Civic Resistance to Japanese Militarism

written by Donald C. Wood | January 11, 2020

Japan's 5.26 trillion-yen fiscal 2019 defense budget set a new record for the fifth straight year, as the country continued to beef up its armed forces while keeping a wary eye fixed on North Korea and China. The trend continues: The Defense Ministry has requested 5.32 trillion yen for 2020, part of which is to go toward the purchase of two land-based Aegis Ashore missile systems from the United States. Although the ministry won its Aegis Ashore budget for 2019, and is certain to do so again, there are signs that Prime Minister Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) may be losing support over the issue in one of the areas where the ministry wants to place a missile system: a region where the party has historically enjoyed strong backing. As the situation slowly unfolds, the Abe administration's arrogance, untrustworthiness, and indifference to the plight of local people come to light, reminding one that the dominant LDP, which is liberal only regarding its economic philosophy, is a party of the state and not of the public.

In December of 2017, residents of the capital city of Akita Prefecture, situated about 280 miles north of Tokyo, were shocked by the sudden unveiling of the Abe administration's plan to convert the Ground Self Defense Forces (GSDF) coastal practice range located in the Araya area of the municipality into a permanent Aegis Ashore strategic missile base. It was—and still is—Tokyo's intention to pay at least 240 billion yen to the Lockheed Martin Corporation for two land-based Aegis-controlled guided missile installations and place one in Akita and one in far-southwestern Yamaguchi Prefecture.

The main justification has been the perceived danger of North Korean missile attacks, a fear that spread across Japan during a wave of test launches earlier in 2017 and was reinforced by government and media fearmongering. A number of municipalities held missile evacuation drills at Tokyo's urging during 2017 and 2018, which also encouraged public angst over North Korea. Unease was especially strong in mostly agrarian and fishing-oriented Akita, as a barrage of tests in March of 2017 had triggered warning sirens and sent several large rockets into the Sea of Japan, off the Akita coast (albeit many miles from the shore). Although an eventual cessation of launches gave the Abe administration no choice but to suspend the drills in June of 2018, it has continued to point to a North Korean threat. At an international summit meeting in Singapore on June 1, 2019, then-Defense Minister Takeshi Iwaya repeated the tired message "[t]here has been no essential change in North Korea's nuclear and missile capacities." This platitude has become the administration's mantra on the matter.

The hermit state's 2019 resumption of limited small-scale missile tests supports the government's position to a degree. Nevertheless, opposition to the government's Aegis Ashore plan is high in Akita. Some 16 Araya neighborhood associations, representing roughly 13,000 residents, had already taken anti-missile base stances by the end of 2018. Resident associations in other parts of

the capital city, and even in other municipalities of the prefecture, have followed suit, while others have collected signatures or hit the streets with signs in hand. In the part of the Araya area that lies closest to the GSDF practice range, anti-base sentiments—and anxieties—are especially high. Said an 80-year-old Araya grandmother one day, “We have to stand up and fight while we can. If we don’t, what can we say later?”

Her words echo a concern raised by a spring 2018 TV program that examined the situation in Slupsk, Poland, a city of about 90,000 situated nearly three miles from an old airfield that is to become the site of a U.S. land-based Aegis missile complex by 2020. This is to protect Poland and its NATO allies from Russian attack. In the program, Slupsk residents showed documents explaining building height and commercial flight restrictions that had been revealed to them only after the finalization of the base construction agreement. “We should have fought this when we had the chance,” lamented one woman.

Several miles between an Aegis missile battery and a residential area may seem close, but the house of the Araya grandmother mentioned above is located only slightly over half a mile from the center of the GSDF practice area. Within a one-mile radius of that point also stand several hundred other houses, the local middle school, two elementary schools, one nursery school, one kindergarten, the prefectural disability services and support center, and the city’s public swimming pool. Over 30,000 people live within a two-mile radius of the proposed missile base site.

The Akita situation is far more vexing than that in Deveselu, Romania—a commune of several thousand that hosts a land-based U.S. Navy Aegis missile base—where at least two miles of farmland lie between the commune and the missile battery. The nearest city is located over four miles away. This base was installed under a NATO agreement, to counter Russia. Although memories of Russian occupation are still fresh among many in Romania (as they are in Poland), local fears of collateral damage from a Russian airstrike on the missile base have been reported.

Likewise, Araya residents worry about a permanent missile base attracting unwanted attention: “It could become a target,” many have said. It is a concern grounded in the collective memory of World War II, during which hundreds of thousands of civilians were targeted by Allied bombers. Memories of the deadly August 14, 1945, attack on Akita City’s port now feed the fires of resistance to the Aegis Ashore plan. To counter such concerns, a government representative said in a spring 2018 Akita City briefing—one of many local “explanation sessions” held by the Defense Ministry—that the proposed missile base was not expected to ever be targeted by any foreign power. However, a contradictory report that “the Japanese government plans to use existing Aegis destroyers and surface-to-air missiles to deal with attacks on Aegis Ashore units and nearby targets” appeared about one year later, highlighting the Abe administration’s dishonesty and lending credence to Araya residents’ worries.

As might be expected, the Aegis Ashore plan has become a major political issue in Akita. On April 7, 2019, the voters of the prefecture’s capital city went to the polls to elect a new council. Among the 46 candidates, 33 had expressed opposition to the Defense Ministry’s plan, and seven, support (but only one strongly). Twenty-five anti-base candidates won seats, and five supporters were victorious. The former, which included at least one LDP member, generally received more votes.

The election results reflected local sentiments and flew in the face of the ruling LDP; over the winter of 2018-2019, a private contractor conducted tests (including radar simulations) in the Araya area. Instead of making the results public in March as expected, Tokyo announced that their release would be delayed for two months. This led to accusations of government stalling in order to allow Akita LDP candidates to avoid having to take clear positions on the matter. Finally, and predictably, the Defense Ministry announced that the site had been deemed appropriate for an Aegis Ashore

base, on May 17.

Following the announcement, the Defense Ministry promptly resumed its attempts to convince the people of Akita City to accept the conversion of the Araya GSDF practice range into an Aegis Ashore missile base by holding another series of "explanation sessions." However, this effort backfired spectacularly when one of its officials fell asleep during a session and when it was discovered that the ministry had used inaccurate geological data in calculations regarding other potential Aegis Ashore base sites in the region. In the wake of this double scandal, the defense minister visited Akita to apologize to the governor in person in early June, but the damage had been done. Despite this very public discrediting of the Defense Ministry, Akita Prefecture's governor was subsequently denounced as "unpatriotic" by many anonymous netizens for not siding firmly with the Abe administration on the issue.

Unsurprisingly, the Aegis Ashore plan played a prominent role in the next election—the battle to represent Akita Prefecture in the upper house of the national Diet. Under normal circumstances, one ruling party candidate goes up against an assortment of opponents, each backed by a separate opposition party, a situation that favors the ruling party. But this time, the opposition parties—including the communist and socialist parties—chose to unite in backing a single, unaffiliated independent candidate in the hope of scoring a win for all on election day—July 21.

In a race that kicked off on July 4, 44-year-old Shizuka Terata—the wife of an opposition-party Diet member—ran against Matsuji Nakaizumi, the 40-year-old male incumbent ruling party (LDP) candidate. Not only did the latter have the public support of the Akita Prefecture governor and the Akita City mayor, but also that of the party and some of its biggest heavyweights, who paid visits to Akita to stump for him—two unprecedented stopovers were made by the prime minister, who apologized for the Defense Ministry scandal but at the same time insisted on a national need for land-based Aegis missile batteries. The candidates differed in many ways, but one of the most prominent disparities was the fact that Terata was openly opposed to the conversion of the Araya GSDF site into an Aegis Ashore base—and also, for that matter, to the purchase of such missile systems—while Nakaizumi avoided taking a clear stance regarding the Akita City location. However, his previous argument for a national need for Aegis Ashore batteries remained unchanged. Terata also voiced discontent with Abenomics—the prime minister's eponymous economic stimulus plan—openly questioning its beneficence to Akita. Nakazumi, on the other hand, embraced ambiguity. Whereas Terata campaigned for change, greater popular control over the government, and putting Akita's needs and concerns first, Nakaizumi represented the LDP and the political status quo.

Due in no small part to these differences, Terata emerged victorious on election day evening, winning by a comfortable margin of more than 20,000 votes. The outcome sent a strong message to Tokyo, but this does not mean that the Defense Ministry will give up on Aegis Ashore. Judging from post-election comments made by the minister—an office that changed hands in September 2019—the ministry is likely to double its efforts, with even stronger support from the ruling party. But the election result does serve to boost the confidence of the locals who are standing up in opposition to the ministry, the administration, and the party.

Some days after the election, a large anti-Aegis Ashore flyer, featuring the names of over 300 supporters, appeared in the generally left-leaning *Asahi Newspaper*. Funded mainly by local, individual contributions, the movement indicates that Akita people who do not want to have such a missile base in their city have begun to do what one Araya resident said they should do during one of my first forays into that area in the summer of 2018: "All of the people of Akita City should fight against it, because it's not (just an) Araya issue." Moreover, the flyer compared the Akita City neighborhood-proximity situation with that in Romania, presented details on possible radar

requirement—and actual radar wave—interference with local marine and air transportation and fishing, and brought up the fact that the proposed missile base site is at risk of being inundated by a tsunami at some point. The flyer's content reminded me of what the head of the neighborhood association that lies closest to the GSDF site said on one of my 2019 visits to the area: "It's not enough for us to simply shout 'No!', we have to educate ourselves about the issue, learn all we can, and then act based on our new knowledge—not just on our feelings."

The flyer also called attention to a matter that had previously been reported in some newspapers—the fact that the proposed Aegis Ashore site in Akita lies directly under the path that a North Korean long-range missile would take to Hawaii, and that the Yamaguchi candidate site lies directly under the path that such a missile would take to the U.S. bases at Guam. The flyer minces no words in suggesting that the Abe administration is motivated to place missile systems in the proposed locations to help protect not the people of Japan but U.S. territory and military assets from a North Korean attack, as well as to help feed the U.S. military industrial complex and the U.S. economy, and of course to politically assist President Trump. Prime Minster Abe's warm relationship with Trump helps support this theory, as does the fact that the initial Aegis Ashore purchase announcement closely followed a declaration made at a November 2017 joint Trump-Abe press conference in Tokyo that Japan would soon buy a great quantity of American military hardware.

One point that the flyer did not, but probably should, bring up is the political and economic power of the corporation that produces the Aegis Ashore missile systems—Lockheed Martin. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the company was the 12th biggest spender on lobbying in the United States from 1998-2018, shelling out over $255 million during the period, coming in just behind Northrop Grumman and Boeing. And Lockheed Martin covers its bases very well. The Center for Responsive Politics reports that it donated $148,699 to Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, $101,950 to Democratic Party senator Charles Schumer, $76,791 to Republican Party Senator Ted Cruz, $45,114 to independent Senator Bernie Sanders, and $44,781 to Republican Party candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 campaign cycle. The eight members of the twelve-member Lockheed Martin Board of Directors for whom Wallmine.com had net worth data as of March 28, 2019, collectively possess over $214 million, with the company's CEO—Marillyn Hewson—holding over $77.3 million and enjoying an annual salary of at least $22.8 million. It is no wonder that Hewson was declared the most powerful woman in the United States by *Fortune Magazine* in 2018.

The results of the July election not only emboldened the people of Akita who do not want a permanent missile base in their city, it also appears to have inspired the *Asahi Newspaper* to run a series of articles on the Aegis Ashore plan, towards which it has continuously taken a critical stance. One of these focused on the proximity of the proposed site to homes and schools, highlighting the psychological effects of the situation on the local people, including the children. Another brought up the 2017–2018 missile evacuation drills held on Akita's Oga Peninsula, just north of the prefecture's capital city. One leading participant quoted in the piece expressed regret for having allowed himself—in his opinion—to be used by the government to justify placing an Aegis Ashore base in Akita City. Finally, another installment told the story behind the extraordinary appearance of a strongly anti-Aegis Ashore article in Akita's leading local newspaper—penned by the newspaper's president—the previous July. This series of articles has no doubt also helped to encourage the dark horses of Akita to fight back.

Yet the anti-Aegis Ashore Akita underdogs are up against a powerful foe backed by great wealth and power, in a fight that transcends President Trump and the Republican Party and perhaps even the LDP. They have enjoyed several small wins, but the total victory they seek—the Defense Ministry giving up on purchasing even a single Aegis Ashore system—will be hard to achieve. However, given the strong anti-Aegis Ashore sentiment in Akita, the strategies now being pursued by the recalcitrant residents, and also new national interest and support, the Abe administration might in the end have

to give up on placing one in Akita City, or even in the entire prefecture.

Recent election results indicate that the political cost of forcing an Aegis Ashore base on the people of Akita—or on any community in the crowded country—might be very high indeed. Losing the voters of Akita—a long-time bastion of LDP power that has supported the party in 14 of the last 16 elections—could cost the party more Diet seats and foment dissention in the ranks; one senior Akita LDP lawmaker recently broke with his party on the matter. Abe might leave behind a weakened party at the end of his tenure, as his powerful mentor, Junichiro Koizumi, did when he stepped down in 2006.

Should these things happen, all the better. It is high time that the autocratic LDP either pay for its hubris, callousness, and untrustworthiness by being voted out of power, as it did in 2009, or change its colors and become a truly democratic, power-sharing, party of the people. Sadly, the latter scenario is highly unlikely, considering the party's current ultra-conservative bent and chauvinistic attitude, which stem directly from its close historical connections to U.S. postwar imperialism and anti-communism. The LDP's dominance today owes largely to the heavy CIA financial support and intelligence connections it enjoyed from its rightist founding in 1955 through the 1960s—connections that eventually led to the dissemination of $12 million in Lockheed Aircraft Corporation bribe money among LDP heavyweights in the early 1970s.

Therefore, the best hope Japan has of one day tasting the fruits of a truly functional and balanced democracy would be for the LDP to once again lose heavily in national elections, which would probably be the best way for the people of Akita to escape from the Aegis Ashore specter looming over them. Yet, also sadly, there is no sign that this might happen in the near future, as effective unions between the opposition parties are much more difficult to build at the national level than they are locally. In the meantime, the underdogs of Akita must, and will, resist and nurture their movement—one that is sure to grow in response to any increase in forcefulness on the part of the Defense Ministry.

A final note of irony: Ten miles south of the Araya GSDF practice range stands a lonely seaside monolith, marking the site of Japan's first experimental rocket launching operation, founded there in 1955—the year of the LDP's birth. It is easy to miss, but at least it is something the people of Akita can be proud of. Only very small rockets were tested at the site, which was chosen largely for its distance from fishing, shipping … and residential areas.

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