

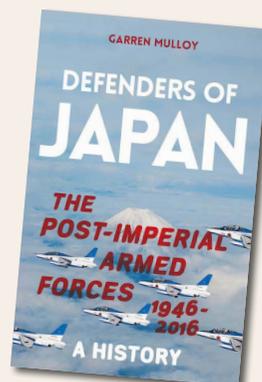
BOOK REVIEW

Defenders of Japan: The Post-Imperial Armed Forces 1946–2016, A History

By Garren Mulloy

C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2021
440 pages.

Reviewed by Corey WALLACE



Garren Mulloy's *Defenders of Japan* is an ambitious attempt to provide an integrated history of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF). Weaving together history, international relations, and military studies, as well as English and Japanese sources, Mulloy eschews oversimplified narratives of postwar defense debates and the policies Japan adopted. *Defenders of Japan* is evenhanded in describing both the capabilities and limitations of Japan's postwar military and offers original material that enhances the discussion over the postwar evolution of Japan's security and defense policy.

Chapter 1 places the 1954 establishment of the SDF in its historical context. It makes the obvious connections to SDF predecessor organizations (the National Safety Force, the National Police Reserve, and the Maritime Safety Agency) and details the personnel and institutional connections to Imperial Japan's military forces. Mulloy is most original, however, in exploring the "blank" period between 1946 and 1954, where a number of Japanese "holdouts," "converts," and "captives," including demobilized troops, were involved in fighting in different parts of Asia—both with Western forces and against them (pp. 12–25). While no official Japanese government-sanctioned military organization was involved in combat during this period, many Japanese ex-combatants certainly were. Citizen involvement in non-combat duties inside and outside Japan set a precedent for later "para-civilian" involvement in the Vietnam War, where Japanese would crew landing and cargo ships.

Chapter 1 also provides real insight into postwar Japanese rearmament debates. There is increasing scholarly recognition that Japanese attitudes towards defense policy in the immediate postwar period were contingent, with the eventual antimilitarist gloss and restraints imposed on Japanese rearmament by no means pre-determined. The postwar conservative battle between the "mainstream" Yoshida Shigeru and "revisionist" Kishi Nobusuke over the direction of defense and security is well known, but Mulloy also describes the important early influence of another conservative, Ashida Hitoshi. Ashida sought moderate rearmament based on constitutional revision, a degree of independence from the United States, and, crucially, on the basis of transparent democratic assent. Ashida argued Yoshida's approach to these three issues was disingenuous and unprincipled for a new democracy attempting to overcome its imperial legacy (pp. 26–31) and would distort

discussions of Japan's national security. Ashida's critique foreshadows the "civilian control" problems introduced later in *Defenders of Japan*.

In chapter 2, Mulloy systematically reviews the establishment, institutional culture, and major events that affected the structure, posture, and capabilities of each of the SDF's three services. This comparative approach allows the reader to appreciate the unique factors shaping the evolution of each service as they sought legitimacy within society, politics, and the alliance. While there is extant in-depth research exploring Japan's Ground and Maritime Self-Defense Forces, *Defenders of Japan* also fleshes out the establishment and evolution of the Air Self-Defense Force. All three services are dealt with in one omnibus seventy-seven page chapter, but I felt that more detail on the post-Cold War evolution of each of the three services could have been covered in separate chapters.

The third chapter provides a useful and detailed discussion of post-Cold War SDF Overseas Despatch Operations (ODOs). Mulloy delves into the struggles and successes of the SDF as they negotiated "a journey with few maps." The purpose of the final section of the third chapter is unclear, however, and some geopolitical context could have been omitted. From this point onwards, *Defenders of Japan* loses its thematic structure and becomes somewhat encyclopedic in describing Japanese security events and policies since the end of the Cold War.

Nevertheless, throughout the book, and in chapter 4 in particular, Mulloy throws the spotlight on the inadequacies of Japan's postwar civilian leaders and their approaches to defense and security policy. Despite constantly raising the alarm about "existential threats" (p. 66), Japan's conservative leaders oversaw the emergence of a "responsibility gap," as they prioritized the avoidance of political damage (pp. 112–113). Mulloy argues that "fear among Japanese politicians decrying public ignorance of security issues" led them to avoid "engaging in security discussions with civil society" (p. 194). Even the vaunted 2015 security legislation reflected limitations in civilian leadership, as it did little to help the SDF navigate its most dangerous post-Cold War ODO in the South Sudan UNMISS operation (pp. 219–227). Mulloy also notes how hypothetical scenarios, such as rescuing Japanese nationals during a conflict or minesweeping the Strait of Hormuz, have dominated the parliamentary debate, rather than more pressing and genuinely existential scenarios, such as Taiwan and DPRK military emergencies and China-related maritime security challenges to Japan's southwest (p. 203).

This "avoidance approach" also limits push back against entrenched interests in the bureaucracy, parliament, and industry. Mulloy observes that during the Cold War, "Discussions by default were often conducted within closed LDP policy committees, largely divorced from JSDF advice" (p. 114) and defense tribes in the Diet asserted their own service- or industry-specific interests and pet projects at the expense of broader discussions regarding Japan's defense portfolio and strategic aims (and trade-offs). That this remains a contemporary issue is demonstrated by the LDP-led push to have the Izumo turned into a "aircraft carrier" (the limitations of which Mulloy discusses on p. 255) and LDP enthusiasm for foreign territory strike capabilities as an alternative to ballistic missile defense—despite dubious real-world application.

Mulloy highlights how force imbalances, obsolescence issues, capability gaps, and legal and constitutional inconsistencies (pp. 112–115, 227–230) remain unaddressed even as Japan's security environments deteriorates. Japan's national defense would be greatly

enhanced by altering command structures (pp. 251–252) and reconfiguring “front heavy tail light” (p. 230) approaches to procurement. The acquisition of frontline and high-tech military systems limits resources for logistical and other enabling operational investments (pp. 103–107, 205–215, 238) that would enhance force posture resilience and the SDF’s ability to generate *and* sustain force during conflict—not only for Japan’s own territorial defense, but to assist Japan’s traditional alliance partner and new strategic partners alike. The impression is that, rather than symbolic enhancements of marital prowess, the SDF requires more resources for burgeoning maintenance costs, logistical and resilience investments, and to improve conditions to sustain recruitment and maintain mental health. The Japanese government also needs to rectify Japan’s poor defense R&D investment to remain technologically competitive with China and valuable to its partners.

Rather than a traditional concern with the prospects of the Japanese military running amok, *Defenders of Japan* makes it clear that civilian control issues for Japan today pertain to elected politicians failing to exert leadership and responsibility. With no independent audit office to provide advice on defense and other policy areas to the public and parliament about the outcomes and value derived from fiscal spending, it is no wonder the government struggles to convince the public of the need for enhanced defense spending *vis-à-vis* other claims on the national budget. For this reader, Mulloy’s book demonstrates how Japan’s elites (across the political spectrum) bear as much responsibility for distorting the postwar debate on defense as much any perceived “one-nation pacifist” mentality among the general public.