

William Woodward

Dilemmas of Global Basing

Stability Then and Now: Article 9 and the American Military in Japan

The security challenge facing Japan is, like that of every country, to defend its sovereignty as a nation-state. But Japan faces a unique tension in its pursuit and defense of sovereignty. Threats to territorial integrity and geopolitical interests suggest strengthening military forces and reducing dependence on the American military based in Japan. But at the same time, defending Japanese national culture and identity pushes toward retaining the pacifist Article 9 of the constitution that drastically limits what the Japanese military can be organized, equipped and deployed to do. The challenge facing Japan, with its unique combination of a constitution that proscribes war and playing host to approximately 50,000 American forces, is to defend its sovereignty in both internal and external ways. Internally, the country has a responsibility to the deeply imbedded pacifist culture built up in the seven decades since the second world war. Externally, it must defend itself against the potential regional aggression of China, and, perhaps, play a role in multinational defense efforts. These two fights for sovereignty are inherently in conflict with each other, but will have long-term impacts on hosting the U.S. military.

How long is long enough to consider aggressive imperialism a thing of the past? Since the United States oversaw implementation of a new constitution for Japan in 1947, Article 9, in which “the Japanese people forever renounce war” and foreswear “land, sea and air forces” has been an internationally famous part of fundamental Japanese law. For decades, Japan has maintained a “Self-Defense Force” as a limited, arguably Article 9-compliant, defense capability, but a major

piece of Japanese security has been the continuous presence of the U.S. military in dozens of bases scattered across Japan. While there seems no serious discussion that the U.S. military will withdraw from Japan, recent years have seen a major push for expanded Self-Defense Force capability and operations, and possible amendment of Article 9. From some perspectives, including South Korea and China, who suffered brutal oppression under Imperial Japanese occupation, any change to Article 9 represents a fundamental change to post-war status quo. But from another angle, change is the logical next step in Japan's defense posture, continuing a process that has undergone regular updating since 1947.

Alexander Cooley pairs Japan with Italy in his analysis of the effects of domestic political change on countries' support for hosting U.S. forces. Both countries fought the United States in World War II, experienced occupation by U.S. forces in the immediate aftermath, and then became strong allies and hosts of significant numbers of U.S. forces to the present day. In both countries, liberal democracy has flourished, but with a dominant political party controlling the government for the vast majority of the past seven decades, a factor Cooley argues is the key linkage between them. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution is a key difference. Italy, who became a co-belligerent with the United States against Germany in 1943, was a founding member of NATO and its hosting of U.S. forces has always fallen under that multilateral construct. The United States never perceived Italy as a significant, enduring threat to regional stability; the only real concern after the war was that Italy would tilt toward communism. Japan, on the other hand, seemed a risk to return to its belligerent past without major constraint and the bilateral security treaty with the United States and basing of U.S. forces throughout Japan, has been one means of doing that.

The initial U.S. basing agreement with Japan, finalized in 1951—before even a formal peace treaty ending the war—had significant invasions of Japanese sovereignty: an unrestricted

right of the United States to base forces “in and about Japan” without necessarily committing those forces to *defend* Japan, U.S. involvement in combating “internal riots and disturbances in Japan,” and authority for the United States to arrest Japanese citizens.¹ The legitimacy of this agreement was understandably questioned by the Japanese people, and revised on more favorable terms in 1960. The revised treaty, negotiated when “anti [U.S.] base sentiment and nationalism were at their peak,” sparked “a full-blown constitutional and democratic crisis” including violent protests after its approval.² The long-term trend since the 1960 treaty, however, has been stability in the basing relationship and incremental change, including, since 1977, payments by the Japanese government to cover operating costs for U.S. bases. When decades of rule by the Liberal Democratic Party ended in the 1990s, there was hardly any effect on U.S. base hosting.

For decades, U.S. military basing in Japan has been remarkably stable, despite localized, subnational opposition on Okinawa, and significant geopolitical shifts, including the end of the Cold War, and the rise of Japan as a global economic powerhouse. A major reason for the stable basing relationship is “compensation politics” that involves substantial investment, in both direct payments and other benefits, by the central Japanese government to the individuals and groups that are negatively affected by the U.S. military presence.³ This bias for stability has resulted in minimal changes in U.S. basing in Japan, even where the two countries agree change should happen, most notably with the closure of the Marine Corps’ Futenma Air Station on Okinawa.

While the security treaty and details of U.S. basing in Japan have changed in small ways, Japan has never amended its constitution. Article 9, just 75 words in its English translation, commits Japan to “forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.” Although the Article insists that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained,” the Japanese Self Defense

Force have existed since 1954, less than a decade after the constitution went into effect. While the Self Defense Force seems counter to the plain language of Article 9 and has been challenged in court over the years, it has remained as an established institution.⁴ Any change to the constitution, even one that merely aligned the fundamental law with the existing state of the Self Defense Force, would be symbolically important.

Japan's constitution did not come from a democratic process. It was drafted by American military attorneys and effectively imposed on the Japanese years before the official end of military occupation or the signing of a bi-lateral security treaty. Amending the constitution would have the benefit of addressing those undemocratic origins, giving 21st century Japan symbolic sovereignty over its basic law and true self-determination. But opponents of Article 9 amendment counter that the origins of the constitution are not as relevant as the fact that the document has undoubtedly "enhanced democracy" in Japan, empowering the Japanese people and allowing the development of institutions for broadly shared peace and prosperity.⁵ At least some of the antimilitarist sentiment and strong support for Article 9 comes from a narrative adopted by the broad Japanese public at the end of World War II that Japan's military leaders had "deceived the people and led the country into a hopeless war."⁶ This betrayal of trust by the Japanese military made it relatively easy to embrace the uniquely restrictive Article 9.

After seven decades then, the status quo seems firmly ingrained in Japanese political culture. While U.S. bases, particularly on Okinawa, are not popular, the Japanese seem comfortable separating "their still negative views of the U.S. bases and Japan's commitment to the security contract in which the bases were embedded."⁷ Article 9 remains popular, with recent polling suggesting only a third of Japanese support revision, despite the enduring tension between the Article's text and the existence of the Self Defense Force.⁸ That tension has only grown in

recent years. Since June 2011, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, have maintained a foreign basing presence in the East African nation of Djibouti, where it participates in anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden.⁹ This is a clear example of Japan acting as the major world power that it clearly is, at least from an economic perspective. But it is an overseas deployment difficult to square with Article 9.

But as World War II fades further into the past, and China grows in power, it becomes an open question whether the Self-Defense Force combined with Japanese-based U.S. forces is sufficient to defend Japanese interests. A decision to amend Article 9 must consider both a domestic audience that must decide whether it will change its constitution, and an international audience, including the United States that wants to see Japan as a stabilizing partner in the region and around the globe. Domestically, both the views of the broad Japanese public's deeply embedded antimilitarism, and the specific concerns of the immediate communities hosting U.S. bases must be considered. Those views do not necessarily align. There can be a conflict not just between the national government and the local, but also local versus local. In the case of Okinawa, the conflict between wanting U.S. bases to stay or go can sometimes happen within the same individual, where "Okinawans leasing land to the bases are encouraged by the compensation-politics equation to continue doing so, whatever their personal feelings regarding the bases or the military may be."¹⁰

Outside analysts have called for Japan to take a more active role in its own defense. In addition to the threat from North Korea, which has fired missiles over Japan multiple times and would likely target Japan in a conflict due its hosting of American forces that would be defending South Korea, Japan faces the strategically more significant threat from China in the East China Sea, where China and Japan have disputes over control of the Senkaku Islands. Since the 1970s,

despite Article 9, the Self Defense Forces have had significant capability to fight potential adversaries. An “active denial strategy” would be a next step for the Self Defense Forces that could maintain the spirit of Article 9—or at least not further violate the Article’s spirit—by increasing the resilience of military infrastructure through hardening and dispersal, and increasingly advanced missile defenses. Perhaps the most creative, Article 9-compliant act for a new strategy is to increase efforts at deception, “luring China to fire missiles at empty shelters or low-value targets”¹¹

If Japan amends its constitution to relax the restrictions on its military, will it also change its basing relationship with the United States? On the one hand, a more capable Japanese military would seem to reduce the need for the presence of U.S. forces to provide regional stability and support Japanese defense. On the other hand, the combination of one dominant party and compensation from the national government to aggrieved subnational groups and individuals suggests that the status quo has real staying power in the U.S.-Japanese relationship. Any change is likely to be incremental. The bias toward stability has broadly benefited Japan and the United States, and continued stability, while continuing to make changes at the margins, will serve both countries best. Seven decades of U.S. forces based in Japan have made the arrangement so accepted it seems likely there will be many decades more.

¹ Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 178.

² Cooley, *Base Politics*, 187.

³ Kent E. Calder, *Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 130.

⁴ Tomoyuki Sasaki. “The Constitution Must Be Defended: Thoughts on the Constitution’s Role in Japan’s Postwar Democracy,” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 16, Issue 20, Number 3 (15 October 2018).

⁵ Sasaki, “The Constitution Must Be Defended,” *Asia-Pacific Journal*.

⁶ John W. Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World*. (New York: The New Press, 2012), 142.

⁷ Cooley, *Base Politics*, 191.

⁸ Reiji Yoshida, “Abe says win gives him mandate to accelerate economic policies but remains mum on Constitution,” *Japan Times* (11 July 2016).

⁹ Jiji, “Japan to expand SDF base in tiny but strategically important Djibouti,” *Japan Times* (19 Nov 2017).

¹⁰ Calder, *Embattled Garrisons*, 173.

¹¹ Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels, “A New Military Strategy for Japan: Active Denial Will Increase Security in Northeast Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* (16 July 2018).

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