

Japan at a Historical Inflection Point

Untangling the Complex Knot of Geopolitics, Domestic Politics, and the Security Alliance

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Abstract

This article examines the current security environment in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing Japan's historical inflection point and the complex security threats it faces. The analysis highlights the evolution of the US–Japan security alliance since its establishment in 1951, demonstrating its resilience amidst changing geopolitical and domestic political dynamics. The alliance has persevered despite various obstacles, benefiting from Japan's strategic location in a region marked by security threats posed by China, North Korea, and Russia. Concurrently, the United States, serving as a security guarantor in both the Atlantic and Pacific regions, has encountered increased demands and uncertainties regarding its security commitments. By delving into historical context, key drivers, and challenges, this article offers a comprehensive overview of the US–Japan security alliance, exploring its implications for regional and global security. Understanding the alliance's complexities offers valuable insights for policy makers and scholars seeking to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific region is currently experiencing a historical inflection point in its security environment. The Government of Japan (GoJ) asserts that Japan is facing the most complex and challenging security threats since the end of World War II. Over the past seven decades, the US–Japan security alliance has evolved, influenced by a complex interplay of historical, domestic, and geopolitical factors. Since its establishment in 1951, this alliance has adapted to changing geopolitical and domestic political dynamics, enduring various unique challenges. Given Japan's strategic location, it finds itself at the center of a precarious situation, grappling with security threats and challenges from neighboring countries such as China, North Korea, and Russia. The United States, being a security guarantor to its European and Asian allies and partners, has found itself stretched thin, managing regional instability in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters. Consequently, this has heightened the security dilemma and prompted doubts among allies regarding US security commitments. Through an examination of the historical context and an analysis of the key drivers and challenges that have influenced the alliance's development, this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the US–Japan security alliance. Additionally, it explores the implications

of this alliance for regional and global security and underscores its significance in the contemporary security landscape.

The Three Pillars of Japanese Security Policy

1947 The Constitution of Japan.

In February 1946, General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) in Japan, along with his occupation staff, drafted a new constitution for Japan. The GoJ made slight revisions to the final draft before its promulgation by the Diet.¹ Japan's postwar constitution of 1947, which replaced the 1889 Meiji Constitution, encapsulates three interrelated principles in Japanese constitutional culture: international pacifism, democracy, and popular sovereignty.² The constitution relegated the Japanese Emperor to a symbolic role, established a bill of rights that guarantees civil liberties, prohibited Japan from exercising its sovereign rights to wage war, and established checks and balances among the government branches of the Diet, Cabinet, and Judiciary.³ Surprisingly, the new constitution received widespread acceptance, not only from politicians and the domestic public but also from the emperor himself. However, the interpretation and implementation of Article 9 of Japan's constitution remain a subject of controversy, with domestic and international political considerations and challenges complicating the issue.⁴ It is worth noting that despite the controversy surrounding Article 9 and the constitution as a whole, no amendments have been made to date.

UN Charter

On 18 December 1956, Japan became a member of the United Nations (UN), marking a significant milestone. Since then, the UN Charter has played a crucial role in shaping Japan's foreign policies and guiding its international relations with other countries. This influence is evident in the 1960 Japan–US Security Treaty, where the UN Charter is recognized as the treaty's legal foundation. Throughout the treaty document, the UN Charter is referenced multiple times, demonstrating

¹ John C. Perry, *Beneath the Eagle's Wings: Americans in Occupied Japan* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980).

² John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

³ "The Constitution of Japan," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 3 May 1947.

⁴ Article 9 is a clause in Japan's Constitution that renounces war and prohibits Japan from maintaining a military force.

Japan's commitment to fostering peace and security, promoting human rights, and acknowledging the inherent right to individual or collective self-defense.⁵ In fact, Japan's foreign policy framework is deeply rooted in the principles of the UN Charter, which serves as a foundation for its understanding and interpretation of various international issues.

1951 US–Japan Security Treaty

The US–Japan security alliance rests upon the principles and democratic values enshrined in the 1951 US–Japan Security Treaty. According to this treaty, the United States pledged to defend Japan in the event of an armed attack on Japanese territory. In support of the alliance, Japan granted the United States continued use of military bases, which served the dual purpose of maintaining international peace, regional security in the Far East, and defending Japan itself.⁶

The security treaty, also known as the “unequal treaty of 1951,” was imposed on Japan by the United States as a condition for ending the US occupation of Japan.⁷ The signing of the treaty was widely regarded in Japan as a necessary sacrifice to regain sovereignty. However, it came at a domestic cost, as demonstrated by the Bloody May Day riots that erupted on 1 May 1952. Communist, socialist, and labor union groups that vehemently opposed the 1951 security treaty organized these riots.⁸ Tragically, two people lost their lives, and approximately 1,500 protestors and 800 police officers sustained injuries during the unrest. This event sparked a surge in anti-American sentiment within Japan and fueled a broader movement advocating for demilitarization and left-wing political ideologies in the country.

1960 US–Japan Security Treaty

The current treaty, which underwent revisions in June 1960, stands as the cornerstone of Japan's security policy. It grants authorization for the presence of US military bases and troops on Japanese soil, primarily to defend Japan in the event of an attack.⁹ The revised treaty also includes an obligation for the United

⁵ “Japan-U.S. Security Treaty,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 19 January 1960.

⁶ “Security Treaty between the United States and Japan,” Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, 8 September 1951.

⁷ Nick Kapur, “Japan's Streets of Rage: The 1960 US–Japan Security Treaty Uprising and the Origins of Contemporary Japan,” *Asia-Pacific Journal* 18, iss. 11, no. 3 (25 May 2020), <https://apjif.org/>.

⁸ Kim Kahan, “Riot: 6 Times Japan Got Mad,” *Tokyo Weekender*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.tokyo-weekender.com/>.

⁹ Mike M. Mochizuki, *Toward a True Alliance: Restructuring U.S.–Japan Security Relations* (Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 1997).

States to consult with Japan in advance if the US military bases were to be employed for combat operations beyond Japan's defense needs. Japanese government officials interpreted this provision as conferring the right to veto the United States from utilizing Japan as a launching pad for military operations in other parts of the region.

Although the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, also referred to as "Anpo" in Japan, now serves as the bedrock of US–Japan security relations, it was met with significant and prolonged popular protests, consisting of the largest demonstrations in Japan's postwar history. The sequence of following the treaty's conception includes the 19 May incident, in which Japanese Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke pushed the treaty through the National Diet after removing opposition lawmakers; the 10 June incident, where US envoys were mobbed by protestors while inside their vehicle; and the 15 June incident, a violent clash between the police and radical student activists on the National Diet compound. On 18 June, an estimated 330,000 demonstrators took to the streets near the Diet.¹⁰ Despite the protest, the treaty was signed the following day.

It is worth noting that this treaty was signed during a period when Japan and the Soviet Union were working toward normalizing relations, even as tensions between Washington and Moscow were escalating. Concurrently, the Japanese people raised concerns about the risk of entanglement in foreign conflicts, the United States' commitment to Japan's defense, and Japan's veto power over US troop movements in Asia.¹¹

Japan's Security Policies in a Historical Context

To understand the postwar Japanese constitution in its historical context, it is important to consider General MacArthur's role during the US occupation and the collective mind-set of the Japanese people at the time. As the SCAP, General MacArthur implemented sweeping political, economic, military, and social reforms aimed at democratizing and demilitarizing Japan.¹² The SCAP's government section was responsible for crafting the postwar constitution, which fundamentally reshaped the distribution of political power within Japan by curtailing the temporal authority of the Japanese Emperor and bolstering the power of the Diet. Consequently, many Japanese elites and politicians pragmatically aligned them-

¹⁰ Mochizuki, *Toward a True Alliance*; and Kapur, "Japan's Streets of Rage."

¹¹ Justin Jesty, "Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage & Grief: Hamaya Hiroshi's Photos of the Anti-Security-Treaty Protests," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, iss. 9, no. 2 (2 March 2015), <https://apjif.org/>.

¹² Michael Schaller, *Altered States: The United States and Japan since the Occupation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

selves with the United States, recognizing that policies aligning with US interests yielded significant benefits. During the US occupation, Washington provided more than USD 2.2 billion in economic and military aid to Japan, surpassing Japan's national budget at the time.¹³ This aid played a pivotal role in Japan's rapid postwar recovery. Furthermore, the Yoshida doctrine, named after the influential postwar prime minister, acknowledged the US security umbrella as a military, political, and economic advantage.¹⁴

Remarkably, the postwar Japanese constitution has remained unamended for more than 70 years, making it the world's oldest unamended constitution.¹⁵ Aside from Article 9, which has increasingly become a subject of debate and contention in recent years due to escalating security tensions globally, the Japanese constitution mainly focuses on provisions related to self-governance. One way to explain the persistence of an unamended constitution for more than 70 years is the security interdependence between Japan and the United States. The Japanese archipelago holds significant strategic importance for the United States due to its geographic location, which grants proximity to trade routes and access to key maritime areas.¹⁶ Japan's geostrategic position enables the United States to project military power in the region and impede China and Russia (and, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union) from gaining direct access to crucial maritime routes and terrain. For Japan, relying on the US security guarantee has allowed the country to prioritize its commercial interests without having to allocate extensive resources to defense spending. Consequently, defense minimalism has been the prevailing norm among Japanese policy makers. The imperative for Japan to amend its constitution has not been compelling enough to seriously consider revising or removing Article 9. However, as security threats in the region have intensified over the past decade, Japan has interpreted Article 9 in ways that strengthen its defense capabilities.

Another factor contributing to the unamended constitution is the collective psyche of the Japanese people. After the war, Japanese citizens widely acknowledged that their militarism and indoctrinated nationalism were major factors leading to

¹³ Nina Serafino, Curt Tarnoff, and Dick Nanto, *U.S. Occupation Assistance: Iraq, Germany, and Japan Compared* (Washington: CRS Report for Congress, 23 March 2006), 5.

¹⁴ Peter J. Katzenstein, *Rethinking Japanese Security* (New York: Routledge, 2008). In principle, the Yoshida doctrine prioritized Japan's economic development over defense development by depending on the United States for its security.

¹⁵ Sheila A. Smith et al., "Constitutional Change in Japan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

¹⁶ Thomas H. Etzold and John L. Gaddis, "Implementation: The Far East," in *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950*. Columbia University Press, 1978.

the conflict.¹⁷ Under US occupation, Japan underwent rapid transformation facilitated by the introduction of Western ideas and practices such as democracy, civil liberties, individualism, and access to US markets and technology. This collective memory of the war and its aftermath continues to shape the psyche of the Japanese people, resulting in a culture of antimilitarism. Japanese society can be broadly categorized into three schools of thought: pacifists, revisionists, and the mainstream.¹⁸ Pacifists advocate for strict adherence to the antiwar and antimilitary provision of Article 9. Revisionists argue that Japan should become a “normal” nation and rely primarily on itself for defense. The mainstream, which prevailed during the Cold War, believed in rebuilding Japan’s economic power and depending on the United States for security. Ultimately, Japanese citizens approach constitutional changes with caution, recognizing that the constitution has safeguarded their postwar democracy.

Japan’s Collective Memory of Internal and External Security Issues

The historical legacy of Japan’s prewar imperial colonization, the Pacific War, and the subsequent postwar reconstruction efforts have profoundly shaped its modern national identity as a peaceful island nation connected to the global community. Throughout the US occupation, the Japanese people internalized the significance of embracing new ideas and participating in international cooperation. However, similar to the immune system’s response to a foreign entity within the body, Japanese society has exhibited comparable responses toward the ongoing presence of the US military on the islands. This section aims to delve into the intricate dynamics among Japan’s domestic audience, its political establishment, and the US military concerning internal and external security events.

The first part will scrutinize the attempts by the Diet to revise the constitution, the connections between the Diet and the country’s elites, and the ensuing domestic reactions. The second part will delve into historical security events, analyze the respective responses from Japan and the United States, and evaluate their implications.

¹⁷ Etzold and Gaddis, “Implementation: The Far East.”

¹⁸ Richard C. Bush, “The U.S. Policy of Extended Deterrence in East Asia: History, Current Views, and Implications,” Arms Control Series 5 (Washington: Brookings Institution, February 2011), <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

Politics of Constitutional Revision

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is Japan's conservative and largest party and has been advocating for constitutional reforms since its inception in 1955. Its longstanding influence on Japan's economic growth miracle and its diverse membership, encompassing both right-wing nationalists and relatively liberal, progressive politicians, have contributed to the LDP's sustained dominance in power for the majority of the past seven decades. The LDP has identified four key areas for revision: Article 9, upper house electoral districts, access to free education, and emergency powers for the Cabinet.¹⁹

During the 1990s, Japan began reevaluating its national security policy in response to escalating external threats, particularly North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.²⁰ In 1999, the Diet ratified the Regional Contingencies Law, which outlined Japanese logistical support for the United States in peacetime, armed attacks on Japan, and regional security contingencies. In 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9, shifting from a strict interpretation to a more flexible approach, paved the way for security reforms through legislative measures that benefited the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the US military. However, the move stirred significant controversy within Japan.²¹

On 16 July 2015, three key bills were passed. The first, the Law on Response to Contingencies, granted Japan the ability to employ force in assisting another state, even if Japan itself is not under direct attack. The second bill replaced the 1999 Regional Contingencies Law with new provisions that eliminated strict geographical limitations on security scenarios, facilitating global cooperation with the US military and other allies. The third bill empowered the JSDF to rescue Japanese nationals overseas and protect the armed forces of the United States and other countries. These laws broadened the permissions and authorities of the JSDF, introducing the concept of "collective self-defense" under three specific conditions.²²

¹⁹ Sheila A. Smith et al., "The Politics of Revision," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

²⁰ Asai Motofumi, "The Bush Strategy and Japan's War Contingency Laws," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 1, iss. 5 (23 May 2003), <https://apjff.org/>.

²¹ Motofumi, "The Bush Strategy and Japan's War Contingency Laws"; and Sheila A. Smith et al., "Public Attitudes on Revision," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

²² The three new conditions are: (1) an attack on another state poses a "clear danger" to Japan's survival or to Japanese citizens' constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; (2) there is no alternative way of repelling the attack and protecting Japan and its citizens without the use of force; and (3) the use of force must be limited to the minimum necessary.

Despite the passage of these contentious bills through the Diet in 2015, the LDP has yet to achieve a successful amendment of Japan's postwar constitution.

The Critics

The legislations passed by the Japanese Diet have faced criticism from China and North Korea due to concerns about Japan deviating from its pacifist policies. South Korea has called for improved transparency and prior coordination regarding military movements related to the Korean peninsula. Within Japan, critics perceive the new laws as “war bills” that potentially grant authorization for the JSDF to participate in foreign conflicts under the guise of collective self-defense, thereby violating Japan's pacifist constitution.²³ Consequently, these security-related issues have become highly politicized and eroded Abe's political capital.

A significant portion of the Japanese public opposed the bills and felt that the government failed to adequately explain their implications, leading to protests near the parliament building in Tokyo in August 2015. Domestic critics argue that Abe's decision to force the bill through the Diet using his coalition's majority was undemocratic, as it disregarded the concerns of constituents and involved bending the rules.²⁴

Identity Politics from Japan's Collective Memory

The relationships between significant security incidents, the responses of the Japanese government and citizens, as well as the reactions of the United States, have been evaluated to assess their impact on the alliance. The analysis reveals that Japan's collective memory regarding security-related matters can be classified into three distinct areas: the domestic politics surrounding Okinawa, the cultural divide within the alliance, and the geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region.

Domestic Politics in Okinawa

To analyze the dynamics between the domestic audience, the GoJ, and the United States, five internal security-related incidents will be examined: the 1970 Koza riot/uprising, 1971 Okinawa Reversion Agreement, 1995 Okinawa rape incident, 2006 Camp Schwab Plan, and the 2012 protest of US Osprey deployment. These incidents have played a significant role in shaping the sentiments and responses of various stakeholders.

²³ Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Abe on His Heels,” *Foreign Affairs*, n.d., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

²⁴ Japanese diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation with author, 29 March 2023.

The presence of US military bases has long been a source of resentment and frustration for the Okinawan people, fueled in part by repeated criminal activities involving US servicemembers. The 1970 Koza riot, for example, was triggered by a drunk-driving accident caused by a US serviceman that resulted in the injury of an Okinawan man.²⁵ The riot saw the participation of approximately 3,000 Okinawans, who engaged in acts of arson, targeting cars with US license plates, a school, and a guard house on a US Air Force base.²⁶ This incident, occurring while the community was still reeling from the acquittal of three US service members who killed an Okinawan pedestrian earlier that same year, not only highlighted the deep-seated frustration among Okinawans but also foreshadowed the challenges that the US military and the GoJ would face in their relationship with the local population.

The 1995 Okinawa rape incident further exposed the complex political, social, and legal challenges associated with the US military bases in Okinawa. This incident prompted widespread protests in Okinawa, with demands for a reduction in US forces and revisions to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The incident underscored the political divisions between the GoJ and the Okinawa prefecture, as well as the societal divisions between mainland Japanese and Okinawan locals. The Okinawan government viewed the SOFA as an unfair treaty that shielded US servicemembers from facing appropriate consequences for their criminal actions and vigorously called for its revision.²⁷ However, the Ministry of Defense, representing the GoJ, was cautious about making changes that could impact the US–Japan Security Treaty and the overall US military presence in Japan. This led to a divergence of opinions between the Okinawan government and the Japanese and US governments, which shared a similar stance on the role of the US military in the region. The United States also perceived any revisions to the SOFA as having broader implications for its forces throughout the Indo-Pacific, including South Korea and beyond, potentially limiting its military activities worldwide.

Okinawans have consistently felt that they bear a disproportionate burden regarding the distribution of US military bases, calling for a more equitable distribution throughout Japan. However, attempts to transfer US military bases from Okinawa to mainland Japan have faced strong opposition from the mainland. Consequently, Okinawans continue to perceive the burden-sharing arrangement

²⁵ “The Koza Uprising,” *Okinawa Memories Initiative*, 2023, <https://okinawamemories.org/>.

²⁶ Jon Mitchell, “Military policeman’s ‘hobby’ documented 1970 Okinawa rioting,” *Japan Times*, 17 December 2011, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>.

²⁷ Masamichi S. Inoue, *The Rape Incident and the Predicaments of Okinawan Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

as unjust and unbalanced, contributing to anti-Tokyo sentiments. Grievances have persisted and grown since the 1971 Okinawa Reversion agreement, which involved relocating US military bases within the Ryukyu Islands. These sentiments have further complicated the dynamics of the alliance.²⁸

Anti-Tokyo Protests

Protests erupted in Tokyo, reflecting widespread discontent and demands for the independence of the Ryukyu Islands from Japan. Critics of the Japanese government raised allegations of secret deals with the United States, which undermined Prime Minister Eisaku Sato's credibility and fueled suspicions about the government's true intentions and discriminatory treatment of the Okinawans.²⁹ These suspicions primarily revolved around perceived favoritism toward mainland Japanese and the United States, at the expense of the Okinawans.

The 2016 Camp Schwab Plan further eroded trust in the government among the Okinawans due to unilateral changes made by Tokyo and Washington regarding the relocation of US troops from Futenma Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) in the city center of Ginowan City, to Camp Schwab in Henoko, Nago City.³⁰ Concerns over the potential risks to civilians and the possibility of air-craft crashes in the densely populated Ginowan City led to tensions surrounding Futenma. Despite strong opposition from the public in Nago City, the GoJ uni-laterally decided to relocate the base to the less densely populated area of Henoko. This decision exacerbated mistrust among Okinawans toward the national government's decision-making process, policy positions, and ability to accurately represent the demands and desires of Okinawa's constituents.

The relocation process has faced numerous complications and delays due to budgetary and political obstacles, further straining the relationship between Okinawa, the GoJ, and the US military. Ultimately, both the Okinawa Reversion agreement and the Camp Schwab Plan have intensified negative sentiments among Okinawans toward the Japanese government. These grievances have amplified societal and political divisions between Okinawans and mainland Japanese, as well as between local and national governments regarding the overall presence of US military forces in Japan.

²⁸ In the 1971 Okinawa Reversion Agreement, the United States relinquished its administration of Ryukyu Islands and Daito Islands and returned them to Japanese sovereignty.

²⁹ Hong N. Kim, "The Sato Government and The Politics of Okinawa Reversion," *Asian Survey* 13, no. 11 (November 1973): 1021–35, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

³⁰ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian E. Rinehart, *The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 20 January 2016), <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

Safety and Environmental Concerns

In addition to the ongoing issues, Okinawans have raised concerns regarding environmental and safety issues associated with US military aircraft, specifically the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft. The deployment of Ospreys to Okinawa in 2012 triggered a public outcry, with 25,000 protestors taking to the streets.³¹ These aircraft had a history of crashes during their development, resulting in 30 fatalities.³² Alongside safety hazards, the military aircrafts also caused noise pollution, negatively impacting the daily lives of Okinawan residents. For many years, US forces conducted nighttime helicopter assault training exercises from Kadena Air Base, located in Okinawa City, the second-largest city in Okinawa prefecture. Despite the protests, the Japanese government accepted the delivery of Ospreys in July 2022 and plans to acquire more, sparking further demonstrations at the gates of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force Tachikawa base. The Japanese government's decision to purchase Ospreys demonstrates its willingness to prioritize the security alliance with the United States, even if it entails potential political costs, although these costs may be marginal.

Cultural Divide of the Alliance

The Ehime Maru incident exposed a significant cultural divide between Americans and Japanese. On 9 February 2001, the USS *Greeneville*, a US Navy submarine, collided with a Japanese high-school fisheries training ship, the *Ehime Maru*, resulting in the tragic death of nine out of the 35 passengers on board.³³ However, the incident was reported differently by the Japanese and US media, reflecting a cultural bias. The Japanese press portrayed the *Ehime Maru* as a training vessel for high-school students and characterized the incident as a “careless human error” by the US commanding officer. On the other hand, the US media depicted the *Ehime Maru* as a fishing trawler and referred to the incident as an “unfortunate accident.” The divergent word choices and the way in which the incident was framed by the media created distinct images in the minds of their respective domestic audiences, shaping their perceptions of the tragic event.

These differing perceptions can also be attributed to contrasting cultural values and societal customs between the two countries. Immediately following the *Ehime*

³¹ Chiyomi Sumida and Travis J. Tritten, “Japan says 25,000 took part in Osprey protest on Okinawa,” *Stars and Stripes*, 14 September 2012, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

³² Jeremiah Gertler, *V-22 Osprey Tilt-Rotor Aircraft Program* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 19 April 2012), 7, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

³³ Tomoko Masumoto, “The Semantic Dimensions of an International Story: The ‘Ehime Maru’ Incident,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 205–13, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

Maru incident, the Japanese expected Captain Scott Waddle, the submarine's commander, to offer a prompt personal apology. In Japan, it is customary for the person in charge to promptly apologize on behalf of their organization as a demonstration of social maturity, sincerity, and contrition. However, a US Navy representative advised Captain Waddle not to apologize, as it could be interpreted as an admission of guilt during potential court trials. While the US President, the US Ambassador to Japan, and top US military officers issued official apologies, these gestures were not fully accepted by the Japanese due to their perceived lack of promptness, which the Japanese interpreted as a lack of sincerity. Captain Waddle was later acquitted in court and received a military honorable discharge along with full pay and benefits. He eventually conveyed an apology in a letter to the bereaved family members, albeit belatedly and impersonally. These divergent social customs and cultural values between Americans and the Japanese contributed to contrasting impressions of each other, fostering mismanaged expectations that fueled suspicions and mistrust.

Biased Media Reporting

The local Okinawans primarily rely on two local media sources—the *Ryukyu Shimpo* and the *Okinawa Times*—for their news consumption. However, due to the reversion agreement, nonlocal newspapers are prohibited from being published within the Okinawa prefecture, eliminating any competition with mainstream Japanese newspapers. Both Okinawan newspapers have been criticized for their alleged bias in reporting the news. For example, in December 2014, when a US Marine saved an elderly Okinawan gentleman, the local newspapers and broadcast companies did not attend the press conference on the incident and misrepresented the nature of the US military.³⁴ This consistent negative media portrayal has contributed to the development of a parochial narrative within Okinawan communities, fostering the belief that the US military is inherently malevolent.

Even during the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, the Okinawan news media provided limited coverage of the goodwill efforts conducted by the US military, in stark contrast to the coverage by mainland media. The way historical events have been conveyed through the media, or intentionally left unreported, has cast a long shadow over US–Japan relations.

³⁴ Robert D. Eldridge, “Words to Worry About: The Danger of Media Bias in Okinawa,” *Nippon.com*, 16 July 2015, <https://www.nippon.com/>.

Differing Norms and Structures

Another instance of cultural misunderstandings between the United States and Japan can be seen during Operation Tomodachi. On 11 March 2011, a devastating 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck Honshu Island, resulting in the displacement of 500,000 citizens, 16,000 fatalities, 5,000 injuries, and the destruction of 129,000 houses.³⁵ The following day, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power complex experienced explosions, necessitating the evacuation of nearby residents. In response to the crisis, Operation Tomodachi was initiated, involving all branches of the US military. They played a supporting role alongside the JSDF, assisting Japan with logistics, search-and-rescue operations, radiological decontamination, and the provision of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance capabilities. By early April 2011, the United States had provided USD 95 million in humanitarian funding. Unsurprisingly, the intervention by the United States was received very positively by the Japanese population. Operation Tomodachi was widely regarded as successful and contributed to a favorable public opinion of the US–Japan security alliance.

However, despite the positive image projected, the joint disaster response effort revealed significant challenges in coordination, decision-making processes, command and control, information sharing, and resource allocation between the two countries. The US approach to disaster response differed considerably from that of their Japanese counterparts, resulting in gaps in situational knowledge and differing expectations. In contrast to the US government, the Japanese government demonstrated a higher degree of compartmentalization among its ministries and agencies, which limited the establishment of a robust command-and-control center and impeded a timely whole-of-government response. Operation Tomodachi, much like the *Ehime Maru* incident, highlighted the differences between the two countries rooted in their distinct cultural, societal, and institutional norms and structures.

Geopolitics in Indo-Pacific Region

Japan's perception of China and Russia as threats has increasingly become palpable and widespread both domestically and globally. A significant incident in 2010 involved a Chinese fishing boat colliding with two Japanese Coast Guard vessels near the Senkaku Islands, leading to the arrest of the Chinese crew members.³⁶

³⁵ Jennifer Moroney et al., *Lessons from Department of Defense Disaster Relief Efforts in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 85–108, <https://www.rand.org/>.

³⁶ Shannon Tiezzi, "Japan Seeks Chinese Compensation Over 2010 Boat Collision Incident," *The Diplomat*, 14 February 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

Beijing implemented an unofficial embargo on rare earth minerals, leveraging the economic interdependence between the two countries. This embargo had significant implications for Japan's automobile industry, particularly in hybrid vehicle production, where rare earth minerals are vital components. Beijing further heightened tensions by arresting four Japanese businessmen for trespassing on a Chinese military facility. Subsequently, thousands of Japanese protestors took to the streets of Tokyo, expressing their dissatisfaction with China's behavior and the Japanese government's handling of the territorial dispute, specifically the release of the Chinese ship captain.³⁷

To address the escalating situation, the United States communicated to the Japanese government that the Senkaku Islands fall under the purview of the US–Japan security pact.³⁸ This implied that any military aggression by the People's Republic of China against the Senkakus would trigger the security pact. In a similar vein, in November 2013, Beijing unilaterally declared an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, creating overlaps with Japan's ADIZ. Once again, the United States reiterated its commitment to Japan's security and criticized Beijing's declaration as “unilateral, escalatory, and destabilizing.”³⁹ Despite objections from Japan and the United States, China persists in asserting its claims over the Senkaku Islands and the East China Sea, exacerbating the tension surrounding the territorial disputes.

US–Japan Security Cooperation: Evolution of the “Spear and Shield” Relationship

The “spear and shield” metaphor is commonly used to describe the division of security roles between Japan and the United States. In this metaphor, Japan assumes a defensive-oriented posture as the “shield,” while the United States assumes responsibility for offensive operations, both conventional and nuclear, as the “spear.”⁴⁰ This approach aligns with the Yoshida doctrine, which allows Japan to prioritize economic development by adopting a minimalist approach to defense spending (capped at less than one percent of GDP). The alliance between Japan and the United States is highly valued by the Japanese government as it plays a crucial role in maintaining peace, security, and stability within Japan, the surrounding

³⁷ Yoree Koh, “Tokyo Protests Blast China's Response to Collision,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 October, 2010, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

³⁸ “Clinton: Senkakus subject to security pact,” *Japan Times*, 25 September 2010.

³⁹ Michael Green et al., “Counter-coercion series: East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 13 June 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/>.

⁴⁰ Emma Chanlett-Avery et al., *Japan-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 6 January 2023), <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

region, and the global security environment.⁴¹ Additionally, the alliance serves as a deterrent against potential adversaries with hostile intentions.

In slight contrast, the United States primarily focuses on the military aspects of the alliance, particularly due to Japan's geostrategic location, which provides access to Eurasia, critical sea lines of communication, and the ability to project military power into the region.⁴² As a result, Japan's military geography is essential for the defense of the United States, as a conquest of Japan or a Japanese realignment with China would have detrimental effects on US national interests. In today's geopolitical environment, the US–Japan alliance has evolved from a bilateral relationship parochially centered around containing communism in a bipolar world to a regionally focused relationship characterized by shared threat perceptions in a multipolar world. Accordingly, the alliance continues to serve as a cornerstone for ensuring security and advancing prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, thereby safeguarding the international liberal order. However, it is important to acknowledge that the security alliance also carries the potential risk of entrapment, meaning that either party could become involved in a conflict or war against their wishes.

Japan's Tough Neighborhood

Japan finds itself in an increasingly challenging neighborhood surrounded by hostile neighbors. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's unilateral changes in the East and South China Seas, and North Korea's frequent nuclear and missile activities all contribute to Japan's security concerns.⁴³ Most importantly, the tensions developing around the Taiwan Strait could draw Japan into the conflict given its proximity to the island nation. According to CIA director William Burns, President Xi Jinping has ordered his country's military to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027.⁴⁴ While enhancing readiness does not constitute a declaration of war, President Xi's ambition should be taken seriously. These developments place Japan on the frontline, with three revisionist states possessing nuclear capabilities in close proximity. Given the shifting geopolitical landscape, Japan has

⁴¹ Ministry of Defense, Japan, "Significance of the Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements," n.d., <https://www.mod.go.jp/>.

⁴² Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁴³ According to the *New York Times*, North Korea launched at least 95 ballistic and other missiles in 2022, which was 10 times more than the previous year. Several of the missiles flew over northern Japan.

⁴⁴ Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom "CIA Chief Warns Against Underestimating Xi's Ambitions toward Taiwan." *Reuters*, 2 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

three options: (1) to disengage, (2) to align with a rising power, or (3) to pursue a balancing strategy.

The first option entails Japan refraining from taking any action against China, which could result in the rewriting of regional norms and order by the “neighborhood bullies.” While aligning with China may offer some potential benefits, it is highly impractical due to ongoing territorial disputes and lingering resentments from the pre-1945 period. This leaves Japan with option 3, which involves balancing against the revisionist states by strengthening its relations with the United States. As external threats have increased and mutual threat perceptions have aligned more closely, the US–Japan security alliance has indeed grown stronger.

However, Japan still believes that its current security posture is insufficient, particularly in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Over the past year, the Japanese government has recognized the importance of expanding its role in internal balancing, such as rearmament, as well as external balancing through broader collaborations with like-minded countries.

US–Japan Security Policy Responses

In light of the evolving threat environment, the GoJ has announced its intention to increase the defense budget to a record high of two percent of its GDP in the 2022 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*.⁴⁵ This includes the acquisition of unprecedented “stand-off” missile capabilities, referring to long-range missiles with the ability to strike enemy territory. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had a transformative impact on Japan, leading to a significant shift in Tokyo’s strategic calculations and military preparedness.

In 2022, Japan released its second-ever *National Security Strategy (NSS)*, the first one was published in 2013), along with the new *NDS* and Defense Buildup Program, which outline guidelines for developing and maintaining critical defense capabilities to support the *NDS*.⁴⁶ These documents primarily focus on enhancing Japan’s deterrence capabilities and addressing provocations from regional adversaries. Japan observed that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was facilitated by Ukraine’s inadequate defense capability. As a small state, Japan saw parallels between itself and Ukraine and viewed Russia in a similar light as China, both being large, autocratic states. Consequently, Japan recognized the need to address its security deficit by enhancing its defense capabilities in a manner that Ukraine was unable

⁴⁵ Ministry of Defense, Japan, “Significance of the Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements.”

⁴⁶ Adam P. Liff and Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Japan’s new security policies: A long road to full implementation,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), 27 March 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

to do. This shift prompted Japan's transition from a "proactive contribution to peace" policy outlined in its 2013 *NSS* to a retaliatory/deterrent approach utilizing counterstrike missile capabilities, such as cruise missiles.⁴⁷

US–Japan Threat Perception

Aside from Iran, Japan's threat perception aligns with that of the United States regarding China, Russia, and North Korea.⁴⁸ The heightened threat perception has led to the deepening and strengthening of the US–Japan security alliance through various security cooperation initiatives, presenting challenges to China's grand strategy. With more than 50,000 US troops currently stationed in Japan, surpassing troop levels in any other country, the United States demonstrates its commitment and preparedness to assist Japan in maintaining its security.⁴⁹ However, despite this US security guarantee, the Japanese still harbor concerns about the potential for abandonment.

Japan's Fear of Abandonment

In a historical context, the security guarantee provided by the United States now carries much greater potential costs and risks than it did 70 years ago. This shift is attributed to the increased capabilities of strategic competitors such as China and North Korea, particularly their extended range missile capabilities that pose a threat to the United States. Moreover, the unpredictability of US politicians has raised doubts about their willingness to engage in conflicts over territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas. These growing tensions have shaken Japan's trust in its sole ally.

The fear of abandonment has remained prominent in Japan since the "Nixon shock" of 1972, when President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger engaged in secret diplomacy with Chinese leaders and made a surprise visit to China without informing Tokyo.⁵⁰ In response to the initial shock caused by Nixon's trip, Japan hastily established relations with Beijing and aligned its policies with the United States, including severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The term *Nixon shock* also

⁴⁷ Ministry of Defense, Japan, *National Defense Strategy* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 17 December 2013), <https://www.cas.go.jp/>.

⁴⁸ US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington: Department of Defense, October 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁴⁹ Jim Garamone, "U.S. and Japanese Leaders Chart Path to Strengthen 'Cornerstone' Alliance," *DOD News*, 11 January 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

⁵⁰ James H. Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

encompasses Nixon's economic policy shift, which prioritized US economic growth and led to the termination of the Bretton Woods Agreement.⁵¹ This had negative economic repercussions for Japan, resulting in an increased value of the Japanese yen and US export tariffs on Japanese imports. Ultimately, Nixon's policies were perceived by the international community, and particularly Tokyo, as a unilateral act in America's national interest.

Parallel themes stemming from the Nixon shock are notably similar to the administration of former President Donald Trump. Trump's presidency caught the international community off guard with his unconventional and unilateral actions, as he criticized US allies and questioned their contributions. Further straining the US–Japan alliance, his “America First” rhetoric, coupled with his unpredictable behavior on social media, created global uncertainty and unease, making it difficult to discern Washington's clear intentions in its foreign policies. Trump's economic policies were contentious and controversial with foreign countries, as he aimed to revise bilateral trade agreements and implement new approaches to multilateral trade and economic cooperation.⁵² This led to Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which added to the uncertainty and raised questions about US reliability in the region.⁵³ This, coupled with his allied burden-sharing stance and ultimatums for increased financial contributions from Japan and South Korea for hosting US troops, further heightened the fear of abandonment among US allies and partners.

Trump's distancing from the region also initially weakened Prime Minister Abe's political standing, which was closely tied to America in terms of security and economic matters.⁵⁴ Japan's concerns over China's revanchist ambitions and North Korea's nuclear capabilities were key drivers for strengthening the alliance and establishing a robust deterrent against regional adversaries. On the economic front, Japan's Abenomics policy aimed to drive structural reforms through initiatives like the TPP.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, US Department of State, “Nixon and the End of the Bretton Woods System, 1971–1973,” *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, n.d., <https://history.state.gov/>.

⁵² V. B. Supyan, “President Trump's Foreign Economic Reforms: Preliminary Results,” *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 90, no. 6 (2020): 653–60, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>.

⁵³ Mireya Solis, “Trump withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership,” *Unpacked* (blog), 24 March 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁵⁴ Tom Le, “Is America Abandoning Japan?,” *National Interest*, 1 February 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

⁵⁵ According to Investopedia.com, *Abenomics* refers to the economic policies introduced in 2012 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to revitalize Japan's economy. These policies encompassed measures such as

Despite these political obstacles, Abe wielded significant influence in shaping the US–Japanese relationship through personal engagements with Trump. The warm rapport and direct line of communication between the two leaders prevented negative surprises akin to the Nixon shock and helped keep Japanese officials informed about major US policy changes.⁵⁶ After a North Korean missile launch, Trump told reporters, “The United States of America is behind Japan, our great ally, 100 percent.”⁵⁷

Furthermore, the Trump administration adopted the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, initially proposed by Japan as a foreign policy approach to address the evolving geopolitical landscape in Asia. This strategy expanded the diplomatic and security perspectives to encompass interconnected continents (Asia and Africa) via two oceans (the Pacific and Indian Oceans).⁵⁸ The convergence of foreign policies between the United States and Japan reinvigorated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) minilateral and redirected the security priorities of the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), which was previously known as the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) since its re-naming in 2018. As a result, Japan is acknowledged as a driving force for transformation and a prominent regional leader, capable of exerting influence over its influential ally. Nevertheless, conflicting viewpoints emerge questioning the justification for preserving the current bilateral relationship, as some argue that prioritizing appeasement towards the United States may impede Japan’s pursuit of its long-term interests.

In shaping the alliance cohesion, the GoJ must strike a delicate balance between its dependence on and independence from the United States to mitigate the risks of abandonment and entrapment. Failing to take sufficient measures on its own security may lead to Japan being labeled as a free rider, inviting further criticism and potential abandonment. Conversely, if Japan becomes too autonomous, the United States may view it as self-reliant and reconsider the need to maintain the current levels of troops and resources in Japan. Japan faces complex challenges at the international and domestic political levels, requiring careful navigation of

increasing the nation’s money supply, implementing government spending initiatives, and enacting reforms aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of the Japanese economy.

⁵⁶ Hannah Fodale, “Abe’s Investment in His Relationship with President Trump has Advanced Japanese Interests,” *Debating Japan* 3, no. 1 (30 January 2020), <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁵⁷ “Trump says U.S. behind Japan ‘100 percent’ after North Korea Missile Launch,” *Reuters*, 11 February 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁵⁸ “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development,” (speech transcript, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 27 August 2016, <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/>).

conflicting policies and competing interests. Balancing internal and external considerations across various dimensions creates a multifaceted dilemma for Japan to address.⁵⁹

Japan's Policies Operationalized

Taking inspiration from Abe, the current prime minister, Fumio Kishida, embarked on a comprehensive diplomatic tour aimed at deepening the security alliance with the United States and other like-minded countries.⁶⁰ Following the release of Japan's NSS in December 2022, Prime Minister Kishida visited several G7 countries the following month to seek assurances and forge closer security ties with Western partners. In addition to the Quad minilateral involving the United States, India, and Australia, Japan is also gaining traction with developing trilateral security groupings.

In March 2023, Japan achieved a historic milestone by joining a trilateral framework with the Philippines and the United States to enhance deterrence against China and prepare for potential crises related to Taiwan.⁶¹ Around the same time, Prime Minister Kishida held a summit meeting with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, marking the first official visit by a South Korean president in 12 years.⁶² This summit showcased a strengthened trilateral relationship among the United States, Japan, and South Korea, contributing to the regional security landscape.

Japan stands to benefit from forging closer relationships through these security arrangements in terms of resource sharing, military interoperability, and increased operational flexibility and range. However, these security arrangements also create a situation prone to miscalculation and escalation. The enhanced security posture of Japan, due to the uncertainty of intentions, may inadvertently convey the impression to China, North Korea, and Russia that their own security is diminishing in comparison.⁶³ This could lead to a reciprocal strengthening of security coalitions

⁵⁹ In this article, *multidimensional factors* are defined as a range of national and international instruments of power, including diplomacy, information, military capabilities, economics, regional institutions, international institutions, media, and interest groups, among others.

⁶⁰ Maria Siow, "Was China the focus of Japan PM Kishida's whirlwind G7 'summit diplomacy' tour?," *South China Morning Post*, 13 January 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

⁶¹ "Japan, Philippines, U.S. to set up 3-way security framework," *Kyodo News*, 28 March 2023, <https://english.kyodonews.net/>.

⁶² Andrew Yeo, "South Korea-Japan rapprochement creates new opportunities in the Indo-Pacific," *Order from Chaos* (blog), 17 March 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁶³ For the original security dilemma, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

and military capabilities in an attempt to restore the balance of power, potentially triggering an arms race, heightening regional tensions, and ultimately escalating toward conflict.

The Indo-Pacific region is particularly vulnerable to the risk of conflict due to a higher likelihood of misinterpreting military capabilities as offensive rather than defensive. Given the geographical dynamics of the region, military capabilities are often perceived as intended for offensive purposes. For instance, the significance of sea lines of communication and maritime resources, such as fisheries, energy, and minerals, for most regional actors fosters a destabilizing competition to develop power-projection capabilities at sea and in the air.⁶⁴ These power-projection capabilities, including fighter jets and carrier strike groups, contribute to the perception that potential adversaries' capabilities are offensive, fostering increased mistrust, suspicion, and potential miscalculations among them.

Nevertheless, historical examples, such as the Soviet Union or China during Mao Zedong's era, demonstrate that effective deterrence measures can obstruct revisionist ambitions.⁶⁵ The United States, with its credible military posture and capabilities, played a crucial role in maintaining the relative peace of the Cold War, ensuring it remained "cold." Building upon this, the US Department of Defense has embraced the concept of integrated deterrence in the 2022 National Defense Strategy. This strategy emphasizes the importance of planning, coordinating, and operating with all government agencies, allies, and partners to establish a combat-credible force across all domains and across the full spectrum of conflict, with the goal of deterring aggression.⁶⁶ While deterrence merely freezes conflicts at a given moment, it remains an effective policy option to prevent revisionist states from exploiting security vulnerabilities to alter the existing international order. Therefore, a national strategy centered on deterrence, although not flawless, could be the most viable and effective option considering the current security challenges.

These layers of security alignments and frameworks contribute to the establishment of a robust regional security architecture that ensures a balance of power and strengthens the posture of allied nations. They also serve as incentives for other countries in the region to reconsider aligning with China. Furthermore, these evolving security groupings in the Indo-Pacific region are reshaping the

⁶⁴ Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 49–80, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

⁶⁵ According to Jervis, deterrence occurs when one individual dissuades another by persuading them that the potential benefits of a particular action are outweighed by the perceived costs of the associated penalties. See Robert Jervis, *Deterrence and Perception* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁶⁶ David Vergun, "Official Says Integrated Deterrence Key to National Defense Strategy," *DOD News*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

previous bilateral model, which relied on the “hubs-and-spokes” alliance system, to a framework that better suits to the contemporary strategic environment in a multipolar world.

This shift signifies the region’s progression toward a more multilateral alliance system akin to NATO, offering the advantages of collective defense, burden sharing, and unified action among member countries.

Conclusion

Over the past 70 years, the United States and Japan have held differing perspectives on domestic, international, and geopolitical issues due to variances in norms and structures. The media, domestic and international politics, as well as the security alliance, have influenced the collective memory of both nations, resulting in intricate identity politics and multiple lenses through which security challenges are viewed. These differences have at times caused misalignment in expectations, misunderstandings, and mistrust between the two countries, particularly regarding the presence of US military bases and political intentions.

However, as regional threats have grown, the US–Japan alliance has adapted to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, with Japan assuming a more equal partnership and regional leadership role. Despite this progress, Japan still faces domestic limitations, including slow decision-making processes, legal constraints, and a struggling defense industry.

Consequently, Japan will continue to depend on the United States and like-minded partners to address the widening military capabilities gap between China and other regional powers. In addition to the United States, Japan must further strengthen alliance systems with countries such as India, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines to establish a robust security architecture that balances power in the region. Furthermore, Tokyo must foster strong relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to mitigate Japan’s strategic vulnerability stemming from limited domestic sources of raw materials, energy, and insufficient food supply.⁶⁷

Ultimately, the past serves as a precedent and plays a crucial role in shaping the present and future. By examining Japan’s historical events, the complex relations between the two countries can better be evaluated and explained. By untangling the nuances of this multifaceted security alliance, Japan and the United States can establish a stronger foundation for mutual understanding, gain fresh insights, and

⁶⁷ Posen, *Restraint*.

develop an improved regional security architecture to effectively manage current threats and prevent future conflicts.

Policy Recommendations

Domestic Politics. The actions of every US Sailor, Marine, Airman, Guardian, And Soldier can have strategic and long-lasting effects on the US–Japan alliance. Therefore, comprehensive policy reforms should be considered at all levels. Within the military, there should be the implementation of a “zero-tolerance” policy toward criminal activities, along with predeployment educational programs that provide basic cultural and language training. These measures aim to help service members bridge cultural gaps and assimilate better into the foreign country. Additionally, research efforts in academia should focus on understanding the systemic issues connecting overseas troop deployments with criminal activity in the host nation. This research would provide valuable insights for addressing and mitigating these challenges. Furthermore, while communicating the significance of the US military presence in Japan is the responsibility of the Japanese government, the direct dissemination of a joint message from the US Forces Japan (USFJ) along with the JSDF via national media could enhance the affinity between USFJ and the Japanese public. At the government level, a thorough review of the SOFA should be conducted to ensure clear, fair, and acceptable terms for all parties involved. If amendments are warranted, the revised terms could anchor on the recently signed Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between Japan and Australia, as well as Britain, as reference points in order to maintain consistency with contemporary laws.

Geopolitics. In addition to the Quad, which establishes its regional architecture across the Indo-Pacific region’s two oceans, it is worth considering two additional regional architectures—one focused on the East China Sea and the other on the South China Sea. While the Quad’s geostrategic scope extends across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, nonaligned countries like India may have limited interests in getting involved in a potential Taiwan contingency. Therefore, directing attention toward the two seas would engage more of those countries that are geographically closer to relevant maritime issues, such as safeguarding the freedom of navigation and ensuring open passages through the Malacca, Luzon, and Taiwan Straits. Southeast Asian and East Asian countries understand that national security encompasses not only territorial defense but also economic security. This calls for a more responsive network of like-minded allies and partners to facilitate more efficient diplomatic, economic, and military engagements in the event of a maritime conflict or Taiwan contingency. With the understanding that certain countries among them advocate for independent foreign policies, the regional framework for the South China Sea could include Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines,

Singapore, and Vietnam. Meanwhile, the East China Sea regional framework could include Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea.

Security Alliance. The US–Japan relationship has evolved from being driven by geopolitical fears and threats to becoming an alliance focused on regional security and prosperity. Shifting further from a bilateral to regional and multilateral perspectives would enhance stability in the region and strengthen the alliance. Furthermore, the continued US military presence in Japan serves as a stabilizing and deterrent force at both conventional and nuclear levels, balancing the power in the region against revisionist states. Therefore, as Japan establishes its joint forces command headquarters, establishing a combined forces fusion cell with the United States should be considered to enhance military “jointness.” At the strategic level, the implementation of a sophisticated combined command structure will enhance policy alignment and alliance cohesion, unequivocally supporting the division of labor. This would allow for more efficient planning, coordination, and interoperability during humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and contingency operations. Similar to the Cold War era, which was characterized by strategic competition and a constant race for superiority in a contest of “one-upmanship,” the United States and Japan, along with other allies and partners in the region, should anticipate and prepare for a similar long-term competition. However, this competition is more complex due to the changing characteristics of deterrence and warfare today, including multidimensional aspects such as weaponized economic interdependence, shifting international and regional frameworks, gray-zone operations, and advanced weapon systems. Thus, the United States and Japan should prioritize the development of their long-term grand strategies and resiliency across the full spectrum of conflict, particularly within the political and military institutional structures at both the domestic and international levels. 🌐

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