



Japan: The Price of Normalcy

John Feffer

In the early 1990s, the Japanese military adopted a cute mascot by the name of Prince Pickles. He's a little guy with a big head and big eyes who lives in a tranquil country bordering on some pretty dangerous territory. In three action-packed comic books aimed at young people, Prince Pickles overcomes his naïve belief that a land at peace needs no army. He enlists in his own country's forces to defend against the predations of the neighboring Evil Empire. He endures intensive training. He helps with disaster relief. He goes on peacekeeping missions. And of course, after these mini-heroic efforts, Prince Pickles gets the girl, his comrade-in-arms Miss Parsley.



Prince Pickles and Miss Parsley

The transformation of Prince Pickles is meant to represent the recent history of Japan writ small. In her groundbreaking new book *Uneasy Warriors*, Sabine Fruhstuck describes Prince Pickles's transformation as a coded message from the state to its citizens that "knowledge and appreciation of the military can be or should become a normative element of growing up. "Only a state with a military is normal and mature, and only a man with military experience is a real man." [1] If a fellow who is only two feet tall and looks like a toadstool with eyes can "grow up" with such aplomb, surely young Japanese men have nothing to worry about, even without access to a Marine Corps boot camp to affirm their masculinity.



Prince Pickles: For the Future of Iraq

Prince Pickles is not the only pop culture gimmick that the Japanese military has used to improve its image in recent years and overcome the deeply engrained pacifist tendencies of

the Japanese population. In recruitment posters, professional female models proclaim in English, "Peace People Japan, Come On!" A music festival sponsored by the military brings in 40,000 people for annual performances that include sexy young women from the pop music scene.[2] The overall message is that Japan's new military is fun, flirtatious, and yet family-oriented – a far cry from the message that the U.S. military projects of strength, determination, and leadership. If the U.S. Army is from Mars, its Japanese counterpart is clearly from Venus. Such are the inescapable influences of Japan's *kawaii* culture of Hello Kitty and giggling schoolgirls.



Prince Pickles and US forces in action

Don't be fooled. The new Japanese military is far from cuddly.

In the last decade, a group of neo-nationalist politicians has begun to more aggressively dismantle the restrictions that have bound the Japanese military since the end of World War II, when, uniquely among industrialized nations, Japan renounced its right to defend itself by military means. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (SDF) has helped refuel coalition forces in Afghanistan since 2003. It has sent troops to Iraq and ships to the Persian Gulf, transported coalition forces on SDF planes, cooperated with the United States on missile defense, and fired on mysterious ships that entered its territorial waters.



Kongo DD173 with Aegis Missiles in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf

It sports new and sophisticated hardware like tanker aircraft for in-air refueling, and has tried to purchase the latest U.S. fighter jets. Despite widespread public resistance to many of these undertakings, Japan's neo-nationalists have grander designs. With strong encouragement from Washington, they have set in motion a process to revise the Japanese constitution, while

seeking to boost military spending and make Japan a fully “normal” military power. They are playing hardball on territorial disputes such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu island conflict with China and the Dokdo/Takeshima island dispute with Korea. The current Prime Minister, Aso Taro, has also spoken of reopening the debate on whether Japan should acquire nuclear weapons.



Japanese Coast Guard Ship turning back a Taiwanese vessel accompanying a boat with Taiwanese activists near the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands on June 16, 2008.

Not everyone agrees that Japan is undergoing such a profound change. After all, the country is not exactly Costa Rica, which even today lacks a military. Despite its self-imposed limits on military spending – no more than one percent of GDP – Tokyo has built the fourth most powerful military in the world with Asia’s strongest navy. Neo-nationalists have spent several decades chipping away at the pacifist foundations of the constitution. Some scholars argue that the post-war consensus on security policy has only been stretched, not broken. But whether its new military posture – and Prince Pickles’s metaphoric transformation from naïf to soldier – is revolutionary or evolutionary, Japan is no longer a marvelous exception in the world of international security.

Japan’s Pacifist Legacy

Japan was not born with a peace constitution, nor did it achieve one. Rather, it had a peace constitution thrust upon it – by the United States immediately after World War II. For the first time in world politics, albeit prodded by an occupying force, a state renounced its right to build and deploy armed forces. According to its new constitution, Japan couldn’t use military force even to defend itself. The famous Article 9 asserts that “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” and “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.” Although the Japanese government has gradually altered the substance of Article 9 – it maintains land, sea, and air forces according to the thin fiction of “self defense forces” – nearly half of all Japanese still believe that the use of force to defend one’s own state is illegitimate.[3]

But almost as soon as it engineered this new, pacifistic Japan, the United States reversed course. With the Cold War escalating and the U.S. in need of a regional ally, America encouraged Japan to rearm. Many of the ultranationalists and former military officers that had been under a cloud after World War II were back in business by the time of the Korean War, a boom time for Japanese rearmament. Weapons sales, largely to the U.S. army, went from 7 million yen in 1952 to 15 billion yen two years later, and it was the Korean War that jump-started Japan’s devastated economy.[4] Meanwhile, in 1954, Tokyo altered the prohibition on maintaining any military capability by creating its own army, the strategically named Self Defense Forces (SDF).

As Richard J. Samuels [writes](#) in his admirable though dense new book *Securing Japan*, which traces the history of the country’s evolving military doctrine, Japanese politicians forged a consensus that somehow accommodated these contradictions. The United States acquired

a reliable ally – an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” in the words of former Japanese prime minister Nakasone Yasuhiro – that played a supporting role in its various Asian Cold-War adventures. At the same time, Tokyo didn’t threaten Washington’s interests by entangling itself with other Asian countries or going head-to-head with the United States on military exports. In return, the United States financed the greater part of Japan’s defense needs. Japanese liberals were delighted that this rather lop-sided alliance allowed them to focus on rapid economic development, pacifists were relieved that constitutional restraints kept Japan from fighting American wars in the Pacific, and militarists took solace in the residual defense capabilities that Japan maintained and ultimately expanded.

This U.S.-Japan alliance was not, Samuels argues, a product of karaoke diplomacy, the United States determining the music and lyrics and the Japanese politicians simply singing along. Rather, the post-war consensus that helped Japan become the number two economy in the world cleverly appealed to the key ideological camps – liberals, pacifists, and militarists – that had been battling for the soul of modern Japan since the end of the 19th century. Although the United States largely wrote the peace constitution, the Japanese have adapted these words to their own music and changed the tune when necessary to fit the tempo of the times.

Outsider observers, fooled by the superficial uniformity and tranquility of Japan, often miss the considerable strife beneath the surface. Although Japan has been essentially a one-party state since World War II, the post-war consensus on security policy was constantly under attack and subject to modification. Some of the first blows came from the Japanese left, which had initially prospered under the U.S. occupation but gradually lost power in the 1950s alongside the radical labor unions that had also gained ground in the first flush of post-war liberalization. As Mari Yamamoto [explains](#) in *Grassroots Pacifism in Post-War Japan*, large majorities of Japanese supported the peace constitution – indeed, for many Japanese, the document represented atonement for Japan’s conduct during the war. But pacifism in the sense of a principled objection to all wars did not sink into the population, and, indeed, few Japanese protested the Korean War when it broke out in 1950.

The Japanese peace movement, Yamamoto points out, was able to mobilize unions and the incipient women’s movement – alongside anti-nuclear, anti-military base, and student movements – to challenge the U.S.-Japan security treaty when it came up for renegotiation in 1960. The protests on campuses and in the streets paralyzed the Japanese government and even forced Eisenhower to cancel a state visit. But the security consensus weathered this challenge, and the U.S.-Japan alliance held. The left pushed the government to adopt the three non-nuclear principles in 1967 and the arms export ban in 1976.[5] But these were partial victories, and in subsequent years, Japan’s pacifism devolved into merely a way for nationalists to fend off unwanted U.S. demands. The peace movement tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to prevent the post-war security consensus from sustaining crippling blows from the other side of the political spectrum. Japan’s ascendant hardliners, unlike the status-quo seeking conservatives with whom they often partner, were willing to risk Japan’s pacifist legacy and even its alliance with the United States to forge a new military identity for the country.

Neonationalist Salami Tactics

After rising to the status of the world’s second largest economy, Japan suffered several setbacks after the end of the Cold War. When the bubble economy popped in 1989, financial anxieties plagued the prosperous nation -- anxieties that worsened in the wake of several governmental failures, including its inept response to the 1995 Kobe earthquake and the utter failure to prevent the Aum Shinrikyo cult’s sarin attacks in the Tokyo subways. The U.S.-Japan alliance also entered a rocky period when Tokyo was faulted for its failure to provide “boots on the ground” in the 1991 Gulf War (its \$13 billion was the largest contribution to the war effort with the exception of the United States) and for sitting on the sidelines of the 1993-94 conflict with North Korea over its nuclear weapon program.

While a 1995 rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl by three U.S. soldiers galvanized the anti-base movement, Japanese neo-nationalists worked hard throughout the 1990s to transform the country's military and foreign policy. As Samuels relates, "The strategy – at least as we can now reconstruct it – was to expand legal and operational capacities for the most overtly peaceful SDF roles and missions, saving for later those which were more publicly military and closest to the homeland." [6] Samuels compares this subtle approach to the *salami taktik* – one slice at a time – by which newly reunified Germany acquired offensive capabilities such as heavily armed intervention forces and high-tech air support. [7]

Between 1954 and 1989, the Japanese parliament amended the Self-Defense Force Law only once. Since 1989, as the hardliners shifted into overdrive, there have been over 50 amendments. [8] The intrusion of North Korean vessels into Japanese waters facilitated the large-scale transformation of the Coast Guard into a de facto fourth branch of the military, and the 1998 launch of a North Korean rocket into Japanese airspace provided the rationale for Tokyo to ramp up its participation in U.S. missile defense. And after September 11, Japan passed new emergency laws that endowed the SDF with new powers to support U.S. forces outside of Japan and explicitly sanctioned the use of military force should the country come under attack. Although the Japanese public did not see far-off Afghanistan and Iraq as suitable for the involvement of Japanese troops, the hardliners deployed a threat nearer to hand – North Korea's credible nuclear and missile programs – and whipped the public into a near frenzy to garner support for a more muscular policy. Japan's Defense Agency has been elevated to ministry level, the SDF is on the verge of being re-branded the National Defense Forces, and Prime Minister Aso is urging a "reinterpretation" of constitutional clause Article 9 so that Japan retracts its renunciation of the right to wage war.

Where many specialists emphasize transformation, Andrew Oros, author of *Normalizing Japan*, sees continuity. He argues that some norms – such as the restrictions on military spending – have proven so durable that, in the 1980s, when Nakasone made a Herculean effort to lift military spending above one percent of GDP, he managed to exceed the limit by only .007 percent. But proponents of a more assertive military have used *salami taktik* – Oros describes this approach as "reach, reassure, reconcile" – all along. The Japanese government adopted non-nuclear principles, but through its advanced nuclear power program it has developed a huge plutonium stockpile and the capacity to produce nuclear weapons quickly. It foreswore aircraft carriers but has built assault ships with big enough flight decks to serve the same basic function. It banned military exports but then sold all manner of defense technology to foreign powers, including China and the Soviet Union, under the pretense of civilian use (perhaps the most famous being Toshiba's sale of milling equipment to the Soviet Union, which used the technology to boost the stealth capabilities of its nuclear subs). At each juncture, Japan has asserted a general principle and then consigned it to a lingering death by a thousand cuts.

The chapters in Oros's book on missile defense and arms export policy are particularly valuable in demonstrating that Japan's security policy has long veered toward "normalcy." Japan has been lauded, for instance, for its ban on arms exports. But the exceptions to the ban -- exemptions for dual-use items, for exports to the United States, for technology necessary for missile defense -- have rendered it almost meaningless. Prohibitions against the militarization of space have similarly been whittled away. In 1985, the government authorized the Self-Defense Forces to use communications satellites for military communication; later the SDF could purchase satellite imagery for military intelligence; later still, in 2003, Japan would launch its own system. And by making the dubious claim that missile defense is for defensive purposes only, Tokyo has made a violation of principle seem like a reinforcement of the status quo. Contrary to Oros's argument that Japanese security policy is more continuity than change, however, the government in Tokyo now operates according to a radically different set of assumptions about when, how, and why to use force in the conduct of foreign affairs.

These assumptions, of course, are radical only in terms of Japan's post-war history. A

“normal” military, according to the rules of international practice, is offensively structured, requires significant outlays of government funds (far more than one percent of GDP in the cases of the United States, South Korea, China, and Russia), an indigenous industrial capacity to produce armaments, and a military doctrine that embraces deterrence. Japan was singularly abnormal for so many years and even sought to export its abnormal approach through a robust peace politics. Japan is now moving steadily toward a conventional and potentially disruptive ‘normalcy’.

Selling War

With Prince Pickles and music festivals and sexy posters, Japanese politicians have tried to acclimatize a peace-oriented public to a more assertive military. But as Sabine Fruhstuck points out, even the military itself is not fully on board. Consider the ambivalent terms with which the army describes itself. Service members are not soldiers but “special public servants.” They deploy to “workplaces” rather than units or battalions. They fly “special planes” rather than fighter jets. In a society where standardized professional dress is ubiquitous, members of the SDF are rarely seen in uniforms outside the base. Many secondary schools don’t allow SDF recruiters onto school grounds. In contrast to the U.S. army, where platoon morale closely linked to macho values and the achievement of battlefield objectives are paramount, SDF commanders are encouraged to prioritize the safety of their charges.

The picture Fruhstuck paints is of an army of bureaucrats and a soldiery uncomfortable with its own image. “If a war broke out, most of us, men or women, would quit,” one SDF member reports to her.[9] The experience of soldiers in Iraq—where their missions were limited to humanitarian aid and reconstruction—was nonetheless harrowing. According to Fruhstuck, “During the three and a half years of deployment to Iraq – the closest Japanese soldiers ever came to war – recruitment rates decreased, the number of suicides soared, and returnees from Iraq primarily expressed relief that everybody survived the mission unharmed.”[10]



Japanese SDF in Iraq

The Japanese government has tried to airbrush this reality with the help of gender stereotypes. Women make up only 4 percent of the armed forces (just as they are rare in industry and government). Yet 80 percent of SDF recruitment posters feature women.[11] The government is cannily projecting an image of its military as stereotypically feminine – peaceful, humanitarian, and concerned with the safety of the soldiers. All the while, it is charting a stereotypically masculine future of preemptive capabilities and the tendency to shoot first and ask questions later.

Not everyone in Japan is passively watching the transformation of the military. In *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace*, Gavan McCormack describes a handful of courageous individuals who have resisted the Japanese government’s imposition of the national flag and anthem, both compromised by their association with World War II policies and the empire.

One 62-year-old schoolteacher distributed leaflets successfully urging those attending a school graduation not to stand for the national anthem (government prosecutors wanted to throw him in jail; instead the Japanese courts levied a considerable fine).[12] To save the peace constitution and Japan's precious tradition of defensive defense, 5,000 Article 9 associations have sprung up around the country.[13] And McCormack describes the impressive, sustained, and at times successful efforts of an entire island, Okinawa, to kick out the U.S. bases that have dominated their island for more than half a century.

Of course, civil society also includes extremists who have been increasingly active in Japan. McCormack describes what he calls a rising tide of right-wing terrorism in Japan, which has included violent attacks on moderate politicians and on the much-maligned North Korean community (Chosen Soren). One fanatic bombed the home of a Foreign Ministry official who had worked to improve ties with North Korea. More "respectable" extremists range from Ishihara Shintaro, the governor of Tokyo who has advocated nuclear rearmament, to the rabid cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori who has graphically rehabilitated Japan's war-time history in a book-length manga that denies all atrocities from the Nanjing Massacre to the comfort women.[14]

These neo-nationalist actors, far more than the new pacifist and anti-militarist social movements, are defining what "normal" means for Japanese security policy through the rewriting of history, the exaltation of the military, and the treatment of pacifism as a threat to the country. Japanese leaders like the popular former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro have espoused nationalist causes – such as visiting the controversial Yasukuni shrine that houses the spirits of several war criminals – to curry favor with the hard right but also to divert attention from their efforts to deepen U.S.-Japanese military relations. As McCormack says of Koizumi, "the more he served foreign purposes, the more important it was that he look and sound like a nationalist." [15] The post-World War II consensus is thus being pulled inside out as the alliance designed to provide Japan with a cheap defense and a nuclear umbrella has become a very costly junior partnership—what McCormack describes as the client state—in the larger U.S. hegemonic project.

The Japanese leadership's readiness to do the bidding of the United States – on Middle East policy, on missile defense – has reaped certain immediate rewards. In a Washington ruled by a zero-sum logic, Japan became all the more reliable as South Korea, seeking to build a new relationship with North Korea—turned unpredictable in the eyes of U.S. policymakers. South Korean observers have been quick to interpret one sentence in Condoleezza Rice's [manifesto](#) last year in *Foreign Affairs* – identifying Japan as an ally and South Korea as merely a partner – as an official if subtle acknowledgement of this recalibration of loyalties. So strong has been the desire of the Bush administration to make Japan into the Great Britain of Asia – and punish the French-like Koreans – that the president even told the Japanese Diet that the two countries had been allies for more than a century and a half, conveniently forgetting the minor interlude that was World War II.[16]

And what will Japan give up in exchange for a "normal" military? The costs of fielding a world-class offensive force are not simply monetary. South Korea and China are not fooled by the Japanese government's attempts to hide their new military capabilities behind Price Pickles, nubile women on recruitment posters, and misleading rhetoric about peacekeeping and defense. By steadily eroding key provisions of its peace constitution, Japan also makes regional security cooperation that much more difficult to achieve – and a regional arms race that much more likely to escalate.

If Japan's hardliners get their way, the strengthened alliance with the United States is simply a transitional phase, a kind of junior drivers' license before Japan comes of age and takes over the wheel. Douglas MacArthur, the imperious regent of the post-war occupation, [spoke](#) of the Japanese as "a childlike people who would run amok without imperial guidance." Along with military mascot Prince Pickles, the Japanese political leadership now wants to outgrow its childlike state. [Like Wordsworth](#), we can only mourn the passing of this relatively peaceful childhood that, despite bouts of colic and crankiness, had "the glory and the freshness of a

dream.” Perhaps someday Japan – and, indeed, the rest of the world – can recapture the naïve but life-affirming essence of its dream of peace.

John Feffer is the co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus at the Institute for Policy Studies, author of numerous works on food policy and on the two Koreas, and a Japan Focus associate. He is the author of [The Future of US-Korean Relations: The Imbalance of Power](#)

He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Published at Japan Focus on January 10, 2009.

*Recommended Citation: John Feffer, “Japan: The Price of Normalcy” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 2-3-09, January 10, 2009.*

Notes

[1] Sabine Fruhstuck, *Uneasy Warriors* (University of California Press, 2007), p. 136.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

[3] Andrew Oros, *Normalizing Japan* (Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 174

[4] Richard J. Samuels, *Security Japan* (Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 33.

[5] Mari Yamamoto, *Grassroots Pacifism in Post-War Japan* (RoutledgeCurzon 2004), pp. 215-6.

[6] Samuels, p. 91

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 87

[8] Oros, p. 178

[9] Fruhstuck, p. 29

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 147

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 91, 125

[12] Gavan McCormack, *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace* (Verso, 2007), p. 22.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 140

[14] Samuels, p. 121

[15] McCormack, p. 87

[16] *Ibid.*, p.54