



**SASAKAWA USA**  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# The Alliance Working in Washington: Impacts of the U.S.- Japan Relationship

## Abstract

*On December 1, 2020, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) held a virtual program in partnership with the World Affairs Council of Seattle and the World Affairs Councils of America (WACA) to educate members of the Seattle and greater Pacific Northwest communities of the importance of the U.S.-Japan relationship. This event was the seventh installment of [The Alliance Working in America](#) (TAWA) series. The event featured a distinguished panel: Dr. Michael Green, VP for Asia and Japan Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); Dr. Saori Katada, Professor of Political Science and International Relations, University of Southern California; and Dr. Mireya Solís, Director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies, Brookings Institution. World Affairs Council President and CEO Jacqueline Miller served as moderator for the event and Shanti Shoji, Director of Programs, Sasakawa USA, provided introductory remarks.*

*This event was timely and important as Washington's relationship with Japan continues to flourish through trade and investment with [\\$6.1 billion of goods to Japan in 2018](#), making Japan a consistent Top Five overall trade partner and the [number two market for Washington's agricultural exports](#). Additionally, Washington has sent numerous trade missions to Japan, including a [technology mission in May 2019](#) that sought to identify opportunities for Washington companies to target business opportunities in Japan, with a particular focus on the artificial intelligence and machine learning sectors. Decades-long cultural and educational exchanges have also increased mutual understanding between the people of Japan and Washington, and the state currently enjoys [38 sister city relationships](#) with Japan and a [sister state relationship](#) with Hyogo Prefecture. It is within this context that Sasakawa USA and the World Affair Council of Seattle brought together a distinguished panel to speak on the impact of the U.S.-Japan relationship.*

## The Effect of Prime Minister Suga on the U.S.-Japan Relationship

Many in the U.S. are very familiar with President-Elect Biden due to his eight years in office as Vice President during the Obama administration, but Prime Minister Suga is more of a mystery to the people of Seattle and the greater U.S. To account for this, the conversation began with each of the speakers explaining PM Suga's background and expectations for his leadership to the audience. First, Dr. Katada discussed that, as Chief Cabinet Secretary for the Abe Administration, PM Suga has been the major behind the scenes actor for the past eight years. Due to PM Suga's former role, he was deeply involved with PM Abe's foreign policy agenda; however, Dr. Katada questioned the extent to which PM Suga can project the same kind of presence and charisma as PM Abe. From a policy standpoint, Dr. Katada explained, PM Suga will follow the same policies as PM Abe, including trade and balancing the relationships with the U.S. and China. Next, Dr. Green highlighted the importance of the Chief Cabinet Secretary position in Japan as a combination of the U.S. positions of Chief of Staff, National Security Advisor, and Press Secretary. Therefore, PM Suga was the most important person in the Abe cabinet, especially in terms of getting things done. Dr. Green explained that he knows PM Suga well and thinks that he will continue most policies of PM Abe, but if there is a shift it is because PM Abe is a little more ideological due to the difference in their upbringings. PM Abe is the grandson of a former prime minister and son of a former foreign minister, whereas PM Suga is the son of strawberry farmers.

Additionally, Dr. Green noted that PM Suga does not have the same wealth of foreign contacts as PM Abe, so it is not yet clear whether he will be able to have the same relationships, but Dr. Green stated that PM Suga will be able to realize some aspects of his policy agenda. Dr. Solís ended the introductory discussion on PM Suga by noting actions undertaken by his administration, such as the eradication of bureaucratic sectionalism, carbon neutrality by 2050, and the digitalization of Japan. Dr. Solís explained that, unlike PM Abe, it seems that domestic policy is a passion for PM Suga, so another aspect that will need to be closely watched is whether he can be more effective than PM Abe at delivering micro-reforms for the economy. She continued that it is still unclear whether he will be able to deliver but based on his ambitious agenda it is unlikely that PM Suga is considering simply filling out the remainder of PM Abe's term and likely has aspirations to continue to lead Japan.

The conversation then turned to discuss the U.S.-Japan relationship throughout the Trump administration. After a relatively successful four years for the U.S.-Japan relationship, PM Suga used his first international trip to travel to Vietnam and Indonesia. So, Ms. Miller asked the panelists if this could be a concern for the U.S. Dr. Green responded first by quickly and succinctly assuring that this is of no concern, and that this was a smart move by PM Suga as it is a bad time to travel to the U.S. due in part to sustained election uncertainty so as not to insult the outgoing administration. Continuing, Dr. Green said that PM Abe's signature foreign policy accomplishment was the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy which the Trump administration embraced, and the Biden administration is also likely to embrace. Vietnam and Indonesia are two critical countries to FOIP and are friendly with Japan, so the trip was both a good domestic move and signaled to the U.S. that Japan is still committed to the region and pursuing stability. Dr. Katada agreed with Dr. Green and mentioned the recent meeting of "The Quad" (Australia, India, Japan, U.S.) foreign ministers in Tokyo, where members discussed ways to enhance FOIP. This meeting highlighted the importance of PM Suga's trip to ASEAN to be inclusive. When it comes to security issues, Dr. Katada said that it is important for Japan to get Southeast Asia friends on board. Dr. Solís reiterated previous remarks and added that although PM Suga has not been able to travel to the U.S. yet, the phone conversation between PM Suga and President-Elect Biden in which PM Suga received assurances about the importance of the Senkaku islands and other notable Japanese security concerns was incredibly important. Dr. Solís ended her response by highlighting that there are reassurances from the incoming president that the Indo-Pacific is a priority and the U.S. cannot afford to go soft on values, democracy, and human rights.

## U.S.-Japan Security Alliance

Following the discussion on PM Suga, the panelists turned to discuss the U.S.-Japan security alliance, a commitment crucial for both countries. The moderator, Ms. Miller, asked the panelists if there is any concern in Japan regarding the U.S. commitment to defending Japan in an emergency. First, Dr. Green referred to data from a CSIS survey in which the average response of U.S. leaders to the question of, how much risk should the U.S. take in response to threats to Japan, was 9 with 10 being the most risk. On the Japanese side, Japanese leaders had the perception that U.S. leaders would average at around 8.5, so when it comes to defending Japan there seem to be high levels of commitment. Dr. Green further explained, however, that if there is concern over U.S. commitments, it is regarding U.S.-China policy. Dr. Green noted that there is some nervousness in Tokyo about the number of Biden people joining his administration from the Obama administration, which embraced a U.S.-China joint decision-making strategy, leaving Japan, Australia, and others in the region out of major decisions. Despite that, Dr. Green expressed confidence that the Biden team understands this issue and will not pursue such strategies.

Next, within the context of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, Dr. Solís highlighted that Japan has no Plan B, as the alliance with the U.S. is the cornerstone of Japanese security policy. She further explained that Japan was fortunate to be spared some of the tumults that other U.S. allies felt over the past four years, with South Korea, in particular, having difficulties over troop drawdown and cost-sharing debates, but Japan was not granted any favors either. One issue moving forward that Dr. Solís noted was the concern over U.S. domestic challenges and divisions. There are some doubts over the U.S. capacity to be outward-oriented when faced with so many internal issues, including the U.S. pandemic response. Dr. Solís explained that the next four years will be a critical period to show that the U.S. is back, so the socio-economic domestic divides must be confronted. In response to Dr. Solís's remarks, Dr. Katada concluded the topic by emphasizing that Asia is waiting for the U.S. to be the entity that supports the global democratic order which can be more easily accomplished by partnering with Japan.

With Japan having no Plan B and PM Abe's failed attempts at revising the Japanese constitution, Ms. Miller asked the panelists if there are ways that Japan can enhance its military, or is it mostly concerning the United States. First, Dr. Solís stated that PM Abe's main priority was constitutional reform, but this was largely a tool to allow Japan to be a more proactive and impactful partner with the United States. Despite not being able to eliminate Article 9, PM Abe was able to achieve several security-based reforms that showed a clear investment in the alliance.

Additionally, Dr. Solís explained, Japan is diversifying its security relationships by elevating relationships with India, Australia, and elevating “The Quad,” all policies that are meant to work alongside the U.S. by giving Japan options after the tumultuous past four years. Lastly, Dr. Green returned to the discussion on Article 9 by noting that for many in the conservative party, Article 9 has become an obstacle to allowing Japan to do more. PM Abe pushed the right for Japan to engage in collective self-defense, whereas previously the Japanese government interpreted the constitution as only allowing defense in the case of an attack on Japan. This policy, Dr. Green explained, allowed Japan to focus on economic recovery rather than getting caught up in conflicts, but now over the past 15 years with Japan’s waters full of Chinese warships, the constant threat of North Korean missiles, and China’s attempts to dominate the sea lanes between Japan and Southeast Asia, it has become critical to Japan’s survival that Japan can now fight alongside its allies. Concluding, Dr. Green noted that an official from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command recently stated that the U.S. has gone from interoperability to interdependence with Japan, which shows just how successful PM Abe was in ensuring the U.S. needs Japan.

On the topic of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, an audience member asked the panelists to discuss how the U.S. and Japan continue close security cooperation frameworks as China continues to flex its muscles in the region. In response, Dr. Green explained that by changing the interpretation of Article 9 and allowing collective self-defense with the U.S. and other partners, Japan has taken a big step forward. He said that the next thing if the U.S. and Japan are to be effective as allies, will be to move toward a framework like NATO or the U.S.-South Korea command structure. Following Dr. Green’s comments, Dr. Solís explained from the economics and technology perspective, Japan is keenly aware of the pressure from China and one of the major issues is how to balance China with links of economic interdependence. The Japanese approach, she explained, can be described as selective competition. The clear U.S. vocalized competition with China is not something that Japan is willing to participate in, Dr. Solís explained, instead, Japan will pursue a more neutral language. Dr. Katada concluded the discussion by succinctly explaining that due to Japan’s geography, China will always be an issue, so many decisions on China come from a geographic lens.

## Trade and Economics

Next, Ms. Miller prompted the panelists to discuss that the state of Washington is one of the most trade-dependent states in the U.S., but trade negotiations have been extremely difficult over the past four years, although President Trump said

the U.S.-Japan deal was phenomenal. First, Dr. Solís responded to this claim by noting that she would not describe the agreement as phenomenal and that there were diminished opportunities. Japan, she explained, did not want to go back to a period of friction especially when dealing with a president who cares so much about trade deficits. Although the digital aspects of the agreement were good, Dr. Solís said that because it was a bilateral deal and Japan wanted a multilateral deal, overall, it was not the best deal. In the end, she explained, Japan would like the U.S. to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which also would have given the U.S. access to bilateral negotiations with Japan.

Since the Trump administration pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Ms. Miller asked the panelists if there is a chance that the U.S. will join the CPTPP under the Biden administration. Dr. Green stated that if President-Elect Biden said that the U.S. will join the CPTPP, doing so would likely be the single most important thing he could do for Japan, Australia, Singapore, and other countries in the region, but unfortunately, he does not think the politics align for President-Elect Biden to join. The problem, Dr. Green explained, is that the main opposition to CPTPP is centered in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, which are important electoral states. Many Biden officials understand how important it is that the U.S. is involved in CPTPP, but the best-case scenario is that President-Elect Biden signals that the U.S. needs to get involved in trade in Asia but does not say he will join the CPTPP, and gets a deal in digital trade instead. Dr. Solís agreed with Dr. Green that the U.S. not joining the CPTPP but achieving deals elsewhere is the most realistic scenario. She added that she does not think trade will be a top priority especially with so many domestic issues, plus President-Elect Biden ran with a big tent coalition with many different views on trade, so it is unlikely he will be able to get consensus on trade agreements, but there are some merits to the idea that digital negotiations will be possible. One thing to keep in mind, Dr. Solís said, is that the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) was accomplished with a bipartisan vote and should therefore be viewed as a roadmap. She ended by explaining that CPTPP members will have to be open to changes to the CPTPP, but will also have the opportunity to ask for concessions from the U.S.

The event was concluded with a question from the audience on COVID-19 and whether the new administration can use COVID-19 as a means of cooperation with Japan and Korea. Dr. Solís responded first by stating that the pandemic put a spotlight on the social fabrics of countries and something as basic as using masks became a political debate in the United States. She expressed hope that the U.S. will not politicize basic public health measures and that the Biden administration will go back to science and listen to public health advisers.

To the question, Dr. Solís said that Japan has mostly been successful in combatting COVID-19, which is therefore something that could be productive for bilateral dialogue. Dr. Green said that the U.S. can learn from Japan, but can learn even more from South Korea and Taiwan, which has very similar domestic divides, but he expressed little faith that the U.S. will learn from either country. Dr. Green concluded that the best aspect the U.S. could learn from Japan is Japan's excellent handling of new international diplomacy concerns that have arisen out of COVID-19. Dr. Katada concluded the response and the event by explaining that Asia is waiting for the U.S. to come back to the table and cooperate on this issue and many more, so hopefully COVID-19, she said, will be an opportunity to show that the U.S. is back and ready to cooperate.

---

*Sasakawa USA is grateful to all our co-sponsors and partners for their support and looks forward to building on the newfound friendship. In particular, we were delighted to be able to work with the World Affairs Council of Seattle to provide an excellent opportunity for the Seattle community to hear from distinguished experts on U.S.-Japan relations. We look forward to hosting similar events throughout the U.S. in the future.*

*The views summarized herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.*

*For more information on Sasakawa USA's The Alliance Working in America (TAWA) series, click [here](#).*

---