

# Understanding Our Differences for a Stronger U.S.-Japan Alliance

Maintaining a stable strategic relationship

by Maj Anthony L. LaVista II

The U.S. alliance with Japan has existed since the end of World War II and included post-war occupation and reconstruction with an effort to rebuild Japan to reflect many aspects of the United States' societal structure. Even though there were extensive social, political, and economic reforms, most of the fundamental underpinnings of the Japanese culture remained and still exist today. There are numerous elemental differences that when taken as a whole paint the scene of a Japanese culture that in many ways could not be more different than that of the United States. These differing elements include the methods to reach military strategic goals, the role of the government in the lives of its citizens, and numerous social differences that are woven deep into the culture and traditions of the Japanese people. The sum of all these differences creates an alliance relationship between two fundamentally different nations in which a productive and stable alliance is challenging and requires constant proactive effort to succeed.

*Different methods to reach strategic goals in Northeast Asia for the Marine Corps and Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF).* Within the current alliance framework, although both the United States and Japan have generally the same strategic goals, the methods to reach those goals diverge and create

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friction toward a productive alliance. Many of those divergent methods stem from foundational elements of Japanese culture and reflect what the Japanese Self-Defense Force's role should be in the lives of the Japanese people.

*Marine Corps Objectives in Japan.* The U.S. aim to project power abroad and maintain stability in Northeast Asia requires the U.S. military to be a capable and proficient fighting force, especially for units stationed in the Pacific Theater. The Marine Corps acknowledges that it is not sufficient to merely display a facade of power and capability but to genuinely maintain a high level of readiness across all domains. In order for the Marine Corps to be a reliable ally, we must continue to train and remain proficient through realistic training in all environments, day and night. Marine Corps forces in Japan strive to maintain high levels of readiness in preparation to support military operations, thereby leading to truly effective power projection and real capability in the event

of armed conflict. This genuine power projection and continued readiness stabilizes the Northeast Asia Region and is necessary for achieving Marine Corps objectives throughout the MARFORPAC Area of Influence.

*JGSDF Objectives.* The overall strategic objectives of the JGSDF remain generally in line with those of the Marine Corps. However, the end state of stability in the region through power projection is desired through different means. The JGSDF's fundamental purpose is to continuously protect and defend the Japanese people, with the key attribute that they are not a military force. Therefore, any tactical training or exercises perceived as disturbing or inconveniencing the local population is not in line with the JGSDF's immediate purpose. Consequently, there habitually exists an inability to conduct realistic training that may disturb local citizens, which has the effect of severely limiting the capability to maintain a high level of readiness and a capable fighting force.

Because of this, the JGSDF tends to avoid training at night or conducting unscripted military exercises. Additionally, recent mishaps such as the AH-64 Apache crashing into a house in February 2018 and a mortar round landing off a training range in November 2018 have led to even more restrictions on realistic training events because of the increase in perceived risk of injury to the public. Any injury to a Japanese citizen by a JGSDF mishap is looked upon as fundamentally going against what the JGSDF's purpose is supposed to be, which is to defend and protect the people of Japan. This has spiraled the JGSDF into a position of extreme risk aversion, choosing to abstain from realistic training and instead focusing on projecting the image of a capable fighting force. Therefore, the JGSDF often work to maintain their image of a capable fighting force by relying on advertising the U.S.-Japan alliance in order to cover up their underlying deficiencies. However, when these training restrictions bleed over into the Marine Corps' ability to conduct realistic training, it also damages the underlying readiness of the Marine Corps—the basis for much of Japan's true power projection. Therefore, even though the JGSDF has the same strategic goals in Northeast Asia as the Marine Corps, the JGSDF goes about achieving them in often contradictory, inefficient, and counter-productive ways.

*The Japanese Central Government in the Lives of the Japanese People.* As with any centralized government, the Government of Japan (GOJ) has many roles and in many ways is very similar to that of the United States. However, the GOJ has the cornerstone function and concerted purpose of protecting its citizens and providing order and predictability for a population seemingly unsettled about their own safety and routine. The GOJ, even though it relies on the United States for protection and stability in the region, will often criticize the U.S. military and its service members—using the Japanese media to proliferate this agenda of the U.S. presence in Japan as an irritant. Therefore, the GOJ can project the image of protecting its people through the presence



**Although risk-averse in some areas, JGSDF training can reinforce tactics, techniques, and procedures for individual Marines and small units. (Photo by PFC Kasey Peacock.)**

of the U.S. military in Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance while at the same time blaming the nuisance of required military training on the U.S. military.

*Protecting the Japanese People.* Much like the JGSDF, the Central Government's fundamental role is to protect the Japanese people. Many of the governing functions of daily life are exercised by the prefectures or local wards within Tokyo, so much larger economic, social, and political activities can be maintained by the Central Government—including sustaining the Defense Forces. In a strange contradiction, however, even though the GOJ has purchased V-22 Ospreys for the JGSDF to protect its people because of the public's perception of the Osprey being a dangerous aircraft, the GOJ imposes more restrictions on Marine Corps MV-22 flight operations than on other aircraft in order to decrease perceived risk and protect its citizens. Additionally, the GOJ works to protect the Japanese people in ways other than through the Defense Forces. The GOJ has overseen the construction of numerous high-speed railways (Shinkansen) and has not had a Shinkansen engineering failure resulting in death since the Shinkansen's introduction just prior to the 1964 Olympics. Also, the GOJ oversees the national healthcare system, seen by the citizens as a critical element for

ensuring the safety and livelihood of the public. Therefore, through numerous government programs and departments, the GOJ is able to fulfill its primary role of protecting its citizens.

*Financially Incentivized Opposition to U.S. Forces in Japan.* Even though the Japanese Central Government maintains the Defense Forces in order to protect its people, much of the Defense Force training areas are controlled by local governments. In order for these areas to be utilized, the GOJ must negotiate with the local government for use of the land, subsequently paying the local government to operate in these training areas. However, if the local governments are able to argue how this training will cause a nuisance to their local population, they are paid more money. If aircraft like the MV-22 Osprey will be involved, since the MV-22 is perceived to be a more dangerous aircraft, its participation will lead to a bigger payoff for the local government. Therefore, through the local government's continued opposition to U.S. forces and perpetuation of the narrative of U.S. forces being a danger to local citizens, whether on or off duty, the local governments will negotiate for and receive a higher payoff. This system is well established in Japan and in the planning of bilateral exercises; if a local government does not get the payoff

they anticipated, they have the power to cancel a scheduled bilateral exercise shortly before its planned start. This financially incentivized opposition to U.S. Forces in Japan is a detriment to training and readiness and is in part a result of the Central Government's unwillingness to address ongoing domestic issues between the GOJ and local prefectures. This is further exacerbated by the complex history between Japan and its neighboring countries and civilian apprehension toward strengthening the Japan Self-Defense Force.

*Fundamental Elements of Japanese Culture that Differ from the United States.* Every society and culture in the world is inherently different, and the United States and Japan are no exception. However, when the many profoundly different cultural elements between the United States and Japan are compounded together, they work to severely inhibit the U.S.-JGSDF alliance. U.S. service members must strive to understand the Japanese way of thinking when stationed in Japan in order to ameliorate the negative stereotypes and perception the Japanese have of Americans.

*A Society of Systems.* From a young age, there is a rigorous effort in Japanese schools to teach children how to constructively exist in Japanese society. In reality, much of a child's early years at school are spent learning these systems. For a foreigner, it may seem strange that in Tokyo there are no trashcans outside but absolutely no trash in the streets. This phenomenon is the result of Japanese children being taught the system of how to properly dispose of trash from an early age. Through this teaching, they learn that throwing trash on the ground is not part of the trash disposal system, and with the addition of societal pressure, the result is a trash-less city. A second example which shows the way in which the societal framework leads to conformity, with no deviation from the system, is the method in which stop lights operate in Japan. Within Tokyo, stop lights and crosswalks are time-based only with no sensors. Therefore, even though someone may be driving in the middle of the night with no one else on the road, they will often encounter a

red-light and have to wait for the light to cycle to their turn. The same often happens to pedestrians, where even if there are no cars around the pedestrian will very rarely cross the street against a red "don't walk" signal. If they do, often they will be scolded by others nearby. Other examples of strict systems include subway and bullet trains arriving and departing exactly on schedule, people forming lines on their own and waiting their turn to get on the subway, and on escalators in Tokyo people standing on the left side and walking on the right. Even if the line on the left is 50 people long with no one on the right, the right side of the escalator is left open for people in a hurry. These examples are just a subset of the numerous systems that have the result of ingraining in the Japanese psyche that what a person does and how they act needs to benefit the greater good of the Japanese society.

*In-Group/Out-Group Framework.* A key element in the Japanese culture that has no true analog in America is the depth to which the in-group/out-group methodology permeates. The Japanese look at the in-group as containing those people to which they are closely related or share similar interests. Depending on the situation, the in-group can be as small as a single person, it can be a corporation, or even all the Japanese

people together. It all depends on what the situation is and what in-group the speaker is referencing, with the out-group being anyone not included in the in-group. With this framework, even in a bilateral alliance, the JGSDF will look at the Marine Corps as out-group and maintain an appropriate social distance. Even though there is a spectrum for this in-group/out-group mentality, and there will exist strong friendships between individuals of the JGSDF and the Marine Corps, someone not of Japanese descent or born and raised in another country will always be in the out-group. The Japanese society is homogeneous, being that nearly all the inhabitants are of native Japanese descent while also being born and raised in Japan. This has a tendency to create an even stronger, somewhat nationalistic, Japanese in-group mindset. Because of foreigners having no place but in the out-group, an awareness of this must be held when developing alliance relationships and understanding that the professional distance that exists between the JGSDF and the Marine Corps is embedded in years of a homogeneous in-group societal framework.

*Holistic Decision-Making Process.* The JGSDF exhibits a more all-inclusive decision-making process than that of the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps



**Cultural exchange as part of training exercises at the tactical level support theater security cooperation and strategic alliances. (Photo by PFC Kasey Peacock.)**



prides itself on commanders conveying clear and concise intent to allow subordinate leaders to make timely and effective decisions. The JGSDF, on the other hand, entertains decisions on multiple levels prior to making a decision. The Japanese even have a term for this called “nemawashi,” which is literally translated as the process of digging around a tree root to remove a tree from the ground. The JGSDF will take a problem set and, rather than an action officer having clear intent and guidance to make a decision at a bilateral meeting, the JGSDF action officer will make note of the issue under discussion, debrief his peers and superior officers, who in turn will do the same. The result of this is that the JGSDF will eventually reach a decision that has been vetted at all levels and is an agreeable solution amongst all JGSDF leaders at all echelons. However, this leads to a slow negotiation process during bilateral conferences or meetings and most frequently leaves the

JGSDF action officer to make few real-time decisions because there is not clear commander’s intent with a decentralized execution framework. Oftentimes, this will lead the Marine Corps’ side to feel as though no real progress has been made at many bilateral meetings and conferences. However, although it seems this way, the Marine Corps must realize that the JGSDF have taken detailed notes of the issue under discussion and that at the conclusion of a bilateral meeting, even though it may not seem like it, more digging has been done around the root of the tree.

*Language Differences.* The depth of the differences between U.S. and Japanese culture are readily apparent in a study of the Japanese language. Japanese has origins completely separate from English, and this is exemplified in an almost opposite grammatical structure. When expressing an idea, an English-speaker will generally say at the beginning of the sentence what a Japanese-

speaker will say at the end. Therefore, at proficient levels of speaking, even the thought process of an English vice Japanese speaker will be essentially reversed. Additionally, since English and Japanese have no common origin, there are many words, verbs, and conjugations that have no literal translation between the two languages. There are many elements of expressing an idea or physical action in Japanese that simply do not exist in the English language. There also exist many levels of humble and honorific speech depending on with whom the speaker is talking to. Therefore, when conducting bilateral operations between the Marine Corps and JGSDF, without a skilled interpreter in attendance, it becomes nearly impossible to communicate anything other than elementary ideas.

*Technologically Advanced Society with a Culture Embedded in the Past.* Japan has a reputation as being a pioneer in technology development with countless technology companies having origins in

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Photo by Lance Cpl. James Bourgeois



Photo by Sgt. John Martinez



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Japan. Additionally, even though Japan has the world's third largest economy by nominal gross domestic product, the population as a whole is still culturally embedded in the past. For a country with such advances, as a general rule, most stores other than department stores, supermarkets, or convenience stores only accept cash. There is some progress towards cashless systems, but generally, most Japanese are somewhat wary of any methods of currency exchange other than cash. Additionally, in America, tattoos have become mainstream, especially in recent years with many Marines having visible tattoos in uniform. However, in Japanese society having tattoos is still very much stigmatized and can prohibit someone from visiting a public pool, spa, or even from joining a gym. This stigma surrounding tattoos can lead to friction between Marines with tattoos and members of the local Japanese community if Marines are not properly educated to these important local cultural sensitivities.

*Long Working Hours Leading to an Inefficient Workforce.* The Japanese workforce as a whole, and the JGSDF in particular, work incredibly long hours. The standard day for JGSDF action officers at the Ministry of Defense is 0600–2000, with many working until 2300. However, these long hours do not necessarily equate to more work being done, with many offices having numerous individuals asleep at their desk in the early afternoon. Even during meetings or academic lectures, JGSDF officers will often fall asleep without any repercussions. In fact, the Japanese have the word “karoshi,” meaning “death by overwork,” and the word “sabisuzangyo,” meaning “free overtime.” Within this culture, showing signs of fatigue and exhaustion is an indicator of a good worker, independent of the quality of work produced. This element of the Japanese culture has the unintended effect of generating high levels of inefficiency and low morale. However, this exemplifies the concept in the Japanese culture of appreciating the time put into something rather than necessarily the quality of the output. Even gardeners will sometimes cut grass using small hand clippers, taking hours more than

if a mower were used. Even though not using power tools for gardening helps to decrease noise pollution, which the Japanese also try to avoid as much as possible, it is this time-spent that is seemingly most appreciated by their employer. This type of culture often clashes with the results-based metrics used in the Marine Corps. In general, Marine Corps leadership pushes toward getting more done in less time, but with the Japanese, there is a strong tendency towards getting less done in more time, which consequently leads to considerable frustration during bilateral planning.

*“Ganbarimasu” Mindset.* In Japanese, the phrase “ganbarimasu,” in its various conjugations, is used quite frequently. Essentially, this phrase can be translated as “to persevere” or “to do one’s best.” This phrase embodies the Japanese mindset of devoting yourself fully to a cause, and, no matter what the result, the victory is in truly doing your best. However, often the Japanese will interpret “doing one’s best” as not being as concerned with the actual result but being more concerned with the time and effort toward a cause. This leads to friction during bilateral planning when a fault in the plan is discovered, and rather than sort out a problem in detail, like gaps in a communications plan, the JGSDF believe that if they try their best in the actual execution of the mission and “ganbarimasu,” things will work out, and they will succeed in the end. This is counter to Marine Corps planning where gaps in the plan are always addressed and solved before execution to mitigate risk.

*The Honorable Suicide.* The final cultural element that significantly differs from U.S. culture is the idea of the honorable suicide. According to a GOJ white paper on suicide measures released in May 2017, suicide was the top cause of death among Japanese people in five age groups from 15–39.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese culture has deep roots in fully devoting oneself to a cause, doing your best to the point of death. In World War II, there were kamikaze attacks by aviators and banzai charges by soldiers, which would result in certain death. As far back as the 12th century, a samurai would stab

himself in the stomach with his sword, an act called “seppuku,” to achieve an honorable death rather than face the shame of defeat. These acts of honorable suicide or death have no true analog in American history, and although the high suicide rate in Japan has numerous causal factors, there remains the view in Japan among many that suicide is an honorable way to die.

It is not unexpected that two cultures from different parts of the world will be different. However, when trying to build a stable and productive military alliance between nations, it is imperative to understand the differences between the cultures to maintain the alliance. For the Marine Corps, the scope of all these differences is truly understood only by those deeply embedded within the U.S.-Japan Alliance. After 80 years of alliance development, achieving a common goal through similar means is a continuous challenge. It is not each one of these differences individually that makes the alliance challenging, it is the sum of these differences that creates the friction within the alliance. Therefore, we must understand that these differences are not likely to change, and we must accept them as a part of the framework for our coordination and bilateral agreements. In this way, we will work to benefit both countries and our overarching unified goal of stability in Northeast Asia and the overall defense of Japan. We cannot try to re-mold what we want our allies to be because Japanese traditions and our differing concepts of what is normal will likely never fully align. We must accept this fact as we work together and understand that it may be necessary for the Marine Corps to modify expectations to reach compromise. Having a true awareness of these differences will allow us to become closer with our alliance partner and ensure a stable and lasting partnership.

Note

1. Tomoko Otake, “Suicides Down, But Japan Still Second Highest among Major Industrialized Nations, Report Says,” *Japan Times*, (May 2017), available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp>.

