Introduction

The United States and Japan have cultivated a unique alliance since the end of World War 2, and while the relationship has generally been considered mutually beneficial, it has never been symmetrical in implementation, nor has it been intended as such. The United States provides military protection to Japan, whose constitution restricts its military capability per its Article 9 “peace clause,” and Japan offers a strategically unparalleled base of operations for America’s military operations in Asia and a critical ally as a regional leader in East Asia (Harold, 29). Since the 1951 Security Treaty between the United States and Japan and the 1960 revisions of the “Treaty of Mutual Cooperation between Japan and the United States,” the United States has stationed between 30,000 and 55,000 active duty military in Japan (Pachomcik, 33).

The two nations share the cost of maintaining the military bases, though there is no widely accepted balance sheet. Media outlets suggest that the $4 billion operation costs are
split with the United States shouldering approximately 60 percent of expenses and Japan covering the remainder, but the Japanese defense minister claims that “in 2017 Japan paid 86 percent of the total cost” (Maizland). The Trump administration questioned the fairness of the relationship, claiming that the benefits to Japan were much higher than their burden in cost-sharing, and, in 2019, demanded a “300% increase in cost-sharing to fund the continued presence of U.S. forces in Japan” (Rusnok, 3). In its first three months, the Biden administration has reversed Trump’s insular rhetoric and reset US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific, attempting to rebuild the credibility of American alliances.

Two major concerns dominate modern American national security interests regarding its troops in Japan: maintaining forward deployment in a geopolitically sensitive region and upholding tight relations with Japan as a counterweight to Chinese expansion. Following realist analysis of East Asia’s security balance, the local presence of American military personnel, maritime forces, and strategic resources has allowed the United States to project power on “some of the most dangerous friction points in the world – specifically Taiwan [and] North Korea” (Rusnok, 5). In light of a rising China, Japan has emerged as a strategically critical ally in moderating Chinese diplomatic and economic developments, and the presence of US troops in Japan underpins the major source of credibility for the American-Japanese alliance. Per the liberal school of analysis, the United States and Japan form an influential partnership in leading international institutions and in forming pacifying trade relationships, and the two strongly influence accepted normative behavior among East Asian states, aligning with theories of constructivism.

In the next three years, the Biden administration should focus on three areas to promote peace and stability in East Asia. Firstly, more joint military exercises and collaborative intellectual property development will reassure Japan of the United States’ commitment and will reestablish America’s deterring credentials. Secondly, rejoining multilateral institutions will prove Biden’s dedication to “re-rebalancing to Asia” and show that the United States intends to maintain its regional leadership.
Trump and Biden Administrations

American foreign policy on East Asia and Japan specifically has vacillated dramatically in the last ten years, ranging from the Obama administration’s “pivot (later rebranding ‘rebalancing’) to Asia,” to Trump’s “America First,” to what appears to be Biden’s return to outward-facing foreign policy. The Trump administration’s foreign policy viewed alliances transactionally and prioritized relationships which “[offered] the most beneficial conditions for the US economy to prosper” (Pachomcik, 42). Under this zero-sum, isolationist revision of previous administrations’ positions, economic protectionism framed “economic openness and globalization as harmful to US jobs and industrial competitiveness” and prompted the United States to exit from the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in favor of bilateral relationships, which offer the United States more negotiating leverage (Takashi). Broadly, the withdrawal from the TPP has contributed to “growing doubts about America’s leadership credibility in the Asia-Pacific,” and in the context of American-Japanese partnership, Trump’s rejection of closer economic ties with Japan mean that the countries’ military ties have become the most salient element of the relationship. American pressure did successfully convince Japan to enlarge its military budget, for example, through the issuance of “a five-year defense procurement plan to expand its defense spending through Japanese fiscal year 2023,” but the concession came at the cost of Japanese confidence in American reliability (US State Department). Four years of Trump’s isolationist rhetoric also prompted Japan to explore its options beyond the American security umbrella.

The Biden administration immediately reversed Trump’s position, offering “unprompted assurances [to Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga] that the United States would continue to offer Article 5 protections for the Senkaku Islands, islands claimed also by China,” only five days after Biden was declared president-elect (Smith 2021, 21). Biden and Suga, who met in April 2021 for Biden’s first in-person engagement with a foreign leader, succeeded in “presenting a united front and rekindling confidence in the alliance” (Harold). The outcome of the summit emphasized both leaders’ interest in strong American-Japanese ties against an increasingly expansionist China, evidenced by a joint statement underscoring “the allies’ focus on the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait” (Harold). By acknowledging concerns about the possibility of a Chinese military
attack on Taiwan and the contested Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, Biden adopted a stance that is significant in two ways. First, he departed from his predecessor President Obama’s stance on China, which some analysts considered overly accommodating, and secondly, he endorsed the importance of the military relationship between Japan and the United States. By reversing Trump’s isolationism, Biden has announced a more outward-facing foreign policy agenda.

**American National Security Interests in East Asia**

**Military Credibility**

The United States’ troops in Japan have acted as the foundation of the American security umbrella in the Indo-Pacific region since the establishment of bases in 1951, contributing to America’s ultimate goal of maintaining peace, stability, and American hegemony in East Asia. Aligning with concepts of realism, the United States has used its local forces to project power and deter threats to its allies in the region. The forward deployment of troops in East Asia has been critical in supporting American military expeditions in the Middle East, has “allowed the United States to conduct joint drills and training with allies,” and generally reminds other countries that the United States maintains a ready-to-deploy presence in East Asia (Tanaka, 2). Specifically, the presence of American military power has been important in recent years in two geopolitically contentious areas: Taiwan and North Korea.

Taiwan, as a highly symbolic point of contention between the United States and China, poses a serious threat to American national security interests of stability and Chinese containment in East Asia. China claims Taiwan as its own territory, but the United States is committed to defending Taiwan’s sovereignty in two policies, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 and the Six Assurances of 1982 (Schuler, Lecture 8). In an April 2021 summit with Japanese Prime Minister Suga, President Biden released a statement that “underscored the allies’ focus on the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait,” mentioning Taiwan in a U.S.-Japan summit statement for the first time since 1969 (Harold). The situation with Taiwan reflects the credible power balance between China and the United States, and although any conflagrations will likely heavily involve maritime forces, the presence of American troops in Japan lends serious weight to American strength projection. Ambiguity in dedication to alliances can lead to miscalculation, so
Once again, it is imperative that the United States proves its commitment to Japan and its military allies in the Indo-Pacific.

North Korea represents a second major issue in American national security issues in East Asia, especially regarding the United States’ stated goal of complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID) of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) (Schuler, Lecture 2). The DPRK’s “rapid increase in the number, types, and ranges of ballistic missiles the North has tested, as well as the regime’s growing and diversifying nuclear arsenal,” demonstrate the gravity of the threat posed by North Korea to both Japan and South Korea, both of the United States’ most importance allies in East Asia (Harold, 2). The presence of American troops on bases in both countries acts as a strong deterrent to North Korean antagonism because the United States would be drawn into any conflict instigated by the DPRK and could draw on its forward deployed resources in the region to “triple [its] force size within ten days from pre-positioned forces” in the event of an attack (Cha, 217). Knowing that a North Korean attack would render collateral damage to American citizens prevents a “spiral of miscalculation” and encourages a tense détente (Cha 235).

Although the United States has been able to leverage its military presence in Japan to deter conflict in East Asia, an argument based on realist principles could be made an American military presence in East Asia is actually prompting China to militarize as it pursues regional hegemony. By antagonizing China in its own home region, the United States may actually be destabilizing the natural Sino-centric order. Additionally, Okinawa residents, who have long resented the American omnipresence in Japan’s poorest prefecture, have begun to more aggressively contest the US military, especially after the rape of a young girl by US service members in 1995 and escalating friction over an Air Force base which claims thousands of acres in crowded Ginowan City (Chanlett, 43). Popular Japanese support for the presence of American troops may require a public relations campaign to continue.

Institutional Influence and Normative Behavior

Japan’s protection under the American security umbrella has allowed it to operate as a regional ideological leader, aligning with liberal and constructivist theories of international
relations, and the maintenance of bases in Japan underscores a major point of credibility of the American-Japanese alliance. Japan’s traditional counterbalance against Chinese expansionism has been critical in limiting China’s hegemonic leadership in the region, aligning with American national security interests of stemming China’s growth.

As China promotes “its state-led capitalism development model,” Japan has been integral in supporting multilateral institutions that align with American democratic values, and without credence and protection lent to Japan by the presence of American troops, Japan would not be able to pursue regional influence. For example, the American-dominated World Bank, Japanese-led Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Chinese-run Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) all offer low interest loans to develop infrastructure (Schuler, Lecture 10). Although the AIIB far outsplits the ADB, Japan is still able to offer loans with similar conditions to those offered by the World Bank, allowing Japan to exert some level of countering force to China’s investment approach. Additionally, while China holds 26% of voting rights in the AIIB, Japan is a member of the organization and can vote according to American interests (Schuler, Lecture 10). Per liberal institutionalist views of the evolving East Asian region, Japan can constrain some of China’s expansion by offering other East Asian countries an alternative regional leader.

Japan also counters China’s influence on normative behavior in East Asia, acting as a soft power projection aligned with American national security interests. For example, while neither Japan nor China are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both do occasionally participate in the regional forums, with China included in ASEAN+1, and China, South Korea, and Japan included in ASEAN+3 (Schuler, Lecture 10). Polls from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs report that 84% of respondents in ASEAN member states rated Japan as a “very reliable” or “somewhat reliable” friend, which may poise Japan well for integration with its southern neighbors (MOFA 2018). China’s influence on regional norms, which “argues that compared to other political rights, economic development is more important for people in developing countries,” has been growing, in direct opposition to American emphasis on “high standards for transparency, social and environmental principles, procurement requirements and the other safeguards of the established [multilateral development banks]” (Peng, Freeman 669). Japan’s influence on ASEAN members, even if not on the organization itself, can counter China’s
development models. Because Japan can focus on its diplomatic relations instead of its military credibility, Japan is a critical ally in aligning East Asian institutions’ normative behaviors with American national security goals.

Despite Japan’s apparent influence on multilateral institutions, China’s rise has fully eclipsed Japan’s reign of the late 20th century. It is possible that Japan’s ideological directions are merely simply filling a power vacuum as China secures its regional hegemony in light of a retreating American influence. Offensive realist perspectives suggest that Japan should have rearmed long ago if it had ambitions of maintaining its status as a great power, and Japanese investment in China continues to grow, with Japanese “companies increasingly seeing their fortunes tied to the Chinese market” (Kang 67, 69). Therefore evidence suggests that Japanese opposition to Chinese expansion may eventually acquiesce, leaving limited room for American influence on multilateral institutions or normative behaviors.

Policy Recommendations

Peace and stability in East Asia should be the primary concern of American foreign policy in the next three years, with containment of China’s influence as a close second. Firstly, from a realist analysis, maintaining a forward deployment of troops in Japan is critical to uphold the credibility of American alliances in East Asia, and further joint military exercises and collaborative intellectual property development will encourage tighter relations with Japan. Doing so will ensure that military ties between the United States and Japan are more than lip-service and will continue to deter blatant antagonism from either China over Taiwan or North Korea’s nuclearization.

Secondly, the Biden administration needs to profusely reassure its allies of America’s commitment, reversing Trump’s isolationist rhetoric, as many countries may prefer the American security umbrella to China’s aggressive expansionism if they feel confidence that the United States is reliable. Reestablishing economic ties through the successor to the TPP, the CPTPP, will demonstrate America’s “re-rebalancing” to Asia and promote the United States as an ally who is economically invested in the well-being of East Asia.
Conclusion

The Japanese-American security relationship continues to be mutually beneficial, but its credibility and subsequent value have suffered from four years of Trump’s isolationist rhetoric. In order to maintain American military deterrence in Taiwan and North Korea, as well as to continue supporting Japan’s regional ideological influence, the Biden administration must reestablish the United States’ commitment to its allies. By deepening military ties with Japan and rejoining multilateral economic institutions, Biden can prove that the United States is a viable leader and continue to encourage peace and stability in East Asia.
References


