

# A plea and a promise for 2023: No more 'pacifism'

Describing Japan's military policy correctly is important given the deteriorating security environment



The characterization of Japan as a 'pacifist' country is widespread – and misleading | BLOOMBERG

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Publication last month of three new national security documents heralds a new era for Japan — and not just because their content marks a shift in defense policy.

Rather, at the risk of sounding pedantic, this is an opportunity to end the misleading and incorrect characterization of Japanese policy as "pacifism."

According to the Financial Times, Japan is scrapping its pacifist postwar defense strategy, a wording echoed by the Indian Express. The Hill, a U.S. publication that focuses on goings-on in Congress, warned that Japan was preparing to break away from decades of pacifism. Regional papers in the U.S. such as South Carolina's Post and Courier (which offer a window on popular thinking) declared Japan was pivoting away from pacifism. Many other papers around the world — many reprinting the same stories — declared that "pacifist Japan" was embarking on its greatest defense buildup.

The characterization of Japan as a "pacifist" country is widespread — and misleading. Yes, Article 9 of Japan's Constitution renounces war as a right of the state, forbids the country from using force to settle international disputes and from possessing the tools to wage war. A commitment to peace has become a cornerstone of modern Japanese identity and has shaped diplomacy and defense policy, with successive governments declaring support for "proactive pacifism."

Andrew Oros, professor of political science at Washington College and author of "Japan's Security Renaissance," points out that "in cross-national surveys, the vast majority of Japanese report that they are not willing to fight for their country even if Japan were attacked — just 19% in the 2022 survey; Japan consistently ranks the lowest on this measure of the dozens of countries polled." That sounds a lot like pacifism.

Other facts belie that simple characterization. Japan has had a military capacity at least since 1954, when the National Security Force was reorganized as the Air, Ground and Maritime Self-Defense Forces. Fearing entrapment and divisive national debates, Japanese leaders used Article 9 as a shield against U.S. demands to increase defense spending and participation in its overseas actions, but they planned all along to rearm — eventually and on their terms.

While Japanese have been reluctant to join U.S. military efforts, that doesn't mean that they doubt the value of the alliance or of the military instruments that are regularly promised for their defense, hence the persistent calls for U.S. affirmation that Article 5 of the Mutual Defense Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands. Oros notes that "these are not views of pacifists, but rather of a public that still views active military solutions to security challenges suspiciously."

Nevertheless, Japan has slowly grown its military capability and its ability to use it. In 1992, Japan passed laws that enabled SDF participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. The 1997 revisions to the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation extended the jurisdiction of the SDF to address "situations in areas surrounding Japan." The SDF joined international efforts after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, supporting Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. That participation was tightly circumscribed by national law and political consensus, but those actions were not those of a "pacifist" nation.

While former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was frustrated in his efforts to rewrite the Constitution and amend Article 9, he did restructure the Japanese national security system — a tale told by Oros and Sheila Smith of the Council of Foreign Relations in her magisterial work, "Japan Rearmed" — in ways that undercut any description of Japan as a pacifist state except relative to others.

Oros explained in an email that Abe, a shrewd politician, "framed this greater military role for Japan within the long-standing language of 'pacifism,' calling for a more 'proactive pacifism' in the 21st century — which really looks nothing like the actual philosophy of pacifism, so much so that in English-language translations of his speeches, translators used the term 'proactive contributions to peace' rather than the literal translation 'proactive pacifism.'"

By 2018, scholars were declaring "Japan's pacifism is dead." Corey Wallace, an assistant professor at Kanagawa University, suggested that headline be put in perspective: The media have accused Japan of moving away from "Pacifism" (with a capital P) so many times that the statement is meaningless. He noted that even at the height of Japanese "antimilitarism" during the late 1960s as the Vietnam war raged, commentators lamented the erosion of pacifism and predicted that "normalization" was imminent.

In "Japan as a Global Military Power," his recent analysis of the country's defense policy evolution, Warwick University professor Christopher Hughes highlighted possession of the world's third- or fourth-largest military budget, the pursuit of counterstrike capabilities, the largest F-35 advanced-jet fighter inventory outside the U.S., military satellite constellations, mini-aircraft carriers, amphibious forces, the right to partake in collective self-defense operations and a proactive cyberdefense — just to name a few — to dismiss the claim that Japan is a pacifist country.

At the same time, however, Japan isn't embarking on a revanchist project. That's a lazy, sensationalist accusation, said Hughes. Japan's evolution "in no way implies a rewind to the wartime period of Japanese military adventurism and imperialism, as is the knee-jerk reaction of some to the term who would like to overly-relativize and thus obfuscate the extent of contemporary change in Japan's security policy." Oros agreed, adding that "Most Japanese remain skeptical of more security through more weapons but are grudgingly accepting the government's plan for doubling defense spending because they see an increasingly insecure region. ... There remains stronger support for diplomatic solutions, economic interdependence, disarmament and nonproliferation, and the like."

Scholars that reject the use of "pacifism" prefer "antimilitarism." Japan doesn't have a "pacifist" security identity because it explicitly incorporates some role for a postwar military, said Oros. That role is limited, said Hughes, by a suspicion in general of the necessity and efficacy of military power to achieve national security ends, a preference instead for economic and diplomatic means and a desire to minimize as far as possible Japan's own military establishment.

That sentiment reflects a deep-rooted belief among the public and parts of the ruling elite that the military was not to be trusted, a product of the experience of the imperial era and the dark days of the Pacific War. Traditionally, the SDF was held in low esteem by most citizens, with high unfavorable ratings; parents expressed concern that a child might enter the service or marry a soldier. The March 2011 "triple catastrophe" changed that assessment. The SDF's heroism during that disaster transformed public thinking about the military.

Disdain for the military and the use of power was something of a luxury, enabled by the alliance with the U.S. That is an important insight into Japanese thinking. However deep rooted the preference for nonmilitary tools, Wallace questions whether public preferences for military restraint have ever been as absolute as outsiders have described them and as the left in Japan hoped they were. That is why Japan has been characterized at various times as a country of "reluctant realists," "resentful realists" or "pragmatic realists."

While this may seem like an exercise in academic abstraction, there is an important reason to describe Japanese policy correctly: It would reduce the hyperbole and hyperventilation that surrounds any effort by Japan to address a deteriorating security environment. It will allow us to better understand the thinking of the new national security documents — and their eventual successors — as Tokyo responds to an increasingly uncertain and threatening world.

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