

## Japan and the Lessons of History

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On August 15, 1945, with the homeland ravaged after eight years of war, the Shōwa Emperor, Hirohito, used a pre-recorded radio address to announce Japan's decision to surrender. Hirohito beseeched his subjects to "bear the unbearable" and to pave the way toward a peaceful future. Tired of war and eager to move forward, most Japanese indeed embraced a new pacifist orientation. Over the past seventy years, they have chartered a peaceful course in international affairs.

Yet concerns in East Asia about a resurgent militarist Japan still abound. These concerns have soared in step with Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's recent moves in security affairs. Abe and his conservative nationalist allies have single-mindedly pushed for legislation that would reinterpret Article 9 of the constitution to allow Japan to engage in collective self-defense. Such legislation seeks to "normalize" Japanese security policy. It would limit the restrictions on the deployment of the Self-Defense Forces abroad and the use of force in defense of another country. Abe believes a more proactive role in security affairs is a necessary component of what he calls "active pacifism."

Does the uproar about the legislation imply that Japan has forgotten the lessons of its wartime past? And does the world have to be concerned with a hawkish—or militarist—Japanese security policy? To answer these questions, it is useful to turn to Japanese history. What lessons did Japan take away from World War II? And how do such lessons relate to the recent defense legislation proposed by Abe & Co.?

The biggest lesson learnt by the Japanese populace is the importance of pacifism. This is a stark contrast to prewar Japan, when war often unleashed a surge of popular enthusiasm. The invasion of Manchuria in 1931—which Japanese elites euphemistically termed the Manchurian "Incident"—became a media spectacle. Newspapers, radio programs, and magazines sensationalized Japan's involvement in China. In the process they created a war fever that helped mobilize popular support for Japanese military aggression. This war fever intensified through the outbreak of war with China in 1937 and the Allied Powers in 1941. Japan's war craze reached its purest form in the infamous media spectacle of the "Hundred Man Killing Contest." Although produced by overzealous journalists, the killing contest of sub-lieutenants Mukai and Noda was consumed and romanticized by an enthusiastic Japanese audience.

Yet this enthusiasm became unsustainable as the war came to the home isles. The war destroyed most major Japanese cities, cost nearly three million Japanese lives, and impoverished its people. By August of 1945 many were in a state of mental and physical exhaustion. Now that people had to worry about their very livelihood, such spectacles as the Hundred Man Killing Contest no doubt appeared frivolous, shallow, and immature. Most Japanese thus welcomed a new pacifist and democratic future. They embraced the American-made constitution, complete with the war-renouncing Article 9, as representing a new way forward. By renouncing war as a sovereign right of the nation, many felt that Japan could turn its dark past into a beacon of hope for the future. World War II, in this sense, opened up people's eyes to the importance of pacifism in international affairs.

By the mid-1950s, popular pacifism had coalesced around a narrative of the Japanese as unique victims of World War II. Peace activists argued that Japan was victimized by its own militarist

state, which drove the country to ruin. And after the Lucky Dragon Incident in 1954, in which a Japanese fishing boat was exposed to the fallout of a U.S. nuclear test, Hiroshima and Nagasaki took center stage in Japanese victimhood. Commemorating Hiroshima led people to re-imagine Japan as a *unique victim* of World War II, and helped make Japan a leader of the global ban-the-bomb movement. Even today, it is commonplace for leaders to state, as Prime Minister Abe did on the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, that the Japanese “are the only people to have experienced the horror of nuclear devastation in war.”<sup>1</sup>

As historian James Orr trenchantly argues, the mythologizing of war victimhood led the peace movement “to privilege the facts of Japanese victimhood over considerations of what occasioned that victimhood.” Remembering Japan as victim has also helped people forget Japan’s past as victimizer. Still, I would argue that this victim consciousness contributes to the passion and longevity of Japan’s peace movement, and has generated a high level of civic activism. After all, why would people ever choose to wage war when it may end in destruction, the deaths of loved ones, and a rain of ruin from the sky?

It would be incorrect to see this as a turn-the-other-cheek pacifism. Japanese have not renounced the use of force as a whole. Most Japanese trust the U.S.-Japan alliance as a means to guarantee Japanese security. A Cabinet Office public opinion poll conducted in 2014 found that 84.6 percent of respondents even support the United States taking up arms to defend Japan.<sup>2</sup> Instead of renouncing force wholeheartedly, the public is resisting what political scientist Gerald Curtis refers to as “the unbridled use of force by Japan itself.”<sup>3</sup> Still, the public carries a strong sentiment against embroiling its citizens in conflicts on foreign soil. Japan’s anti-interventionist pacifism has been a major legacy of World War II.

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Japan’s conservative leadership has taken different lessons from the war. On the whole, they have been less repentant about Japan’s dark past. Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, the architect of Japan’s pacifist global strategy from 1948 to 1954, saw the war as a “historic stumble.” A committed realist and political nationalist, Yoshida did not oppose imperialism or military intervention per se. He simply believed that the military had led Japan down a blind ally into an unwinnable war. By allying with Germany, Japan had contravened the trend of the times. A major lesson Yoshida (and likeminded conservatives) took from the war was that the pursuit of national power was best served in concert with the global hegemon, the United States.

Yoshida, in fact, wanted to make use of the United States to rehabilitate Japan. Japan lay in ruins after World War II. In addition to the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all of Japan’s major cities (aside from Kyoto) had been targets of Allied firebombing. Japan had lost a quarter of its national wealth in the process. Yoshida created a grand design for the future, one aimed at transforming Japan from a defeated wasteland into an economic powerhouse. Historians and political scientists call this strategy the Yoshida Doctrine.

The Yoshida Doctrine was an economics-first program, one that prioritized economic rehabilitation through a reliance on the protective shield of U.S. power. Under Yoshida, Japan engaged in a limited rearmament while shunning involvement in international security affairs. Yoshida interpreted Article 9 in a way that banned the use of force in defense of another country. Instead, Tokyo would only use force to protect the home isles. Washington reluctantly agreed, viewing the alliance with Japan and access to bases as more important than Japan’s security orientation. Japan thus committed itself to becoming a junior partner (or defensive satellite) of

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<sup>1</sup> Translation note: 唯一の戦争被爆国

<sup>2</sup> <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-bouei/2-6.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/cjeb/sites/cjeb/files/Japan's%20Cautious%20Hawks.Curtis\\_pp77\\_86.pdf](http://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/cjeb/sites/cjeb/files/Japan's%20Cautious%20Hawks.Curtis_pp77_86.pdf)

the United States. In the process, it sidestepped the costs of a full rearmament, and took economic advantage of the bipolar Cold War world.

The Yoshida strategy was wildly successful because combined the public's pacifist leanings with Japan's conservative leaders' desire to ally with the United States. Yoshida's successors (in particular Ikeda Hayato and Satō Eisaku) institutionalized the strategy to impose additional restraints on Japan's security involvement. Economic good times ensued, further committing Japan both to its pacifist stance and to its American embrace. The ability to focus single-mindedly on economic growth fed into "catch up" growth. And Japan did not simply catch up; it had become a major economic power by the 1980s.

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The two major lessons taken from Japan's war—the importance of pacifism and the U.S. alliance—thus converged neatly within the Yoshida strategy. But the changing security environment in the post-Cold War era has thrown this strategy into disarray. The growth of Chinese power and a bellicose nuclear-armed North Korea have created concerns about the U.S. defense guarantee. Japanese centrists and rightists now wonder whether Washington would choose to aid Japan in a possible clash with China when Japan is constitutionally prohibited from aiding the United States. As some key advisors fear, Japan's anti-interventionist pacifism may no longer be compatible with the U.S. alliance.

Japanese leaders have thus slowly abandoned their nation's self-imposed restraints on a broader security role. Since the 1990s Japan has participated in missile defense, sent the Self Defense Forces on peacekeeping missions abroad, revised the principles restraining arms exports, and signed agreements to develop weapons jointly with friendly nations. Such moves would have been unimaginable during the Cold War. Japan has been casting off the Yoshida Doctrine like an unwanted cloak.

Abe's defense legislation is best understood within this broader historical context. It is an attempt to get rid of the strongest remnant of the Yoshida Doctrine: the interpretation of Article 9 banning participation in collective self-defense (Yoshida's own interpretation!). It is also a fiercely personal mission. Abe and likeminded conservatives are willing to spend all their political capital to transform Japan into a "normal" country with only limited restrictions on military activities. Such moves are severely unpopular in Japan. But Abe may be successful owing to weak opposition to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

This does not mean that Abe is uncorking the bottle of Japanese militarism. The reinterpretation of Article 9 will not undermine the strong popular pacifism that emerged since World War II. The 100,000 protestors who took to the streets on July 15 (according to the organizers) to protest Abe's defense legislation attests to that. As does the fact that Abe felt it necessary to explain his new security policy under the moniker of "active pacifism." Nor will the reinterpretation likely bring about an interventionist Japan. As Christopher Hobson correctly notes, "Japan will still have a uniquely dovish foreign policy compared to other countries of similar size and strength."

But the real danger is that the legislation contributes to greater regional volatility. Tensions remain high with China in the East China Sea, and show no signs of abating. Abe's constitutional moves threaten to add fuel to in a fire-prone region. In prioritizing the U.S. alliance over Japan's anti-interventionist pacifism, Abe may have put Japan at greater risk of being sucked into a full-blown war. In this context, perhaps the real lesson Japan should take from the war is that it is best not to make any heavy decisions without a clear understanding of the trend of the times...