Prof. Tom Le Discusses Japan's Unconventional Militarism in New Book

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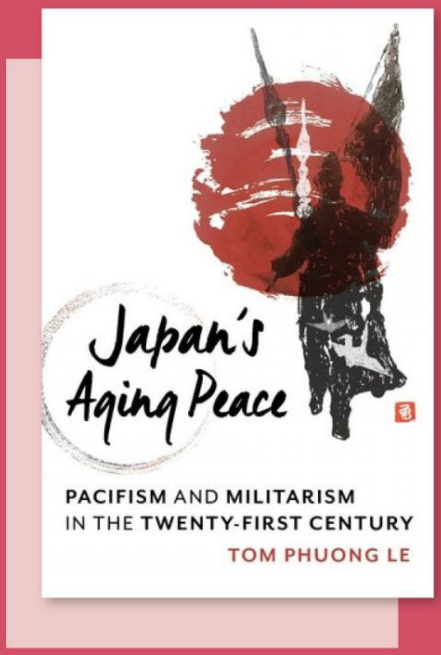

The central argument of Pomona College Politics Professor Tom Le's new book, *Japan's Aging Peace: Pacifism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century*, is that the country—as the population ages and declines—will not aggressively re-arm despite growing regional threats, contrary to some predictions. But despite not having a traditional military thanks to its post-World War II constitution, Japan is indeed militaristic and not pacifistic, says Le, though not in the conventional sense.

Le talked to us about Japan's notions on human security, the ways the country challenges international relations assumptions and collective memory's role in world affairs.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Why did Japan initially not seek to remilitarize?

World War II is the critical juncture, the crossroads for them. There's a couple of initial reasons. One is constitutionally, they weren't allowed to, in the traditional sense. The United States and Japan wrote a constitution where Japan gave up the right to wage war to settle international disputes, which means they couldn't maintain ground, sea, and air forces.

Culturally, I would argue that they suffered immensely from World

John Dower, a historian from [the] University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, wrote a great book and he talks about how many of the Japanese who survived the war experienced war guilt. Teachers and parents felt guilty sending their kids off to war in what turned out to be kind of a pointless war, right? I think a combination of the legal hurdles plus the cultural hurdles due to the history are the early reasons why Japan didn't remilitarize.

How have perceptions of security changed in the intervening years?

What Japan does quite uniquely is that their definition of security is much broader than Americans'. Traditionally in international relations, we always start with the state, that your state has to survive, and you have to defend yourself against other states. And the Japanese have that too—all states do.

But, because they weren't busy really fighting the Cold War or the war in Iraq or the war in Afghanistan, they just weren't doing those kinds of things. For the most part, nobody messes with Japan. It's an island nation. It trades with many countries. If they don't like Japan, they're not threatened by Japan. The Japanese really spent the majority of the post-war era focusing on human security, which is how do you increase wages? How do you provide healthcare? How do you provide retirement funds? Their definition of security was beyond just, is your state surviving, but how can people get the basic goods that they need

Yes, definitely. Because they're not spending so much money on the military, they have money to spend on other things, right?

Where does that more holistic or total sort of perception of security come from?

Again, Japan is not militaristic in the same way as other countries because it's forbidden to do so. Additionally, I would say by the 1950s, the Japanese economy was recovered from the war. The economy was growing quickly; incomes were doubling. And with the government, one party really enjoyed a monopoly for a long time because they were meeting the needs of the people, at least economically. And the people bought in as well. It's just a virtuous cycle. If Japan does well financially, then people buy better goods, have higher standards of living, and they don't worry about health insurance and going bankrupt.

And they live peacefully and then they don't fight as much with other countries. Then, if you don't fight as much, you live more peacefully. It’s a cycle that continues.

Whereas in other countries, sometimes they get trapped in conflict. If you fight a war, spend a lot of money, you're stuck there. And then the people you're fighting are also victims of that conflict and then they don't see you positively. Then there's this unvirtuous cycle. Japan was able to break free from it because of the post-war period, the way the

Talk about one of the unusual factors when it comes to security policy in Japan.

One, the constitution says they can't have a military force. So that's weird. Countries don't have that. And to be clear, Japan violates their constitution every day because they have a self-defense force. It's a military. Technically speaking, it should be illegal. The only reason why Japan gets away with it, and even China and Korea and all the former colonies don't really mind them having a military force, is because all countries recognize the right to defend yourself. In the United Nations, you have a right to defense. So that supersedes Japan's constitution.

But a couple little quirks. One is the government only spends 1% of the GDP on the military. And it's not a law. It's just a general agreement among everybody that has stuck for decades. That's kind of an artificial cap. So the size of the Japanese military is not tied to external threat. If North Korea gets a bunch of nuclear weapons, theoretically Japan should spend more, right? And if China's becoming threatening, you should spend more. But Japan, since it's capped at 1%, it's really just tied to the size of the economy. The economy is doing well, you spend more in the military because it's 1%. If it's doing poorly, you spend less because it's capped at 1%. Japan also doesn't have a military defense sector really. In the U.S., we have Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Boeing. And they've generated 50%

for war purposes. If a company can't sell its product to other countries, and its own country doesn't spend more than 1%, it makes no sense to build weapons.

So that helps, I argue in the book, to cultivate a culture of the country that just doesn't see the military as part of the day-to-day life. For example, in the U.S., if you go to SeaWorld before a show, they'll ask all the veterans to stand and then people will clap for them. Or if you're a veteran, you wear a uniform.

In Japan, nobody wears their military uniform publicly. It's a work uniform. You put it on when you get to the office. And if you wear it, in the past, people might judge you. That's less so now because the public's opinion of the military is actually quite good now because of all the disaster relief things they do.

If you're a college graduate, say out of Harvey Mudd or Pomona, and if you get a job at Boeing, or if you get a job at a defense contractor, people would consider that a good job because it's high-paying and a respectful company.

In Japan, nobody is going to school to learn how to work at the defense division of Mitsubishi. Those companies, instead of wasting the talents in the military division, they'll put you to making cars or televisions.

What do you think about historical

politics and world affairs? How does that play a role?

This is a sticking point with a lot of Japan's former colonies. Japan says it's a peaceful country now, and it's never going to go to war. And it points to its defense spending, or it points to its official development aid all around the world. It's true. It's really unlikely Japan is going to go to war with others.

I think we believe optimistically that people learn from their mistakes in the past. And part of that has to mean accepting the terrible things you did.

During World War II, the military took over the government and they hijacked the country, and by being a militaristic country, everyone suffered. There were food shortages, they suffered from the atomic bomb.

Well, that's one half of the war story. The other half is you also colonized and killed a lot of people. So are you very sorry about that? Because if you're really turning against war, you have to accept that part. For many in East Asia and other parts of the world, they argue that Japan is not truly genuinely sorry. They haven't shown deep remorse and they've not forgotten, but downplay the colonization. And the Japanese would say that's not true because they paid out reparations in the past and they have peace treaties and all these other

sorry. If mathematically speaking, they're not spending money on the military. In my book, *Aging Peace*, I argue that the population is just getting too old and too small to really become a war nation. If you add aging population and aversion to warfare because warfare is terrible, lots of success because of trade and interdependence … you put all that together, it's very unlikely Japan is militaristic in the traditional scary sense.

How does Japan challenge assumptions in international relations?

The assumption in international relations is if you are not militarily strong or aggressive, others will take advantage of you. And I think that's true to a point, but if you have a certain level of defense, that's fine. You don't really have to push your weight around internationally. This is something I think the Japanese government continues to grapple with. What makes the country a great power? How do you gain respect? For a long time, Japan was like many different countries where you gain respect by having a big impact on international affairs, militarily, send your troops to support or rebuild a country. And I think what Japan has shown is that you can gain a lot of respect by not doing that, by judiciously using your military for really narrow purposes, disaster relief, maybe some peacekeeping to help with elections, things like that.

This is seen in the Middle East where many countries have a lot of

government don't agree and I know some that do—but with global warming, climate change, a lot of insecurity due to poverty and inequality and state insecurity, a lot of conflict is going to happen because of natural disasters or a lot of refugee crises because of displaced people from environmental change and inequality and poverty.

So Japan, if it's at the cutting edge, if it just uses its military to assist states to deal with refugees or to find victims of a hurricane, it's going to gain a lot of respect for that. Just like firefighters are universally respected because they fight this natural enemy, you could use the military to do the same thing. Everybody hates a hurricane, right? There's no bad guy there. So if you use your military for that, I think it could gain a lot of respect.

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