

# Former Japanese air force chief justifies colonialism and militarism

John Chan  
8 January 2009

A scandal that erupted last year involving the chief of staff of the Japan Air Self-Defence Force (JASDF), Toshio Tamogami, has highlighted the resurgence of militarism within sections of the Japanese political establishment. Tamogami was sacked from his post in October after he won an essay competition with an entry that justified Japanese military aggression in the 1930s and 1940s.

The "True Modern History" essay competition was organised by the APA Group, a Tokyo-based real estate developer, to challenge the prevailing official ideology that acknowledges in a limited fashion that Japan was guilty of aggression. APA Group CEO Toshio Motoya is well known in Japan for his right-wing views and as a close supporter of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

While Tamogami insisted on his right to enter the competition, it is clear that his essay was aimed at provoking a public debate aimed at reviving the ethos of Japanese militarism and freeing the armed forces from the constraints of the so-called pacifist clause in the constitution. The *Asahi Shimbun* reported last month that Motoya had personally intervened to ensure that Tamogami won the 3 million yen prize. Despite the fact that the identity of participants was meant to be kept secret, Tamogami chose to make his involvement public, thereby provoking a furore.

Tamogami's essay, "Was Japan an Aggressor Nation?", was an open apology for the crimes of Japanese colonialism. He justified the stationing of Japanese troops in China from the early twentieth century on the grounds that it was authorised by an international treaty imposed by eight imperialist powers after the crushing of the anti-colonial Boxers Rebellion in 1900. His argument is a classic example of justifying one's own crimes by pointing to those of others—in this case, Western colonial powers.

Tamogami's essay repeats the old lies used to justify Japan's subjugation of China in 1937, stating that it "was dragged into the Japan-China War by Chiang Kai-shek and was a victim". In

fact, the full-scale invasion of China, following the annexation of Manchuria in 1931, was long planned by Japan to gain control over raw materials, markets and cheap labour. Hard hit by the Great Depression in 1929, Japan was unable to economically compete with its stronger imperialist rivals without resorting to military means.

The international press highlighted Tamogami's declaration that Japan had been "trapped" into attacking Pearl Harbour in 1941 by the Roosevelt administration. In this case, however, there is an element of truth in his remarks. While American accounts emphasise US concerns for the Chinese people and Japan's "sneak attack" on Pearl Harbour, Washington's designs on China were no less predatory than Tokyo's. The imposition of a US oil embargo on Japan to force the withdrawal of its troops from China made war between the two imperialist powers all but inevitable.

Tamogami repeated Japan's wartime propaganda that it was "liberating" the yellow races from the "white nations", absurdly declaring that the Japanese occupation "is held in high esteem" in Asia. In fact, Japan's "Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" was a colonial empire that ruthlessly exploited labour and resources. In the name of freeing the yellow races, the Japanese army was responsible for numerous atrocities, including the slaughter of 300,000 people during the "Rape of Nanking"—a monstrous crime that is routinely denied by defenders of Japanese militarism.

The real purpose of the essay is to be found in its conclusion that Japan should not accept its defeat in 1945 and had to reassert itself as a "normal" military power. Tamogami called for a campaign against the widely held anti-militarist sentiment in Japan that "if the Japanese army becomes stronger, it will certainly go on a rampage and invade other countries". Urging an end to the constitutional barriers on the armed forces, he wrote: "Compared with the militaries of other countries, the SDF [Self-Defence Force] is bound hand and foot, and immobilised."

Tamogami's views are by no means exceptional in Japan's

political establishment. While adapting to anti-militarist sentiment at home and the dominant US role during the Cold War, successive governments in Tokyo never fully accepted Japan's responsibility for its wartime crimes throughout Asia. What made Tamogami's essay unusual was simply that he stated in public what other politicians and top officials discussed among themselves privately.

Increasingly, however, the constitutional ban on the use of its military overseas has become an intolerable restriction for the Japanese ruling elite, particularly as great power rivalry has intensified following the end of the Cold War. During the First Gulf War in 1990-91, the US pressured Japan to pay billions of dollars toward the US-led war against Iraq to further Washington's ambitions in the Middle East. In the 1990s, successive governments carefully sought to circumvent the constitution's pacifist clause, by having Japanese troops participate in so-called UN peacekeeping operations.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who held office between 2001 and 2006, took the first major steps towards the revival of Japanese militarism. By strongly backing the Bush administration's bogus "war on terrorism," he ensured US support for a more aggressive stance by Japan, in North East Asia in particular. Koizumi dispatched Japanese naval ships overseas for the first time to assist the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. In 2004, despite overwhelming public opposition, he sent Japanese troops to Iraq—the first time that the Japanese army had been in a combat zone since World War II.

At the same time, Koizumi sought to make the symbols of Japanese militarism respectable at home. In 2001, his government provoked a diplomatic row with China and South Korea by authorising the use of a controversial school history textbook sanitising the role of Japan in Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. His public visits to the notorious Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead led to further protests. Instead of offering any apology, Koizumi bluntly insisted that it was not the business of other countries.

Subsequent prime ministers—Shinzo Abe, Yasuo Fukuda and Taro Aso—sought to mend relations, particularly with China, which had become Japan's largest trading partner. None of them has publicly visited the Yasukuni Shrine, but all have maintained a more aggressive military posture. It was Abe who appointed Tamogami as JASDF chief of staff in March 2007 over better qualified officers. According to the *Japan Times*, Tamogami's background was limited to logistics, but he was closely connected politically to Abe via APA Group CEO Motoya.

Tamogami's views were in line with Abe's planned "education reform" to reintroduce indoctrination in Japanese

patriotism into schools. After the furore erupted over his essay, parliamentary hearings revealed that Tamogami had conducted lecture courses on wartime history for officers when he was the head of the Joint Staff College in 2002. He had written a number of essays similar to the one for which he received the prize.

Although he sacked Tamogami for the essay and promised to strengthen civilian control over the military, Prime Minister Aso defended Tamogami's "freedom of expression". Aso is well known for his nationalist attitudes. As foreign minister under Koizumi, he provoked controversy in late 2005 by declaring that China was beginning to be a considerable threat. Just months later, he called on the emperor to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, but later retracted the remark.

Since being sacked, Tamogami has continued his campaign, calling on December 1 for a national debate on the building of nuclear weapons. He declared that if Japan had had nuclear weapons in 1945 it should have retaliated in kind for the US atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He condemned the current teaching of history in Japan as written by the "winners" of the war and denounced the present alliance with the US as a humiliating subordination by Japan.

During a hearing before the upper house committee on foreign affairs and defence in November, Tamogami was asked about his essay and his views on revising the constitution. He simply replied: "I simply wrote what is generally spoken about. But now, I believe [the constitution] should be amended." A total of 97 JASDF officers entered the essay contest. According to the defence ministry, the Air Staff Office's Education Division faxed an outline to personnel about the competition in late May. Tamogami denied any direct role in this, claiming that if he had become involved more than 1,000 air force personnel would have participated.

It is no accident that the Tamogami controversy erupted in the midst of the greatest economic crisis since 1929. Just as in the 1930s, economic and trade tensions between the major powers are escalating. Tamogami speaks for layers in ruling circles who believe that Japan, like the US and its other rivals, must be free to use its military muscle to pursue its economic and strategic objectives.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**