



# The realities of national defense: The Japanese public's impression of the Self-Defense Forces according to an awareness survey — Deepening divide between the “interested” and the “indifferent”



There is a high public interest in the disaster relief activities of the Self-Defense Forces.

Photo: gigi / PIXTA

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## Impressions of the Self-Defense Forces

To begin with, please take a look at the list in Table. This list shows the top ten works most commonly mentioned in response to the question “If there are any novels, manga, anime, movies, or dramas [omit] that have greatly influenced your impressions and opinions about Japan’s defense system and the Self-Defense Forces (SDFs), please list them — as many as you like.”

The Study Group on Military Culture, which is made up of sociological and historical researchers, conducted an “Awareness Survey on Self-Defense Forces” in January and February 2021 and received responses from approximately 2,000 people across Japan (Study Group on Military Culture, “Report on How Japanese Society Views Self-Defense Forces ‘Awareness Survey on Self-Defense Forces’” (Seikyusha, 2021)). Table 1 shows some of these responses.

The fact that *Umizaru* (Sea monkeys), a manga, TV drama, and film featuring a coast guard officer, was the top answer is in a sense symbolic. The Japan Coast Guard (JCG) is by no means unconnected with “Japan’s defense system” but is, of course, a different organization from the (Maritime) Self-Defense Force.

However, for many readers and audiences, the impression of coast guard officers battling to rescue people at sea without considering the danger to themselves is similar to that of the Self-Defense Forces



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personnel often seen on the news engaged in large-scale disaster dispatch activities. The distinction between the JCG and SDFs is only a distinction of secondary importance.

*Public Affairs Office in the Sky*, the second most popular response, is a novel and TV drama set in the Air Self - Defense Force's Public Affairs Office. The fact that it depicts the “contact point” between the Air Self - Defense Force and civil society i.e. the Public Affairs Office is no doubt a reason why many readers and audiences find it accessible.

Kazlaser, a Japanese comedian who was the sixth most popular response, features in the list because of his close coverage of the SDFs and a series of TV variety shows about enlisting in the military and, here again, a key factor is his role as “contact point.”

In contrast, the works in which the SDFs appear as a military organization responsible for using military force are *The Silent Service*, *G.I. Samurai*, *Kubo Ibuki* (Aircraft Carrier Ibuki), and *Boukoku no Aegis* (AEGIS), none of which made the top two spots. These are all “military simulation” in a broad sense depicting SDF activities in a fictional setting.

Ranking seventh or lower came *The Eternal Zero*, *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Barefoot Gen*, all of which depict the days of the Asia Pacific War. This indicates that the memory of the last great war weighs on the minds of many Japanese.

The above results are a good indication of the Japanese public's impression of “Japan's defense system and the Self-Defense Forces” today. The most commonly mentioned works are soft images closely aligned with civilian life and any hard images of a military organization are limited to the world of simulation and memories of past wars.

The survey also included the question “What do you think is particularly important as the role of the Self-Defense Forces?” (multiple answers from 20 choices). The top answer was “disaster dispatch for earthquakes, typhoons, floods, etc.” (77.0%), surpassing “defend our country against armed attacks from the outside” (72.4%) in second place and “protecting the people by evacuating, rescuing, and giving first aid to residents caught up in armed attacks” (60.8%) in third. In other words, SDFs are more highly rated, albeit slightly, as an organization responsible for disaster dispatch activities than as a military organization responsible for national defense.

According to the “Public Opinion Survey on the Japan Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues” conducted by the Cabinet Office every three years, especially since the largest ever disaster dispatch activities in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, the response “have a good impression of the Self-Defense Forces” (including “have a relatively good impression”) has remained at a high level of around 90%. This positive evaluation of the SDFs is basically in line with our survey, in which the percentage responding “affirmative” (including “rather affirmative”) to the question “Do you affirm the existence of the Self-Defense Forces itself?” was 80.9%.

**Table : Works that influenced the Self-Defense Forces image**

Ranking	Title	Number of responses
1	<i>Umizaru</i> (Sea monkeys), manga, TV drama, film	56
2	<i>Public Affairs Office in the Sky</i> , novel, TV drama	45
3	<i>The Silent Service</i> , manga, animation, radio drama, game	41
4	<i>G.I. Samurai</i> , film	37
5	<i>Kubo Ibuki</i> (Aircraft Carrier Ibuki), manga, film	33
6	Kazlaser, comedian	26
7	<i>The Eternal Zero</i> , novel, manga, TV drama, film	25
7	<i>Grave of the Fireflies</i> , novel, animation	25
9	<i>Barefoot Gen</i> , manga, animation, film, TV drama	23
9	<i>Boukoku no Aegis</i> (AEGIS), novel, film, manga	23

**Source :** Study Group on Military Culture, “Report on How Japanese Society Views Self-Defense Forces ‘Awareness Survey on Self-Defense Forces’” (Seikyusha, 2021)

The above survey results show that the general public's image of SDFs has been greatly influenced by disaster dispatch activities and the soft image created via media. The positive evaluation of the “existence of the Self-Defense Forces itself” is also likely to be based on such an image. The image of the Self-Defense Forces as a military organization is somewhat weak in comparison.

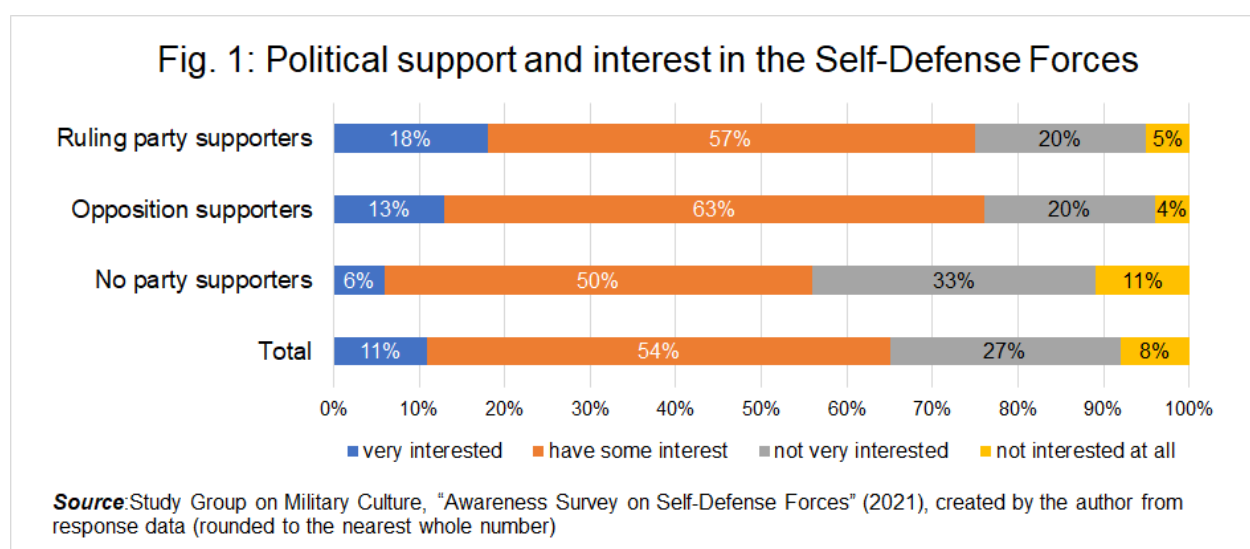
## Minimal impact of political wrangling

For a long time after the war, the constitutionality of the existence of the SDFs was a point of contention in connection with Article 9 of the Constitution which stipulates “non-maintenance of war potential.” If anything, it is no exaggeration to say that political wrangling over the SDFs, for example, whether “constitutional revision” to amend or abolish Article 9 was required, whether to maintain the status quo that the SDFs are not unconstitutional, or whether the SDFs are unconstitutional, used to constitute the main political axis in postwar Japan. However, our recent survey shows that this political wrangling has virtually no impact on the current image of SDFs anymore.

Now, instead of this, the basic dividing line is whether or not people have any knowledge of or interest in the SDFs and security issues, in other words, the dividing line between the “interested” and the “indifferent.”

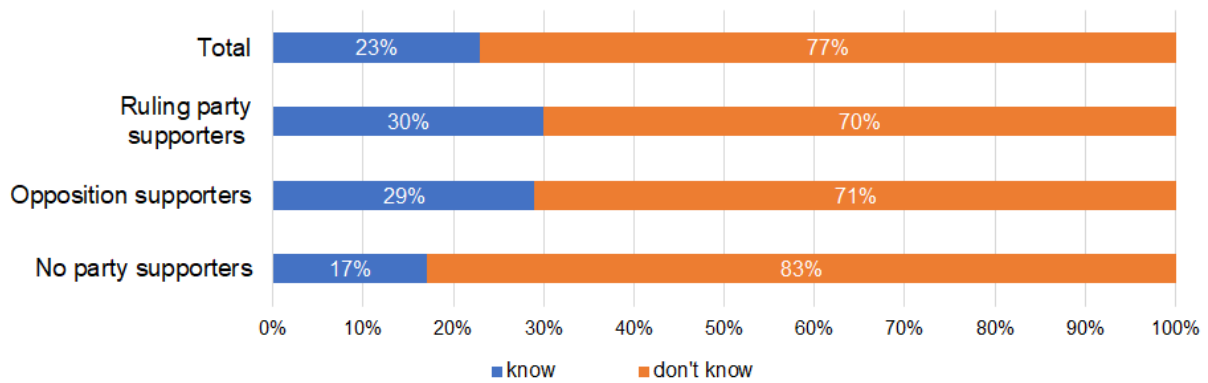
I would like to present several sets of data. In doing so, I will use political party support (ruling party support, opposition party support, no party support) as an additional line in my analysis since this makes it clear that political axis has become of secondary importance though it cannot be said to have disappeared completely.

Firstly, Fig. 1 shows the distribution of responses to the question “Are you interested in the Self-Defense Forces?” The percentage of the “interested” (together with “extremely” and “somewhat”) was only 56.2% among no party supporters compared with 75% among ruling party supporters and 76.2% among opposition supporters.



Next, Fig. 2 shows the distribution of responses to the question “Do you know that Japan’s defense program is stipulated by the ‘National Defense Program Outline’ determined by the National Security Council and the Cabinet meeting [omit]?” The percentage responding “know” was just 17.0% among no party supporters compared with 30.0% among ruling party supporters and 28.8% among opposition supporters (figures which should be seen as fairly low).

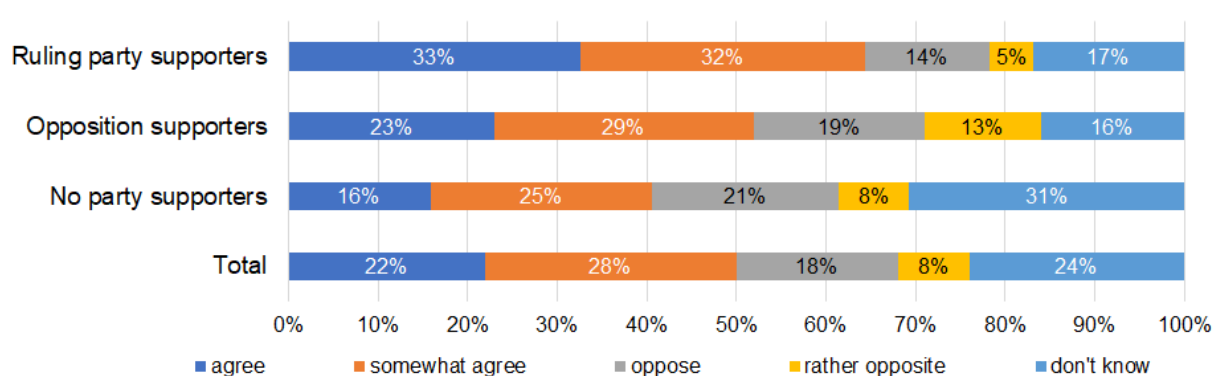
Fig. 2: Political support and knowledge of the "National Defense Program Outline"



**Source:** Study Group on Military Culture, "Awareness Survey on Self-Defense Forces" (2021), created by the author from response data (rounded to the nearest whole number)

The "National Defense Program Outline" is one of Japan's three security documents alongside the "National Security Strategy" and "Mid-Term Defense Program" and, as of October 2022, the Kishida administration aims to revise these documents before the end of 2022 with a view to "drastic strengthening of defense capability." More specifically, a significant increase in the defense budget to 2% of GDP and the development of counterattack capabilities (strike capability against enemy bases) are key elements of the political agenda.

Fig. 3: Political parties and pros and cons of owning stand-off missiles



**Source:** Study Group on Military Culture, "Awareness Survey on Self-Defense Forces" (2021), created by the author from response data (rounded to the nearest whole number)

As military equipment for realizing counterattack capabilities, stand-off missiles (long-range cruise missiles capable of attacking enemy bases) are envisaged. Fig. 3 shows the pros and cons distribution of possessing stand-off missiles in response to the question "Currently, the next plan is being discussed regarding the equipment and reorganization of the Self-Defense Forces. What do you think of each plan?"

The percentage responding "agree" (including "somewhat agree") was 40.7% among no party supporters compared with 64.6% among ruling party supporters and 52.0% among opposition supporters. However, the percentage of those responding "oppose" was lower among no party supporters than among opposition supporters. The striking difference compared with ruling and opposition supporters was the high percentage (30.8%) responding "don't know" among no party supporters.



The above can be summed up as follows. Firstly, the gap in interest, knowledge, and opinions about SDFs and security issues is greater between ruling and opposition supporters and no party supporters than between ruling and opposition supporters. Also in terms of opinions about “defense enhancement, etc.” the percentage who agree is smaller among no-party supporters than among ruling and opposition supporters and the percentage of no party supporters responding “don’t know” is conspicuously high. Similar tendencies to those described above were also observed in the distributions of responses to several other questions which were omitted from this paper due to space constraints.

Another point I would like to stress is that the division between ruling and opposition supporters and no-party supporters described above is also a generation divide (as already clearly demonstrated by various public opinion polls on political party support).

Our survey results also show significant differences between generations, with the percentage of respondents with “no party to support” determined as 33.8% among respondents in their 70s and older and 46.5% among respondents in their 60s compared with 61.9% among respondents in their 30s and 72.3% among respondents in their 20s and younger. In other words, the division between the “interested” and the “indifferent” regarding the SDFs and security issues described above is also to a fairly large extent a division between the older and younger generations.

## Changes in the sense of ownership of younger generations

I would now like to focus on the significance of the “don’t know response” which was frequently given when young people who are no party supporters were asked their opinion on security policy.

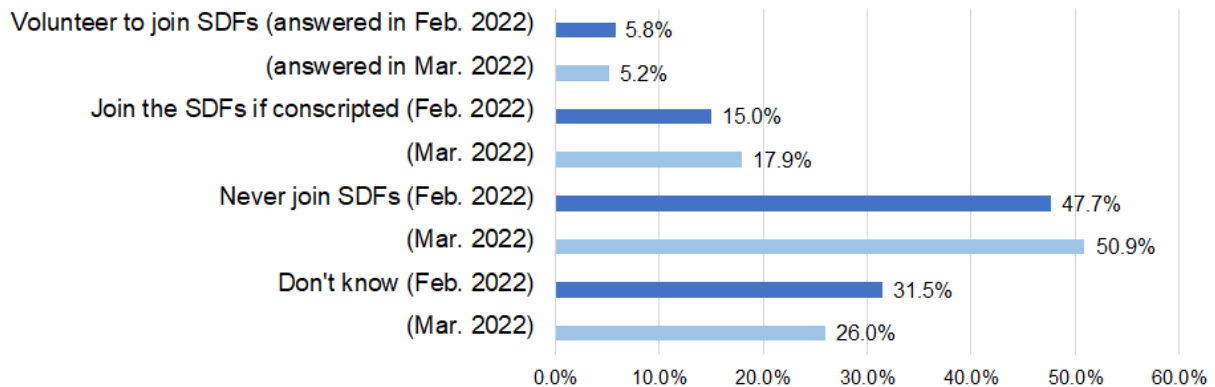
Nogami Gen, Professor at Waseda University and a member of the Study Group on Military Culture, argues as follows based on his own survey results concerning the relationship between this “don’t know” response and the respondents’ sense of ownership over security issues (Nogami Gen, “Irresponsible or Aspirational? ‘I Don’t know’ and Japanese Social Consciousness Concerning War and Peace—” (*Shiso*, May 2022)).

Nogami conducted a “Social awareness survey on war, military and peace” on two separate occasions — first in early February 2022 when tensions on the Ukrainian-Russian border were high and again in mid-March directly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Both times the same 346 respondents took part. The aim of the survey was to explore changes in Japan’s social consciousness which happened (or may have happened) in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Only men and women in their 20s and 30s took part in the survey in order to focus on the relationship between respondents’ “sense of ownership” and the “don’t know” response.

This survey included a question with a very specific scenario; namely, “If a foreign army invades an inhabited remote island (other than Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and Okinawa main island) where you do not live, and the Self-Defense Forces need personnel, will you join the Self-Defense Forces?” There was a change in attitudes to the question about a “Japan emergency” so to speak in the period between February before Russia’s invasion and March after Russia’s invasion.

Fig. 4 shows changes in the percentage of respondents choosing the four options. The percentage responding “Volunteer to join SDFs” was low at the 5% level in both February and March but the percentages responding “Join the SDFs if conscripted” and “Never join SDFs” both increased by around 3 percentage points from February to March. In contrast, the percentage responding “don’t know” decreased by 5.5 percentage points. In other words, a certain number of respondents changed their “don’t know” response” for a clear statement of intention.

Fig. 4: Changes in attitudes toward “Japan emergency”



**Source:** Reconstructed by the author based on Nogami Gen, “Irresponsible or Aspirational? ‘I Don’t know’ and Japanese Social Consciousness Concerning War and Peace” (*Shiso*, May 2022)

This change in attitude indicates the possibility that a certain number of respondents developed a sense of ownership — some negative and some positive — about “fighting for my country” by becoming more knowledgeable about and interested in a real war i.e. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In other words, the results suggested that the percentage responding “don’t know” decreases overall if the situation becomes more pressing and respondents have more knowledge and more opportunity to think.

### Need for opportunities for debate

Regardless of political standpoint, few would dispute the view that Japan’s security environment is now more severe than ever before. The push towards a “drastic strengthening of defense capability” described above is a response to this view.

However, with Japan potentially on the brink of a major turning point in the pacifism it has maintained since the war, opportunities for debate to calmly confront the realities of “war” and “military” are still sadly lacking. The survey-based research presented in this paper is part of efforts to demonstrate this situation and to develop objective and scientific data to be used as the basis for debate.

Military power, in its primary sense, is a self-negating presence in that it exists to prevent situations in which it will be exercised from happening. This is why a debate about deterrence is necessary. However, when the exercise of military power becomes a reality, leading to a situation in which people are killed, debate based on the reality, in other words, how to minimize the ravages of war, must also be held. This is because looking away from this reality could, if anything, lead to the worst case scenario.

However, military power is, of course, just one piece of the complex puzzle of security. Only when properly combined with diverse constituent elements such as diplomacy, economy and culture does military power gain significance.

I would like to end this paper with the hope that younger generations who are indifferent about security issues will become slightly more interested and develop a sense of ownership and that opportunities for debate in which they can participate will be created.

*Translated from “Kokubo no riaru: Ishikichosa kara mita Nihonjin no Jieitaizo—‘Kanshin-ha’ to ‘Mukanshin-ha’ no aidade fukamaru bundan* (The realities of national defense: the Japanese public’s

impression of the Self-Defence Forces according to an awareness survey- Deepening divide between the ‘interested’ and the ‘indifferent’),” *Chuokoron*, December 2022, pp. 84-90. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [January 2023]

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