



Dispelling Three Myths about the U.S.- Japan Security Alliance

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Abstract

The year 2020 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which the United States government itself recognizes as the “cornerstone of U.S. security interests in Asia and fundamental to regional stability and prosperity” (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2020). This treaty and the resulting partnerships form the bedrock of peace in the Indo-Pacific region, and yet during my time on the JET program, I have encountered multiple individuals from the United States, Japan, and elsewhere who have a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. As the world changes and certain states, including the United States, become more isolationist, particularly in the COVID-19 era, it is important to clarify these misunderstandings and continue to promote the bilateral relationship that has proven critical to U.S. and Japanese security and promoted prosperity across the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Dispelling Three Myths about the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance

For sixty years, the United States-Japan Security Treaty has served as both the foundation for modern U.S.-Japan relations and the bedrock of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The importance of the relationship is acknowledged at the highest levels of government in both states, with the United States recognizing the treaty as the “cornerstone of U.S. security interests in Asia and fundamental to regional stability and prosperity”¹ while the Japanese government proclaims “our Alliance has played and will continue to play an integral role in ensuring the peace and security of our two countries while realizing our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.”² This alliance is crucial to world peace and prosperity and provides a prime example of mutually beneficial law-abiding cooperation for the rest of the world.

Despite the immensely vital role this relationship plays, during my time on the JET program, I have encountered many people from the United States, Japan, and elsewhere who have a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. In my discussions with American and Japanese citizens, three primary misconceptions have proven particularly widespread. These assumptions are empirically inaccurate, demonstrably false, and damaging to the United States, Japan, and the world at large. As the world changes and certain countries, including the United States, become more isolationist, particularly in the COVID-19 era, it is important to clarify these misunderstandings and continue to promote the bilateral relationship that has proven critical to U.S. and Japanese security and ensured prosperity across the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Myth #1: The Japanese Self-Defense Force is an ill-prepared, under-equipped force incapable of protecting Japan absent the United States.

This myth is arguably the easiest of the three to dispel, and its perpetuation is likely linked to the pacifist nature of Japan’s constitution, particularly Article 9, which explicitly renounces “war and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.”³ However, Article 9 does not

¹ “US Relations with Japan: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet,” Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State, January 21, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-japan/>

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Joint Statement on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America,” press release, January 17, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002758.html

³ “New Role for Japan,” The Washington Times, February 10, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/feb/10/editorial-japan-becomes-the-worlds-fourth-most-pow/>

preclude the maintenance of a robust defense force capable of ensuring the territorial integrity of the state, which is the function of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF). As a result, the JSDF is one of the most technologically advanced armed forces on the planet.⁴ Additionally, as a result of constant training with the United States and other partner nations in the region, the personnel comprising the force are disciplined, well trained, and prepared to respond to any incident whether it be an attack by a foreign power, terrorist event, or natural disaster. Since the Cold War, Japan has consistently been within close proximity of ideologically opposed nuclear powers, including the USSR, China, and North Korea, which has necessitated the maintenance of a ready and capable defense force, making Japan one of the most effective forces on the planet.

The JSDF possesses some of the most advanced military technology the world has ever seen, encompassing land, air, and sea defense capacities that make them a formidable force on the world stage.⁵ As one of the United States' most trusted partners, Japan has always been amongst the first to receive new technologies. The JSDF air force has for decades operated the F-4 Phantom, F-15, and the F-2 (Mitsubishi modified F-16) fighter jets, which have consistently ranked amongst the world's premier interceptors. Japan is one of the few nations allowed to modify U.S. military hardware (see previously mentioned F-2) while also being one of the few nations granted permission to operate its own F-35 fleet.

As for their naval capacity, Japan boasts a range of ships that exceed their contemporaries' abilities and are uniquely suited to ensuring territorial integrity. In terms of offensive capacity, the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) possesses deep water capable helicopter carriers, frigates, and a robust submarine fleet. These ships arguably comprise the most effective navy in Asia.⁶ The backbone of their defense capabilities are destroyers equipped with the Aegis missile defense system and a full range of auxiliary ships. The Aegis system has been thoroughly tested through U.S. action in the Middle East and demonstrated effectiveness against conventional missile types that Japan's regional neighbors have stockpiled.⁷ Further augmenting their naval capacity is the widely accepted belief amongst military analysts that, with slight modifications, their helicopter carriers are more than

⁴ "New Role for Japan," *The Washington Times*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/feb/10/editorial-japan-becomes-the-worlds-fourth-most-pow/>

⁵ Christopher Hughes, "Japan's Military Modernisation: A Quiet Japan China Arms Race and Global Power Projection," *Asia-Pacific Review* 16, no.1 (2009): 84-99.

⁶ Kyle Mizokami and Alex Lockie, "Why Japan Has the Best Navy in Asia," *Business Insider*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-japan-has-the-best-navy-in-asia-2016-10>

capable of operating as conventional aircraft carriers, which is the most effective forward operating tool for any military since World War II.⁸ As a result, Japan possesses the most aircraft carriers in Asia, including more than, most notably, the large, increasingly belligerent, and more economically powerful China. As an island nation, the presence of a competent navy is vital to defense, and the MSDF has shown itself able to respond, within minutes, to any crisis occurring within its territory.

The JSDF is one of the most well-trained forces on the planet. They benefit from near constant training both independently and in conjunction with partner nations like the United States, South Korea, Australia, and India. The interoperability with foreign militaries enhances the response potential wherever an incident may occur. With regards to operational effectiveness, as an island nation frequently subject to all manner of natural disasters, the personnel of the JSDF frequently deploy in response to these hazards, which has resulted in the development of an effective logistics system capable of putting personnel and equipment where it is most needed quickly and efficiently.⁹ This capability is complemented by a diverse geography that has prepared the JSDF for operations wherever the threat may arise. The notion that the armed forces of Japan are ill prepared for defense operations is a fallacy that ignores the facts on the ground.

The collective effect of these assets is the existence of a well-equipped, effective, and multifunctional armed force that is bolstered by the support of friendly nations across the globe. The JSDF is more than capable of responding to threats both foreign and domestic and, given Japan's economic power, technological advancements, and well-documented interoperability with the United States and other partner states, should be considered one of the premier armed forces on the

⁷ Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of China," *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 14, 2018, last modified July 16, 2020, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/china/>; Eleanor Albert, "North Korea's Military Capabilities," Council on Foreign Relations, last updated November 16, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-koreas-military-capabilities>

⁸ "Japan to Convert Helicopter Carrier Izumo into Aircraft Carrier," *Nikkei Asia*, December 11, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-to-convert-helicopter-carrier-Izumo-into-aircraft-carrier>; "U.S. F-35B's May Conduct Takeoff and Landing Drills on Japan's Renovated Izumo Carriers," *The Japan Times*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/08/23/national/u-s-f-35b-drills-japan-helicopter-carriers/>; and Miguel Ortiz, "Japan Has Started to Convert Its First Aircraft Carrier in 75 Years," *Business Insider*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/japan-starts-conversion-of-first-aircraft-carrier-in-75-years-2020-7>

⁹ The Government of Japan, "Emergency Relief Assistance Provided by Japan Disaster Relief Team," *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/brand-connect/governmentofjapan/emergency-relief-assistance-provided-by-japan-disaster-relief-team/>; "Japan Calls Up SDF Reserves for First Time Since 3/11 for Typhoon Hagibis Disaster Relief," *The Japan Times*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/28/national/japan-sdf-reserves-typhoon-hagibis/>; and Yasumasa Nishiyama, "Disaster Relief Activities of the Japan Self-Defense Force Following the Great East Japan Earthquake," *Disaster MED Public Health Prep* (2014): 194-198.

planet. As the world's fourth best armed force¹⁰ with the sixth highest military expenditure,¹¹ those who underestimate the abilities of the JSDF ignore reality. These advantages result in a Japan that, far from being overly reliant on U.S. military might, is a vital partner in an alliance that protects both nations' interests.

Myth #2: The United States is bearing the brunt of the cost for protecting Japan and receives little to nothing in return for its sizeable investment.

The Japanese government invests significantly in their own defense capabilities as well as expends a considerable amount for the maintenance of the United States Forces in Japan (USFJ). Japan also provides significant contributions in return for the protection afforded by the presence of USFJ and the U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty. The second myth is particularly prevalent amongst those who advocate a more isolationist approach to American foreign policy. However, like the first myth, this idea is not reflected in the facts.

Japan not only pays its fair share of the burden for hosting U.S. troops but, one could effectively argue, also contributes more than the United States. For the fiscal year 2017, the United States spent approximately \$2.7 billion on non-personnel USFJ costs (costs that exist regardless of where troops are stationed).¹² That amounts to less than 0.5 percent of the total U.S. defense budget for the fiscal year 2017.¹³ By contrast, Japan spent approximately \$2 billion as a result of the Host Nation Support Agreement,¹⁴ which, while less than the United States, does not account for the additional benefits afforded to the United States by existing U.S.-Japan agreements. Such benefits include the approximately \$1.2 billion Japan spends on subsidies for base-hosting communities,¹⁵ the fact that Japan pays the costs associated with relocating bases, as well as 75 to 95 percent of the

¹⁰ "New Role for Japan," *The Washington Times*.

¹¹ Mariko Oi, "Japan's Contradictory Military Might," *BBC News*, March 15, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17175834>

¹² *Japan-US Relations: Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2018).

¹³ Based on a requested budget of \$582.7 billion. "Department of Defense (DoD) Releases Fiscal Year 2017 President's Budget Proposal," U.S. Department of Defense, February 9, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/652687/department-of-defense-dod-releases-fiscal-year-2017-presidents-budget-proposal/>

¹⁴ *Japan-US Relations: Issues for Congress*

¹⁵ "U.S. Forces in Japan: Related Costs Borne by Japan (JFY 2015)," Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000098651.pdf>

construction costs incurred on these bases. For example, amongst others, Japan spent \$12.1 billion on the Futenma Replacement Facility on Okinawa.¹⁶ This far and away makes Japan the largest partner nation in terms of contributions made to hosting U.S. troops.¹⁷ When considering the full scope of expenses incurred by Japan for hosting U.S. troops on a purely numeric basis, the United States is fairly recompensed, if not exceeded by, the Japanese contribution.

While the monetary assistance Japan pays toward the maintenance of USFJ is significant, it does not cover the full scope of Japan's contributions to the United States in the social, diplomatic, economic, and military spheres. Japan acquires nearly 90 percent of their foreign defense acquisitions from U.S. firms, which is a significant contributor to the U.S. economy. Japan was the fifth largest trading partner of the United States in 2020, ahead of every NATO ally except Canada.¹⁸ In addition to the multiple defense treaties between the two nations, Japan has sent troops to aid the United States with reconstruction in Iraq, marking the nation's first overseas deployment of military assets since World War II.¹⁹ There are robust technology transfers and development partnerships between the two nations.²⁰ Japan frequently supports U.S. initiatives at the United Nations. Arguably, the most important contribution Japan makes, as a result of its proximity to three of the United States' top adversaries (China, Russia, and North Korea), is the near-constant stream of civilian and military intelligence on these nations' actions, enhancing U.S. defense and response capabilities and contributing greatly to the security of the United States.

Myth #3: The U.S.-Japan security relationship is a relic of a bygone Cold War era and no longer provides any material value to either party.

During the Cold War, Japan provided an ideological counterbalance to hostile nations and a staging ground for military operations during several U.S. conflicts, all while increasing the scope of

¹⁶ *Japan-US Relations: Issues for Congress*

¹⁷ Tatsuro Yoda, "Japan's Host Nation Support Program for the US-Japan Security Alliance: Past and Prospects," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 6 (2006): 937-961.

¹⁸ Based on U.S. Census information, which can be found at the following web address: <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/top/top2011yr.html>

¹⁹ Masaya Kato, "SDF Logs Cast Doubt Over Legality of Japan's Iraq Mission," *Nikkei Asia*, April 17, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/SDF-logs-cast-doubt-over-legality-of-japan-s-iraq-mission>

²⁰ Tate Nurkin and Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, *Emerging Technologies and the Future of US-Japan Defense Collaboration* (Atlantic Council Sowerd Center for Strategy and Security, 2020).

the U.S. defensive umbrella. In return, Japan received development grants and protection from the U.S. military. However, as the Cold War has ended, many individuals argue for the alliance's abrogation. This would be a mistake for U.S.-Japan interests as well as those of the greater community of nations.

The U.S.-Japan security relationship continues to serve the same roles it always has, but given the current prevailing global trends, it has a renewed significance. Japan continues to be surrounded by potentially hostile nations,²¹ and as such, the U.S. military is a powerful deterrent against their machinations and, as previously mentioned, the United States receives her fair share of benefits from the alliance. However, the true benefactor is the world at large. While certain leaders retreat into isolationist mindsets and away from multilateral cooperation, the U.S.-Japan relationship continues to demonstrate the benefits of cooperation. Both nations continue to advocate for those systems that promote peace and prosperity, including adherence to international law, non-violent confrontation, and free trade. Through actions like freedom of navigation patrols and support for international institutions, both the United States and Japan further society and, through their successes, promote these values to other nations. This final myth is the most dangerous as it ignores real, potentially existential threats faced by a world that increasingly seems to diverge from a long-running, rules-based order.

Conclusion

Some increasingly powerful nations actively partake in bellicose actions that pose material threats to the world at large. Nuclear proliferation, territorial expansion, and the commission of crimes against humanity are on the rise. The planet also faces threats like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which not restricted to individual nation-states. As these threats rise, it is increasingly important that strong, mutually beneficial alliances and other forms of international cooperation continue to shape international relations. These alliances promote intercultural exchanges, scientific endeavors, and economic expansion, in addition to promoting security for each other and the world at large.

The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty is the pillar upon which relations between the two nations are built and has served to promote the common good on an increasingly contentious world stage. They

²¹ Alastair Gale and Chieko Tsuneoka, "China Provocations Hasten Japan's Military Revival," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-china-military-provocations-revival-disputed-islands-pacifism-11594735596>

are two of the world's three largest economies and amongst the world's most stable democracies. Their contributions to science, medicine, and technology have had a profoundly positive impact on the way individuals all over the world live their lives. As nations that aspire to and advocate for adherence to a rules-based international order, the United States and Japan are shining beacons for what can be accomplished when countries adhere to the law and partake in mutually beneficial cooperation. This alliance is a bulwark against regional aggression and one of the guarantors of world peace which, through continued adherence to communication, cooperation, and those other shared values the two nations hold dear, should continue to function for another sixty years to the benefit of a great many people.

Author Biography

D'Mitri A. Farthing Jr. is a Los Angeles native who received his Bachelor of Arts in Science, Technology, and Development from Colby College in 2017. He is currently a Master of Science in Global Technology and Development-Applied International Development candidate at Arizona State University with an expected completion date of May 2021. His current research includes exploring the effectiveness of interventions by supranational organizations (e.g., the European Union and the United Nations) in promoting peace and economic development as well as using language acquisition programs (e.g., JET program and EPIK) as tools of soft power. He began serving as a JET in the Kochi Prefecture in August 2018 and will complete his term in July 2022.