

# The US-Japan Alliance in the Post-COVID Era

## Intensifying US-China Rivalry and the Wavering Deterrence of US Forces

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### Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted national resilience worldwide, including the operational readiness of armed forces. In the United States, outbreaks spread rapidly not only on Navy aircraft carriers but also across other branches of the military, including the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and National Guard, severely constraining routine operations and deployments. Some analysts have even argued that the pandemic could accelerate a broader decline in U.S. military power and deterrence, a trend described as "COVID-induced disarmament".

Meanwhile, global developments in recent years have reinforced the view of an accelerating decline of the US and the rise of China, with many expressing concerns about the antagonism between them. As tensions between the US and China intensify, the US-Japan alliance is facing the phenomenon of COVID-induced disarmament. This raises the question: How will these developments affect the future of the alliance?

This paper examines the impact of the rapid spread of COVID-19 on the deterrence capabilities of the US-Japan alliance and the nature of deterrence in the context of an impending transformation of the security environment. It does so with an eye to the US presidential election in November 2020, the strategic

orientation of the US and its posture towards China.

Michael Mazarr (2018, 2) defines deterrence as "the practice of discouraging or restraining someone [...] from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack." Originally focused on nuclear capabilities during the early Cold War, the concept of deterrence broadened in the 1960s to encompass conventional and even non-military instruments, reflecting the diversification of strategic threats. Deterrence is commonly distinguished between direct deterrence, aimed at protecting one's own territory, and extended deterrence, which involves protecting allies. The security guarantees provided by the United States in East Asia—including those underpinning the US-Japan alliance—fall into the latter category.

### COVID-induced Disarmament: The Spread of COVID-19 and the Decline of US Military Deterrence

In late March 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt of the US Indo-Pacific Fleet. Subsequent infections were confirmed on the nuclear-powered aircraft carriers USS Ronald Reagan, USS Carl Vinson and USS Nimitz, leading to an unprecedented freeze in US military deployments overseas. Documents from Brett Crozier, the former captain of the discharged USS Theodore Roosevelt, re-

vealed the crew's infections. As a result, he became a subject of criticism, particularly for revealing to the media that the Pacific Fleet, a vital deterrent in the vast Indo-Pacific region, had become dysfunctional.

As of 1 May 2020, more than 8,500 US military personnel worldwide had been infected with COVID-19 (Myers 2020). As this figure includes US forces in Japan, it has also raised concerns about infections within Japan. Regarding the situation of infected US military personnel in Japan, Defense Minister Kōno Tarō announced at a press conference on 3 April 2020 that the US Department of Defense had decided not to disclose the number of infections by base. Consequently, under the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the Japanese government has been unable to determine the status of infections at US military bases in Japan.

To prevent the spread of infections, the public health emergency imposed on US troops stationed in Japan, as well as movement restrictions for US Department of Defense personnel were prolonged until mid- and end of June, respectively. Although these measures were aimed at avoiding the so-called "Three Cs", the three conditions that facilitate the transmission of infectious diseases (closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings), it must be acknowledged that this response has in fact resulted in a reduced deterrent capability in the traditional security domains of land, sea and air.

The spread of COVID-19 disrupted economic activity, restricting the operations of private companies serving as military contractors and partners. This reduction in shipbuilding and maintenance capacity has raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of the national defense industrial base. As Taoka Shunji observes, if the "plateau state" of prolonged economic stagnation—driven by sustained efforts to avoid the Three Cs (closed spaces, crowded places, close-contact settings)—persists, the national defense budget is likely to shrink,

modernization programs will be delayed, and spending on overseas deployments and training curtailed. While Taoka contends that "COVID-induced disarmament" has already taken place, it remains uncertain whether this phenomenon is merely temporary (Taoka 2020).

Scholars and policymakers have increasingly voiced concern over a potential decline in U.S. national power, particularly its military deterrence. Stephen Walt (2020) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has so severely weakened U.S. capabilities that it symbolizes the "death" of American competence in governance and strategic leadership. This decline undermines not only the country's military and economic strength, but also allies' confidence and global trust in its ability to employ these resources effectively. Walt concludes that only fundamental political change can restore U.S. credibility and global influence.

Associate Professor Phillip Lipsky of the University of Toronto also invoked Charles P. Kindleberger's theory of hegemonic stability, humorously dubbing it the "hegemonic stupidity theory" in relation to the current international order under US leadership. "When the hegemon is stupid, the international system becomes unstable and prone to crisis", he said on Twitter, mocking the Trump administration (Lipsky 2020).

Similar to this critique, G. John Ikenberry (Princeton University) and Charles Kupchan (Georgetown University) contend that preventing Donald Trump's re-election in November 2020 was essential to overcoming the COVID-19 crisis (Ikenberry and Kupchan 2020). Their argument reflects a broader scholarly debate, as numerous analysts questioned the resilience of U.S. power and global leadership under the Trump administration.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, questions had emerged about the credibility of U.S. deterrence. In Southeast Asia, concerns centered on the Trump administration's "America First" policy and the simultaneous rise of China (Hey-

darian 2020). Reflecting these doubts, Ian Storey—an expert on the South China Sea conflict—has questioned the effectiveness of the U.S. military presence in the region. Such activities, including forward deployments of U.S. forces on allied territory, port calls, training exercises, and surveillance operations, are designed to signal resolve and deter potential adversaries, yet their actual impact has been increasingly scrutinized.

According to Storey, the US military's presence in hotspots such as the South China Sea has been transient, meaning that it has shown up primarily in response to Chinese actions and otherwise left the area unattended. Storey pointed out that this approach has allowed China to gradually strengthen its position in the region through a series of irreversible actions, such as advancing the construction of military bases in the South China Sea, and that the US military is ultimately not functioning effectively as a deterrent anymore (Beech 2020).

In response, China has sought to enhance its international influence through a blend of hard and soft power. On the hard-power side, it has strengthened its military presence in East Asia and increased deployments in the South China Sea, even announcing the creation of a new administrative zone. On the soft-power side, particularly since the outbreak of COVID-19, Beijing has engaged in “mask diplomacy,” supplying medical equipment—including masks—to countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Chinese side's perception of a weakening of US Navy operational capabilities could further increase military tensions around Taiwan and the South China Sea (Jiji 2020a). At the same time, the US State Department claims that China is using the COVID-19 pandemic to exert military pressure on Southeast Asian nations such as Malaysia (Reuters 2020). In response, the US military has continued to conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea to keep Chinese forces at bay. How-

ever, military experts suggest that China could take an even harder line, possibly employing new tactics such as using electromagnetic waves to temporarily disable the weapons and control systems of US warships (Jiji 2020b).

In April, China also deployed two Y8-Q patrol aircraft to the Fiery Cross Reef, an artificial island in the South China Sea. These aircraft are capable of detecting, tracking and following US Navy nuclear submarines, and, if so ordered, carrying out attacks. China is also catching up in the domains of cyber and space technologies (Fuse 2020).

In addition, China has reportedly expressed a preference for a Trump reelection, reflecting strategic calculations in response to U.S. policies. During the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Pete Buttigieg cited an analysis by Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University, who argued that the U.S.-led alliance system had weakened under Trump. According to Yan, this shift created favorable conditions for China, including improved relations with traditional U.S. allies such as Japan. He concludes that, “in fact, China has identified its greatest strategic opportunity since the end of the Cold War” (Buttigieg 2020).

### **US-China Hegemonic Rivalry in a “G-Zero” World**

This situation may resemble what A.F.K. Organski describes as “power transition”. Power transition refers to a scenario in which a state challenging the existing international order gains power, while the previously dominant state experiences a relative decline. However, as we are currently witnessing, the transition of power does not proceed smoothly, and the hegemonic rivalry is likely to continue. This rivalry involves not only direct military power, but also competition in areas such as economics and technology, including AI, with intellectual property emerging as a key issue in the US-China trade conflict. Within this dynamic, the competition for security dominance increasingly intersects with other domains.

The U.S.–China rivalry is likely to persist across military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. This complex situation cannot be fully accounted for by either power transition theory or hegemonic stability theory. According to Robert Gilpin's hegemonic stability theory (1981), a hegemonic state stabilizes the international economic order by providing global public goods; when a rising challenger contests the hegemon, competition ensues, and the eventual victor assumes the role of organizing the international economic system as the new hegemonic power.

After the Cold War, there was a period when the international community was described as a unipolar system dominated by the US, the superpower, or as a multipolar system in which countries other than the superpower took the lead. Even today, with the growing presence of countries such as India and Southeast Asian nations, some see this as an era of multipolarity. But it may also be the case, as Ian Bremmer of the US political consultancy Eurasia Group has argued in the past, that the characteristics of a “G-Zero” (non-polar) world are becoming increasingly pronounced.

G-Zero refers to a world in which global leadership is absent, as developed countries focus on domestic issues. In an interview with *Asahi Shinbun* in June 2018, it was suggested that the Trump administration had accelerated the global trend towards a G-Zero world, causing a level of disorder that exceeded expectations (Aoyama 2018).

In the post-COVID era, it is possible that the hegemony of a single nation will no longer be sufficient to maintain the global order. Moreover, as China and the US are likely to continue to assert their influence and challenge each other's dominance in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, costly missteps or miscalculations could easily occur (Chan 2020). Although the end of the unipolar era is in sight, the US stubbornly refuses to relinquish its position as the hegemonic power, suggesting that the struggle

for dominance will continue indefinitely. What will be the role of the Indo-Pacific nations, particularly Japan, which is at the forefront of this G-Zero world?

### **The US-Led Liberal International Order and its Alliance Relations**

In Asia, the US-led alliances have been described as flexible relationships under concepts such as “alliance network” or “alignment” (Tow / Acharya 2007; Wilkins 2019; Matsuoka 2020). In addition, there has been a growing tendency to strengthen alliances based on ideological alignment since the end of the Cold War. US alliances, including the US-Japan alliance, have increasingly served as mechanisms for maintaining the liberal international order itself (Mochizuki / O'Hanlon 1998; Berger *et al.* 2007; Fujishige 2008; Ikenberry 2011; Matsuoka 2018). Value-based diplomacy and the development of Quad relations (comprising the US, Japan, Australia and India) are reflected in the rebranding of the Pacific Command (PACOM) as Indo-Pacific Command (INDO-PACOM), which aligns the strategy even more closely with the idea of containing China, especially under the Trump administration.

In April 2020, Mac Thornberry, a member of the US House Armed Services Committee, introduced the Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative bill, which proposed a budget of approximately USD 6 billion to strengthen missile defence and the capabilities of allies (House Armed Services Committee 2020). Admiral Philip Davidson, Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, also requested an additional USD 20.1 billion in spending between 2021 and 2026 to prepare for the growing military threat from China in the Western Pacific region, particularly to Japan and Taiwan (Gordon 2020).

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, which made face-to-face exchanges difficult, virtual conferences were held during spring under the banner of “Quad Plus” between the US, Japan, Australia, India and other countries closely

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allied to the US (Grossman 2020). In response to China's growing influence, it has become increasingly clear that close cooperation between the US and its allies, including Japan, is a crucial part of the broader framework of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (Mie 2020).

### **Growing Perception of China as a Threat and the Entrenchment of a Hard-Line Stance**

The perception of China as a threat has intensified not only within the Trump administration but also across party lines in Congress. In the Senate, Senators Marco Rubio (Republican) and Jeanne Shaheen (Democrat) have led a movement to stop the transfer of federal retirement savings to China. In addition, various legislative measures have been introduced in response to COVID-19, such as the "Li Wenliang Act" and the "Stop COVID Act", as well as resolutions demanding compensation from the Chinese government. These developments highlight the increasingly tough US stance on China (Shaheen 2020; Cotton 2020; Gooden 2020).

Moreover, both Trump and Biden have proposed a hard-line policy towards China ahead of the US presidential election in November 2020. Biden outlined his foreign policy principles for the year in an essay published in the US foreign policy journal *Foreign Affairs* entitled "Why America Must Lead Again". While aware of China's rise, he advocates the preservation of a liberal international order and US-led alliances (Biden 2020).

Within the Democratic Party, a movement has emerged to defeat the Trump administration by working with progressive liberals, including Bernie Sanders, who was one of Biden's rival candidates. While this influence may lead to changes in Biden's foreign policy principles, his fundamental hard-line approach towards China is not expected to change. Whether Trump or Biden becomes president, given the damage caused by COVID-19 in the US and the resulting deterioration in US public opinion towards

China, it is highly likely that the US will maintain its hardline stance towards China.

### **US Strategy and the US-Japan Alliance: The Present and Future of US-Japan Integration**

Since the 1990s, major US military reforms have been pushed through, including the introduction of advanced military technologies and the reorganisation of military bases. At the same time, the integration of US-Japan military operations has progressed, and regular joint training and exercises have become more routine. However, in the context of COVID-induced disarmament, joint US-Japan training exercises or the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC 2020), which involves the participation of more than 20 countries, have been cancelled or postponed, and their scope and duration have been reduced. This has raised concerns about a weakening of the US-Japan alliance.

Nevertheless, new initiatives have been undertaken to address the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) and the U.S. Navy have introduced unprecedented joint training measures in Southeast Asian waters, including adjusting navigation protocols to avoid close encounters and relying on radio communication between warships. Both countries are also deepening their alliance to strengthen deterrence and response capabilities. In one example, five B-52 strategic bombers previously stationed at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam—considered vulnerable due to its proximity to China's intermediate-range ballistic missiles—have been relocated to Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota. This constitutes a notable adjustment in the operational deployment of U.S. strategic bombers.

In addition, collaboration on a new US-Japan joint missile interception system has improved communication between vessels. This includes the Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC) system, which has further accelerated

integration by enabling highly accurate, real-time sharing of enemy location data. Recently, the MSDF's newest Aegis destroyer, Maya, became the first to be equipped with the CEC system, enhancing its missile interception capabilities. The Self-Defense Forces' (SDF) Space Operations Group was also newly established on 18 May, with US-Japan cooperation naturally included in its outlook. Amid concerns about the declining US deterrence, the US military and the SDF are stepping up their cooperation, which in turn strengthens the US-Japan alliance.

At the same time, the US National Defense Strategy formulated in 2018 emphasized "Dynamic Force Employment" and readiness capabilities. This approach implies a reduction in front-line forces, which could lead to a reduction in forward deployments. As the forward presence of the US military in Asia is seen as critical to deterring aggression, this shift could signal a US retreat from the world. Concerns that this could lead to a decline in deterrence in the future are intensifying (Kotani 2020).

A review of the U.S. Navy under Secretary of Defense Mark Esper indicates a strategic shift towards prioritizing mobility by reducing and lightening overall combat power and weaponry. The Navy is also exploring a shift from its traditional practice of maintaining a constant aircraft carrier presence in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific toward a more flexible crisis-response posture (Larter 2020). This approach reflects the U.S. emphasis on cost-effectiveness in force planning. Some analysts argue that deterrence could still be preserved while pursuing such optimization, for example through the adoption of unmanned systems, particularly in light of COVID-19-related operational disruptions to the fleet.

In addition to the three traditional domains – land, sea and air – that Japan's National Security Strategy focuses on, the 2018 Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines have also added the use of space, cyberspace and the electro-

magnetic spectrum. A report by the Atlantic Council highlighted the potential for US-Japan cooperation to counter the growing threat from China in the areas of unmanned aerial vehicles, drones, AI-enabled synthetic training environments and unmanned aircraft intercepting systems (Nurkin / Hinata-Yamaguchi 2020). Given the development of operations based on these new technologies, it is expected that this will further deepen the integrated operations of the SDF and the US military.

### **Security Environment in the Post-COVID Era**

In the traditional understanding of security, which focuses on military power *per se*, the continuing reduction of US forward deployments seems to symbolise a decline in its deterrence capabilities. Behind the scenes, however, security measures have been advancing beyond the deployment of military forces. Cooperation between Japan and the US has also steadily progressed in areas that transcend previous military collaboration, such as space and emerging technologies. In the future, security is likely to shift towards unmanned systems, with the promotion of emerging technologies and scientific and technological progress.

In addition to efforts to deepen the Japan-US alliance in this direction, new initiatives are being pursued in the context of COVID-19, which has limited the traditional functions of the armed forces. In the post-COVID era, it will be essential to overcome the traditional understanding of security as confined to the domains of land, sea and air, and to pursue a broader scope of security cooperation that includes cyberspace, outer space and infectious disease control.

However, there are differences in perception between Japan and the US regarding joint military technology research and development. According to Yamamoto Satoshi, researcher at the Institute for Future Engineering, it is impossible to conduct research and weapons development without considering Ethical,

Legal and Social Issues (ELSI), so these matters cannot be resolved instantaneously (Japanese Society of Public Utility Economics 2020). Moreover, realistically speaking, the US faces severe budgetary constraints. According to Heino Klinck, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, “it will be a slog particularly now in this COVID-19 environment as resources are even tighter” (McLeary 2020). The challenge will be to provide security with limited financial resources.

### **US-China Rivalry in the G-Zero Era, the US-Japan Alliance and Japan’s Strategy: Time for a Flexible Shift in Security Thinking**

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the US-China rivalry, raising questions about the effectiveness of US deterrence in Asia and providing an opportunity for reassessment. There is a strong tendency to see the situation as one of a declining US and a rising China. However, an examination of US strategy, its policy towards China and the US-Japan alliance suggests that this is less about a power transition than a protracted struggle for dominance in the G-Zero era.

Future security will no longer be limited to deterrence in the three traditional domains of land, sea and air but inevitably extend to fighting against invisible viruses and the protection of cyberspace. Rethinking deterrence against China and strengthening the US-Japan alliance from multiple angles is necessary in this context.

However, a number of issues remain to be resolved. These include the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement and Japan’s financial contributions to US forces stationed in Japan (burden sharing). As the aforementioned Storey points out, it is time to reconsider the actual effectiveness of deterrence and think about a more flexible approach to security, rather than viewing the US military presence as an absolute deterrent.

As Collin Koh (2020) observes, scenarios in which the SDF must assume roles beyond those covered by the US

military necessitate the development of long-term, self-reliant defence capabilities. Building on this concern, the 2020 edition of the annual East Asian Strategic Review, published by Japan’s Ministry of Defense’s National Institute for Defense Studies, stresses the importance of a comprehensive multilateral and multi-layered security cooperation strategy to advance Japan’s vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (National Institute for Defense Studies 2020). Together, these perspectives underscore Japan’s dual approach of enhancing autonomous defence capacity while engaging in multi-lateral security partnerships.

In the US, more hard-line policies towards China are being implemented, such as a ban on visas for Chinese students in the high-tech sector. In the security environment of a G-Zero world, Japan must not only maintain its alliance with the US, but also accelerate the diversification of its partnerships, while closely monitoring the future of US-China rivalry in the non-polar system and respond flexibly to the changing security environment.

### **Update to the original article**

The rivalry between the US and China has intensified since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, confirming earlier predictions that security would extend beyond traditional military spheres. The US has strategically reinforced the “China threat” narrative to justify its security recalibrations and its alliances. The US-Japan alliance has evolved in response to these new challenges, moving beyond traditional military cooperation to focus on a multi-layered, technologically integrated framework. This comes at a time when President Donald Trump has accused Russian, Chinese, and North Korean leaders of conspiring against the US during a military parade in Beijing in August 2025, underscoring a perception of these nations aligning against Washington.

Against this backdrop, alliance dynamics are also being reshaped by de-

bates over burden-sharing and defense commitments. As Kanodia (2025) notes, Washington has urged Indo-Pacific allies, including Japan, to raise defense spending to NATO-like levels and to assume more explicit roles in potential contingencies with China. While such demands have generated unease, allies

remain inclined to adapt in order to sustain U.S. security guarantees. This adjustment, however, reinforces a trend toward militarization, raising difficult questions about how Japan can balance the strengthening of deterrence within the alliance framework with the need to avoid deepening regional tensions.

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