



Crew members of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's (JMSDF) latest Izumo-class helicopter carrier DDH-184 *Kaga* stand in front of Japan's naval flag 22 March 2017 during a handover ceremony for the JMSDF by Japan Marine United Corporation in Yokohama, Japan. (Photo by Toru Hanai, Reuters)

# Understanding Japan's Role in Securing the Western Pacific

Lt. Col. Peter D. Fromm, U.S. Army, Retired

**T**he political-military climate in Japan is undergoing a series of unprecedented changes; these include broad new discussion about Japan's future relationship to Article 9 of its postwar

constitution conceived by the United States.<sup>1</sup> Oddly, that Article 9 is now over seventy years old does not seem to have diminished the resonance of its framework in projecting the *image* of intentional pacifism,



as it was originally intended to do.<sup>2</sup> Japan's pacifist image is still very important to the region and will continue to be so in the decades ahead.

In a 2001 *International Herald Tribune* article, Michael Richardson quoted predictions made by Chinese professor Wu Xinbo of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai:

Given the evolving political, security, and economic trends in East Asia, the U.S. security involvement in the region ten years from now will have to be transformed, both in form and substance. ... The U.S. forward military presence will decline, security alliances will become less relevant as an instrument of U.S. policy, and a pluralistic security community will very likely emerge.<sup>3</sup>

The professor was clearly wrong in predicting the decline of U.S. security alliances with East Asian nations. The bilateral alliance with Japan and alliances with most others in the region are as strong as ever, and U.S. cooperation with Japan has evolved into one of the strongest and most important security relationships in the world, a fact the U.S. Pacific "pivot" underscores.

Japanese soldiers prepare to clear rooms down a hallway 18 September 2016 during a bilateral urban warfare exercise in support of exercise Orient Shield 16 at Aibano Training Area, Japan. Orient Shield is an annual bilateral combined arms training exercise designed to improve joint operations, combat readiness, and interoperability between the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, U.S. Army Japan, and U.S. Army and Air National Guard forces. (Photo by Spc. Elizabeth Scott, U.S. Army National Guard)

Wu, however, was correct in predicting the evolution of a pluralistic security community. Moreover, that security community, led in part by the United States, aims to contain Chinese hegemony. However, the U.S. military needs to ensure it conducts its bilateral relationship with Japan in a way that enhances Japan's role in the East Asian security community and avoids unintended consequences such as those in the Philippines, which now courts China.

## The Future Normalization of Japan

In spite of recent debate about reinterpreting Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, a true collective self-defense



alliance between the United States and Japan is probably decades away.<sup>4</sup> Such an agreement would entail as yet undetermined changes in Japan's political situation and a vital alteration of its constitution, but significant change is inevitable, however distant. In brief, the reasons Japan will move inevitably, albeit slowly, toward true collective self-defense with the United States and other nations are varied. They include that Japan aspires

- to become a truly “normal country,” one that exercises the right of collective self-defense under international law;
- to gain respect from the international community as a nation willing to share the burden of world stability;
- to improve its credentials as a legitimate member of the United Nations Security Council;
- to demonstrate to the American public that Japan is willing to become a full partner in a normal defense alliance (which would forestall Japan's having to bend to China's will and hegemony in the region should the U.S. public come to oppose what it views as a one-sided alliance); and, in a seeming paradox,
- to free itself of its too-heavy reliance on U.S. power.

Again, these are the reasons that Japan will normalize—as a military power—in the distant future, but it will move so slowly that the image of the “Peace Constitution” will persist.

In a draft 1995 U.S. Army War College thesis, Maj. Gen. K. Mochida of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) relayed sentiments not uncommon among senior Japanese policy makers today:

Japan cannot become an active partner in the construction of the new world order as long as there is uncertainty about Japan's future direction both inside and outside of the country. Without such a clearly established and articulated direction, Japan runs the risk of losing the respect of other nations and becoming nothing more than an international “check writer” who is not included in the discussions as to how the “check” will be used.<sup>5</sup>

This is the condition John Dower described as Japan's special problem: “Japan's peculiar dreams of peace have come to involve a gnawing sense of entrapment.”<sup>6</sup>

That “sense of entrapment” is still very much alive and well nearly two decades after Dower wrote *Embracing Defeat*. Dower's book is still considered

current, as conditions have only changed marginally since *Embracing Defeat* was published. The book is used by U.S. Army Japan in its Leader Certification and Development Program for all new officers, senior NCOs, and senior civilians.

Implicit in Mochida's observation above is the idea that Japan's security connects more to economic issues than to political ones, and that willingness to share military burdens carries a moral responsibility eclipsing the constitutional standards of nonbelligerency. The links between military security and economic vitality are of course not unique to Japan. However, since Japan is the only nation that recognizes, yet rejects, the right of collective self-defense, the linkage is troubling when juxtaposed with Japan's still strong economy (number three worldwide as of 2015).<sup>7</sup> For a country as strong and rich as Japan is to be a mere “check writer” rather than a full participant in world security undermines its position for autonomous self-interest in world affairs. Yet, eighteen years after Dower's observations, incremental progress has been made. Note this observation on the disagreements involved from “The Article 9 Debate at a Glance”:

While the LDP [Liberal Democratic Party] insists that the Constitution must be amended to reflect today's realities, politicians on the Left counter that the realities of Japanese security policy should be changed to reflect the provisions of the pacifist Constitution. Many moderates, meanwhile, maintain that the best way to adapt to changing circumstances is to continue to pass new laws under the current provisions of Article 9. In addition, a number of liberal politicians have called

**Lt. Col. Peter D. Fromm, U.S. Army, retired**, is the deputy G-1 for U.S. Army Japan at Camp Zama, Japan. He holds a BA in social science from San Jose State University and an MA in philosophy from Indiana University, Bloomington. He served with the 1st Battalion (Ranger) 75th Infantry, the 82nd Airborne Division, the 1st Cavalry Division, and the 2nd Armored Division. He was a principal staff officer with U.S. Army Japan. He taught English, philosophy, and ethics for several years at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York.

for constitutional revision with a completely different aim from the LDP's: to more narrowly define and circumscribe the scope of self-defense and the duties of the SDF, including participation in collective security.<sup>8</sup>

There is little agreement on the best way to move forward, and the progress that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made toward true collective self-defense can realistically only be described as limited. On 3 May 2017, Abe released a video message declaring his efforts to add a third paragraph to Article 9 by the year 2020 that would clearly define the existence of Japan's armed forces, yet even that small change, which would be the first alteration to the constitution in its seventy-year history, was met with skepticism at best.<sup>9</sup>

Since the end of World War II, East Asian nations such as China and Korea have feared a militarily recidivist, aggressive Japan, hence the go-slow approach for expanding the scope of employing its military forces is pragmatic. It is difficult to predict when the world, particularly China and Korea, would accept Japan as a true military power and collective defense partner akin to South Korea or Australia.

Even so, regional concerns about an aggressive Japan are unwarranted, and, strange as it may seem, concerns among Japan's Asian neighbors are largely not understood or appreciated by Japanese citizens.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Japan will continue to appear to resist changes to the constitution's meaning while aiming toward normalization, thereby maintaining the facade of a pacifistic posture (maintaining the *image* of pacifism) to ameliorate lingering regional fears (or mere resentment).

The government will continue to maintain the pacifist image to enhance political and economic power internationally, as ironic as that sounds. Although the go-slow approach to normalization is a good thing for the region and for Japan, the Japanese posturing of pacifism—as a slowly dwindling facade—may seem a controversial notion. However, the logic of self-interest underpins the behavior of all nations, and seeming contradictions are just that—merely on the surface. The fact that the debate on change is painfully slow in itself reveals Eastern views of history and national strategy.

There is and has been broad belief inside Japan and perhaps elsewhere in the West that the nation is now fundamentally pacifistic, that World War II somehow changed the Japanese cultural psyche.<sup>11</sup> The Eastern

fear of a neo-imperial Japan in the future is the other side of this form of dissimulation. Neither pacifism, which is logically incoherent, nor an equally incoherent political imperialism would best serve Japan's future interests or the interests of anyone. Logic of circumstance suggests that, more for self-interested economic reasons, less for ideological ones, a return to a politically imperialistic Japan is unlikely.

Further, the United States can do much to mitigate Asian fears of Japanese military power by maintaining a U.S. military presence in Japan and by supporting Japan in its chosen pace of change. By encouraging Japan to change in a balanced way, America can help Japan maintain the appearance of contrition for its previous history of Asian expansionism that has until now stabilized the region. The challenge America faces in cooperating with Japan is how to encourage Japanese political changes without implying that America would like to see a radical reinterpretation of Article 9, or its abolition, even if U.S. leaders thought changing Article 9 would be the best course of action in the long term.

Pressuring the Japanese in this area would not be a good idea; they must proceed at their chosen pace to demonstrate they are striving for a harmonious and predictable change. If America miscalculates in trying Japan's patience with its view of the western Pacific, Japan may come to alienate itself from the alliance and rely more on its independent potential for unilateral actions, or even on a renewed relationship with Russia or China, however unlikely that may seem now. Such moves would be destabilizing for the region.

## Importance of a Continuing Cooperative Relationship

The partnership between Japan and the United States is vitally important to both countries; it might also be the best hope for the rest of the world in advancing the prosperity of the Earth, given the economies and combined strength of the two nations. Squandering this relationship through carelessness and arrogance would be a moral issue that could quickly have strategic implications. As America's partnership with Japan is a matter of the common global good, it becomes of general interest for the community of states because it represents a fusion of two overwhelmingly dominant world civilizations at the height of their development.



There is nothing deeper than that common self-interest at work between the two countries. That is to say, the relationship is not primarily a friendship, a thing Americans are used to entailing with unconditional affection. The United States' bilateral partnership with Japan represents self-interested peaceful coexistence and cooperation along the main fault line of civilization in the modern world. On the surface, we speak of friendship with Japan, and it is a useful metaphor. We may have friends in Japan on the level of the individual, and that can help. But Japan as a nation is our bilateral partner first and foremost, and—as the Chinese are well aware and may attempt to leverage—it can cease to be at any moment. A political environment in the United States that seeks to minimize or even penalize Japan in some way could be the first step to the ruin of the partnership.<sup>12</sup>

That partnership is not fragile, but it is also something the American policy makers should not take for granted. The Japanese are a people to whom the United States handed an ultimatum twice in the mid-twentieth century; first in 1941, when we told them to get out of the colonies they had annexed or face embargoes, and second in 1945, when we demanded an unconditional surrender. For the Japanese, the Pacific War was one that

Japan Ground Self-Defense Force Type 87 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns participate in the annual Japan Self-Defense Forces military parade 23 October 2016 at Camp Asaka, Japan. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe conducted a review of troops. (Photo by Honey Nixon, U.S. Army Japan)

“took on the qualities of a clash of civilizations.”<sup>13</sup> The author of those words, Mochida, wrote, “By this I mean that there was no idea of coexistence; on the contrary, the fighting had at its foundation the amplification of mutual distrust, which lacked fusion/harmony. It could be said that this was a repeat of the conflict between Rome and Carthage.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, as Mochida explains it, Japan had deep-seated cultural and ideological interests at stake as well as economic ones in that struggle.

Their involvement in World War II was, as the Japanese saw it, a war of survival fought along a fault line of world views that would determine how the world's civilizations would evolve. Sentiments such as those show how deep the Japanese themselves think the differences between East and West are. Mochida's not mentioning in his analogy the infamous fate Rome imposed on Carthage implies through its absence that Japan would not, and will not, allow itself to suffer a similar total eclipse at the hands of Western





dominance. Consequently, if Professor Jay Parker, an Army analyst, is right in his guess that Japan will eventually take the option of getting on China's bandwagon, such would be a step to prevent eclipse by the West.<sup>15</sup>

In turn, that step would signal the East polarizing itself from the West once again. Professor Paul Bracken warns against this possibility in *Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age*, pointing out, "the sources of conflict in Asia arise from nation-states, not civilizations ... a pullback [by the United States] would prove disastrous for the United States, and for Asia."<sup>16</sup>

What is left to American decision makers today is the task of finding the "fusion/harmony" Mochida talks about. Japan will seek to find a harmony regardless of how the world develops and—as nearly all agree—it would be better for the world at large if that harmony was with America than with the next alternative. As history has shown since the end of World War II, it has been in America's interest to coax Japan out of its American-engineered pacifism and into rational military empowerment to one degree or another. Still, there is form to consider,

Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force members carry simulated humanitarian supplies from a U.S. Marine Corps MV-22B Osprey tiltrotor aircraft with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 262, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, 18 November 2016 at Oruma Air Base, Nagasaki, Japan. (Photo by Cpl. Darien J. Bjorndal, U.S. Marine Corps)

which is as important as substance is in the Asian East when dealing with the legacy of World War II and the hangover from military rule, and that means that sudden movements would be good for no one. Form is more important than substance in the development of Japan as a "normal country" with military capabilities that could communicate a willingness to use offensive operations. The Japanese word for heart is *kokoro*, and the way in which they grow out of their twentieth century legacy has to reflect the *kokoro* of peace that they want to communicate.

At the very least for Korea and China, Japan must keep up the face of benevolence, docility, and pacifism for the sake not only of appearances but also of practical political realities. The longer it maintains a strong alliance with the United States, the longer it can take emerging

from its so-called pacifism in a public way, and the less likely tension will arise among its neighbors.

## Importance of History

The main difference between Western and Eastern cultures is their foundational philosophical perspectives—even that phrase is telling. In the West, we have what we call a world “view,” and although there are many, they all spring from the same source (i.e., the Judeo-Christian traditions). In the East, people have a “way” of being in the world, and although there are many, they have a common origin different from the West’s (the seminal texts of Hinduism and Buddhism and of Confucian and Taoist philosophies). Both perspectives suffer from plagues of fear, ignorance, and prejudice among the poor and the poorly educated. Surmounting these obstacles to effective cooperation from the Western side of the cultural gap is America’s obligation to the alliance. History suggests Americans have had difficulty in this regard. Bracken, in *Fire in the East*, calls the Western inclination to shape things according to Western views the “challenge of self-conception.”<sup>17</sup> When working with the Japanese, assuming this posture deliberately or unwittingly can have undesirable consequences for the alliance.

Centuries of domination by the military ethos of a political and moral elite have shaped the discourses of the nation, the dominating ideologies that form the psyche of a people, and the way they navigate in the world on every level. Harvard scholar Thomas Cleary reminds the inattentive West that “crucial to understanding Japanese psychology and behavior is an assessment of the influence of centuries of military rule.”<sup>18</sup> Not even the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 that culminated in Japanese surrender and the end of World War II, and the abrupt changes that followed those disastrous events, can alter that. Expecting such an alteration would be like telling Westerners to stop using the Judeo-Christian tradition as a lens for viewing the world.

However, as noted above, the legacy of military rule and defeat does not suggest that Japan will again become militaristic—the lingering fear of many nations in the region. It has a historical pattern of pragmatically adapting the ways and ideas of other civilizations (for instance, as in the case of adopting Chinese religion and technology in the sixth and seventh centuries and Western

military technologies in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries). This implies rather that the Japanese have good reason to continue to pretend pacifism because that is what is pragmatically the best course of action now for the economic security and stability of the region and to emerge from the perception of relative political-military impotence in whatever way serves Japan’s own best interests and its place in the world.

Japan’s history shows a clear progression from religious elites, to emperors, to military dictatorship, to military oligarchy, to representative government. Americans need to remember how long a military government ruled in Japan—roughly nine hundred years. Patience, self-reliance, and self-determination are part of the bushido (samurai) ethic that has suffused itself among the general population.<sup>19</sup> These virtues are as important to the country as to its individual citizens, and Japan sees the need to preserve them to keep its own best interests on the table in future power discourses.

## The Glue in the United States–Japan Security Alliance

The importance of American military bilateral engagement in Japan, with the Japan Self-Defense Forces and with Japanese society, cannot be overestimated. The alliance depends upon the military and civilian relationship at the ground level, where Japanese and American soldiers and leaders train with each other in cooperative broadening assignments, where the military staffs plan and conduct exercises together, and where local politicians and bureaucrats work with and interact with American bases. Although Japan combines the best geographic and geopolitical factors as the location most suited for America’s military command and control center in the western Pacific, there are better reasons for thinking hard about future improvement of the fabric and quality of American presence in Japan. Since Japan represents the economic and cultural pivot for the best interests of America’s future, and since Japan is America’s most important ally in Asia if not in the world at large, *host-nation relations* should be the top priority of the U.S. military, with exercises taking a back seat to the qualitative nature of alliance maintenance. Military exercises must serve the maintenance of the relationship, not the other way around. Operations serve strategy, and there is no room for parochialism on the part of exercise planners.

The Army has the lion's share of this maintenance responsibility in spite of it having the smallest footprint of U.S. forces in Japan. The JGSDF is by far the largest and, arguably, the most influential of the branches of Japanese military service.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the U.S. Army has a significant burden in the maintenance of the bilateral alliance, one that is likely the most crucial among the services given the current state of affairs. The Army, too, is welcome in Japan; there are no significant movements and little sentiment to oust Army presence from Japan, and no efforts to do so are likely. The challenge for American soldiers will be keeping the Army's relationship with the JGSDF at a level that communicates the respect Japan deserves as our ally. Looking out to the future, the Army bilateral engagement program should receive renewed emphasis from the Department of the Army, expressed as a higher rank structure for officers in Japan.

Fifteen years ago, as I was retiring from the active Army as an officer on the U.S. Army Japan staff, I heard a top-level commander of the JGSDF remark, "the U.S. Army still has no interest in Japan; they are just as blind as ever—they see no relevance." That may still be true given the Army's preoccupation with the Middle East, and if so, it needs to change. Understanding Japan and its probable future role in security for Asia is critical to the best-case outcomes for the world at large. ■

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## Notes

1. "Japan: Article 9 of the Constitution," Library of Congress website, last updated 29 September 2015, accessed 21 March 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/japan-constitution/article9.php>. See also Kitaoka Shinichi, "The Turnabout of Japan's Security Policy: Toward 'Proactive Pacifism,'" Nippon.com website, last updated 2 April 2014, accessed 3 May 2017, <http://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00108/>.

2. "The Constitution of Japan," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet website, accessed 16 May 2017, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution\\_and\\_government\\_of\\_japan/constitution\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html).

3. Michael Richardson, "China Developing a Navy that Could Confront U.S.," *International Herald Tribune*, 5 January 2001.

4. "The Article 9 Debate at a Glance," Nippon.com website, 31 August 2016, accessed 4 May 2017, <http://www.nippon.com/en/features/h00146/>.

5. K. Mochida, "The Dawn of a Second Pacific Era" (unpublished manuscript, 1995), draft copy in possession of the author.

6. John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 563.

7. "Gross Domestic Product 2015," World Bank data, 2015, accessed 21 March 2017, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>.

8. "The Article 9 Debate at a Glance."

9. "PM's Call for Revision to Article 9 of Constitution Puzzle Even Ruling Parties," *Mainichi*, 4 May 2017, accessed 16 May 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20170504/p2a/00m/0na/010000c>.

10. This is the author's observation based on sixteen years of living predominately in Japan and the author's personal conversations with a broad cross section of the society, including family, friends, fellow students at the International Christian University, and coworkers spanning from 1972 until present.

11. Pacifism formed the nucleus of Japan's foreign policy in the postwar era. The policy is rooted in the horrors of the Pacific War and Japan's wartime trauma, including the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Article 9 of the postwar constitution, drafted under U.S. occupation in 1947, declares that the Japanese people "forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation." See Matt Ford, "Japan Curtails its Pacifist Stance," *The Atlantic*, 19 September 2015, accessed 4 May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/japan-pacifism-article-nine/406318/>. After Abe's success in reinterpreting Article 9, "Tens of thousands of students protested the bill in Tokyo, and opposition leader Tatsuya Okada warned that the bill and other security-related measures would 'leave a big scar on Japanese democratic politics.'"

12. See discussion about Western arrogance toward Eastern countries in E. Valentine Daniel, "The Arrogation of Being by the Blind-Spot of Religion," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 33 (2001): 83–102, accessed 1 May 2017, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/43294582?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43294582?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents). Professor Daniel, Columbia University anthropologist, presented a lecture at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo on anthropological distinctions between the East and West. He finds full elucidation of cultural misunderstanding deeper than explanation allows. He claims that framing the differences in typical Western ideas about world "views" is a category error, a logical mistake. He speaks of the "innocent arrogance" of Western people imposing the idea of a "view" on the rest of the world.

13. Mochida, "The Dawn of a Second Pacific Era." Because his view reflects what many people in Japan believe but will not say openly, what Gen. Mochida has said about the war from the Japanese perspective is both revealing and important to understanding Japan's current view of their own history: "There were many Japanese who believed in the ideals reflected



in the Japanese idea to free other nations from the bonds of Western colonization and the Japanese plan to build a sphere of coexistence and co-prosperity. I believe that looking at the current situation in Asia, this idealistic plan is nothing that Japanese should have to be ashamed of now ... Japan ended up in defeat, but as a result of the war many Asian countries were released from their colonial bonds and became independent nations. We are too close to the rainbow now, but as time progresses, it will be important to calmly and objectively evaluate and understand Japanese actions from the Russo-Japanese war to World War II ... It is important to bear in mind that Japan's defeat in World War II served as a symbolic historical turning point which made the Japanese realize the impropriety of the use of force to attempt to dominate other countries. The idea that the use of force to achieve national desires is legitimate had been rooted in ancient history and the practice had continued since then. However, based on our World War II experience, we Japanese came to recognize that this kind of thinking did nothing but cause suffering and delay human progress. This is the lesson that should be learned not only by Japan, but also by the countries who were victorious in the war ... Although there are various sources of friction between the U.S. and Japan today, we Japanese are making the efforts to open our markets in the spirit of harmony, not confrontation."

14. Ibid.

15. Jay M. Parker, "Japan at Century's End: Climbing on China's Bandwagon?" *Pacific Focus* 15, no. 1 (2000): 6. Professor (Col.) Parker believes that, of Japan's three options (continuing reliance on the U.S. security arrangement, rearming as a technological superpower, or accommodation of China's interests), Japan will move away from America and toward China. This has not happened in the fifteen years since he wrote, but it remains a possibility.

16. Paul Bracken, *Fire in the East* (New York: Perennial, 1999), 163.

17. Ibid., 170.

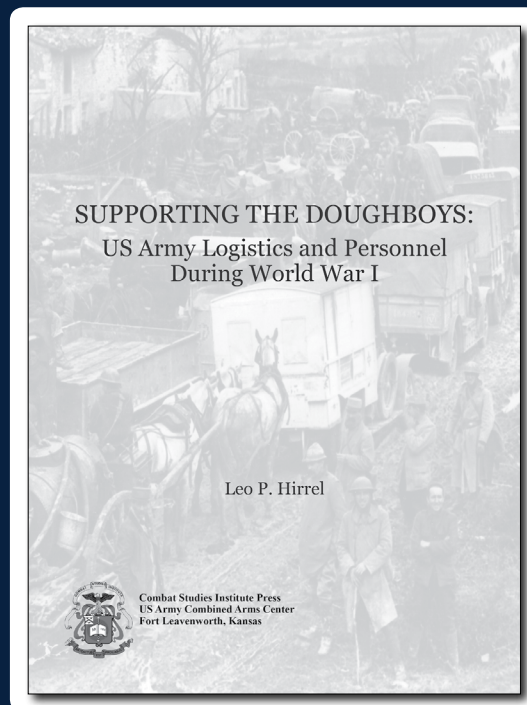
18. Thomas Cleary, *The Japanese Art of War: Understanding the Culture of Strategy* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), 123. In this sense, as Cleary remarks, "The obvious front is not the measure of what it is supposed to represent, even though the existence of the facades is an inescapable fact of life when dealing with Japanese culture as a political reality."

19. Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Boston: Harvard, 1977), 214. See also Inazo Nitobe, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1963), 63.

20. U.S. Army Japan, "Command Brief" (Camp Zama, Japan, 2016).

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