

It has been a long term, and I have asked you to think about many different things relating to Japanese society. However, the focus has been mainly domestic. In our final class we are thinking about Japanese society within international society.

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**Japan in International Society**

- Very broadly, modern Japanese history can be categorized as:
  1. Sakoku: Relative isolation (to 1850s)
  2. Imperial Japan: Aspiring to join the imperial powers (to 1945)
  3. American ally: A focus on economic growth within the American sphere (to today)
  4. What next ...?

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When we think about Japan within international society, there are three very broad phases within the modern period.

The first is *sakoku*. This is the period from the mid-seventeenth century when Japan largely shut itself off from the rest of the world. However, it is important to remember it was not completely shut off. There remained contacts with the Ainu in the north, Ryukyuans in the south, there was some trade and diplomatic exchange with Korea and China, and the Dutch maintained an outpost at Dejima in Nagasaki.

The second period is imperial Japan. From the Meiji Restoration to the end of World War II, Japan aspired to be one of the great imperial powers. The imperial project ended in defeat and disaster for Japan.

And out of this destruction came the third phase, which continues to this day ... just. Now, Japan is a peaceful economic power within the American sphere of influence. Looking at most university-level textbooks about Japanese society, the

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key has been understanding how Japan fits within international society in this postwar order, namely how the earlier two phases have continued to affect the third phase.

But, I think we are just about to enter another phase. I will leave that question until the end of the lecture. So, for now, let's concentrate on what we know about the present and the legacies of Japan's sakoku and imperial pasts.

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### Postwar Japan

- Framed by the Constitution.
- Dominated by the issues stemming from Japan's defeat in 1945.  
E.g. 60 Years. *The Path of a Nation Striving for Global Peace*.
- A model member of the United Nations.

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Japan's postwar has been greatly shaped by the constitution. This was enacted in 1947 and has remained unchanged ever since. If you have not read the constitution yet, please make sure to do so.

Defeat in 1945 and war responsibility issues have affected all of Japan's postwar participation in the international community. Read the government pamphlet *60 Years. The Path of a Nation Striving for Global Peace* to see how the war has affected bilateral relations with other countries and Japan's identity as a peaceful nation.

Also, mindful of how Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933 over the Manchurian Incident deepened Japan's conflict with others, ever since the war Japan has aspired to be a model member of the United Nations. Again, you can read about this via links in the class homepage.

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## The US-Japan Alliance

- Born in defeat and occupation.
- The Anpo Protests regarding the 1960 Japan-US Security Treaty signing.
- The controversy continues to the present with the 2015 protests over “collective self-defense”.
- One of the most contentious issues is the continued presence of US military bases in Japan, mainly in Okinawa.

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The cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy is its alliance with the United States, which was born following Japan's defeat and occupation. Of course, Japan is the junior partner. After 1945 it had little choice except to go along with American wishes.

Issues of defense and security, therefore, remain very sensitive. There was great popular protest in 1960 when the Japan-US Security Treaty was signed.

And there were more large protests in 2015 when the so called “collective self-defense bills” were being debated in the Japanese parliament.

Another major area of dispute is the continued presence of US military bases in Japan, mainly in Okinawa. For many nationalists in Japan, all this dependence on - indeed, continued occupation by - the United States is a painful reminder of

defeat. It triggers a desire to break free from domination by a foreign power. For many progressives in Japan, the ongoing military alliance with the United States is a symbol of continued Japanese complicity in imperial structures. Those American bases were used extensively during the Vietnam War, for example. This made Japan complicit once again in Asian suffering during war during the 1960s and 1970s.

However, for many less ideologically committed people, the foreign military presence in Japan is either an economic opportunity or a social nuisance. For some, the bases are good in that they employ many Japanese, and the tens of thousands of American personnel in Japan spend their wages in local shops and restaurants. For others, however, the bases are a social nuisance causing problems such as noise pollution and crimes by American military personnel.

## Defense, Territory, History

- The Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF): How can it exist given Article 9 of the Constitution ("land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained")?
- Ministry of Defense documents/videos about the SDF.
- Japan has territorial disputes with China (Senkaku Islands/Diaoyu), South Korea (Takeshima/Dokdo), and Russia (Northern Territories/Southern Kuriles).
- The "history issue" has also been a thorn in relations with China and South Korea in particular. **Take my class "The History Issue in East Asia" in the 3rd year.**

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In addition to the American military, Japan is defended by its own Self-Defense Force, or JSDF. It is a simple reality of international politics that any country the size of Japan has a military. However, read the constitution carefully. You will see that according to Article 9 the SDF should not exist. It exists via a series of incredible "interpretations" that stretch the meanings of the Japanese and English languages to the absolute limit. Somehow "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained" has been interpreted to mean that 250,000 military personnel, tanks, warships and fighter aircraft can be maintained. This constitutional contortionism is actually extremely dangerous. If perfectly clear words in black and white on a page can be interpreted to mean the complete opposite of what they clearly say, is the Japanese Constitution worth the paper it is written on?

Anyway, read the Ministry of Defense White Papers and watch the videos linked from the class homepage. You will see that Japan has a formidable military, albeit called a Self-Defense Force. And yes, there is a Ministry of Defense that oversees this organization supposedly outlawed by the Constitution.

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In practical reality, you will see in the Defense White Papers that Japan does not live in a completely stable part of the globe. Japan has territorial disputes with its three immediate neighbours: China, South Korea and Russia. Again there are extensive online documents available via the class homepage.

In addition to territory, the so-called "history issue" continues to affect relations between Japan and its neighbours. If you are particularly interested in such issues, please take my class "The History Issue in East Asia" in your third year. The history issue is my other main research area alongside contents tourism.

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## Military and the Environment



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Military issues are not just about defense. They also relate to the environment. Here is Bakhmut in Ukraine ... or what was left of it after intense fighting in 2022 and 2023. Every war destroys buildings, uses vast amounts of fuel and materials, shatters forests, and poisons the water supply, either with chemicals or corpses. It has led to calls for the crime of ecocide, or crimes against the environment, to be prosecuted alongside war crimes such as torture and genocide.

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## Military and the Environment

Table A1a. Top 20 countries in terms of military expenditure, 2019

State	Military expenditure (US\$ billions) <sup>1</sup>	Number of active military personnel (world ranking) <sup>2</sup>	GHG emissions: national share of global total (world ranking) <sup>3</sup>
United States	800.7	1,379,800 (3rd)	12% (2nd)
China	[293.4]	2,035,000 (1st)	24% (1st)
India	76.6	1,442,900 (2nd)	6.8% (3rd)
United Kingdom	68.4	148,450	0.9%
Russia	65.9	900,000 (5th)	3.9% (5th)
France	56.6	203,750	0.7%
Germany	56.0	181,400	1.4% (11th)
Saudi Arabia	[55.6]	227,000 (20th)	1.5% (10th)
Japan	54.1	247,150 (18th)	2.3% (7th)

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Then there are the environmental costs of just maintaining a military. The group Scientists for Global Responsibility have produced a report titled Estimating the Military's Global Greenhouse Emissions. Their conclusion is as follows:

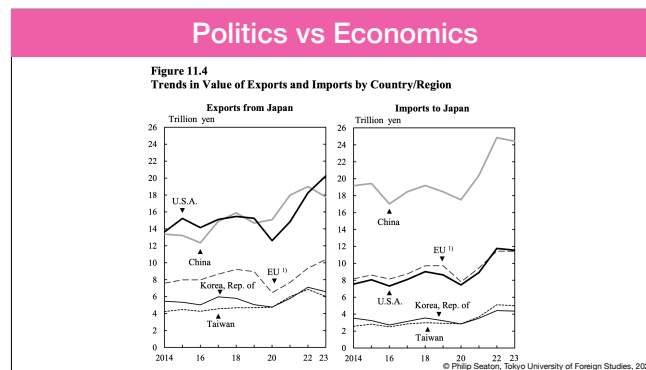
“we find that the total military carbon footprint is approximately 5.5% of global emissions. If the world's militaries were a country, this figure would mean they have the fourth largest national carbon footprint in the world – greater than that of Russia. This emphasises the urgent need for concerted action to be taken both to robustly measure military emissions and to reduce the related carbon footprint – especially as these emissions are very likely to be growing in the wake of the war in Ukraine.”

Of course, Japan is a significant part of this equation as the 9th biggest military spender in the world, and the country with the 7th highest CO2 emissions in the world. The more that Japan has to scramble fighters to defend its airspace, and the more patrols it must send to the Senkaku Islands, the more carbon is emitted. Peace and environmental protection go

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hand in hand.

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I mentioned earlier that Japan has strained ties with neighbours over territory and the legacies of the Japanese empire. However, we should not confuse close military or political ties with close economic ties. And conversely, we should not confuse difficult political relations with difficult economic relations.

Look at this graph from the *Statistical Handbook of Japan*. Japan has difficult historical and political relations with China, but China is Japan's most important trading partner. And despite a military alliance with the United States, there is considerable economic friction. Note how America imports far more goods from Japan than it exports to Japan. This balance of payments deficit has long been a cause of anti-Japanese economic sentiment in the United States. And in 2025, the Trump administration imposed tariffs on Japanese imports in an overtly hostile move that dominated newspaper headlines for much of the year.

By contrast, Japan's relations with the European Union are basically strong. In 2019 the EU-Japan Economic Partnership

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Agreement was reached, which reduced tariffs and trade barriers between the two.

### Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

- Hard power (military/economic) vs Soft power (cultural)
- Japan Foundation: promoting Japanese culture and language overseas.
- JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency): volunteer work, ODA.
- There's never "pure altruism": Much aid is a legacy of imperial history, or a strategic matter.

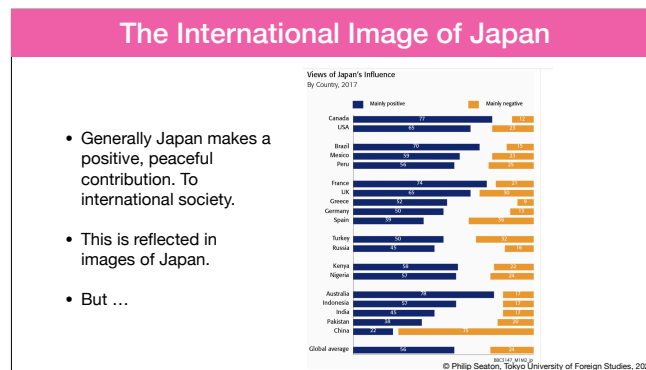
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In contrast to the use of hard power in military and economic relations, Japan also tries to use soft power, particularly in the rest of Asia and the “global south”. Soft power is the idea that you can encourage other people to act in a beneficial way for you via good relations, instead of forcing them to do what you want via the hard use of military or economic power. A lot of this revolves around the popularity of Japanese culture, particularly manga, anime, and traditional culture like Japan's amazing cuisine. But even here, in the realms of soft power and cultural diplomacy, historical issues come into play. Many countries in Asia suffered greatly during the age of Japanese imperialism. They don't forget so easily ...

So, Japanese initiatives like cultural diplomacy via the Japan Foundation, developmental assistance via JICA, or other forms of ODA can contain meanings of “making amends” for the past. However, activities such as overseas aid are never pure altruism. Japan benefits, too. Often the benefits are economic: Japan might be constructing a dam in Vietnam, but Japanese companies are doing much of the work and therefore receiving much of the construction costs. Or, an Indonesian student might be receiving a Japanese government scholarship, but there is a higher chance that the

Indonesian student will become a Japan-friendly member of society who perhaps works for the economic benefit of Japanese companies operating in Indonesia in the future.

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The overall result of Japan's activities in international society is that people around the world generally have a positive view of Japan. This is data from a 2017 survey. Unfortunately I cannot find a more recent one of this global scope. But this poll asked tens of thousands of people around the world if they viewed a country's influence as mainly positive or negative. Japan comes very high up the international rankings as one of the best liked countries around the world. Note in particular how countries with close cultural ties rate Japan highest. The large Nikkei population in Brazil, the joint love of comics and fine dining that Japan shares with France, the Australian policy of promoting Japanese language learning - these cultural factors all push Japan's positive image abroad. Soft power truly is more effective than hard power in gaining genuine friends. The one country that stands out as having strongly negative views of Japan's influence is China. China is the neighboring economic rival. But it is also the country with the deepest wounds from Japanese imperialism. To understand Japan's present, you must also understand Japan's past ...

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## What next ...?

- We are beyond "Postwar XX". We are "Pre-Storm".
  1. Climate change: We are at the +1.5 degree world.
  2. Depopulation + immigration: Next stop populism?
  3. Trump 2.0: Wither the US-Japan Alliance?
  4. Collapse of liberal democracy: The age of oligarchy and misinformation?
  5. A post-UN world: A new age of impunity.

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And what of the future? Let me return to this question I posed at the beginning of the lecture. I sense that we are entering a new phase in the history of Japanese society. Last year was postwar 80. I hope Japan will continue to learn from that era of its history, but the relevance of being "postwar" now seems marginal. I think we are beyond "postwar". If anything, we are "pre-storm". The issues in the rearview mirror are of marginal help in dealing with the fast-approaching problems.

- 1) Climate change: In 2024, the globe exceeded pre-industrial temperatures by more than 1.5 degrees centigrade for the first time. We have breached the major climate target and have entered the +1.5 degrees world with no indication that the brakes on carbon emissions have been applied. In the coming decades, Japan will have to cope with even greater summer heat, and eventually sea level rises that will submerge much of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. The relocation of Japan's political and economic infrastructure away from zones that we know are vulnerable to climate change cannot begin soon enough.
- 2) Depopulation and immigration: Japan's population is aging and shrinking. The government is allowing in more and

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more foreign workers to prop up certain sectors of the economy and prevent collapse of Japan's standing as a major global economy. But, in other advanced industrialized nations, mass immigration has triggered nationalist and often overtly-racist populism. This phenomenon arrived in Japan in 2025, although the early warning signs of hate speech have been discussed for many years. Furthermore, if Japan's wealth divide continues to grow, it will just exacerbate the politics of grievance, as we have seen in many other places. Japanese politics could easily become much more angry and extremist.

- 3) Trump presidency 2.0: The first year of the Donald Trump presidency has taken the postwar order to the brink of collapse. He has withdrawn from many UN institutions, and his interest in "acquiring" Greenland threatens to destroy NATO. He has clearly flipped sides on the Ukraine War and is more sympathetic to Russia than Ukraine. Plus, in his first presidency he sucked up to dictators like Kim Jong-un. It should not be surprising that 70% of Japanese people said in an opinion poll in August 2025 that relations with America have got worse (<https://www.nippon.com/ja/in-depth/d01157/>). Japan needs to have a serious debate about whether its best interests are served by staying in the Japanese-American alliance. But, it is debatable as to whether Japan could change the status quo, and even if it could, would losing America and coping on its own with Chinese and Russian security threats be any better?
- 4) The collapse of liberal democracy: Many countries around the world are witnessing rising populism and a lack of trust in political and intellectual elites. The United States, in my assessment, is descending rapidly into authoritarianism and nineteenth-century-style imperialism. The capture of many mainstream media organizations by power-hungry billionaires, and the unregulated space of the internet have placed liberal democracy under tremendous pressure. Many major countries now are effectively oligarchies, with billionaires and major corporations wielding disproportional influence and the electorate feeling ever more marginalized.
- 5) The collapse of the postwar system: I am referring here primarily to the United Nations. It could be argued that the Security Council is no more or less divided now than it was at the height of the Cold War. But we are now clearly in an age of impunity. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 makes a mockery of the idea that the Security Council is about maintaining security. American's attacks on Iran in 2025 and Venezuela in 2026 were also both clear violations of international law that the UN could do nothing about ... except offer critical noises. We seem to be slipping back towards the dog-eat-dog world of imperialism. What will happen if China decides to claim Taiwan by force, or if North

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Korea decides to restart hostilities with the south, or if the Russian alliance with North Korea drags it into East Asian conflict once again?

In short, we live in unstable times.

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### Our best hope ...

- Listen to scientists.
- Learn tolerance.
- Choose your friends carefully.
- Combat misinformation. Become a good researcher.
- Get offline!
- Learn about history, justice, and morality.

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But I do not want to be pessimistic. I am hopeful. And the best way to be hopeful is to truly value your time at university and the lessons you are learning here. I am deeply cynical about politics, capitalism, and the global system humans have created based on greed, competition, and conflict. I believe strongly in the power of what we try and teach you at university, namely multiculturalism, understanding issues from multiple perspectives, and reaching conclusions based on solid evidence. So my messages for a hopeful future are as follows:

- 1) Study what scientists, not politicians, say about how to protect our planet, and behave accordingly.
- 2) Learn tolerance and respect towards those with different backgrounds. There is strength in our diversity as human beings.
- 3) Choose your friends carefully. And remember that while friends mostly say nice things to each other, good friends are able to give blunt criticisms when necessary.
- 4) Combat misinformation by always having an inquisitive mind. Constantly question what is correct, and seek out the

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most reliable information sources. Learn about how to be a good researcher, and learn to distinguish valid conclusions from bullshit.

- 5) On a social level, combat the danger of social media to your worldview and mental health by getting off your smartphones and getting off the internet. Spend quality time in-person with your friends. We are social animals, not digital animals.
- 6) Similarly, trust your brain, not AI. AI is obviously part of our future, but it is a potentially very dangerous tool. Never ever become the sort of person who relies on AI so much that they forget how to think for themselves.
- 7) Finally, learn about history, justice, morality, and other big topics that feature prominently in university life. Acquire a strong moral compass via the ethics of research, and take that with you into the adult world.

In short, think of everything you learn here at TUFs as a chance to make you a better person, and the world a better place. That is where my hope lies, and why I believe so strongly in the importance of education.

**Finally ...**

- At the end of this course, what is the most important thing you feel you have learned about Japanese society?

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But enough of my pep talk. We have reached the end of our course about Japanese society. This is the final question I want to leave you with. “What is the most important thing you feel you have learned about Japanese society?”

Let me tell you what I hope you have learned: That Japan is complicated. From now on, make sure you talk about Japan using considerable nuance and attention to detail. Do not rely on broad stereotypes about Japanese society and culture. Stop using phrases like “the Japanese think this” or “the Japanese do that”. If you use clichéd words like “unique” to describe something about Japan, make sure that it really is the case and not just a tired stereotype.

Furthermore, there have been significant changes and turning points throughout Japanese history, and at the moment we are moving quickly towards another period of great change. This is the era of post growth, namely when depopulation, aging and economic stagnation are occurring against the backdrop of the social changes that will be forced upon us by climate change. Your generation did not cause these problems, but your generation will be at the forefront of finding and

implementing the solutions to these problems. For that you will need critical thinking skills in addition to detailed knowledge. So, while this course has been about Japanese society today, I hope that more than anything else it has taught you to challenge and question everything you know about Japan. I also hope it has taught you to think deeply about how the knowledge you are learning here at university will help you solve the challenges that you and Japan will face in the future.

*Otsukaresama deshita!*