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Parsing Differing U.S. Views on Japan's Approach to China

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China Risk and China Opportunity for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

How should the risks and opportunities presented by a continually rising, increasingly self-assertive China be addressed? This is a pressing issue for the international community, particularly for the United States and Japan, whose alliance has proactively helped form and maintain the liberal, rules-based international order for the past several decades.

To enhance mutual understanding and encourage effective policymaking, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have convened a small group of U.S. and Japanese scholars to examine the risks and opportunities accompanying China's ascendance. This group includes China specialists, alliance experts, and authorities on trade and security issues in the Asia Pacific.

Led by Matake Kamiya and James L. Schoff, the group has conducted research and facilitated dialogue since April 2017 through private roundtables and public symposia that seek to further U.S.-Japan cooperation and coordination on China policy. The project examines different perspectives between the alliance members and discusses ways in which Washington and Tokyo can effectively respond to China's rise. An accompanying series of policy briefs explores various China-related risks and opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance in the areas of regional and international order, trade and technology, security, and foreign relations.

JFIR, together with the project's U.S. team members, wish to thank the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership respectively for their generous support, without which this project would not have been possible.

—Matake Kamiya and James L. Schoff, Project Leaders and Co-editors

Introduction

Over the last decade, the U.S.-Japan alliance has become increasingly focused on China. This new emphasis has put a premium on aligning the U.S. and Japanese policy responses to China's rise. Although Japanese experts' views of China have typically been more negative than those of Americans, leaders in Tokyo and Washington hold increasingly similar opinions about Beijing. Yet internal disagreements within both countries remain about the degree of threat the Chinese Communist Party poses and what to do about it.

Assessing American views of Japan's China strategy can lead to a better understanding of how these perspectives have changed and how they might evolve in the future. There are four differing U.S. perspectives on Japan's China strategy. U.S. policymakers tend to see their Japanese counterparts as alliance advocates, but examining other viewpoints sheds light on how these positions might evolve in the years ahead.

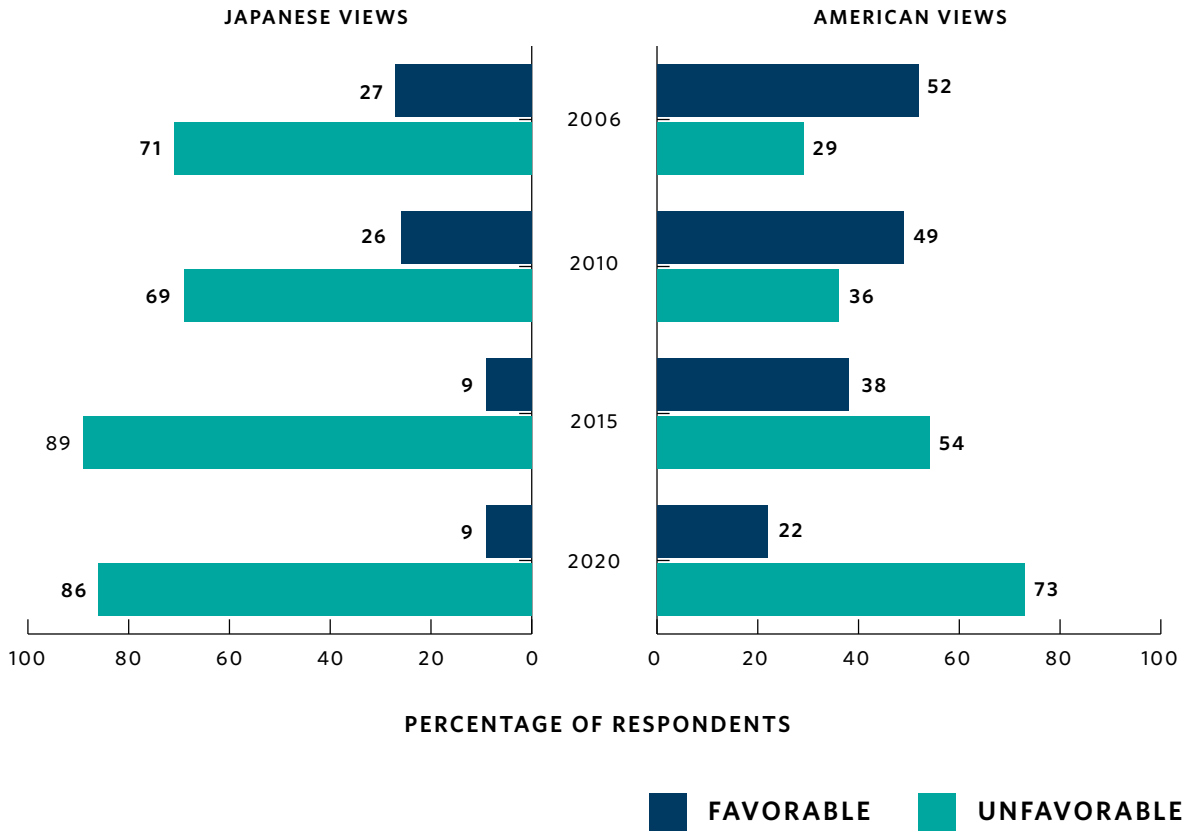
Assessing Japanese and American Views of China

Since the turn of the century, American and Japanese views of China and the Chinese Communist Party have shifted significantly. Opinions have worsened in both Washington and Tokyo, but Japanese views were already quite negative even before this decline. According to recent polls by the Pew Research Center, 86 percent of Japanese people hold an unfavorable view of China. As shown in figure 1, this number is up from roughly 70 percent a decade ago but down slightly from 89 percent in 2015.

In the United States, opinions of China were initially more positive by comparison, but these sentiments have deteriorated rapidly. Although this shift began before former president Donald Trump took office, it has accelerated over the last several years. By 2020, 73 percent of Americans reported to Pew that they viewed China unfavorably, including 83 percent of Republicans and 68 percent of Democrats. This partisan breakdown is consistent with polling by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which shows that 67 percent of Republicans view China's development as a world power as a critical threat, compared to 47 percent of Democrats. Despite these differences, the Chicago Council found that 85 percent of Democrats say the United States should maintain or increase efforts to defend allies, with 81 percent of Republicans agreeing. These views are important background information for understanding how different groups in the United States view Japan's China policy.

FIGURE 1

U.S. Public's Declining Views Toward China



SOURCE: "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," Pew Research Center, October 6, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/PG_2020.10.06_Global-Views-China_FINAL.pdf.

NOTE: These figures do not add up to 100 percent because respondents who refused to answer or didn't know are not listed.

American experts tend to hold one of four basic views about Japan's China strategy. These views are determined in large part by the degree to which observers believe the United States and Japan are aligned in their assessments of the threat China poses. Observers make two separate but related calculations. First, they analyze the level of threat China poses to Japan. Second, they evaluate the level of threat that Japanese leaders perceive from China. These two variables result in four different viewpoints, as shown in table 1.

TABLE 1

How American Experts View Japanese Counterparts

United States and Japan both view China as a threat to Japan	Alliance advocates
United States views China as a threat to Japan, but Japan does not	Freeriding friends
Japan views China as a threat to Japan, but United States does not	Meddling militarists
Neither United States nor Japan views China as a threat to Japan	Persistent pacifists

Alliance Advocates

The most prevalent American perspective on Japan's China policy is that both the United States and Japan view China as a serious threat and are responding appropriately. Experts that hold this view tend to see Japanese leaders as alliance advocates. This group of experts dominates Washington's debate on the U.S.-Japan alliance. Most experts of this type believe that Tokyo has accurately assessed the dangers inherent in China's rise and has developed a prudent set of policy responses.

Key figures in this group hail from both ends of the U.S. political spectrum, from Joseph Nye and Kurt Campbell on the left to Richard Armitage and Michael Green on the right. They typically support Japan's recent efforts to take a more proactive approach to managing China. Sheila Smith, for example, writes, "The United States and Japan see eye-to-eye on some of the complaints about Chinese behavior." She suggests that similar views of China have helped to drive Tokyo and Washington toward deeper cooperation, even if differences between leaders in both countries remain. These experts, the author included, tend to push for a more equal and ambitious U.S.-Japan alliance to meet the challenge from China.

American experts who see Japanese counterparts as alliance advocates tend to believe that both allies are right to be concerned about China and that the threat from Beijing is likely to push Washington and Tokyo closer together. Echoing these views, the U.S. government typically refers to the U.S.-Japan alliance as the "cornerstone" of regional security in Asia.

Freeriding Friends

Although the alliance advocate school is the most common U.S. viewpoint, there is a range of other views among U.S. experts on Tokyo's China policy. One alternative argument is that China seriously threatens Japan but that Japanese leaders do not appreciate the true level of the threat. These experts see the debate in Tokyo as dominated by economic concerns about commercial profits rather than security. In other words, they argue that Japan is continuing to freeride on the United States by ignoring the degree of threat that China and the Chinese Communist Party pose.

Retired Marine colonel Grant Newsham, for example, writes that "Japan is not ignoring defense. But it almost seems to be going through the motions—hoping China is somehow frightened off or loses interest." Newsham sees Japan's "business interests shaping defense policy" and argues that "Japan Inc might be in the 'Senkakus aren't worth a war' camp." Similar critiques have come from Christian Whiton, who has argued that former prime minister Shinzo Abe "did a disservice to Japan, its alliance with the United States, and the man he calls his friend, President Donald Trump" by visiting China in 2018. He warned that an "entente between Tokyo and Beijing could . . . erect obstacles" detrimental to the U.S.-Japan alliance. If Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga invites Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Japan in 2021, some of these voices in the United States might grow louder.

Trump himself seems likely to fall within this group. He reportedly told Abe, "We're paying a lot of money. You're a wealthy nation. And we're, you know, paying for your military." Trump's emphasis on burden sharing by U.S. allies has increased concerns about this issue among Republicans. Many in the American public wonder why U.S. allies haven't done more to balance China's rise. While the primary view among Republicans is that Japanese policymakers tend to be alliance advocates, there is a growing contingent that sees Japan as a freeriding friend.

Meddling Militarists

A third group of American experts hold that Japanese views are misaligned, but in the opposite direction. These observers think that Japanese leaders are meddling militarists, who are not seriously threatened by China but rather are using Beijing's actions to promote hawkishness within Japan. These views tend to be more popular within the academic and human rights communities, making them more prevalent among Democrats than among Republicans.

One of the more outspoken advocates of this view is Jake Adelstein, who writes that Abe was a militarist who passed legislation that could "blow up Japan's brittle democracy." He and Mari Yamamoto write that Abe and his supporters are creating a "militarist time machine." Mindy Kotler comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that the United States "has a responsibility to remind Japan, its ally, that human rights and women's rights are pillars of American foreign policy." These commentators tend to suggest that China is not a serious threat but rather is being used by Japanese policymakers to galvanize political support for higher spending on Japan's military and revised legislation on its use.

Although the belief that Japanese leaders are meddling militarists is not widely held within Washington, it is more frequent in some circles beyond the policymaking community. The Editorial Board of the *New York Times*, for example, has periodically published editorials and opinion pieces reflecting this view. One editorial stated that Japanese leaders were fueling "fear and mistrust" by raising concerns about China via "right-wing nationalists" advocating "abhorrent historical revisionism." These opinions are often among the louder voices in the American debate, but they remain on the margins of policy discourse among experts in Washington.

Persistent Pacifists

Finally, a fourth group of experts sees Japan and the United States as aligned on the threat emanating from China, but not in the way that alliance advocates believe. Instead, these scholars assess that the threat China poses to Japan is low, and they believe Japanese leaders see the threat this way themselves. This persistent pacifist view is not prevalent among either Republicans or Democrats, but like the meddling militarists viewpoint, it is more common among academics.

David C. Kang, for example, has argued that "identity, rather than military or economic power, is the driving force behind Japan's foreign policy." Far from viewing Japan as a more proactive regional player, he argues that "Japan is not a leader. Japan's regional role is diminishing, not increasing." He also asserts that there is "little evidence of free-riding by American allies in the region," because he believes the Japanese public simply is not that worried about China. Kang argues that efforts to convince Japan to take on greater responsibility appear "unlikely to prod Japan into adopting a clear antagonistic position against China."

Such scholars tend to use Japan's low defense spending as evidence that Tokyo does not see Beijing as a serious threat, despite what Japanese leaders might say in public. What differentiates this group from those who think Tokyo is freeriding on the United States is that the persistent pacifist camp

believes China does not pose a serious threat to Japan. Of the four viewpoints, this is possibly the one least frequently seen, particularly as views of China in both Japan and the United States have worsened in recent years.

Explaining the Dominance of the Alliance Advocates School

The variety of American views about Japan's approach to China is worth keeping in mind, even if most experts in Washington tend to see Japanese leaders as alliance advocates, pushing the relationship forward by smartly balancing against Beijing's assertive behavior. Yet this is not the only view. Republican and Democratic administrations alike typically have to contend with different sets of critics. In the Republican Party, Japan's detractors tend to argue that the threat from China is more serious than Tokyo appreciates and, therefore, that Japan is not doing enough. In the Democratic Party, critics of Japan often contend that the threat from China is overplayed by nationalist leaders in Tokyo, Washington, or both. In short, although a majority of experts from both parties tend to believe that Japanese policymakers are alliance advocates, a minority of Republicans view Japanese leaders as freeriding friends while a minority of Democrats perceive Japanese leaders as meddling militarists or persistent pacifists.

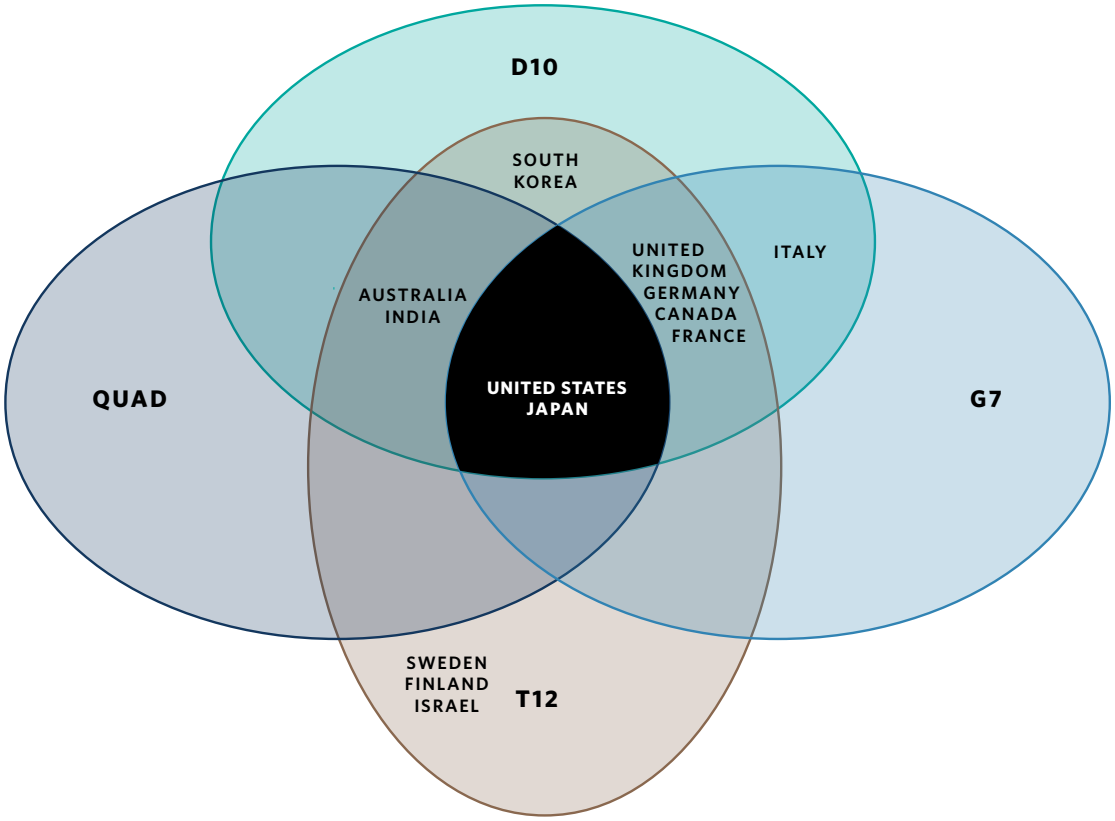
This pattern aligns with the primary tensions in the U.S.-Japan alliance during the last two U.S. administrations. Under Trump, critiques about unfair burden sharing have taken center stage, leading to difficult discussions about how much Japan should pay under the Special Measures Agreement. Conversely, under former president Barack Obama, the primary criticism of Japan was that its leaders were dragging the United States into an overly confrontational approach to China. Thus, the dominant expert assessment that Japanese officials are alliance advocates is tempered in both parties by a secondary view that is more critical of Tokyo's policies. As long as the threat from China appears high and the Liberal Democratic Party remains in power in Japan, the dominance of the alliance advocates appears likely to hold.

If this theory is correct, then the administration of President Joe Biden is likely to focus less on burden sharing than the Trump administration did. But those around the Biden team might grow more worried about hardline Japanese views and policies on China, which could create different tensions within the alliance.

Still, there is much reason to think that the alliance advocates will remain dominant in Washington, despite the change of administrations. Most importantly, Japan is in a unique position as the only U.S. ally central to all aspects of competition with China (see figure 2). The United States and Japan

FIGURE 2

Japanese and American Views of China



are both members of the four emerging coalitions aimed at managing different dimensions of China's rise: the geostrategic coalition (represented by the Quad), the economic coalition (represented by the G7), the technological coalition (represented by the T12, a group of twelve leading "techno-democracies"), and the democratic governance coalition (represented by the D10).[1]

As figure 2 shows, there is little room for U.S. policymakers who see China as a shared threat to Some in Washington complain that their counterparts in Europe don't speak out enough on the security challenges posed by China. Others worry that India does not model good governance or that South Korea is unwilling to engage on some tough regional security issues. But none of these cri-

tiques can be said of Japan. In that sense, the multidimensional nature of competition with China is pushing Tokyo and Washington closer together, thereby enhancing the dominance of the alliance advocates.

As a result, the key question for the alliance is how to fully take advantage of this period of aligned interests to deepen the U.S.-Japan alliance and to stabilize the regional order. Barring a major change in Chinese, American, or Japanese politics, it is unlikely that the alliance advocates will be seriously challenged. Therefore, this is a remarkable period of stability for the U.S.-Japan alliance—one that the two sides should not waste.

About the Author

Zack Cooper is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He is also co-director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and an associate at Armitage International.

Notes

1 The D10 includes the G7 countries—Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the United States—as well as Australia, India, and South Korea. The T12 includes Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, India, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, the UK, and the United States.

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