Japan’s peace movement and the new Japanese identity
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Japan’s place in the emerging East Asia region hangs in the balance. The pressures of the geopolitical environment and the political desires of the people of Japan, together form a mêlée of political change and a fierce ongoing peace debate around the policies that will direct Japan through the twenty-first century. However, Japan’s very active peace movement makes more of this issue than simple government doctrine. It would appear that the very identity of the nation, as an intrinsic part of the Japanese expression of security, is free for the taking. As Tsuchiyama explains: ‘Partly as a result of Japan’s geopolitical, cultural and historical situation, the Japanese have almost not succeeded in conceptualising Japan’s identity in terms of security compared with the foreign policies of other advanced countries’ (Tsuchiyama 2007, 48).

The Japanese identity, it would appear, is currently unformed, particularly in terms of security expression. Japan can be said to lack direction in the geopolitical realm and this frustrates the Japanese who wish to identify themselves with some kind of international leadership role. For a wealthy, non-military nation such as Japan, militarisation is potentially a direct and fast method of achieving this, a constant trend against which the peace movement must act by providing a better alternative. The peace movement must provide the means of achieving a global leadership role based on their principals if they are to gain acceptance and create Japanese identity in their image.

It is beyond question that one of the principal aims of any peace movement is to encourage its country, or whatever sphere of influence it covers, to contribute to a situation of peace in the world. However, there is more at work here than would appear obvious. Following the argument of Gleditsch that, ‘[it is] hard to believe in any direct relationship between the emergence of a movement and the issue on which it focuses. It is not the issue which creates the movement, but the movement which creates the issue’ (1990, 77), it can be seen that the peace movement in Japan was forged from politically active groups of Japanese society, in the culturally confusing post war period, having fixed upon the peace agenda as a means to their chosen end: to re-forg
the fragmented Japanese identity, creating something that fits into both an historical context and a modern environment and embraces pacifist principles.

Since the end of the Second World War, Japan has been subject to a unique and often conflicting set of pressures from both within and without, creating a strain upon the nation as it has struggled to understand its role. Japan was a capitalist powerhouse on the hottest ‘lines’ of the Cold War. It is an economic behemoth in a still developing region. It is a nation that balances Western individualism and a Confucian history and has much at stake in the potentially volatile environment of East Asia.

The timing of the peace movement’s development is key to understanding its relationship with Japan’s identity. Its activities started in earnest, and began to appeal to a wider public, only after the traumatic events of the end of the Second World War. The transfer of power at the end of World War Two was from the aggressively militaristic and nationalistic Meiji government to the occupying American forces. It was at this point that the debate about the merits of peace, and the Japanese attitude towards it, took on the crucial identity aspect. ‘Until the day Japan surrendered unconditionally at the end of World War II, the state had possessed a clear and powerful identity’ (Tamamoto 1995, 2). Japan had been united under the imperial flag, but in 1947, as the dust and ash were barely beginning to settle, the beloved peace constitution of Japan, which to this day has restrained Japan’s right to ‘belligerency’ or even the possession of the means to make war, was first penned in Article 9, in a foreign language, by an occupying force, under the conditions of surrender (see note below)*.

The problem which then faced the would-be cultivators of a new Japanese identity was: how exactly to use the creation of peace to build a new Japan? Would the new constitution, simultaneously a foreign imposition and a path towards redemption, offer the means to reunify the Japanese people under one banner? Or might Japan’s unique status as the victims of atomic war be the answer? As the movements created in this environment still strive to achieve their goals, this essay endeavours to understand the task before them, asking to what does the peace movement of Japan need to appeal in order to earn the popular support of the Japanese people, therefore becoming successful advocates of an internationally active, peaceful Japan, and how
might the two loci of this movement, the supporters of the peace constitution, and the anti-nuclear movement, be successful in doing so?

A great insight into the dynamics of this debate can be provided using Halbwachs’s notion of collective memory: the socially constructed notions of events, coherent across a body of people, but held by individuals within that body (Halbwachs 1925). Whether fighting the corner of pacification or militarisation, those vying for the future of the Japanese identity call on the collective memory of the Japanese people to support their claims. ‘Japanese collective memory retains images of the violence of the pre-war era when political leaders buckled to the demands of the military and Japan’s consensus culture was exploited by the military to demand unstinting support for the war’ (Buszynski 2004, 55). Buszynski notes the strength and depth of collective memory in Asian cultures, and the potency of Japanese memory of World War Two. It was the military, under the Meiji constitution, which was given unbridled power to wage their campaigns over East Asia, and the imprint on the Japanese collective memory was profound, leaving a persistent residue of distrust. This is directed towards the military, but also towards the government, who were too weak to oppose them. The memories of the war, as recounted in museums in, for example, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, tell of an age of hardship and exploitation of the Japanese civilians, who sacrificed their possessions, from crops to metal, and saw family members taken away to distant battlefields. These sacrifices were then rewarded with humiliating defeat, massive bloodshed, cities razed by fire bombing and nuclear war, and the loss of the symbols of their identity.

Actions, agendas and movements, which appeal to collective memory, act as an affirmation of national identity and have, therefore, an instant appeal. They are an effective tool for gaining popular support, essential for the success of a civil movement with political ambition, such as the peace movement of Japan, and can create a core around which the movement, in all its incongruent forms, can adhere. Collective memory is essential to the success of the Japanese peace movement in forming a national identity and in creating peace. It is vulnerable, however, to disparate interpretation and it is also grounded in the past. It can therefore only act as a guideline to navigate through the emergent challenges of the present day, which in themselves must be considered equally important for the shapers of Japan’s embryonic self image.
In recent history Japan pursued regional domination by force in an attempt to imitate the great colonial powers. Following cataclysmic failure at the end of that road, Japan became an economic megalith, experiencing astonishing growth and becoming a much respected economic power. This experience was also followed by disillusion. Japan’s economic crash in the 1990s was almost as spectacular as its defeat in war, and has left Japan in a period of recession lasting almost two decades. Japanese pride was hurt badly by these experiences, and the pursuit of global esteem has not been abandoned. But where can Japan go from here? Hayes argues that:

If Japan wishes to recapture its pre-eminent role in Asia, it will find its choices few. The military option is of course, out. Nor will Japan dominate Asia by its culture, language or religion. Japan is not a commercial trendsetter. Financial services, fast food outlets, and the whole spectrum of consumer services are not areas where Japan has excelled … Japanese banks and financial institutions, once powerful, have lost their lustre in the wake of bursting bubbles and bad debts … As matters now stand, it appears Japan will have an uphill struggle to reassert itself in the twenty-first century in the new world order phase of its foreign policy (Hayes 2001, xvi).

Hayes may be correct about Japan’s limitations in the fields of cultural, commercial and financial domination, but the security situation of the entire world changed dramatically in 2001 and ‘the military option’ is no longer ‘out’. American pressure on Japan, to revise its constitution so as to make a military contribution to the international order, has existed for some time and has intensified under the shadow of the ‘War on Terror’, and the Japanese government has shown a growing willingness to explore this option.

If Japan is reverting to military expansionism, it is as much a case of remedying frustrated pride as it is practical ambition or response to diplomatic pressure. The argument goes that Japan has a massive amount of financial resources, but a limited amount of international political influence, and that this situation is not ‘normal’. Japan, as the Japanese see it, should be a great power because it has such great wealth; if its global political capital matched its financial clout, it would become a ‘normal country’. The pro-militarisation argument follows that Japan should invest its money in its military and allow the military to become involved in international conflicts
Susumu 2001). Following this path, Japan could potentially find success in influencing the global situation through military action, and realise its long held ambition of being seen internationally, and domestically, as a true global player in its own right, ‘seen from [Prime Minister Abe’s] nationalist perspective, for Japan to become a beautiful country it has to assume the military responsibilities of a normal state that is prepared to exercise them both regionally and globally’ (DiFilipo 2007).

As an alternative, experiments have been made in pouring Japan’s wealth into Overseas Developmental Assistance (ODA) programmes, to the point where in the 1990s Japan’s international aid contributions even exceeded those of the United States. But the returns were far from satisfactory; as it had no answer to the executive power of the Bretton Woods institutions, Japan’s contributions were almost invisible, no matter how massive. Simply pouring out wealth to under-developed countries does not attract the attention of international policy makers, nor does it satisfy the Japanese public’s desire for a foreign policy based on identity; however effective or useful ODA may be for recipient countries, it in no way appeals to Japanese shared identity or collective memory and therefore cannot form the basis of Japanese foreign policy. Without fully embracing either active pacifism or remilitarisation, Japan lacks international direction, receives very little acclaim, and the public are left unsatisfied.

If the peace movement wishes for pacifist ideals to achieve wholesale acceptance in Japan and form a defining feature of Japanese foreign policy, it does so against a tide of support for militarisation to form the basis of ‘normalisation’. It needs to appeal to Japanese collective memory, but at the same time it is imperative that it develops an agenda that will advance Japan’s status as a nation of global importance; these are the keys to success. The modern peace movement comprises of two driving forces: the movement in defence of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, the famed ‘peace constitution’, and the movement against the spread of nuclear weapons. The two are affiliated, but their distinctions reveal drastic differences in direction that have resounding consequences for their development and efficacy.

Recollections of World War Two are, for most Japanese, related to mistrust of the military itself and a lack of faith in the ability of the government to constrain the military. As Article 9 serves
the function of constraint that the government was apparently impotent to fulfil, its existence appeases the profound concerns of the people. Inversely, many associate any degradation of the letter or spirit of Article 9 with a return to old school Japanese militarisation, fixating on the collective memory of the Meiji military: out of control, and with a free reign over East Asia. This is evidenced by the ‘Scientist’s Association of Article 9’, which states: ‘[t]here is no mistake that [our government] wishes to sanction actions prohibited by Article 9; namely the use of military force without restriction’ (Masakawa 2009). With such a close association between Article 9 and the collective memories which serve to guide the formation of identity, Article 9 in itself is claimed by the peace movement as an ingrained symbol of the identity of Japan, upheld as a statement of the Japanese people’s exceptionally adverse attitude towards war, based on the cultural memory of the trauma, shame and humiliation of World War Two. Responding to recent attempts to revoke Article 9, the Social Democratic Party of Japan, which affiliates closely with the peace movement, claimed that, ‘[t]he unifying nature of our constitution is lost to us as its pacifism is destroyed’ (2006), indeed emphasising the association between Article 9 and a united Japanese identity.

This statement clearly resonated well; the concurrent response among the Japanese public was the formation of nearly 6000 local pro-Article 9 groups. This represents a sweeping response in the public domain to a threat to what the peace movement has long advocated as an intrinsic component of national identity, which can be considered a significant success for the movement and a signifier of the strength with which Article 9 is bound to the idea of who the Japanese are.

For sixty years the constitution has withstood revision in the face of Cold War fear, American pressure, rapidly developing neighbours and the list goes on. Japan does indeed maintain armed forces, for the ostensible purposes of self defence, but they are restricted in their use and development by Article 9. For example, Japan has no nuclear weapons or aircraft carriers, and Japanese troops, or ‘defence personnel’ as they are called, have not entered into direct combat with a foreign force since Article 9 came into effect (1947). As well as endowing the peace movement with a sense of justification and empowerment, this fact appeals to the collective memory of a military in need of restraint. The restraining power of the peace movement upon the government was indeed demonstrated when the Liberal Democrats (LDP) unveiled their plans to
revise Article 9 in 2005. The response in the peace community, at first most notable in the swelling of its ranks, became manifest in a very unusual defeat for the LDP in the following upper-house elections (2007). The Japanese people, notable for their inactivity at the polling stations, were stirred into action and the Abe administration dropped the reform proposal in response, encouraging the peace movement further (Di Filipo 2007). The people of Japan responded to their calls to recognise Article 9 as an irrevocable symbol of who they are, to the extent that they imposed their will to retain the article unmodified upon their government in a manner almost entirely without precedent.

From all this it may seem reasonable to assume that Article 9 is the ideal symbol of identity for the peace movement to support. But there are two serious challenges facing pacifists here. The first is that the Article 9 movement is largely reactionary, ‘[t]o a significant extent, debates on Japan’s participation in peacekeeping operations revolve around issues related to the proximity of Japanese troops to violence’ (Frühstück and Ben-Ari 2002). Instead of pushing for recognition of wider ambitions, the movement has been caught up in flash-in-the-pan disputes over troop placements, focusing on small issues and then returning to a placid state. This passive nature has left the pro-Article 9 movement comparatively dormant for sometime, and puts the recent rush to action into a perspective by which it seems a lot less spectacular.

What is to suggest that this rapid growth in support will not disappear now that the constitutional revisions have been shelved? Without a constitutional crisis to drive the people, or an enemy posing an immediate threat, Article 9 may be left intact and the Japanese people satisfied with their victory, but the LDP still face the same external pressures to rearm as they did before. Yamauchi pleads: ‘it must not be forgotten that if the movement to protect the constitution lets up just a little, the LDP government will waste no time in reviving their movements towards revision’ (2008). If the pro-Article 9 movement can be described as reactionary and it has nothing to react to, what can be done to maintain membership and drive people to action? Or perhaps more essentially, what is stopping the movement from pursuing a more active Article 9 policy in the government?
A clue lies in the fact that the pro-9 peace movement leaders have so far been unsuccessful in visualising what the Japanese really desire, a national identity that can lead foreign policy. Idealistic claims are made, for example:

Japan must play an active role in the tide of world history by exercising its autonomy and acting in a pragmatic manner. It is precisely because of Article 9 that Japan can engage its partner nations in peaceful diplomacy while respecting their various positions, and collaborate with them in the fields of economy, culture, science and technology (Article 9 Association 10 June 2004).

However, they do not stand up to a great deal of scrutiny, not least because many nations maintain ‘peaceful diplomacy’ while having active armed forces; East Asian nations in particular have proven quite adept at this. The Japanese peace constitution alone will not aid Japan’s diplomatic position, especially not in Asia, where other issues, including Japan’s attitude towards its own history, remain as barriers to diplomatic success. No concrete suggestions are put forward as to how Japan might ‘act in a pragmatic manner’ in forging an Article 9 based foreign policy, in fact the word ‘pragmatic’ itself might seem an unfortunate choice.

The idealistic appeal of a peace constitution may well reach out to peace movements around the world, many of which are affiliated with, or even based upon, the propagation of Article 9. Most commonly referred to, however, are the ‘universal spirit’ (Kim 2007), or the ‘principals’ of Article 9 (Global Article 9 Campaign 2008); proposals for non-military interaction are far from abundant, and so the Article 9 movement has no agenda to bring to the government of any country in the hope of propagation. It has been successfully restrictive in Japan, but the Japanese government and people want a constructive plan, which might empower them to take positive action.

The awesome potential of the pro-Article 9 movement to inspire action is clear; the sheer number of affiliated groups is testament to this. This is because Article 9 has successfully become embedded in a large section of the Japanese psyche as a symbol of peaceful identity. A clear connection to collective memory is evident and the appeal of that connection is widespread.
However, the nature of the actions taken by the movement has been shown to be reactionary, even if they are effective. Without a long term goal beyond the defence of Article 9, the peace movement will struggle to find complete acceptance in the Japanese public, and to influence governmental policy initiatives.

The nuclear arms debate is approached in an entirely converse manner and has different consequences when compared to the Article 9 discussion. Firstly, the way in which the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki resound in the Japanese collective memory provides a contrast with the collective memory appeal of Article 9. The Japanese identify as victims of atomic warfare, and no matter who is held responsible for beginning and escalating World War Two, the bombs were dropped from American planes at the forefront of an occupying force. This allows the Japanese people to identify with the aims of the anti-nuclear movement on a cultural level, ‘given its unfortunate experience with the devastation caused by nuclear weapons, [Japan] has the responsibility to help eliminate them from the planet’ (DiFilipo 2000, 598). The movement has a sense of righteousness and purpose already evident in the Japanese collective memory, upon which to appeal and develop a strong and active movement.

Relating collective memory to the events of the war itself, however, brings the Japanese into contact with sensitive and controversial areas of their own history. The collective memories of other East Asian nations recount brutal Japanese aggression and imperialism and remain a serious obstacle to amicable relations to this day. The nuclear movement has a tendency to encourage addressing these difficult issues, as one statement claims: ‘[w]e do not believe that the hibakusha (atomic bomb survivors) are the only victims of the war, and we think that we must seriously confront Japan’s war responsibility and post-war responsibility’ (Japanese Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms [JALANA] 2009). In such declarations, the nuclear movement leans towards discussion and confrontation of uncomfortable facets of Japanese history to generate international validity, which can put Japanese people off. This problem, however profound, and in spite of restraining its immediate appeal, does not negate the efficacy of the anti nuclear movement. Ultimately, as far as the Japanese are more than willing to identify as a nation afflicted by atomic war, they are willing to accept a mandate to share that experience and eradicate nuclear weapons through creating international solidarity and pressurising their
government to act internationally. In encouraging this trend, the anti nuclear peace movement has a great deal of capital to employ in achieving its aims.

Japan has adopted the three ‘non nuclear principals’: never to allow possession, testing or presence of nuclear weapons by the Japanese nation, or on Japanese soil. But the government has come under criticism for allowing American military logistics operations to pass through Japanese territory without inspection, potentially allowing the transport of nuclear weapons to be facilitated by the use of Japanese ports. Beyond resolving this domestic issue, the anti-nuclear movement of Japan expects the Japanese government to use their own non nuclear status, and unique position as a nuclear war afflicted nation, to push the anti-nuclear agenda on an international level.

And this is where the anti-nuclear peace movement has more appeal than the Article 9 movement. For one, the proposition of a foreign policy agenda creates a long term goal for the movement, and the continued existence of nuclear weapons in such high numbers provides a continual need for action, therefore preventing the movement becoming reactionary or passive in nature. The benefit of this is a steady and focussed following, and more of a chance that people will become fully connected to the issue, not just joining up when politicians go ‘too far’. Groups such as ‘Mayors for Peace’ and ‘Peace Depot’ have published detailed, step-by-step action plans for Japan to follow in creating a nuclear free world involving grass roots campaigns and diplomatic agendas, and have berated the Japanese government for not following them. The movement here is claiming that the government is passive where there is plenty of potential for activity. This is where the movement starts to work on two levels, pressurising the government to take an active position and, at the same time, becoming active itself on the grass roots level.

Furthermore, the ‘Mayors for Peace’ group, for example, reaches out on a global scale (with over 3000 member cities worldwide), and therein lies the second advantage of the nuclear aspect of the peace debate; that Japan has the potential, according to peace activists, to lead the international process of abolition of nuclear weapons. This is often the focus of the anti-nuclear movement, to push Japan to take up the mantle of anti-nuclear leader, and to criticise the government heavily when it ‘misses the bus’ (Kushibuchi 2007). Moreover, these groups create
their arguments using either existing frameworks for denuclearisation, as in the case of Peace Depot, or in certain cases suggest active policy actions which would express the Japanese desire for a nuclear-free world through policy on specific issues, such as the North Korean Nuclear Crisis (Kushibuchi 2007), or propose action plans such as the five step plan towards creation and implementation of a nuclear arms convention suggested by JALANA this year.

Moreover, denuclearisation is already part of the international dialogue, unlike Article 9, and has received even more attention in recent months, as President Obama has highlighted the issue as an American foreign policy priority. This can only act as further support for the anti-nuclear movement’s claims that Japan has a place in high level international dialogue on denuclearisation and has the potential to take a leadership role.

The pro-Article 9 movement has been shown to appeal successfully to the Japanese collective memory which has granted it access to momentous support with very little resistance. Article 9 itself has been accepted as a symbol of Japanese pacifism and has gained recognition among the people for surviving sixty years and more without revision and having successfully restrained Japanese militarisation in that time. When Article 9 came under attack in 2005, the peace movement proved very responsive and effectively mobilised, growing in membership rapidly and forcing the government to shelve plans for revision. However, as demonstrated above, the response was reactionary and the movement may not retain the support it received at that time.

The main failing of the pro-Article 9 movement is its inability to create a concrete Japanese foreign policy agenda. Aside from vague and idealistic notions of a peaceful world inspired by Article 9, no sufficiently persuasive arguments for adoption of Article 9 as a foreign policy cornerstone have been made. This lack has left the movement without any long term goals and so they must simply wait until the next proposed revision or reinterpretation before they have a cause behind which to rally support.

The anti-nuclear movement, however, was shown to have a more than acceptable foreign policy appeal. Japan’s unique experience, having been bombed with nuclear weapons, provides immediate access to an already dynamic nuclear proliferation dialogue, on top of its appeal to the
Japanese memory of the bombings. A problem occurs in that this dialogue highlights a disparity between Japanese collective memory, as victims of World War Two, and East Asian collective memory of Japan as the aggressors in the war. Addressing this disparity would be an awkward and possibly painful process for the Japanese and therefore creates reluctance among many to get involved. However, it could well be argued that whatever means Japan chooses in its bid for global acceptance and influence, it will have to confront this discord and address its World War Two history. This is therefore a problem inherent in Japanese foreign policy and not unique to the anti-nuclear movement. It could then be argued that the fact that the anti-nuclear movement addresses this issue is an indicator of their readiness to act on a global level.

Most impressive is the multitude of ‘action plans’ evident in the anti-nuclear literature. This movement has long term international goals that it wishes to impose upon the government and proposals in place for achieving them, it does not wait for the government to come forward with an issue, as the Article 9 movement does. This movement’s support base is not as large, it cannot boast the 6000 groups of the Article 9 movement, neither is it so passive. With a long term focus and a goal of international leadership, the anti-nuclear movement has all the elements necessary to succeed in shaping the identity of the Japanese into that of an active, globally pacifist, anti-nuclear nation.

Notes

* The section in question of Article 9, reads:
1) Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.
2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.
(Archive 9 of the Japanese Constitution 1947, 2)


Masukawa, T. 2009. ‘Professor Masakawa’s Thoughts on Article Nine: “Constitutional Revision as a Tool for Free Use of the Military”’, Asahi Shimbun online:


