

Preface

It is not easy to pinpoint the exact date and location that this book began. As is common among first-time authors, the initial pieces of the puzzle appeared in graduate school. Japan watchers in academic and policy circles seemed obsessed with what made Japan so peculiar. I did not know any better than any of these fantastic scholars. Still, I was equally dissatisfied with how much Japanese security policy did not match the predictions in academic literature, opinion editorials, and news reports. Despite the volatile regional and international contexts, the government of Japan had failed to amend the Constitution, significantly increase defense expenditures, and convince the public of the need to normalize.

Piecing together the puzzle came in fits and spurts. Between my first trip in 2005 as a study abroad student and my most recent research trip in early 2020, I have completed a little more than two dozen trips to Japan, totaling approximately 2.5 years of on-the-ground time. During this period, Japan experienced three monumental events that revealed the character of its people—the 3/11 Tōhoku triple disaster, the awarding of the 2020 Olympics, and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The international community marveled at the Japanese industriousness that rebuilt a country ravaged by natural disasters, soft power that drew the world's attention, and a robust welfare state that contained a pandemic far better than the West. The Japanese public held its government to a much higher standard—criticizing its slow reaction, waste of resources, and odd faith in the power of two face masks. There was an apparent disconnect between what the Japanese public and the outside world expected of the government.

In the hundreds of conversations with friends about the state of their country, the aging and declining population kept coming up. They wondered when they would be able to have children? How would they support them? When could they retire, given the uncertainty of the pension system? How would they take care of their aging parents? Young Japanese men and women had little time for the high politics of power balancing. If anything, given that Japan enjoyed such peace and prosperity in domestic and global affairs, my friends found my framing of security in terms of a rising China and nuclear North Korea strange, maybe even American. What came naturally to me was abnormal for them. Hence, my focus shifted from understanding security policy to understanding how different societies think about security.

The first “aha!” moment may have occurred in 2013 during a homestay in Hiroshima. In addition to taking peace studies courses at Hiroshima City University, I spent dozens of hours playing *Super Smash Bros.* with my two host brothers, looking for Subaru WRX parts with my host father, and chatting about the differences between living in a big city and the countryside with my host mother. I purposely avoided talking about research and politics because it would have been rude and, at worst, boring. It is quite rewarding and enjoyable to just observe and listen. On one morning before I left for class, a Japan Self-Defense Forces commercial played on the television. I was taken aback because I had never seen one live before, not in Tokyo or Yokohama, where I had previously lived. How effective would the commercial be in the famed peace city of Hiroshima?

The commercial’s content and tone were not very interesting; it checked all the boxes of the atypical Japanese militarism that Western anthropologists and political scientists found so curious—smiling faces, upbeat music, and not a gun to be found. My host mother’s reaction? Now that was interesting. In a somewhat panicked fashion, she told me that she was surprised to see the commercial herself, and she went to great lengths to assure me that such commercials must be an anomaly and that I should not worry. Her reaction provided direction for this book. It became clear that security needed to be understood within the context of those who experience it, and that the literature was lacking in this regard. How could Japan remilitarize when poor demographics constrained the economy, and the public showed no interest in testing the Constitution’s limits? Politics is the art of the possible, and that possible is determined by the physics and biology of the material world as well as the ideas held by society. In fleshing out different

conceptions of militarism and how states pursue security given the constraints, I could grapple with how we justify violence in international relations when Japan's case suggests that its brand of antimilitarism offers a more peaceful path forward.

I have many people to thank for making this book possible. To begin, I am very grateful to the many interviewees who graciously gave their time, patience, and expertise to a Vietnamese-American with few connections to elite policy circles. Engrossing conversations in Kesennuma *snakku*, Tokyo *izakaya*, Hiroshima parks, Teshima museums, Iwaishima homes, and cafes and offices across the country taught me so much about Japanese politics, life motivations, and greatly underappreciated diversity.

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