

JAPAN MINUS U.S. PROTECTION: GODZILLA AND JAPANESE FEARS OF AMERICAN ABANDONMENT

by
Jeffrey J. Hall

On November 3, 2023, the latest film in the Godzilla franchise, [Godzilla Minus One](#), was released in movie theaters across Japan. A [resounding success in Japan](#), the film has also exceeded expectations in America, where it has [set box office records](#) for the U.S. release of a live-action Japanese film.

Storytelling on Screen

A major element of the film's story (*spoilers follow*) is that Japan is left to fend for itself after being abandoned by the United States. It is set in 1946-47 when hundreds of thousands of American troops were stationed across Japan. However, when Godzilla arrives in Tokyo to wreak havoc, not a single American soldier is in sight. Audiences are told via a news broadcast that General MacArthur and the U.S. military are unable to defend Japan because of an unspecified crisis involving the Soviet Union.

Godzilla's attack lays waste to the area around Tokyo's famous Ginza Crossing, which would have been [thronging with American troops and jeeps in 1947](#). The U.S. Eight Army's Post Exchange (PX) is clearly visible on screen, but its U.S. military customers are noticeably absent among the panicked Tokyoites. It is almost as if the film was subjected to Occupation Era censorship that [instructed filmmakers](#) not to remind Japanese audiences that they were under American occupation.

The idea of 1947 America scaling back its military presence in Japan and doing nothing after a giant monster destroys central Tokyo is absurd. However, judging from reviews this doesn't seem to bother Japanese audiences. This is, of course, because most viewers are prepared to suspend their disbelief when watching a science fiction film, but it may also speak to Japanese insecurity about the U.S.-Japan Alliance. Although director Yamazaki Takashi set the new

Godzilla film in the early years after World War II, it is not hard to see its story as a reflection of Japan's current geopolitical situation. Production of the film began in early 2022 as Russia invaded Ukraine and America and its allies turned their attention towards Eastern Europe. The America in *Godzilla Minus One* is also focused on an overseas crisis, so much so that it "minuses" itself from the equation of Japan's defense.

Reel and Reality

Past films in the franchise have featured the United States as an interventionist superpower demanding that the Japanese step aside so the U.S. military can eliminate Godzilla. For example, *Return of Godzilla* (1984), created during the Cold War tensions of the Reagan era, features an America that is eager to use its nuclear arsenal against the monster. The most recent predecessor to *Godzilla Minus One*, *Shin Godzilla* (2016), ended with the Americans providing military support to the Japanese Self-Defense Forces' non-nuclear solution to the Godzilla problem.

A lot has changed since. The election of Donald Trump created a situation in which Tokyo needed to manage a mercurial and unpredictable president who questioned the value of America's network of alliances. It [has been argued](#) that Prime Minister Abe's obsequious behavior towards Trump proved that the U.S.-Japan alliance is so indispensable that the U.S. can get away with "bullying its friends." Abe's willingness to endure humiliation allowed for stability in the U.S.-Japan relationship, but also [laid bare uncomfortable realities about Japan's subordinate status](#). The proactive stance towards the U.S.-Japan alliance taken by Abe and his successors may reflect feelings of insecurity about American reliability as much as it reflects Japanese conservatives' longtime dream of Japan unrestricted by pacifism.

Yamazaki's Godzilla is a destructive nuclear-armed creature that suddenly decides that portions of Tokyo are within its "territory" (*nawabari*). Whether or not Yamazaki intended it, one can compare the on-screen monster to the People's Republic of China, a powerful nuclear-armed state that lays claim to Japan's Senkaku Islands. Article 5 of the [Treaty of Mutual](#)



[Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan](#) states that the United States will defend “territories under the administration of Japan.”

The U.S. government has repeatedly made public statements confirming that this [includes the Senkakus](#). However, it is not unreasonable to believe that there [could be hesitance in America](#) over risking a wider war in defense of a few uninhabited islands.

Fear that the United States will not honor the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty has long been a [concern](#) of Japanese policymakers, and the war in Ukraine has made Japan’s general population more worried about security threats to their own country. [One September 2022 survey](#) found that 51 percent of Japanese respondents believed that the U.S. military would come to Japan’s aid in the case of a Chinese attack, down 4 percentage points from 2021. In other words, barely half of Japanese have faith in America’s promise to protect their country from possible Chinese aggression.

Recent events in the United States may further erode Japanese confidence in American reliability. Despite U.S. government pledges to support Ukraine, Republican lawmakers have used partisan disputes over immigration to [stall a desperately needed emergency aid package](#). President Biden has correctly stated that [the world is watching](#) these developments. It has become clear that domestic political problems in the United States can jeopardize the timely delivery of critical aid to countries that rely on such aid for their very survival.

A Happy Ending?

In *Godzilla Minus One*, there is a happy ending for a Japan abandoned by the United States. Former members of the Imperial Japanese Navy organize a volunteer-only force that uses military technology

developed by Japanese researchers to subdue and defeat Godzilla before he can attack Tokyo for a second time.

The organization that defeats Godzilla in Yamazaki’s film is not called a “Self-Defense Force,” but many filmgoers will see the obvious similarities between it and its real-world counterpart. In fact, Japanese military historians were [employed as advisors](#) so that the film could provide a historically accurate depiction of the postwar minesweeping missions that led to the creation of the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF). The fictional naval organization that defeats Godzilla, like the MSDF that exists today, has its roots in the old Imperial Japanese Navy, but makes a point of distancing itself from the extreme ideology of its predecessor. The officers in the film tell their sailors to fight hard and live for the sake of Japan’s future, rather than die for the emperor.

Godzilla Minus One’s box office success demonstrates that Japanese consumers are happy to pay to watch a film about a Japanese quasi-military fighting against all odds to defeat a powerful invader. Paying to beef up Japan’s national defense in the real world, however, is an entirely different matter. The Kishida Administration is planning a historic [60 percent increase](#) in defense spending over five years that will also require complementary tax increases. Facing low approval ratings and fears over a public backlash, Prime Minister Kishida has been [slow to implement](#) the necessary fiscal measures to fund his ambitious plans. Moreover, Japan’s ruling party is facing a very unhappy start to 2024 due to a [major fundraising scandal](#) that could unseat several of its influential Diet Members and derail its policy agenda.

Jeffrey J. Hall is Special Lecturer, Kanda University of Foreign Studies, Japan.