

Self-immolation Protests PM Abe Overturning Japan's Pacifist Postwar Order 焼身行為で抗議 安倍総理に覆された平和主義に基づく戦後秩序

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On June 29, 2014 a man set himself on fire in Tokyo to protest PM Abe Shinzo's bid to lift constitutional constraints on Japan's military forces and in subsequent days tens of thousands of citizens gathered outside the prime minister's residence to loudly protest this initiative. Opinion polls, even those conducted by reliably rightwing news organizations, indicate widespread opposition to his renunciation of pacifism and very little support for collective self-defense (CSD).

The self-immolation was a gruesome spectacle captured on numerous smart phone videos and disseminated on social media. Good thing because the mainstream media all but ignored the most extraordinary act of political protest in the quarter century that I have lived in Japan. NHK news, the government broadcaster, didn't even mention the event, apparently playing by Pyongyang rules: ignore any ugly truths that might discredit the powers that be.

Since NHK is the dominant media presence, its non-coverage is significant. In his Independent Web Journal, reporter Iwakami Yasumi says that someone at NHK divulged to him that NHK's blackout was politically motivated,

leading him to comment wryly that NHK is a 'state broadcaster' not a 'public broadcaster'. However, TV Asahi did air some footage of the self-immolation and the next morning the television 'wide shows' that feature a discussion format probed the event at length, connecting it with Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9.

Sketchy reports did appear soon after the event on various media websites about the unnamed sixty something year old man, noting that he had ranted for about an hour about Abe's subversion of the constitution, then doused himself with gasoline before torching himself. He was hospitalized. The subsequent print stories in the major newspapers were almost all buried deep in the back sections where crime and human-interest stories dominate. The Chunichi Shimbun provided more in depth coverage, elaborating on what the man said and pointing out that he quoted Yosano Akiko's anti-war poem, "Don't Lay Down Your Life".

The symbolism of the man's defiant act of self-sacrifice was not lost on social media, where videos of his 'performance' went viral as did Yosano's poem.

Overall, the major media either ignored or downplayed the event, keeping it out of the limelight and not following up with subsequent analytical stories, despite this being one of the most dramatic political acts since Mishima Yukio's suicide in 1970 after failing to win public support for his radical rightwing views and proposed coup. Arguably the stakes this time were higher in that Abe's radical coup was a done deal, a stunning renunciation of Japan's pacifist postwar order. This made the media's muted and blinkered coverage all the more striking. When Abe's spokesperson was asked about the self-immolation on June 30, he shrugged it off, stating that the Cabinet would proceed with its planned reinterpretation the next day.

On July 1, an NHK correspondent interviewed me about Abe's reinterpretation gambit, and when I mentioned the self-immolation at Shinjuku station this veteran journalist gave me a dumbfounded look and asked what I was talking about. When I explained that it was highlighted in CNN's coverage and on social media, he said he had never heard about it. When I offered to show him, he expressed no interest. So there are reasons to worry about media censorship in Japan, but ignorance and incuriosity of mainstream journalists may be an even bigger threat.

Self-immolation is a weapon of the weak, an assertion of moral authority in the face of authoritarian power, a last resort demonstration of defiance ordinarily confined to despotic states. As in Tibet, where more than 130 people are known to have set themselves on fire since 2009 to protest Chinese repression, cultural chauvinism and economic exploitation. Or as in Tunisia at the end of 2010 where a street vendor's fiery protest sparked a national revolution against tyranny that inspired the Arab Spring. But a Japan Spring

seems unlikely even as protests mount against Abe's ideological agenda and moves to circumvent democracy through the special secrets law, the evisceration of Article 9 and restarting nuclear reactors in defiance of majority opinion.

Make no mistake, Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9 is a game-changer because he has eradicated the constitutional ban on waging war. In doing so, with a stroke of the pen he has overturned the postwar pacifist order that has become a touchstone of national identity. But he is getting his way by making a mockery of Japanese democracy in bypassing established procedures for amending the Constitution, doing it by the backdoor of edict rather than the front door of revision as provided for in the Constitution.

The Supreme Court long ago ruled that the nation has the right to maintain the capacity to defend itself and thus the SDF is deemed constitutional, although many Japanese disagree and have challenged this ruling. In 1981 the Cabinet Legislative Bureau decided that Japan has the right of collective self-defense (CSD), but due to Article 9 it could not exercise this right. Since then successive conservative governments led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have endorsed this interpretation and embraced the Constitution. Abe has long wanted to revise the Constitution which he feels the US imposed to keep Japan weak and subordinate. But unable to gain the required support for Constitutional amendment despite a dominant position in the legislature, Abe has chosen to reinterpret it by diktat, ironically invoking the need to protect US forces in the event of an attack as one of the principal justifications for doing so.

Apparently, not many Japanese are keen to provide such protection. The Yomiuri Shimbun, for example, on July 2-3 asked if respondents supported shooting down a missile headed for US territory (Guam and Hawaii) and only 37% agreed while 51% opposed doing so. It's worth noting that the Yomiuri has been an enthusiastic cheerleader for Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9 to allow for CSD and frames questions to elicit favorable responses. Thus it is remarkable that its poll found only 36% support the reinterpretation and 51% oppose. A Kyodo survey on July 1-2 found that 54.4% oppose while 34.6% expressed support. In the Kyodo poll, 73.9% said they expect that the scope of CSD will expand, apparently unconvinced by Abe's reassurances that it will not. Kyodo also found that 61.2% said Japan is now more likely to get sucked into a war, rejecting Abe's argument that CSD will serve as a deterrent to conflict; 34% agree with him.

Although Abe has unshackled the SDF, 73.2% of respondents in the Kyodo polls oppose dispatching the SDF to participate in CSD initiatives involving the use of force.

In both polls an overwhelming percentage of respondents were critical of Abe's decision to unilaterally reinterpret Article 9. Only 13% in the Yomiuri poll agreed that there had been sufficient discussion while in both polls more than 80% felt there had not been.

So across the political spectrum there is considerable disquiet about Abe's unseemly haste in gutting Article 9 and little support for CSD. Most Japanese oppose PM Abe's renunciation of Article 9 because pacifism is a touchstone of national identity. Moreover, sabotaging Article 9 by decree bypasses

established procedures for revising the Constitution that require two thirds approval in both chambers of the Diet and majority support in a national referendum. Reinterpretation is thus seen to be a dubious ploy to sidestep these procedures that flouts democratic principles. As such, Abe has acted like a thief in the night stealing the heart and soul of Japan's pacifist Constitution.

Team Abe has branded his militarist agenda 'proactive pacifism', but such sugarcoated sophistry has proved notably ineffective. Even after three months of political theater and endless promotion of CSD, Abe has not managed to convince anyone who didn't already agree with him, and very few do.

The conditions for engaging in CSD are so vaguely defined that they amount to a blank check for Japanese military action and waging war. The public is apprehensive that Abe is frog marching the nation down what everyone understands is a slippery slope. What may start as a limited action to protect allies can easily escalate out of control while the fog of war obscures the exit sign.

The bottom line is that many Japanese believe that Abe is more of a threat to Japan than China or North Korea. Advocates justify reinterpreting the Constitution because Japan lives in a dangerous neighborhood with China militarizing its territorial disputes and Pyongyang punctuating bellicose rhetoric by launching missiles. But even as the Japanese public understands these threats it appears that by a vast margin they fear Abe even more. Essentially, the public is worried that Abe or some successor will drag the nation into war somewhere, sometime at Washington's behest.

Last year the box office hit about the kamikaze, *The Eternal Zero*, delivered a powerful antiwar message as the protagonist tried to subvert the war effort and what he dismissed as an inhumane waste of young men's lives on suicide missions that would have no bearing on the outcome of a war already lost. The hardcore militarists in the film are portrayed as raving sociopaths. Abe is said to have liked the film, but did he get it?

Abe's move to unleash the nation's formidable military forces tramples on Japan's postwar norms and values. Schoolchildren learn about the horrors of war in their textbooks, focusing mainly on the dreadful wartime suffering of the Japanese population. Many also visit Hiroshima and Okinawa on school trips where they encounter graphic anti-war messages that bolster support for Japan's war renouncing Constitution. In contrast, Abe has made a reputation for himself by trying to rehabilitate Japan's discredited wartime past, but he has won few converts while tarnishing the nation's reputation and alienating the US and East Asian neighbors.

Internationally, Washington has welcomed Abe finally achieving what it has been pressuring Japan to do for the past half century. There appears to be little concern that Abe's underhanded methods discredit his constitutional coup and demean democratic

principles; the ends justify the means. The regional reaction has been relatively muted as South Korea is under pressure from Washington to tone down its criticism of Japan. China, however, didn't miss the opportunity to draw attention to Japan's resurgent militarism and accuse Abe of fabricating a China threat. With considerable chutzpah Beijing accuses Abe of steamrolling the opposition and hawkishness, this from a nation that stifles all dissent and has increased defense spending by double digits annually for two decades. In some respects, China has helped Abe advance his security agenda by acting like a plausible regional bogeyman with hegemonic ambitions.

July 1, 2014, the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the SDF, will go down in history as a watershed in Japan's postwar history, a 21st century day of infamy when Abe hijacked democracy by renouncing Article 9 and the nation's pacifist postwar order in an unscrupulous manner, achieving by fiat what he didn't dare try through established constitutional procedures. Apparently Abe fears the people as much as they fear him.

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