Why I Continue My Peace Activism
— Thinking from Kumamoto about "White Flag Diplomacy" and the Potential of Article 9's Pacifist Principles

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At the heart of my commitment to the peace movement is a deep conviction that war is the greatest violation of human rights. War takes the lives of countless people who have nothing to do with the conflict and destroys livelihoods, cultures, and communities. In the lead-up to war, governments begin preparing for it. They introduce new laws and systems one after another—including legislation on protecting personal information, measures to prevent espionage, and security clearance systems—while monitoring people's activities and adopting policies that can even infringe on their "freedom of conscience." War begins in people's minds.

My own experience of discrimination was what first led me to become involved in the peace movement. In the 1970s, Minamata disease [1] was reported daily in Kumamoto Prefecture, western Japan, and many people believed that "you could catch Minamata disease by going to Minamata." My father, a hospital physician, would sometimes drive to Minamata early on Sunday mornings in a battered old car. When I was little, I did not know why he went there, but I went with him to keep an eye on him so that he would not fall asleep at the wheel. I was the eldest of four children, and my mother was fully occupied caring for my two younger sisters and my newborn younger brother.

Before long, adults and children alike began directing cruel remarks at our family. "If you play with that child, you'll catch Minamata disease." The words and looks directed at me hurt more deeply and left a more lasting scar than any act of physical violence could have. Unable to bear living in such an environment, I left Japan immediately after graduating from high school.

After a series of experiences, I eventually found my way to a refugee language school in Fresno, California. About 70 percent of the people sitting beside me in the classroom—people of different ages, religions, and nationalities—had no passports. They were refugees who had been driven from their homelands by war. I was the only Japanese person among them.

Demonstrations and protest rallies were a frequent part of daily life. Before elections, it was perfectly ordinary for children and adults alike to talk politics and debate. In this environment, the Gulf War broke out in 1991. It was my first direct experience of war.

Yet what I witnessed was completely different from what I had learned about in Japan—the Battle of Okinawa, the devastating air raids, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ordinary Americans watched images of the war on television while eating their meals. When the news was over, they simply switched off the television and went on with their lives as usual.

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When I think about it now, the United States had not experienced a major war fought across its own territory for generations. For Americans, war is something that takes place “somewhere else.” They had not experienced the same kind of wartime devastation and privation that Japan had endured, and lived by slogans such as “We shall not want until victory.” Yet Japan has entered into a security alliance with a country whose understanding of war and security differs fundamentally from its own.

I believe the dangers of forming an alliance with a country whose fundamental understanding of peace and war differs so greatly from ours are evident in Japan’s shift to the right since the Abe administration. Since the so-called “three key security and defense documents” [2] explicitly set out a direction for military expansion in 2022, Japan’s military buildup has continued to accelerate. In 2024, then-Prime Minister Kishida, during a state visit to the United States, reaffirmed Japan’s acquisition of counterstrike capabilities and expansion of defense spending—steps that, in my view, signaled a move toward becoming a country capable of waging war.

This clearly departed from the principles of the Constitution of Japan [3] and was an exercise of authoritarian power by those in government. It is something we cannot simply overlook. Japan’s sovereign power belongs to its people, not to the ruling parties.

This year marks 81 years since Japan’s defeat in World War II. In its aftermath, Japan’s Constitution was fundamentally transformed. Ordinary Japanese people must have embraced the new Constitution as something they desperately needed after a devastating war had exhausted the country and left its people longing for reconstruction.

In particular, the Constitution of Japan’s principles of pacifism and democracy must have been especially welcome at the time. Freedom we now take for granted—freedom of expression, freedom to choose one’s occupation, freedom of movement, and many others—were not guaranteed in everyday life before the war.

I believe that peace cannot be secured by military power alone. Peace is built through trust between people, dialogue between nations, and the strength of civil society. For this reason, I believe we should work toward a society that places greater emphasis on diplomacy, international cooperation, and mutual understanding rather than confrontation through force.

Yet wars continue to recur around the world. One side attacks, the other retaliates, and that retaliation leads to another act of retaliation, creating an endless cycle of violence. Every country invokes its own sense of justice and explains its actions as being “for self-defense.” But the people who suffer and die in the name of that justice are unarmed civilians and children.

The longer a war continues, the more deeply the logic takes hold that says, “We have already sacrificed so much; we cannot stop now.” Wars then continue not because there is a realistic path to victory, but simply because the parties no longer know how to stop. That is why I believe the world needs not countries that compete over victory and defeat, but countries willing to step forward and stop the killing.

Could Japan play such a role? I believe that possibility lies in Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan [4]. As the only country to have experienced the wartime use of nuclear weapons against its cities,

Japan has a unique position from which to call on nuclear-armed states to reject both war and nuclear weapons.

A white flag is not a symbol of defeat. It is a declaration: “We will not fire another shot.” It is a flag of human reason—a refusal both to kill others and to force our own people to kill or be killed. It signifies stepping away from war and declaring our determination to break the cycle of retaliation.

I believe Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution can be understood as raising this white flag as a national principle. Its provisions on the “renunciation of war,” the “non-possession of war potential,” and the “denial of the right of belligerency” are more than a passive promise that Japan will not wage war. They can also be understood as an active proposal to the world: that disputes between nations should be resolved not through force, but through dialogue and diplomacy.

Yet Japan today appears to be moving in a direction that runs counter to this principle. One particularly symbolic example is the deployment of long-range missiles in recent years. These weapons are designed to strike targets deep inside an adversary’s territory. Critics have pointed out that their deployment represents a significant departure from Japan’s traditional policy of “exclusively defense-oriented policy.” Japan is also expanding ammunition storage facilities, strengthening command structures, and increasing troop deployments in western Japan, such as Okinawa, the Nansei Islands, and Kyushu.

These developments are being pursued in the name of strengthening deterrence. But I have serious doubts about this approach. Does deterrence really prevent war? Or does it simply make war preparations more advanced and sophisticated? From other countries’ perspective, weapons such as long-range missiles can pose a clear threat and may, in turn, accelerate an arms race. Moreover, could developing such military infrastructure increase the risk that the Japanese archipelago itself would become a target in a conflict?

These are questions that deeply concern me. Why should Japan think about sustaining a war for as long as possible? What we truly need is not greater war-fighting capacity, but greater capacity to bring wars to an end. How quickly can we stop the fighting? How can we bring hostile parties back to the negotiating table? Where can we break the cycle of retaliation? I believe that this is where a nation should concentrate its wisdom and resources.

I believe Japan should aspire not to be a military power, but to be “the country in the world that does the most to stop wars.”

When war breaks out, Japan should immediately call for a ceasefire, open diplomatic channels with all parties to the conflict, and offer a place for negotiations. It should help mediate prisoner exchanges, repatriate remains, evacuate and treat the wounded, evacuate civilians, and establish humanitarian corridors. Even when its proposals are rejected, Japan should never close the door to dialogue. Should this not be Japan’s role in the world?

Japan should also refrain from supplying weapons or ammunition to countries at war and should not allow its bases, ports, airports, territorial waters, or airspace to be used for attacks against other countries. Instead, Japan should send food, medicines, medical personnel, rescue teams, interpreters, and mediators, demonstrating its commitment through humanitarian action. To make this possible, I

would like to see the Japan Self-Defense Forces transformed into an international disaster relief force—one that goes wherever natural disasters strike, regardless of the country involved, and puts its capabilities and experience to work for humanitarian purposes. I also believe we need a permanent international institution dedicated to helping stop wars: an "International Ceasefire Mediation Center."

When I think about these principles, I cannot separate them from the realities facing Kumamoto, Kyushu, Okinawa, and the Nansei Islands. The deployment of long-range missiles, the construction and expansion of ammunition storage facilities, and the strengthening of military bases are also part of a broader effort to position these regions as a "front line of defense." In particular, there are concerns that the Nansei Islands could become military staging areas or targets in a conflict, and residents' anxiety is growing.

In Kumamoto, too, military facilities, including Camp Kengun, are being strengthened, and their role in Japan's southwest defense posture is expanding. I believe these developments require careful discussion from the perspective of local communities' safety and everyday lives. That is why I have continued to learn about these issues and raise my voice together with other citizens.

For me, peace means more than simply the absence of war. It means a society in which children can go to school without fear, older people can live with peace of mind, and everyone can look to the future with hope. Education, healthcare, social welfare, disaster preparedness, the environment, and local economies—all of these are deeply connected to peace. That is why I believe we should think of peace not merely as a matter of national security, but as a matter of people's everyday lives.

I see civic activism as an exercise in democracy—a way for citizens to work toward a better society. Through petitions, signature campaigns, public study sessions, dialogue, and engagement with local assemblies, citizens can make their voices heard in society. The willingness to keep talking despite differences of opinion is democracy's strength and the foundation of peace.

I hope Japan will not be "a country that fights to the very end," but rather "the country that is first to lay down its weapons." When the world is building up its arsenals, I want Japan to be a country that shows the way toward a ceasefire. When the world turns toward military expansion, I want Japan to keep the channels of dialogue open. And I want Japan to become the kind of country that makes people around the world say: "When war breaks out, call Japan."

The white flag is not a symbol of defeat. It symbolizes our determination to put human life above national pride and break the cycle of retaliation. From Kumamoto, I will continue to advocate among citizens for "White Flag Diplomacy," drawing on the principles of Article 9 of the Constitution, and work to expand the possibilities for peace.

Editor's Notes

[1] Minamata disease is a neurological disorder caused by methylmercury poisoning. It occurred in Minamata, a coastal city in Kumamoto Prefecture in southwestern Japan, where industrial wastewater contaminated the sea and seafood, causing severe mercury poisoning among local residents.

[2] The three key security and defense documents adopted by the Japanese Cabinet in December 2022: the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program.

[3] The Constitution of Japan's fundamental principles include popular sovereignty, fundamental human rights, and pacifism. The Constitution establishes that the people hold sovereign power.

About the Author



Yukiko Kaikita is Secretary-General of the Women's Group for Peace and Against Military Expansion, Kumamoto. She is also a co-representative of the "Okinawa and Western Japan Network to Stop the War!", established in 2025. She moved to the United States at the age of 18. While attending a refugee language school, she became involved in support activities for people living with AIDS and participated in anti-war demonstrations. She is now based in Kumamoto, in western Japan, where she supports migrant workers and works as a medical interpreter.

[4] Article 9 renounces war, prohibits maintaining war potential, and denies the right of belligerency, embodying Japan's constitutional commitment to pacifism.