after the January 2015 massacre at the office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Japanese protesters began waving signs declaring “I’m Not Abe,” putting their own spin on the “*Je Suis Charlie*” signs that proliferated in France. They were printed in English, to assure that their message was as widely disseminated as possible. The simple placard appears regularly now in different sizes and colors in a host of venues, including a live television news show in late March, when a regular commentator held it up to announce that he had been fired because his views contradicted the Abe administration’s.

Perhaps nothing did more to turn “I’m Not Abe” into the protest movement’s most prevalent slogan than the horrific murder of Japanese freelance journalist Kenji Goto, who was beheaded on camera by a member of ISIS in Syria on January 31, 2015. Abe immediately tried to capitalize on the tragedy by claiming that it proved the need for Japan to adopt a forward-leaning military posture in the world. If his security bills were enacted, he asserted, Japanese troops could rush in and rescue its citizens from danger.

While Japanese society as a whole was stunned by Goto’s death, few believed that Japanese troops could have done anything to rescue him, particularly since the best-trained US special forces cannot always save Americans in similar situations. Moreover, a militarized response to ISIS would clearly bring about a greater threat to Japan and to Japanese people abroad. Many Japanese were dismayed that their country’s leader would spin this tragedy into a justification for waging war. Indeed, Kenji Goto’s work as a reporter who specialized in covering humanitarian crises in war zones underscored the unique benefit that Article 9 confers on the Japanese people, most of whom want to ease the suffering caused by war, yet are opposed to waging wars in the name of their nation. ■