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Trump calls the U.S.-Japan alliance 'one-sided.' Tokyo says otherwise.

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a Cabinet meeting at the White House on Thursday in Washington. | AFP-JIJI

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U.S. President Donald Trump has railed against his country's alliance with Japan, calling the partnership — which turns 65 this year — unfair and "one-sided."

"We defend them, but they don't have to defend us," Trump said suddenly during a Cabinet meeting last Friday as he was riffing on his global tariff push and of the inequity of the global trading system. "We pay hundreds of billions of dollars to defend them ... they don't pay anything."

But Trump's views don't always jibe with reality — and Tokyo has been quick to set the record straight.

The Japanese government has countered the U.S. president's views by noting that the countries' security treaty does allow for a joint response to protect Japan and that legislation passed in 2015 greatly expanded the scope of mutual protection under certain conditions.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi has even said that Japan and the United States "are now able to help each other seamlessly in any situation."

Some observers believe Trump's worldview is stuck in the 1980s, a time when the Japanese economy seemed unstoppable and trade deficits — and the associated frictions — captured the attention of U.S. policymakers.

"His view of a Japan as an economic competitor seems unchanged and stuck in a time warp from nearly 40 years ago, and he has limited understanding of how the security relationship has moved on massively since then," said Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England.

Masashi Murano, a Japan defense expert at the Hudson Institute think tank, noted that despite the best efforts of assassinated former leader Shinzo Abe and current Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba to explain in detail the significant changes the alliance has undergone, Trump has continued to base his views on "a stereotypical image of Japan in the 1980s."

Murano said that while it is important to recognize that Trump and his supporters feel a sense of unfairness, it is also necessary to understand that most alliances, by nature, are "asymmetric."

"An alliance requires a process of finding a political balance point that is agreeable — fair — to both sides, while accepting a certain degree of asymmetry," he said.

Ryosei Akazawa (center), Japan's envoy for tariff negotiations with the U.S., depart Tokyo for Washington on Wednesday. Japan's financial contributions to its alliance with the United States could come up during those talks. | AFP-JIJI

Whether Trump and his team are willing to do that is a different question, especially as his administration signals that this asymmetry could be used as leverage in ongoing negotiations over onerous tariffs that the U.S. president slapped on the top Asian ally. Talks between the two sides over the tariffs were set to kick off Wednesday in Washington.

“Trump has a strange tendency to link and delink trade and security issues,” Hughes said. “He often sees security as a way to place pressure on friend and foe alike on trade, and vice versa.”

The U.S. president said clearly for the first time hours ahead of the trade talks that cost-sharing for the American troop presence would also be on the agenda.

"Japan is coming in today to negotiate Tariffs, the cost of military support, and 'TRADE FAIRNESS.' I will attend the meeting, along with Treasury & Commerce Secretaries. Hopefully something can be worked out which is good (GREAT!) for Japan and the USA!" he posted on Truth Social.

A long list of contributions

Japan hosts more than 50,000 American troops, the largest number of active-duty service members outside of the U.S., with the forces regarded as a key bulwark against military assertiveness from China, North Korea and others.

Contrary to Trump's claims that the U.S. doles out "hundreds of billions of dollars" to defend Japan while Tokyo pays nothing, the latest five-year cost-sharing deal reached in 2022, known as a Special Measures Agreement (SMA), shows that Japan will spend around ¥227 billion ($1.69 billion) this year on expenses such as utilities, facility maintenance and wages for Japanese staff at U.S. military bases in the country.

In addition to the SMA, Japan says it pours even more cash into hosting U.S. troops — about ¥456 billion this year alone on rents for U.S. exclusive-use land, construction of facilities for Marines being moved from Okinawa to Guam, as well as "burden reduction" measures, among other things.

Members of the Self-Defense Force's Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade take part in a joint airborne landing exercise with U.S. Marine Corps members at the Higashifuji training field in Gotemba, Shizuoka Prefecture, in March 2022. | REUTERS

But even with these expenditures — which dwarf those of other U.S. allies that host American troops — Japan has taken a relatively low-key approach to emphasizing the numbers in public, possibly because they are notoriously difficult to calculate.

"The calculation is far from simple, because there are just too many inputs to produce a figure without arbitrarily making decisions on what to include or exclude," a former U.S.-Japan alliance manager told The Japan Times on condition of anonymity in order to speak frankly.

“Do you factor in the costs for rotation units? How about the cost of running overseas schools, commissaries, recreation areas or mail rooms? What about the cost of moving service members and their families to those foreign countries? How much of this would be costs that the U.S. would be spending if those same forces were stationed somewhere else? The list goes on.”

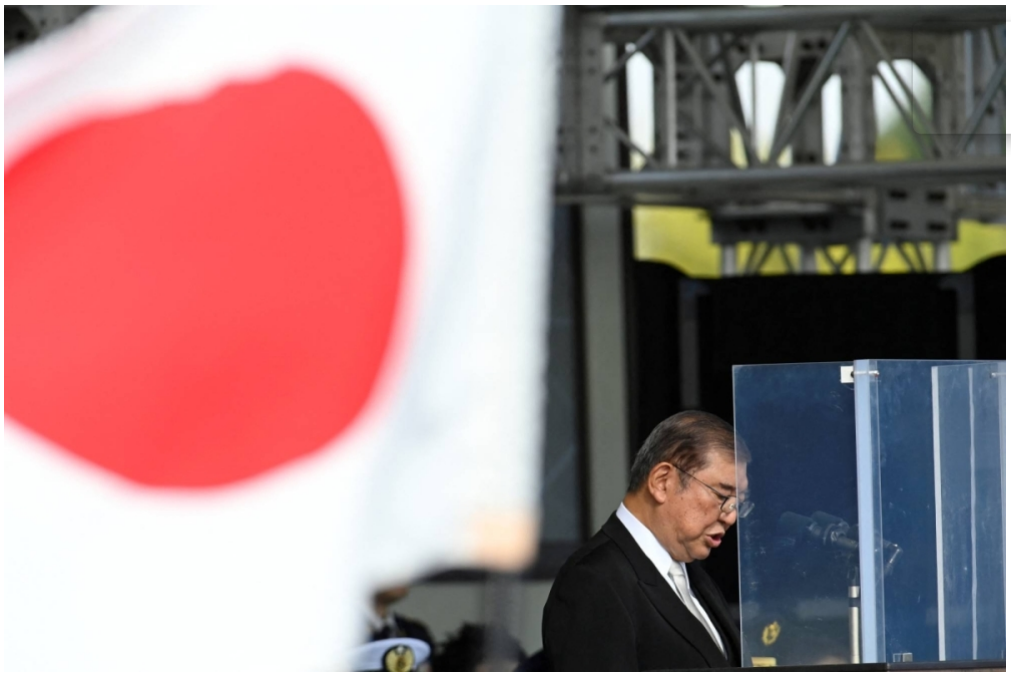
In private, however, Japanese officials will almost assuredly point to these figures — as well as Japanese purchases of U.S.-made military kit — as a retort to any talk of an unfair relationship.

Cost-sharing is also seen by those intimately involved in the alliance as a small subset of broader alliance designs that include many obligations and contributions — it was not even part of either the original alliance treaty in 1951 or in the renegotiated treaty of 1960, only becoming formalized in 1978 with the so-called *omoiyari yosan* (sympathy budget) that eventually evolved into the SMAs.

According to the former alliance manager, the Trump administration’s views on Japan “are neither new nor unique,” and the contemporary argument that America’s allies must pay more or do more “continues to be underpinned by the same bad assumptions as before.”

These include the views that U.S. forces are solely in other countries to “protect” the host nation and that cost-sharing is a crucial part of the alliance.

“Yes, the United States government extends security guarantees to others, but U.S. forces are not mercenaries — they are there for unilateral national interests that extend well beyond posturing for collective self-defense,” the alliance manager said.



Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba delivers a speech prior to reviewing troops of the Self-Defense Forces during a 70th anniversary event at the Ground Self-Defense Force's Camp Asaka in Saitama Prefecture, last November. | POOL / VIA REUTERS

Big picture

Japan's rebuttal of Trump's criticism that the U.S. must defend Japan, but Japan need not defend the U.S. is more nuanced.

Tokyo has emphasized that Article 5 of the revised bilateral security treaty stipulates that both countries will jointly respond to an armed attack on Japan, while Article 6 grants the U.S. the right to have military bases on the Japanese archipelago. It has also noted that the 2015 security-related laws allow for the limited exercise of the right of collective self-defense.

According to the former alliance manager, "Japan may not be obligated under the mutual security treaty to defend the United States, but the government has postured itself to be able to do so under certain conditions" — especially when it comes to "the types of conflicts that would matter most for U.S. national interests."

There are also other capabilities that Japan can exercise to aid the U.S. outside of the treaty that do not necessarily constitute the use of force, including logistics support, asset protection and evacuation operations. Those are all codified in the 2015 Defense Guidelines as well as bilateral plans that the U.S. military routinely exercises with the Self Defense Forces.

“Those capabilities are all meaningful and important,” the ex-alliance manager said.

While Trump’s complaints about the alliance’s lack of straight reciprocity “have some validity” in that Japan might only exercise collective self-defense in certain contingencies, Trump fails to see the bigger picture of alliance ties, the University of Warwick’s Hughes said.

“Trump’s transactional and zero-sum worldview seemingly makes it hard for him to grasp that Japan’s security commitment to assist the U.S. occurs in all sorts of indirect ways,” he said, noting, in particular, that the alliance provides Washington “with the platform to pursue its security interests in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.”

Going forward, Japanese policymakers are expected to double down on making the arguments to the Trump administration that Tokyo is indispensable to the U.S. in dealing with China and has undergone a dramatic transformation in terms of what it contributes to the alliance since the 1980s.

Speaking last month during a parliamentary committee meeting, Ishiba signaled as much.

“Japan is obliged to provide bases for the United States. How significant a role does it play in U.S. global strategy?” he asked. “We need to have a proper conversation about it.”

Whether this will sync with Trump’s worldview, however, remains an open question.

KEYWORDS

U.S.-JAPAN RELATIONS(HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/US-JAPAN-RELATIONS), U.S.(HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/US), DEFENSE (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/DEFENSE), SDF (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/SDF), U.S. BASES (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/US-BASES), DONALD TRUMP (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/DONALD-TRUMP), TARIFFS (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/TARIFFS), TRADE (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/TRADE), U.S. MILITARY (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/US-MILITARY), CHINA (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/CHINA), SHIGERU ISHIBA (HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/SHIGERU-ISHIBA)