

Japan Can Remain an Important U.S. Ally Despite Demographic Challenges

By Mina Pollmann

The world is aging. Some countries are not only aging, but their populations are shrinking as immigration fails to make up for rapidly falling birth rates. Many U.S. allies and security partners are among those beset by these trends. This raises questions about how decreasing fertility and increasing life expectancies will shape the future world order, and specifically the sustainability of U.S. alliances such as with Japan, whose aging and population decline will make it more difficult for the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to compete for the best Japanese talent as the Japanese labor pool shrinks ever smaller, and Japanese tax dollars with which to hire military personnel grow ever scarcer.

Mina Pollmann,

PhD candidate in the MIT Department of Political Science, explains that “Despite positive attitudes and media coverage of the JSDF’s role in disaster relief following the 2011 Triple Disaster, Japan’s pacifist and antimilitarist culture still makes the JSDF an undesirable job prospect for many citizens.”

Unless SDF recruitment trends change dramatically, Japan’s ability to participate in both technology-intensive and manpower-heavy alliance missions will decline over time. The fulfillment of manpower-intensive missions requires, of course, manpower, while even the fulfillment of technology-intensive missions will be affected by the JSDF’s inability to recruit technologically proficient talent. Ensuring the JSDF meets quantity and quality targets is imperative, but will require more government spending. But an aging and shrinking population will reduce the size of the working age population that pay taxes and increases the size of the retired population that depends on the state’s benefits for the elderly. While this will affect the JSDF’s ability to fulfill both technology-intensive and manpower-heavy missions with the United States in the future, the alliance will remain relevant to U.S. security in the Indo-Pacific because of the value of U.S. bases in Japan which forms the core of the alliance.

Despite positive attitudes and media coverage of the JSDF’s role in disaster relief following the 2011 Triple Disaster, Japan’s pacifist and antimilitarist culture still makes the JSDF an undesirable job prospect for many citizens. Steps that the MSDF is considering in order to alleviate this particular burden is to allow MSDF personnel the use of Internet and social media while onboard. Even though year-to-year recruitment rates fluctuate, in fiscal 2018 the SDF as a whole achieved only 70 percent of its recruitment target, while the MSDF could not reach even 60 percent.

Early signs of personnel challenges having a detrimental effect on operations are beginning to emerge. After Japan backtracked on the Aegis Ashore system in June 2020, it decided to acquire two additional Aegis destroyers for missile defense – but one of the most significant hold-ups to this development is the challenge of finding 500 MSDF personnel to crew the destroyers. That said, Japan still contributes to manpower-heavy humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) missions in the region, whose importance will only increase as climate change contributes to more frequent and more severe natural disasters.

The most recent Ministry of Defense Annual White Paper (as of March 31, 2020) reveals that at the lower enlisted ranks, the forces are only staffed at 77 percent of authorized levels. But in the same year, the acceptance rate for uniformed SDF personnel candidates (privates) was 26 percent, and the acceptance rate for non-commissioned officer candidates was 23 percent. The JSDF is not competing with the Mitsubishi and Mitsui-Sumitomos for top college graduates, but recruits must still meet a baseline of physical and mental fitness. An aging and shrinking population only exacerbates this challenge.

According to a forecast by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Japan's number of 18 to 32-year-olds was 19.03 million in 2018, will be 17.5 million in 2028, and will shrink to 15.63 million by 2038. With conscription unconstitutional, many economic and social factors contribute to recruitment difficulties. These include salary and benefit levels that are not competitive with the private sector, more qualified high-school graduates wanting to go to college rather than join the JSDF, and the general rigors and challenges of a military lifestyle.

Attracting technologically-proficient recruits to perform technology-intensive missions and having enough boots on the ground to be effective at HA/DR will require Japan to invest in increasing salaries and benefits for the SDF and destigmatizing this career choice. Other routes to bolstering the JSDF include increasing the mandatory retirement age, increasing the maximum age of new recruits, and increasing female participation. Perhaps the most easily implementable reform from the perspective of countering China and North Korea is to shift personnel from the much-larger Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) to the smaller but increasingly more important – for surveillance and enforcement – MSDF and Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF). However, even this requires a trade-off by cutting back on the GSDF at the same time HA/DR missions are likely to become more important. It is one of Japan's ironies that the GSDF is so dominant in an archipelagic state, but this is a Cold War legacy of the JSDF being primed against a Soviet invasion through Hokkaido.

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But even with the JSDF's foreseeable decline in numbers, the U.S.-Japan alliance is still valuable to U.S. security interests in the Indo-Pacific because of the kinds of contributions Japan makes. An ally's ability to make troop contributions to the alliance is directly related to its population size, mediated by social and economic factors already discussed (e.g. competitiveness of wages, constitutionality of conscription, acceptance of women in combat roles, and so forth), while an ally's ability to contribute geographically is not related to its population size at all. Therefore, the more value an aging ally brings to the alliance because of its troop reserves, the more the alliance is impacted by its aging, and the more value an aging ally brings to the alliance because of its geographic position, the less the alliance is impacted by its aging. As long as Japan allows the U.S. military to perform the missions that they need to out of U.S. bases in Japan, the alliance will be valuable and, hence, sustainable from the U.S. perspective.

Japan can also offer the alliance a strategic vision, regardless of its aging. While the core of the alliance is the result of a Cold War bargain, the future of the alliance lies in intangibles. Aging and shrinking does not have to affect Japanese leadership or creativity. It was Japan that promulgated and propagated the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” vision, and Japan has been making the most active effort trying to bring together major regional players in the Quad grouping. Under former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan was an “idea innovator,” as the 2020 Armitage-Nye Report on the alliance notes. Even under new leadership, Japan will contribute the most to the alliance when it can play the role of the long-term strategic visionary.

The incoming Biden administration should keep these tangible and intangible contributions in mind as it prepares to engage in Host Nation Support talks with Japan. What Japan pays cannot be weighed against what Japan “should” pay for U.S. protection relative to what the United States pays for it (as the Trump administration assumed), but what the United States would have to pay to project power in the Indo-Pacific on the same scale from as far back as Hawaii or Guam.

While demographics will create challenges for the U.S.-Japan alliance in the future, the greatest benefit to the United States from the alliance was never Japan's personnel, financial, or technological contributions, but the geographic contribution Japan could make and equally important going forward will be Japan's vision. Both of these contributions are enough to transcend the problem of an aging alliance.

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