In the late spring of 2007, when revision of the constitution was the subject of much debate, I was looking for books on the constitution to introduce to the students in my seminar class, when my wife handed me a small booklet that she had found and bought through the internet.

I could not stop the tears welling in my eyes as I read from cover to cover this small book written in plain language. Allow me to quote a passage from its chapter titled “renunciation of war,” though it may be all too familiar to those who have read it before.

“I think many of you saw your father or brothers off to the last war. Did they come back safely? Or did they never return? I think many of you also lost your home or loved ones in the air raids. Now the war is over. Don’t you wish to never have to repeat such a terrifying and tragic experience? What did Japan gain from such a war? We gained nothing. All we got was countless terrors and sorrows. War destroys people. It destroys all that is good in this world. So the countries which started this war bear a heavy responsibility. After the previous World War, many nations had pledged never to engage in war, but another devastating war was started nonetheless. Is it not a tragedy?

For this reason, our new constitution made two commitments to ensure that Japan never goes to war again. The first is that our country will never have soldiers, battleships, fighter planes, or any other means to fight wars. From now on, Japan will not have an army, navy or air force. This is called renunciation of war potential. “Renunciation” means to “do away with.” But you do not need to feel insecure. Japan is doing the right thing, ahead of other countries. Nothing is more powerful in this world than doing the right thing.

Secondly, we decided never to resort to war as a means to defeat or force our will on other countries when disputes occur with them. Instead, we will resolve our differences through peaceful discussions. Why? Because waging war will ultimately destroy our country. We also decided to never use our power to threaten others. This is called renunciation of war. If Japan can get along well with other countries and they become our friends, we will be able to prosper.

Dear friends, let us all firmly pledge never to allow such a horrific war to occur again, nor to ever start a war again.”

This book, titled “Our New Constitution (Atarashii Kenpou no Hanashi)” was published as a social studies textbook for middle school students.

The Japanese Constitution and “Japeneseness”

Takeshi Furuichi
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by the Ministry of Education in August 1947, shortly after the Japanese constitution had been promulgated. I have never seen any writing that expresses the spirit of Article 9 as clearly, and with as deep reflection upon the past as well as strong hope for future world peace, as this small booklet. It is hard to believe that it was written by the same Ministry of Education that is now relentlessly interfering with textbook descriptions of the Nanking massacre and war in Okinawa. Despite the deep reflections expressed in this booklet, it was not long before the breakout of the Korean War again plunged the world into the frenzy of war. The booklet was downgraded to “supplementary reading material” in 1950, and went out of print in 1952. It was like a miraculous flower that bloomed briefly during a short pause in the world’s war-torn history.

When one re-reads the Japanese Constitution, one cannot fail to be struck by its noble and powerful language. Its lofty ideals are enshrined in the preamble as follows: “We, the Japanese people, desire peace for all time and are deeply conscious of the high ideals controlling human relationship, and we have determined to preserve our security and existence, trusting in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world. We desire to occupy an honored place in an international society striving for the preservation of peace, and the banishment of tyranny and slavery, oppression and intolerance for all time from the earth. We recognize that all peoples of the world have the right to live in peace, free from fear and want.” In Article 9, it goes on to powerfully declare: “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.” It is rare indeed to find such lofty ideals and guidelines for action expressed in so lucid a manner.

Hikari OTA of the comedy duo “Bakusho Mondai,” in his dialogue with academic Shinichi NAKAZAWA published with the title “Article Nine as a World Heritage,” says that the Japanese constitution seems like something miraculous in its audacity that sprang to life by some whim of chance. Indeed, the deeply moving experience of reading the constitution or the textbook “Our New Constitution” reminds one of watching a documentary on Gandhi’s non-violent non-cooperation movement that shook the British Empire and led India to independence. Perhaps it is not surprising that some people with “common sense” consider such an unguarded stance to be reckless in today’s violent world, and criticize the constitution as having been forced upon us by the USA.

However, is it really so? Could such daring ideals really be enshrined in our constitution merely as a result of coercion? Indeed, the USA may have wanted Japan to adopt a constitution that would prevent it from ever going to war again. But did not its adoption have as its background the deep sorrow, regret and reflection shared by many Japanese as expressed in “Our New Constitution”? We can get confused if we try to think in too complex a manner about constitutional revision. What we first need to think about is the most basic issue, namely, why to change it.

I remember reading an editorial on constitutional revision in which the following simple question was raised: “revision means to correct something that is mistaken or wrong, but what is wrong with the constitution, anyway?” The term
constitutional revision is often used in the sense of making a better constitution, but that should be called “improvement” of the constitution. The constitution is not something to be tinkered with for “improvement” or other frivolous purposes, if it is not flawed. So if “revision” is the task at hand, what are the flaws to be corrected? It is often said that the constitution was forced on us by the USA, so we Japanese should now take the initiative to draft our constitution with our own hands. But this is no argument for “revision,” however much it may be for “improvement.”

Two arguments are often given in favor of constitutional revision. The first is that the constitution ties our hands so we are unable to contribute to the international community. But there is the strong counter-argument that “putting boots on the ground” is not the best way for Japan to contribute to the world. My experience from frequent trips to Africa for wild primate research leads me to strongly agree with this counter-argument.

I do not know what is said in political negotiations with the USA and European powers, but I have not met a single African who said Japan should contribute to the world with military power. Their image of the Japanese is generally that of “harmless, good-natured folk with good technical skills.” Though lacking international experience, we Japanese tend to “do as the Romans do,” naturally mingling among the local people. If we visit African back-country, we enjoy chatting with the locals over a bottle of country brew, but European missionaries or plantation owners who have lived there for decades rarely do so. Our inability to clearly state our views to others, a common Japanese weakness, can become a virtue of sorts. We Japanese, always smiling and nodding our heads, are not viewed as a strong adversary. When oppositional power games occur in projects, we Japanese are often left out of the loop and end up playing the role of mediator.

Ever since 9-11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, I have noticed in frank conversations with local people everywhere how often they vent their anger towards the USA. It is not just the Muslims that show such animosity. It is no exaggeration to say that practically everybody shares such feelings. I feared that feelings toward Japan would also change as it serves as loyal sidekick to the USA. Surprisingly, this has not happened yet. Despite its stance as a diehard supporter of the USA, and its logistic assistance for US military aggression, one still seldom hears criticism of Japan. It seems people think “the Japanese have no choice but to toe the US line,” pitiful as it is.

I once was detained by airport immigration authorities when entering the Democratic Republic of Congo in central Africa at a time of civil war. I was suspected of being a spy, as my passport had an entry stamp of the Republic of Uganda, which was supporting the anti-government forces. The director of our partner research institute gave an explanation, and I was at last freed after three hours. As I was leaving, the officer made the gesture of a tail coming out of a devil’s rear end, telling me “I would never have let you go if you were British or American. But Japanese are generally not up to anything bad.” In Uganda around this same time, over ten tourists who had come to see the gorillas were kidnapped by anti-government guerillas. After the abduction, the guerillas checked the tourists’ passports one by one. They tortured and killed people from countries associated with the UK, but released the rest.
It is quite strange that Japan is still not viewed with animosity, despite its support for US military action in tandem with the UK. This is not the result of any intentional action on our part. For better or worse, our “Japaneseness” may have spared us from the ill-will of the world. But no one knows how long we will get away with this.

It is only certain political elites in the West that will be pleased if Japan bolsters its military contribution to international issues by “revision” of its constitution. We will have to brace ourselves for the dismay and hostility of the rest of the world. On the contrary, we Japanese have plenty of ways to leverage our wishy-washy, harmless image by contributing to the international community in civilian and economic spheres. Some say the world will look askance at us if we do not contribute militarily, but it is only the USA and some Japanese politicians who are actually saying this.

The other reason given for constitutional revision is that the restrictions on use of military force imposed by our present constitution will prevent us from protecting the lives and property of the Japanese people. I have doubts about this as well.

Roughly speaking, there are three stances that can be taken in response to armed belligerence from overseas. The first is that of accepting whatever attack may come, without resistance, as advocated by Gandhi. But this requires tremendous resolve. I am not sure I would be able to take the blows passively if my family or I were suddenly attacked by thugs.

The second stance is to fight in self defense only when actually attacked by an enemy. The Self Defense Forces currently maintained by Japan are in principle an embodiment of this exclusively defensive posture. Of course, this is based on an expanded interpretation of the constitution that stretches its logic considerably, but it is also true that most Japanese agree with this position.

However, it is argued that the lives and property of the Japanese people cannot be adequately protected with such a stance. People with the third stance say that Japan must destroy missile bases before they can be used to launch missiles into Japan, and countries developing inappropriate nuclear weapons should be forced to give up such ambitions. But will this really protect us? Would those countries often viewed as our potential adversaries retreat silently if Japan destroyed their missile bases, and would they give up developing nuclear weapons if we pressure them with military force? As long as nations are in conflict with each other with the aim to protect their own security and economic development, they are highly unlikely to retreat silently unless there is a very wide power gap between them. Or does Japan think it can be part of an overwhelming and inexorable military force by teaming up with some other countries?

Some people think that various reasonable limits could be placed on use of force beyond national borders for self-defense purposes, but this is a mere illusion. Any number of arguments can be made to adjust the scope of what is deemed self-defense, and it is basically those in power who think up such arguments as well as approve them. We must not forget that self-defense was one of the pretexts for US aggression against Iraq.

Strictly speaking, our present constitution only allows the first option of nonviolence. However, laws are generally subject to extended interpretation; the Self Defense Forces with an exclusively
defensive role are accepted by most Japanese people as being somehow within acceptable bounds of interpretation. The proposals for constitutional “revision” submitted by the Liberal Democratic Party and other parties all cross over this line and attempt to pave the way for use of force beyond our country’s borders, based on adequate debate and approval by the people and the Diet. But we must recognize that all constraints on use of force will be lost once this line is crossed.

The stance of exclusive self-defense requires considerable resolve, though not to the extent of nonviolence. If attacked first, casualties cannot be avoided and loss in battle may lead to the miserable fate of occupation. Nonetheless, crossing the line does not bring peace with security of life and property either. Should we not make the most of our “Japaneseness,” reaffirm our commitment to never fight unless attacked, and focus our efforts on peace diplomacy and international contribution in the civilian sphere? Japan’s peace diplomacy and international contribution are viewed in much higher esteem than some politicians and pundits would have us think. We need to be more confident and redouble our resolve.

“We do not need to feel insecure. Japan is doing the right thing, ahead of other countries. Nothing is more powerful in this world than doing the right thing.”

2) “Article Nine as a World Heritage (Kenpou Kyujo wo Sekai Isan ni),” Hikari OTA and Shinichi NAKAZAWA, SHUEISHA Inc.