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While we weren't looking

Joan Chittister | Aug. 18, 2006 From Where I Stand

While people go on being killed in Iraq every day and more and more Taliban creep back into Afghanistan every month, and war threatens to engulf even more of the Middle East now, an issue brews in Japan that could change the geopolitical balance of the globe. But few Westerners are aware of it, and almost no one here is talking about it.

And yet, the issue has as much to do with the United States as it does with Japan itself.

The question is whether Japan is independently Asian or a hybrid, a kind of little USA bred by us and beholden to us. The answer is not as easy to come by as we might be inclined to think.

My first night in Tokyo, for instance, supper was served by women in silk kimonos kneeling on bamboo mats. The next day I ate spaghetti -- good Italian spaghetti, incidentally -- at a small Japanese-Italian restaurant on a side street. The day after that, lunch was a huge bowl of green salad topped off by an even bigger cold octopus whose tentacles reached every-which-way down the table. Point: On the one hand, Tokyo is a very Western city. On the other hand -- don't be fooled -- it definitely is not.

But the confusion shows. Even in them, certainly in us. Westerners can be easily misled by the tall, gleaming office buildings and the sleek, rapid trains that developed during the American occupation that followed World War II. But down deep, Japan's culture is uniquely its own: highly communal, breathtakingly efficient, profoundly, philosophically and politely Asian.

So, the problem comes from the growing notion that Japan is an American outpost in the Pacific Ocean.

The United States, according to the Catholic Council for Justice and Peace, a commission of the Japanese Catholic bishops' conference, maintains 135 military installations in Japan in 27 municipalities, and extending over 1,100 km, or almost 700 miles.

In October 2005, an agreement between the U.S. and Japanese governments expanded past security agreements that confined the U.S.-Japanese military alliance to the defense of Japan and peace in the Far East to, among other things, "preventing and eradicating terrorism."

As a result of this new agreement, "both U.S. and Japanese forces are to be renovated, reinforced and equipped to carry out U.S.-directed global missions." Obviously the plan, in effect, would absorb the Japanese military into the U.S. military.

The United States, the document says, has even suggested moving the global headquarters of its 1st Army from Washington State to Camp Zama near Tokyo.

Peace groups in Japan view this proposal, whether it ever occurs or not, as a sign that the United States sees Japan as its own surrogate territory.

The rest of the world might well see it as a sign of an expanding U.S. empire.

And the problem is getting worse.

Now, forces in Japan itself, generations who did not live through war, want Japan to be a "normal" country, meaning in possession of an army. The United States, too, is encouraging Japan to change the very article of the Japanese Constitution that the United States required of Japan when the Constitution was written.

Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution reads:

> *"Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes ... land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."*

Japan, free to put their money into computer chips and electronics rather than bullets and bombs, has prospered economically under Article 9.

As a result of Article 9, for example, the 200 Japanese troops sent to Iraq in 2003 had to be deployed in "non-combat zones" only and for the purpose of humanitarian aid. They could not participate aggressively in what the Japanese Conference of Catholic Bishops calls "a vicious cycle of violence ... and retaliation."

Instead, as a result of the movement to delete Article 9 from the Constitution of Japan, unprecedented anti-Japanese demonstrations have begun in East Asia, especially in China and Korea. The tide of fear is running strong.

It looks like fuel to the fire of an already crackling arms race in the region. It looks, too, like what will be seen as more U.S. aggression globally. It looks like trouble.

So much for the security weapons bring us all.

But the Japanese bishops say something else that may give us all pause.

They write in their short but pointed three-page peace pastoral:

> *"The Bishops' Conference published the message 'Resolution for Peace' 50 years after the end of war. In it we acknowledged that before and during the war, the Catholic church in Japan 'lacked an awareness of the prophetic role it should have fulfilled to protect human life and carry out the will of God.' ... In the 10 years since, despite our calling for peace, the world has not been able to shake the chains of various forms of violence. We are very much aware that now is the time we have to perform our role as prophets, that is, to 'read the signs of the times and convey the message of God.' "*

Catholics are less than 1 percent of the population of Japan. They do not move into the public debate with great numbers of the faithful or great support in the government as Catholics in the United States do. They do not curry great national favor or bring numbers of voters into the polls.

What they do bring to the discussion, however, is courage. The only nation on earth to have been subjected to

the use of nuclear weapons -- which, incidentally, we now authorize for strategic use in the field -- they refuse to confuse patriotism with humanity.

"Are we not right to be proud of the fact," the Japanese peace pastoral goes on, "that for 60 years we have not killed anyone in war and that none of us have been killed in war."

They are forthrightly calling the world -- calling you and me -- to write to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his government, appealing to them not to add to the culture of violence on this globe, not to repeal Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, "the renunciation of war as means of settling international disputes and the renunciation of arms." Clearly a very Asian commitment to peace.

But then they also sent a delegation -- Auxiliary Bishop Michael Goro Matsuura of Osaka, the bishop-president of the Catholic Council for Justice and Peace, Deacon Masataka Nagasawa, executive secretary of the council, and Mercedarian Sr. Filo Hirota, president of the Association of Major Superiors of Religious Women of Japan and a council board member, to seek collaboration with peace and justice groups here. Clearly a very Western commitment to networking.

From where I stand, it occurs to me that smallness is no obstacle to truth-telling. If we're only willing to tell it.

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