



# The Trump Administration Must Maintain America's Indo-Pacific Basing Posture

May 20, 2020 **Melinda Madden** *The Diplomat*

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Japan

U.S. President Donald J. Trump's draft 2021 budget, which was completed and submitted to Congress earlier this Spring, encompasses a \$740-billion plan to modernize America's military which, the president says, will enable the United States "to deter war, preserve peace, and, if necessary, defeat aggression." But if military modernization is a major focus of the administration's fiscal plan, preserving America's current basing posture clearly isn't. To the contrary, the draft plan envisions steep cuts to spending on defense aid for allied countries – steps that would force those nations to pay more for continued U.S. assistance.

That latter priority is certainly in step with the president's ambivalence about the use of American resources in defense of allies – something that has been a recurring theme in his Administration's approach to foreign policy. The underlying logic is clear, however. By calling on allies to pay more to sustain the U.S. military presence abroad, Trump hopes to turn America's global posture into a net economic positive.

Yet it bears noting that not all allies are equal, and many of America's current cooperative defense relationships are the products of arrangements that continue to be deeply beneficial to the United States in strategic, political and even economic terms.

Japan provides a case in point. America's current military relationship with Japan is a legacy of World War II, following which the U.S. effectively dismantled the country's military so it could never again be a threat. Ever since, Japan has relied on an American military presence for its protection. As part of that arrangement, pursuant to Japan's Special Measures Agreement, the country pays about \$2 billion annually to maintain that protection – a figure which encompasses labor costs, utility costs, and training relocation costs. All told, the government of Japan funds over 23,000 U.S. base workers and covers 72 percent of overall utility costs, meaning that most of America's military presence in Japan is covered by Japan itself.

The White House, however, seems to be rethinking this already preferential arrangement. In November 2019, the president reportedly pressured Japan to quadruple its annual payment as a condition for maintaining America's troop presence in the country. In doing so, the Commander-in-Chief was taking a page from his playbook vis-à-vis NATO, where the administration has successfully pressured at least some Alliance members to boost their defense spending. That pressure continues; U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper recently requested that NATO do more in Iraq and thereby shift the burden of operations off of America.

However, what works in Europe is ill-suited for Japan, for a number of reasons.

First, the United States did not occupy Europe in the same way it did Japan. After World War II, the U.S. enforced restrictions on Germany, and demanded reparations from it, but nevertheless allowed the country to retain an offensive military force. In Japan's case, by contrast, the U.S. defended Japan from costly reparation demands but eliminated its offensive military capabilities. That decision worked in America's favor; as a result, Japan was able to rebuild its economy rapidly and grow into an important ally to the U.S.

Second, NATO is a multilateral alliance in which some countries conspicuously do not to pull their full weight – something that has been a bone of contention for successive American administrations for years. Japan's situation is very different, because there is no indication that it is underperforming in its bilateral relationship with the U.S. As a result, Trump's proposal to effectively quadruple Tokyo's costs in order to simply maintain the *status quo* implies that the U.S. sees Japan's current level of cooperation as inadequate or lacking – something that is bound to be deeply damaging to the long-standing trust that has made relations between the two countries so vibrant.

Finally, it's necessary to acknowledge that the benefits of the U.S.-Japan partnership are much more than simply monetary. Over the past half-century, our alliance with Japan has bolstered the American economy, culture, and technology. Even more importantly, it has strengthened the U.S. presence in East Asia and helped to counterbalance the looming presence of China in recent years.

As such, the president's demands risk damaging relations with Tokyo at precisely the wrong time. Today, America's security challenges in the Indo-Pacific are growing. So, too, is the need for a robust international consensus about confronting China. In Tokyo, Washington has a natural ally on both fronts, and it would be wise to nurture the relationship.

*Melinda Madden is a researcher at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.*

