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The Nomination of Article 9 of Japan's Constitution for a Nobel Peace Prize 日本国憲法第9条ノーベル平和章候補に
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Alexis Dudden

On April 9, 2014 the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that the "Japanese people who conserve Article 9" had succeeded in registering themselves as contenders for this year's Nobel Peace Prize. As of this typing, the group remains a loosely organized, broad-based cross section of Japanese society committed to saving the Japanese constitution's famous clause outlawing war.

A number of groups in Japan have long worked to save Japan's unique, legal forfeiture of a national right to war — especially prominent is Nobel laureate Oe Kenzaburo's group — and recent polls demonstrate such efforts having wider reach than ever before: an opinion poll published April 14 in the Asahi Shimbun reports 64% of Japanese favor preserving Article 9. Those who support attracting international attention through a Nobel Peace Prize now have between their action at Earth Day in Tokyo (April 19) and May 5 when the Nobel Prize committee announces its short list (winnowed down from this year's record 278 contenders). The race is on, and some of the effort's participants have set their sights on Japan's May 3 National Constitution Day as a metaphorically significant goal line.

In many regards, the Nobel Prize Committee's acceptance of the nomination is a victory in its own right, coming as it does at a time when many view the actions of Japan's leaders as tantamount not only to eliminating Article 9 and radically revising the Constitution but as leading the nation toward war with China. For his part, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, who proposes radical constitutional revision, calls his new security policy "proactive pacifism".

The nomination is significant, moreover, because its proponents represent a wide swath of Japanese society and a small number of international figures, who would single out for praise not Japan's political leaders but the Japanese people who support Article 9. Nominators and supporters currently include people that will never be famous, and also Oe Kenzaburo, in addition to Noam Chomsky, and Japan Socialist Party Diet representative Fukushima Mizuho. Equally important, there are a number of powerfully connected business people and former and current government employees (including several former ambassadors), some of whom define themselves as "supporters" of the current prime minister yet who are deeply disturbed by his "turn to the right" (as one of them wrote to me in an email).

Late last spring, Takasu Naomi (鷹巣直美), a self-described 37 year-old housewife from Kanagawa prefecture outside Tokyo, began to collect signatures on her personal web page to preserve Article 9 in an effort to garner a Nobel Peace Prize for it and publicize its meaning internationally. At the time, she was still trying to determine the rules for submitting such a proposal. The Nobel Prize committee explained that only people or groups could win the award — not a constitution. Moreover, only certain kinds of people are eligible to make a nomination — not including housewives. Takasu redirected her energies to new channels. Organizing her efforts around an amorphous group in Japanese society that has perhaps never been so aptly or collectively named before, she submitted an entry on behalf of a group of Japanese citizens who believe in a core post-1945 national value ("Japanese people who conserve Article 9"). Equally noticeable is the fact that this group appears to be almost entirely absent in today's news, which is dominated by headlines trumpeting (or occasionally questioning) the current Japanese leadership's militarist turn and revanchist attitude.

On January 3, the Tokyo Shimbun reported Takasu's efforts. During the New Year's holidays, Hamaji Michio, a businessman in Tokyo with 25 years experience in the oil industry in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States, read the newspapers carefully and responded enthusiastically to Takasu's drive: "Shocked and so inspired," as he puts it. Believing deeply in the drive's core message, Hamaji immediately offered his political and business world connections.

With the February 1 nomination deadline looming, Hamaji grew apprehensive that Takasu's drive might fall short or fail to meet the Nobel committee's strict rules. He expanded her initiative on his own and turned "abruptly" (his words) to a small group of foreigners — mainly U.S.-based academics as well as Nobel laureates and nominees (thus qualified nominators) — many of whom by chance were also appearing in the January newspapers having signed a petition in support of Inamine Susumu's bid for mayor in Nago, Okinawa, who was campaigning at the time against the construction on a U.S. Marine heliport in his area's village of Henoko (he won).

And here's how Hamaji introduced himself to me in mid-January:

"Allow this sudden mail from Tokyo.

I am encouraged to have found your name… I, a Japanese businessman having spent years in Arab/Iran, and in Connecticut, strongly believe that it is not possible to change the culture with hard power… I, a supporter of Abe in general terms, am concerned about his recent 'toward-right' policy. May I have your attention to our civic movement of 'Nobel Peace Prize to Japan' who had maintained for 68 years the Article 9 of Constitution, prohibiting war?"

Even before I read the email, Noam Chomsky responded to a like note: "It's a wonderful idea."

A "thank you" followed my support (and that of several others totaling 14 nominators), and then nothing until April when the Oslo-based committee accepted the bid.

Some rightly argue that it would be absurd for Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to be in a position to accept the honor of winning a prize for preserving the peace. As Mark Selden pithily explained: "Abe is, of course, precisely the PM hell bent on abolishing Article 9 and indeed rewriting the core principles of the Constitution in ways that are fundamentally at odds with the peace provision."

Hamaji does not address the disjuncture between the citizens who seek to protect Article 9 and their nation's Prime Minister whose efforts appear solely trained on its destruction. Nor does he appear to want to delve into other contradictions, including the presence of the American military in Japan with or without Article 9. That said, Hamaji seems convinced that this fundamental principle of Japan's post-1945 international posture is vital for the nation's sustainable future as well as for an possible future peace in the region and the world. Some might argue that his is a purely self-interested view, yet Hamaji's actions to gain support for the Nobel Peace Prize cut across ideological, national, and economic positions. In a word, he presents himself as a true believer in Japan's pacificist posture, and he is not afraid to work with people who do not share all his other views. Having secured the nomination thus far, Hamaji argues that it is in Japanese citizens' interests to have Prime Minister Abe win the prize, noting (perhaps not without irony) in fiscal terms: "Yes, we would allow Abe to spend our tax payers' money to come to Oslo to pick up the prize."

There are a number of important surprising things taking place in Japanese society at this moment, not in the least former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's recent campaign against nuclear power. With a goal similarly large — the preservation of Article 9 as Japan's true national treasure — it is important to remain focused on the prize. Although not yet a signatory to the campaign, if Prime Minister Abe is in fact the one to collect the prize I am sure that many of us will be happy to help write his acceptance speech.

Alexis Dudden is Professor of History, University of Connecticut and a Japan Focus Associate. She is the author of Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States *and* Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power *and an associate of the Reischauer Institute's* *Constitutional Revision Research Project*.

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