

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-and-germany-are-again-preparing-for-war-8dc75cc1>

THE SATURDAY ESSAY

Japan and Germany Are Again Preparing for War

Memories of World War II still cause anxiety in both countries, but a rising generation feels less constrained—and less sure of the U.S.—in the face of Russian and Chinese aggression.

By Ian Buruma

March 24, 2023 10:57 am ET

The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called this moment a “historic turning point.” In Japan, a famous comedian named Tamori coined the (somewhat obscure) phrase “new prewar,” and it has been widely used to say much the same thing: That Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has forced both countries to take their own military preparedness more seriously.

In February last year, Mr. Scholz promised to use a fund of 100 billion Euros to strengthen Germany’s neglected military forces and to push Germany’s military budget over the 2% of GDP required by NATO. Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida paid a surprise visit to Ukraine this week, the first time a Japanese prime minister had set foot in a country at war. Though still constrained by the pacifist constitution drawn up after World War II by American jurists, Mr. Kishida has vowed to boost defense spending by 50% over the next five years and to acquire missiles that could strike enemy targets if Japan were attacked.

None of these measures mean that the two former Axis powers are returning to their belligerent ways of World War II. Japan hasn’t sent anything more lethal to Ukraine than helmets and bulletproof vests. And Germany wouldn’t agree to supply Ukrainian troops with old Leopard 1 tanks, as well as some new Leopard 2 tanks, before the U.S. agreed to send M1 Abrams tanks too. The older German tanks are still under repair.



German Prime Minister Olaf Scholz (right) and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock see the war in Ukraine as an urgent defense of democracy.

PHOTO: FABRIZIO BENSCH/GETTY IMAGES

There is also considerable opposition in both countries to these responses to Russian aggression. In February, over 10,000 German pacifists, joined by pro-Russian members of the right-wing AfD party, staged a “rebellion for peace” demonstration in Berlin, protesting against the sending of German arms to Ukraine. In Japan, the liberal Asahi newspaper warned Mr. Kishida that his new defense plans were unconstitutional and failed to heed the lessons of the past. According to Article 9 of the constitution “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.” That is the way old-fashioned Japanese liberals like it.

Still, the invasion of Ukraine and, in the case of Japan, China’s threatening behavior toward Taiwan, less than 500 miles from Okinawa, have created a new situation that goes beyond the rousing words of leaders’ speeches. Despite Asahi editorials or protests here and there, recent events have broken the postwar consensus in both countries that they must never participate in war again.

Right-wing Japanese nationalists, such as the former prime minister Shinzo Abe, who had already done his best to improve Japan’s defenses, like to claim that official pacifism was imposed on their country by the U.S. in the aftermath of a catastrophic defeat. Until he was assassinated last year, Abe worked tirelessly to fulfill the ambition of his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, to restore Japan’s right to be a military power and wash away the dark stains of history. Kishi, Japan’s armaments minister during World War II, had been accused of being a war criminal but won a reprieve from the U.S. and eventually became prime minister.

Because Japan’s military aggression in the 1930s and 1940s couldn’t be blamed on Nazis or a dictator like Hitler, the American occupiers sought to wean the Japanese themselves off their traditional militarism, their samurai spirit, as it were. What Alcoholics Anonymous is supposed to do for alcoholics, Article 9 of the pacifist constitution would do for Japan.

What Japanese nationalists often choose to

What Japanese nationalists, who wish to revise the constitution, often choose to forget is that pacifism has been overwhelmingly popular in

forget is that pacifism has been overwhelmingly popular in Japan.

Japan. War had cost millions of lives all over Asia and left Japan itself in ruins. No matter how hard nationalist leaders like Abe tried to revise Article 9, public opinion remained resolutely against it, at

least up until the 1990s, after which opinion began to shift slowly. Not only had it suited Japanese fine to be shielded by the U.S. nuclear umbrella while they got on with rebuilding their nation's wealth, but the moral satisfaction of having learned their lesson and renounced war forever even helped many Japanese forget the horrors they had inflicted on others.

It wasn't the Japanese people who first regretted constitutional pacifism. Visiting Japan as Dwight Eisenhower's vice president in 1953, Richard Nixon told his rather startled audience that the U.S. had made a mistake in 1946 and Japan should be able to rearm. In fact, Japan had already done so to some degree. A National Police Reserve was authorized by the U.S. in 1950 and later became the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

Hirohito and Nagako, the Emperor and Empress of Japan, greet Vice President Richard Nixon and his wife Pat Nixon in Tokyo, 1953.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Unfortunately, generations of Japanese conservatives who agreed with Nixon have tended to make their case by denying that Japan did anything wrong in World War II. After all, in their view, the war in the Pacific was fought to liberate Asia from Western imperialism. That many people died was unfortunate, but such bloody episodes were part of every nation's history. The more that nationalist Japanese politicians and intellectuals insisted on this point, the more that most Japanese, and of course other Asians, resisted a change in the status quo.

This, too, is beginning to change, however, because of Russian aggression and Chinese threats. Most Japanese today have no memories of World War II. According to several polls, more than 50% of Japanese now favor a constitutional revision. And although many Japanese resist paying higher taxes to buy more arms, they are not against Prime Minister Kishida's defense strategy per se. This is one of the consequences of living in the "new prewar."

Germany's postwar story is rather different from Japan's. Neither West nor East Germany had pacifist constitutions. Hitler and the Nazis were blamed for the last war, not German militarism. After the two halves of Germany were purged of Nazis, more or less, the German Democratic Republic became a Soviet-controlled Communist front-line state in the Cold War, and the Federal Republic of Germany became a member of NATO and staunch U.S. ally. "World Peace" was the official motto in East Germany, and West Germans were instilled with the phrase "never again."

Even though East German soldiers were mobilized to crush popular uprisings in other parts of the Soviet empire, such as Czechoslovakia in 1968, Germans on both sides stayed well out of hot wars. National security in West Germany was left in the hands of the U.S., and German defenses were neglected as a result. Since the East Germans counted themselves as the heirs of "anti-fascism," they didn't even need to feel guilty about atrocities committed during the Third Reich. And West Germans, rather like the Japanese, felt that they had learned their lesson, while the Americans who protected them could be conveniently denounced by the pacifist left as imperialists and warmongers. This dovetailed neatly with the Soviet propaganda imposed on East Germany.

Germans protest their country's delivery of weapons to Ukraine, Berlin, Feb. 25.

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN MANG/REUTERS

Some of these attitudes were still in evidence in the peace demonstrations in Berlin last February. Unlike the extreme rightists, however, who openly admire Vladimir Putin, German pacifists still believe that anything is better than war. Annalena Baerbock, the German foreign minister, who is strongly in favor of military support for Ukraine, was denounced by the crowds as a warmonger. Germany's most famous philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, wrote a widely discussed article pleading for a negotiated settlement to the war. He, too, criticized Ms. Baerbock for seeing “war through the lens of victory and defeat,” instead of exhibiting “sensitivity on normative questions.” Focusing on peace above all was, in his view, part of Germany's “hard-won mentality.”

As in Japan, age plays a large role in these debates. Mr. Habermas is 93. He was a teenager in Hitler's army when Germany collapsed in ruins. “Never again” is baked into his intellectual and emotional DNA. Annalena Baerbock was born in 1980, 35 years after the war. What is truly remarkable about Ms. Baerbock, however, is not just her relatively young age but the fact that she is a member of the Green Party, which was once staunchly pacifist. She sees the Ukraine war as a defense of democracy against an autocratic imperialist aggressor. Precisely

because of Germany's dark past, in her view, Germans must stand with the oppressed and help them to defend themselves, not just with words but with tanks. In a speech at the United Nations in February she put the choice facing the West quite simply: "To stand isolated with the oppressor—or to unite for peace."

Japan's Prime Minister Kishida is a member of the Liberal Democrats, the same conservative party that Abe once led. But he was never one of the hawks who sought to revise the constitution by denying Japan's wartime record. As is true for Ms. Baerbock or Chancellor Scholz, who is a member of Germany's Social Democratic Party, this makes it easier for Mr. Kishida to argue for a stronger military role for his country. He, too, can frame his policy as a defense of democracy, not as an argument to excuse the past.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has vowed to boost defense spending by 50%.

PHOTO: KEVIN DIETSCH/GETTY IMAGES

The imminent threats from China and Russia were the catalysts for change in Germany and Japan. But there is another reason too. Pax Americana in Europe and East Asia,

established soon after World War II, relied on confidence in American military protection. This confidence took a great hit when President Donald Trump expressed his contempt for NATO, his admiration for Mr. Putin and his aim to put America First. Suddenly the French ambition to reduce European dependence on the U.S. by remaking Europe as an autonomous military power seemed to be more persuasive. This is still what Emmanuel Macron, the French president, is hoping for. Japanese plans to improve their own defenses are driven by similar anxieties, even though these are rarely directly expressed.

Still, Mr. Trump was right about one thing, however crudely he expressed it: Pax

Americana cannot go on forever in the way it was constituted after 1945. U.S. economic dominance is no longer what it was in the last century. The total dependence of wealthy U.S. allies in Europe and Asia on American military protection will be increasingly resented by American taxpayers. It is clearly time that Europeans and Japanese did more to defend themselves and asserted some degree of autonomy.

But the Ukraine war has actually had the opposite effect. The West and NATO have never been more united. This is partly due to President Biden's deft and sensible diplomacy. But it also shows how far key allies, such as Germany and Japan, are from any sort of military independence. That Chancellor Scholz, who himself comes from the "never again" pacifist left, refused to send German tanks to Ukraine without Mr. Biden's promise to send Abrams tanks as well, is a clear example. Polish, French or British politicians, and indeed some of Mr. Scholz's cabinet members, might think they can act without holding Uncle Sam's hand, but the German chancellor doesn't think so. And he may well be right that his caution is the only way to ensure he has the majority of Germans behind him.

Germany will send Leopard 2 tanks (above) to Ukraine but didn't make the decision until the U.S. agreed to send M1 Abrams tanks.

PHOTO: ALEXANDER KOERNER/GETTY IMAGES

Japan is, if anything, even more dependent on the U.S. than Germany and other NATO members. The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which obliges the U.S. to come to the rescue if Japan were attacked, is the only security guarantee Japan has. Japan is not obliged, of course, to defend the U.S. in return. Mr. Kishida's plans to spend more on military defense and establish the right to strike enemy bases are a kind of historic turning point, but the main aim of these measures is to enable the Japanese to help the U.S. to defend their own country.

Taiwan has no such guarantee. The U.S. may or may not come to its rescue. But Japanese fear of Chinese aggression and worries that Russian success in Ukraine might inspire China to take violent military action have drawn Japan ever closer to the U.S. Whoever inhabits the White House, Japan has no other option.

Germany's turning point and Japan's "new prewar" are far from meaningless. The first hesitant, cautious, painful steps toward taking on more responsibility for their own defense have been taken. "Never again" can no longer be taken for granted. But, for better or worse, Pax Americana is far from exhausted. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have seen to that.

—Mr. Buruma is the Paul W. Williams Professor of Human Rights and Journalism at Bard College and the author, most recently, of "The Collaborators: Three Stories of Deception and Survival in World War II."

Appeared in the March 25, 2023, print edition as 'Japan and Germany Are Again Preparing for War A Call To Arms Breaks Taboos'.