

Japan: The Indispensable Ally, Except in U.S. Academia...¹

A quiet but looming crisis in U.S.-Japan relations and call for action (and funding)

–Adam P. Liff² ([Posted online on April 8, 2024](#))

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly common in U.S. foreign policy circles to refer to Japan as America’s “indispensable ally.” From the urgent, shared need to counter-balance an increasingly assertive China and deter a nuclear-armed North Korea to ensuring resilient semiconductor supply chains, across a diverse array of issues Japan is now widely seen as America’s most important partner in Asia, if not the world.

For longstanding advocates of a robust and comprehensive U.S.-Japan partnership, this is welcome (and long overdue) news. With Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida set to make a historic state visit to Washington, D.C. on Wednesday (April 10, 2024), there is much to celebrate.

Unfortunately, just as recognition of Japan’s and the U.S.-Japan alliance’s unique importance for America is peaking in Washington, there is an inconspicuous but looming crisis in U.S.-Japan relations: the accelerating disappearance at major U.S. research universities of faculty expertise and coursework on contemporary Japanese foreign/security policy and U.S.-Japan relations.

A Call for Action

The bottom line, up front: Unless U.S. and Japanese private foundations, corporations, wealthy philanthropists, and other entities who value mutual understanding and a strong bilateral partnership at all levels of government and society surge investments in U.S. universities now to support and, ideally, endow faculty positions and research centers focused on contemporary Japan’s role in the world, current trends may soon be irreversible.

¹ Note: An earlier, shorter version of this piece was published for a Japanese audience (in Japanese) in the *Nikkei Shimbun* on April 5, 2024. (アダム・リップ：日米関係の未来(下) 日本外交専門家を育成せよ (日本経済新聞; 2024年4月5日) <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGKKZO79785600U4A400C2KE8000>)

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Left unaddressed, the huge number of students who graduate from a major U.S. university that does not offer even a single course on contemporary Japanese foreign policy—already the vast majority—will increase. And the already miniscule pipeline of graduate students devoted to understanding Japan’s role in the world—i.e., future professors, policymakers, journalists, and business, civil society, and opinion leaders—will further atrophy.

Japanese foreign policy expertise in U.S. academia: an accelerating disappearance

According to the informal survey I conducted last year of faculty expertise and course offerings at America’s “top 100” universities (U.S. News “Best National University Rankings,” 2023), the vast majority—more than four in five—do not regularly offer a single course on contemporary Japanese foreign policy or U.S.-Japan relations.

Still more lack a tenure-track or tenured faculty member teaching on these issues and with both the specific expertise and long-term, stable employment necessary to provide the mentorship essential to educating future scholars.

What’s worse, an already worrisome trend is accelerating.

A raft of recent and looming retirements by leading experts who received their first academic jobs during the heady days of Japan’s “economic miracle” and the decade following—coupled with recent departures of prominent scholars from U.S. academia—mean the already small coterie of U.S.-based professors with deep expertise on Japanese foreign/security policy is shrinking.

Meanwhile, widespread recognition within the field of the dearth of both junior and senior-level job opportunities for such experts means that young, would-be future professors are often discouraged from developing deep knowledge of contemporary Japanese foreign policy and U.S.-Japan relations, pursuing an academic career, or both.

It’s worse than you (probably) think

Declining support for Japan studies across U.S. higher education is hardly unique to any field. Indeed, a famous multidisciplinary panel at the (U.S.-based) Association of Asian Studies’s 2019 conference was forebodingly titled “the Death of Japan Studies.”

However, given the diverse and worsening array of concrete foreign policy challenges that America faces in the Indo-Pacific today, the accelerating disappearance of faculty expertise and courses for students on contemporary Japanese foreign/security policy and U.S.-Japan relations stands out as particularly acute.

How bad have things gotten?

Two jarring data points:

- (1) over the past decade, *none* of the aforementioned “top 100” U.S. universities has hired into a tenure-track faculty position a junior scholar with primary expertise and who regularly teaches courses on U.S.-Japan relations or Japanese foreign/security policy.
- (2) And only *one* of these institutions currently employs such a tenure-track or tenured faculty member under the age of fifty.

Meanwhile, of the few institutions that offer a course on contemporary Japanese foreign policy, several now appear to delegate its teaching primarily to short-term hires (e.g., postdocs; adjunct faculty). These individuals may be excellent teachers, but the temporary nature of their positions usually prevents them from offering students the long-term mentorship, support, and training necessary to develop deep expertise, much less to thrive as a Japan scholar amid an extremely competitive academic job market.

The “pipeline problem”

Unfortunately, this trend is not easily reversed. But left unaddressed, a vicious cycle is likely to worsen.

Simply put, fewer Japan-focused mentors and course offerings at major U.S. universities means fewer students who are inspired to study abroad, do JET, and/or pursue careers or graduate studies related to Japan—the “origin story” of many of today’s leaders of U.S.-Japan relations within and beyond academia.

It also means fewer graduate students able to develop deep, nuanced understandings of Japan’s role in the world.

This, in turn, leads to fewer Ph.D. students able to compete for the few jobs in U.S. academia that exist—extremely few of which are looking for candidates with primary expertise on Japanese foreign policy or U.S.-Japan relations.

And it means fewer experts to push back against the various misleading narratives that permeate contemporary discourse.

Geographical (and opportunity) maldistribution

Unfortunately, there is yet another largely overlooked problem with important consequences—especially for U.S. undergraduate education: scarce faculty expertise is not equally distributed across America.

Look beyond a few prominent universities and think tanks on the East and West coasts that understandably attract the most attention, and you will find that the vast majority of states

in middle America now have no major research university at which students can take a single course on, much less work closely with a faculty member over a period of years to develop deep expertise in, contemporary Japanese foreign/security policy or U.S.-Japan relations.

The lost educational and other opportunities for many young Americans studying in the U.S. heartland are significant.

So, too, are the long-term implications of these gaps for well-informed domestic political debates in communities across *the entire* United States about the manifold security, economic, and other challenges facing both the United States and Japan, as well as the importance of working together to address them.

An Urgent Call for Action Along Three Major Tracks

The disconnect between growing awareness in Washington of the real-world importance of Japan's role in the world and the declining value placed on teaching and research about it by most major U.S. universities is worsening.

Without major outside financial support, and soon, an already bad situation seems certain to worsen as more Japanese foreign policy-related faculty positions, course offerings, and opportunities for students disappear, and as the talent pipeline further atrophies.

Simply put, if those with an interest in the U.S.-Japan relationship wait until the looming crisis becomes conspicuous, it may already be too late. For those who care about the "indispensable" U.S.-Japan partnership, this should be an "all-hands-on-deck" moment.

Prime Minister Kishida's historic state visit provides an excellent opportunity for U.S. and Japanese leaders to draw attention to the problem, and to accelerate discussions on how to address it. Together.

Three tracks should take priority in any future investments:

1. New Endowments from U.S. corporations, foundations, and wealthy philanthropists

If even a small fraction of the corporations and business leaders who benefit to the tune of billions of dollars annually from close (and politically stable) U.S.-Japan relations at the national, state, and local level endowed U.S. university-based faculty positions and centers to support research, teaching, and programming on Japanese foreign policy and U.S.-Japan relations, it would be a game-changer.

Endowments serve as potent force multipliers and are far more impactful in the long-term than project-specific, short-term grants. The annual returns that endowments produce

provide a perpetual floor—rather than a ceiling—of financial support upon which entrepreneurial faculty and administrators can build.

Executed well, they can provide direct benefits for students through new faculty hiring and course offerings, public events, workshops, and fellowships/scholarships. And the practical financial consequences and demand signals they send to administrators, faculty mentors, and students will also help address both job market and pipeline problems.

2. Creatively pool resources, especially through more public-private partnerships

The successful invigoration of Korean studies at U.S. universities over the past decade-plus offers a few templates for those concerned about trends in Japan studies.

Of particular note, the South Korean government-affiliated Korea Foundation (KF) has become extraordinarily active endowing both dozens of Korea-focused professorships—many at a senior level—and university-based research institutes. KF sometimes acts alone. In other cases, it partners with major Korean multinational corporations, other organizations, and/or wealthy philanthropists (e.g., alums) to pool resources.

The impact has been transformative. One case-in-point: over the past decade, my home institution (Indiana University's Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies) has received multiple large gifts to support (1) three *new* Korea-related faculty lines, including an endowment to sustain a senior-level “Korea Foundation Professor,” and (2) a new Institute for Korean Studies.

Korean studies, in dire straits only a few years ago, is now thriving, with Indiana University serving as a major Midwestern hub. Similar stories can be told at universities across the United States.

3. Invest strategically, and where marginal impact will be greatest

Especially when resources are scarce, it is important to invest strategically, and efficiently—i.e., to support teaching, research, and programming on Japanese foreign policy and US-Japan relations where each investment will have maximal impact.

In addition to the prominent coastal institutions and think tanks that typically attract the most outside support, four target categories where investment could be truly transformative also deserve consideration:

1. **public research universities** with large student enrollments that do not typically attract large philanthropic gifts, and which often lack sufficient resources (and/or

administrative will) to create country-specific positions or research centers without outside support;

2. **major (“R1”) research universities in states in between the East and West coasts of particular importance for U.S.-Japan relations**, such as those states with large amounts of Japanese investment and workers employed by Japanese firms (see Figure 1, below)

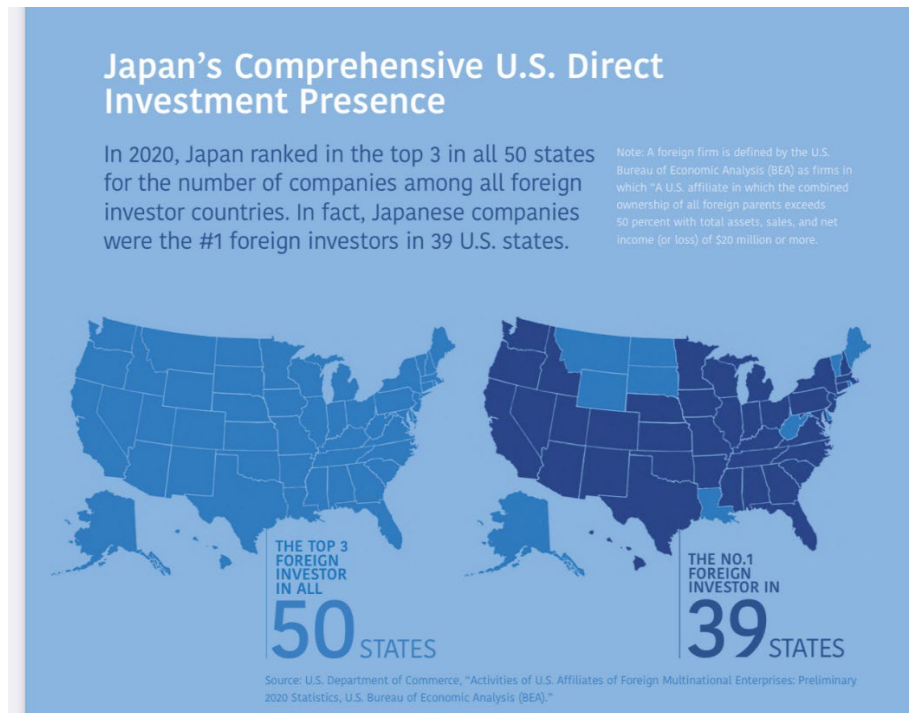


Figure 1 (Image source: 2023 JETRO report “Japan’s Investment Dynamic”, pg.9)

3. **universities with robust multi-disciplinary East Asian studies departments and/or international affairs and policy schools** that value language/area expertise and which already educate many students who continue on to careers in academia, foreign policy, politics, intelligence, and business;
4. **the many prominent U.S. research universities that today boast an abundance of faculty expertise on contemporary China/Chinese foreign policy** but which have not invested in analogous expertise on Japan

A critical juncture; no time to waste

Recognizing the need to deepen Americans’ understanding of Japan’s rapidly evolving role in the world, last summer U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel [issued](#) a clear call to American universities: “this is the moment...to double down on Japan and Japanese Studies.”

Especially considering recent trends in mainstream American political, popular, and foreign policy discourse, investing in research and teaching on the foreign policy of contemporary Japan, the U.S.' most important ally and partner in Asia, if not the world, has never been more important.

Unfortunately, the exact opposite is happening across the U.S. academy—and has been for years.

The time is now for U.S. and Japanese foundations, corporations, wealthy business leaders and philanthropists, and other entities who care about the U.S.-Japan relationship to surge investments to support and, ideally, endow related Japanese foreign affairs-related faculty positions and research centers.

U.S. universities are not only the training grounds for future scholars and business and policy leaders, they are also the key to giving undergraduates *and the surrounding communities* exposure to and a familiarity with Japan and its importance for America that most would otherwise lack.

Supporting Japan studies in academia—and not only in the foreign policy space—is essential to keeping a pipeline of expertise on Japan and the U.S.-Japan partnership flowing across *all* of America, both within the academy and beyond.

The field is at a critical juncture. To address this looming crisis, the time to act is now.