As an American JET in Okinawa, I had the unique opportunity of experiencing the presence of U.S. troops there through both the lenses of interactions with my local community and my military friends. Tracing the history of the post-war U.S. administration of the Ryukyu Islands, through to the development of the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF), and the continued American military presence throughout Japan forged my interest in international defense affairs and led me to pursue a career as a military officer. I have long considered my service in the U.S. Army as a continuation of my experience on the JET Program. Members of the military serve as ambassadors around the world, and ensuring authentic and principled participation in exchanges like these creates opportunities for understanding that buttress peace and security.

In this paper I will explore my research into the JSDF’s Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, formed under the evolving security situation in East Asia, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Defense, as an example of successful military cooperation between the U.S. and Japan. I will discuss the role of the political atmosphere in both countries, as changes in administrations in the U.S. leads to fears over the continuation of the security alliance, while Japan continues to wrestle with the role and meaning of Article Nine of its constitution. Both countries must continue to cooperate to ensure peaceful coexistence throughout East Asia, but as the role of each in that relationship is constantly recast, only clear and trusted communication will guarantee its endurance.
The Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade and Evolution of the Japanese Self-Defense Force in Regional Security

Experience in Okinawa

I never imagined that America would follow me when I departed for Japan, or that once I had arrived, I would experience first hand so many new aspects of my own culture. But, the presence of the U.S. military in Okinawa is ubiquitous, and the vestiges of the Battle of Okinawa—which even shaped the distribution of populous cities wedged between massive bases—are unavoidable. Okinawa’s long engagement with my country is now woven into its culture and history.

As a first-year JET Program participant in Okinawa in 2002, my first inkling that the political situation in the prefecture was more complex than I had gleaned in my first six months was Nago mayoral candidate Yasuhiro Miyagi’s loss. Sentiment against the U.S. military’s presence in Okinawa was vocal and a constant topic, especially following the September 11 attacks. Miyagi was staunchly anti-base and the specter of what would become the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma at Henoko—a part of Nago—was the hot-button issue of the election.¹

This is not to say that the perpetuation of American bases in Okinawa is a foregone conclusion. Like the larger U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, the nature of that relationship continues to evolve. However, gaining a sense of the dialogue between the three parties at play on the island—the Okinawan government and people, the government of Japan, and the U.S. military—helped me understand how dynamic and relevant Okinawa Prefecture remains. Further, it opened my eyes to the complexity of international relations in security studies.

These complexities would continue through my tenure in Okinawa. I recall watching the national debate over the deployment of the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) to Iraq in 2004 over a bowl of Okinawa soba. On JET, I learned to pause the immediate application of my worldview and take the time to ascertain native problem solving strategies, local norms, and extant paradigms. Over time, I began to see one role of a nation’s military as a key portion of its international engagement strategy. Troops on the ground are, for better or worse, informal ambassadors, and as such, I am always surprised that I do not meet more JET alum in the military.

Research Decision

In 2019, I was selected to attend the U.S. Army’s Command and General Staff Officer’s Course at Fort Leavenworth, KS, a ten-month graduate level program that prepares field-grade officers for senior level military staff work. I immediately enrolled in an elective thesis program,

intent on studying the U.S.-Japan Alliance to help make sense of the history I had witnessed as a JET participant.

I chose to study the emergence of a new organization, the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB) constituted under the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF), as a lens to examine current trends in Japanese defense strategies. The creation of this unit takes place in the larger context of increased focus on Japanese military spending and the current form of its defense forces, both in the United States and Japan. All these changes are silhouetted by Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, in which the country specifically renounces the right to wage war or maintain a military. Studying the formation of the unit, its purposes, and the context of Japan’s larger strategic defense goals has provided a window into the ongoing debate of Japan’s military contributions to the balance of power in the region. The ARDB represents the military capability of amphibious entry, which has not existed in any Japanese military defense force since World War II.

The study, still in progress, examines the advantages and disadvantages of Japanese rearmament and changing security posture through a lens of historical development and explores potential applications. Changes in the political and military environments in Asia over the last ten years, including the growth of Chinese GDP and military power, the development of North Korean ballistic weapons, and a surge of interest in the topic of remilitarization in Japan, have culminated in the form of the ARDB. Further, examining the ARDB has allowed me to explore prominent concepts of security in international relations in general through the lens of domestic political affairs.

**U.S.-Japan Alliance and East Asian Security**

When thinking about Japan’s recovery from World War II, it is necessary to consider the role of the United States as Japan developed its government, economy, and military. From the establishment of its postwar constitution to the contemporary development of the ARDB, the United States has played a singular role in the development of Japan’s conception of its own role in the Pacific, and more broadly, globally.

Due in part to the intimacy of this relationship, a common theme in literature on the alliance is the risk of entrapment and abandonment. According to Michael J. Green, reliance on other states can result in entrapment, when a state is forced into a conflict in which it shares no vested interest. At the other end of the spectrum, over-reliance can also lead to abandonment, where an ally reneges on promised support. Political developments from across the period of the alliance, such as Nixon’s Guam Doctrine in 1969 or comments from then-candidate Trump concerning the...
United States’ responsibility for defense against North Korea in 2016, have kept Japan wary of the possibility of abandonment. However, as the threat of the Cold War is forgotten and tensions continue to grow in East Asia, Japan’s concerns have gradually moved from fears of entrapment into war with the USSR and toward the certainty of the alliance.

In 2014, Prime Minister Abe successfully pushed forward a reinterpretation of the Japanese Constitution to allow for collective self-defense, enabling its military to use force in support of an ally. The question of autonomy has been key for the Japanese since the advent of its recovery from World War II, and especially in the development of its military, and this test has prompted further military development. However, the evolution of Japan’s military has continued since its re-creation following the establishment of its Peace Constitution. Its progress and growth has been stymied by a number of forces, even as these same forces have shaped it into the unique organization it is. Different interpretations of Article 9 reveal the flexibility with which Japan has handled its constitution; however, while loathe to make amendments, the government has buttressed its implementation in laws and security strategy documents that provide necessary structure and legitimacy.

A larger question for Japan has become the involvement of the United States in potential conflict with China. Only China and the United States have the means or will to control this region (Japan’s adherence to its constitution forbids it), but the United States maintains control due to its alliances, forward bases, and military presence, especially in Japan. China expresses a desire for peace that suggests it is unlikely to attack unless attacked, but its actions in the area reveal increased ambition. Smith views China’s rise as revelatory of competing narratives for the region, with one corollary being Japan moving closer to the United States as an advocate. Furthermore, as China continues to increase its military spending relative to Japan, there is concern about Japan’s ability to hold the Senkaku Islands should China attempt to take them.

---


5 Smith, *Japan Rearmed*, 216.


8 Smith, *Japan Rearmed*, 232.
Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade

The United States has ensured the Japanese they will support them in any attempt to take the Senkaku Islands by the Chinese, but the issue remains a bellwether test for support of Japan and raises the specter of abandonment. With a constitution that abandons the use of military force to influence other states, it may seem like the question of rearmament of the JSDF is categorically impossible, but the reality of Japan’s role in security in Asia and around the world is much more complex. The ARDB is a manifestation of the changing nature of the JSDF, a product of its history and the changing security environment, and Japan’s relation to the United States.

In 2010, the National Defense Program Guideline’s (NDPG) focus on dynamic defense and active operations also highlighted offshore islands as a priority in response to growing tension around the Senkaku Islands. The 2014 NDPG further instructs the JSDF to “develop full amphibious capability,” enabling the force to land, recapture, and secure any invaded islands. The 2018 Medium Term Defense Program finally ensconced the ARDB in formal doctrine, further stipulating subordinate JSDF units responsible for security response to remote islands. The United States played a role in the early conception of a unique Japanese amphibious resource, emphasizing that much of the matériel required for its construction already existed in the JSDF.

A key aspect of the ARDB is that it underscores the importance of the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance and military interoperability. In reiterating the non-expeditionary nature of the force, Lieutenant General Koichiro Bansho (JGSDF, retired), writing on new defense strategy in the Southwest Islands, insists that for the ARDB to succeed, Japan and the United States must strengthen their security cooperation through exercises and bilateral operational concepts. Smith insists that Japan’s new focus on dynamic defense “must be premised on responding to the military capabilities of other[s],” namely, its allies. At the center of the ARDB’s role lies the question of its potential for an


expeditionary role, one which seems to contradict the spirit of Japan’s constitution as it is interpreted today. Domestically, there is little appetite for Japan to develop its own marine corps. As such, continued training and operations in partnership with U.S. military forces for now has satisfied demands for both a non-expeditionary force but one that expands the JSDF’s capabilities.

Conclusion

Designed for a purpose that is specific to its time, but also the product of decades of sui generis military development, the ARDB may represent the balanced needle of Japan’s ambitions for autonomy but the realities of its political system. Calls from the United States for a rearmed Japan issued forth quickly after World War II as the Cold War raised tensions in Asia. It is clear that the ARDB raises many of the same questions that have followed Japan’s military for decades, and several more. Hunter-Chester observes vis-à-vis the question of its pacifist nature, that “Japan has rearmed. The [J]GSDF has tanks, multiple-launch rocket systems, and attack helicopters; Japan has one of the largest military budgets in the world.”

What is certain is that the ARDB underscores Japan’s commitment to its alliance with the United States. Developed with interoperability in mind, it reflects the decades-long security dialogue between the United States and Japan, demonstrating that Japan is willing to fulfil its obligations to the alliance, if only as it is able. Researching the ARDB has surprised me; what I thought would be a project focused on matériel, doctrine, and training became one focused on the ways a country engages international politics through defense planning. In turn, studying the emergence of the ARDB and the relationships and contexts that have birthed it has frequently reminded me of what I learned as a JET Program participant. Without dedicated efforts to understand the intents, constraints, challenges, and hopes of our partners and allies—military and otherwise—we risk the valuable bonds that benefit us all. Japan and JET taught me to listen, observe, and understand before I acted, and it is through understanding and communication that we continue to grow.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

15 Smith, Japan Rearmed, 222.
Author Biography

Patrick Ripton (2001-2005, Okinawa and Shiga ALT) is a U.S. Army Officer stationed at Fort Knox, KY. He is currently the Battalion Executive Officer, 1-409th Brigade Engineer Battalion, First Army. He holds Masters Degrees in Engineering Management from the Missouri University of Science and Technology, and Military Operation Studies from the US Army Command and General Staff College. After JET, he spent a year working as a research analyst for the Consulate-General of Japan in San Francisco, and then commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 2009. He is currently completing work on a Master’s thesis on the Japanese Self Defense Force’s new Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade. His interests include international strategic studies, the U.S.-Japan security alliance, and Okinawan society and politics.

About the JETs on Japan Forum

The JETs on Japan Forum is a partnership between USJETAA and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) that features selected articles of JET alumni perspectives on U.S.-Japan relations. The series aims to elevate the awareness and visibility of JET alumni working across diverse sectors and provides a platform for JET alumni to contribute to deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations from their fields. The articles serve as a resource to the wider JET alumni and U.S.-Japan communities on how alumni of this exchange program are continuing to serve as informal ambassadors in U.S.-Japan relations.

All views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of USJETAA and Sasakawa USA.