

Japan's Self-Defence Forces Fight! Competing Narratives of
the SDF in Japanese Security Discourse and Yanai Takumi's
Gēto: jieitai kano chi nite, kaku tatakaeri

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1. Introduction:

A new role for Japan's Self-Defence Forces

1.1. The Self-Defence Forces come to the aid of Japan's allies

On 19 September 2015, the upper house of the Japanese Diet passed a package of laws that are meant to extend the scope of Japan's security policies. The laws were already passed by the Diet's lower house in July and provide a substantial elaboration of the way in which Japan's pacifist constitution is currently interpreted. The further interpretation of the constitution heralds a new role for Japan's armed forces. In particular, the legislative changes enable Japan to engage in 'collective self-defense.' This means that the country's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) are now allowed to come to the aid of allies that are under attack—most notably the United States (US)—even if Japan is not directly attacked itself. This is quite a significant step in the long-standing bilateral security pact between Japan and the US, and one that marks a shift towards an alliance in which Japan can fulfil a bigger security role. The new legislation also makes it easier for the SDF to operate in more forceful roles in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO).¹

Although the new security legislation and its envisioned novel roles for the SDF do not involve sweeping changes, they are still fiercely contested both domestically and abroad. Abe Shinzō, Japan's prime minister, has long been a proponent of loosening the constitutional restrictions on the SDF, so that Japan can contribute more proactively to peace and security in an increasingly interdependent world. Similarly, the US has also welcomed the expanded role of the SDF and the greater responsibility that Japan is taking in both in their bilateral security alliance and outside of it.² However, there are many people and groups that do not subscribe to these narratives. For instance, the new security laws were only passed after days of fractious wrangling in the Diet and vocal protest outside of it.³ Many people in Japan fear that the SDF might get caught up in conflicts of the US, and some academics and observers point out the unconstitutional nature of the new legislation.⁴ Japan's neighbours have also

¹ For a discussion of the implications of the legislation for the Self-Defence Forces, see, for example: Rupakjyoti Borah, "Japan's Controversial Security Bills Pass in the Upper House. Now What?" *The Diplomat*, 19 September 2015. Accessed online.

² "Japan's Security: Gloves Off," *The Economist*, 11 July 2015, p. 44.

³ "A new role for Japan's Self-Defence Force: Abe's Stain" *The Economist*, 26 September 2015, p. 46.

⁴ Rupakjyoti Borah, "Japan's Controversial Security Bills Pass in the Upper House;" *The Economist*, 11 July 2015, p. 44.

fiercely condemned the expansion of Japan's security policies. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that the new legislation undermined regional stability, and its state-run press agency, *Xinhua*, marked it as a return to Japanese militarism.⁵ These highly diverging narratives demonstrate the contested nature of Japan's armed forces in discourse on Japanese security policy. All narratives portray different views on the legal status of the SDF, how its various branches should be organized and equipped, where it can be deployed and under what circumstances, and what the scope of its activities should be.

1.2. The Self-Defence Forces and popular culture

These narratives on the SDF are not only projected in governmental and media discourse. A domain that has become increasingly relevant as a site where issues related to security and the role of the armed forces are negotiated and contested in Japan is that of popular culture. On the one hand, Japan's defence establishment has followed the lead of other government agencies in drawing on cultural codes and conventions in its communication with domestic and foreign audiences. On the other, representations of the SDF in works of popular culture have both appeared more frequently and become more complex in their messages. While the incremental changes in the roles of the SDF and the shifts in Japanese security policy and identity have been well studied by now,⁶ the interrelationships between popular culture and the SDF have hardly received scholarly attention. A notable exception to this is the work of Sabine Frühstück. She has examined how the Japanese military is striving to manipulate and align itself with popular culture in their public relations to shape their image.⁷ Frühstück also briefly considers the appearance of the SDF in works of popular culture, but this is not the main focus of her study. A number of other studies that do examine the contestation of politics in works of popular culture sometimes touch upon issues surrounding the SDF—themes such as nationalism, wartime history, and the security alliance with the US—but none of them centre on the narratives and images that are constructed around Japan's contemporary armed

⁵ "A new role for Japan's Self-Defence Force: Abe's Stain" p. 46.

⁶ Recent examples include: Glenn D. Hook, and Key-Yong Son, "Transposition in Japanese state identities: overseas troop dispatches and the emergence of a humanitarian power?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67, No. 1 (2013): 35-54; Arpita Mathur, "Japan's Self-Defense Forces: Towards a Normal Military," *Strategic Analysis* 31, No. 5 (2007): 725-754; and Oros, Andrew, *Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity, and the Evolution of Security Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

⁷ Sabine Frühstück and Eyal Ben-Ari, "'Now We Show It All!' Normalization and the Management of Violence in Japan's Armed Forces," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002); and Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): esp. pp. 116-148.

forces specifically. I will discuss some of these studies more in depth later on. Examining how the SDF is represented in popular culture yields valuable insights of how Japanese society thinks about itself and its armed forces.

1.3. Outline of the thesis

My thesis project builds on the work of the scholars that have examined the political content of works of popular culture in Japan. In particular, it attempts to analyze in more depth how images and narratives of the SDF are represented in cultural texts. The study focuses on contemporary Japanese comics (manga) as a pop-culture medium in which dominant understandings of security and the armed forces are negotiated and contested. Manga not only remains one of the most widely consumed media in Japan, but its nature as both a textual and graphic form give it compelling capabilities for communicating messages. As a case study, I have selected the manga adaptation of Yanai Takumi's popular military fantasy series *Gēto: jieitai kano chi nite, kaku tatakaeri*.⁸

The aim of my study was to find out how representations of the SDF in *Gate* convey particular understandings of Japan's armed forces and its role in international security policy through narrative and graphic devices. I have conducted a politico-historically situated textual analysis to this end. In order to determine how the understandings conveyed in *Gate* relate to Japan's new security legislation and its envisioned novel roles for the SDF, I have contrasted the manga's narrative both with Japan's extant security posture and other key compelling narratives for an alternate envisioning of the military in Japanese security discourse, which have already been mapped by earlier studies. In doing so, I was able to assess whether the narrative of the SDF in the manga is mirroring and legitimizing or deflecting and challenging Japan's existing security posture and the role of the armed forces therein.

The thesis is outlined as follows. Chapter 2 situates the study in a theoretical framework and explicates how I conceptualize and operationalize the key concepts in my study by drawing on existing secondary literature. First, it considers the uncertain status of the armed forces in Japan, after which it identifies dominant narratives surrounding the SDF within the discourse on Japanese security policy. Second, the chapter will explain in more depth how popular culture has increasingly become an important site in which these narratives compete for dominance. In particular, I will focus on manga as a medium of political contestation.

⁸ The title of the series can be loosely translated as *Gate: Thus the Self-Defence Forces Fight in That Place*. Hereafter, I will simply refer to the series as *Gate*.

Chapter 3 discusses my methodological framework by explaining the selection of my cases and sources and elaborates upon the research methods I have used in the textual analysis. My analysis of the primary source material is then presented in chapter 4. It explicates the narrative surrounding the SDF as it is conveyed in *Gate*, and how this narrative constructs a specific understanding of Japan's security and the role of its armed forces. Finally, I will briefly consider how *Gate* supports or challenges the other main narratives in Japanese security discourse identified earlier and reflect upon the implications of the understanding that *Gate* constructs.

2. Theoretical framework:

Contesting narratives of the Self-Defence Forces

2.1. The uncertain status of Japan's armed forces

The legitimacy and role of the Self-Defence Forces lie at the heart of the current debate surrounding the Abe administration's new security legislation and the imminent possibility of constitutional revision. In particular, the debate centres on what Frühstück aptly describes as the "central paradox of military-societal relations in Japan."⁹ Essentially, this paradox has to do with how Japan's armed forces relate to the Japanese constitution. Currently, Article 9 of the constitution stipulates that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph," it further reads, "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."¹⁰ The very existence of Japan's armed forces thus contradicts the constitution. In fact, the Self-Defence Forces not only have all the organizational features common to most modern armies (they have ground, sea, and air branches) but are also one of the most technologically advanced militaries in the world, equipped with sophisticated weaponry (bar nuclear weapons).¹¹ Also, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the annual military expenditure of Japan ranks eighth in the world, having spent \$40.9 billion on military spending in 2015 (although the spending has been capped at a maximum of 1 percent of GDP since the 1970s).¹² Although Japan's Self-Defence Forces are funded, organized, equipped, and trained to exercise a wide range of activities, one of these still remains a preparedness for combat and war.¹³ However, the armed forces are legally prohibited and normatively constrained in exercising their capacity for violence and are instead exclusively deployed for non-combat operations such as disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping operations. The constitutionally ambiguous standing of the Self-

⁹ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur Tiedemann, *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Vol. 2: 1600 to 2000*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Columbia University, 2005) p. 1032.

¹¹ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 8; Also see Japan Ministry of Defence. "Defense of Japan 2015" *Official Website Ministry of Defense*. 2015. Accessed online.

¹² Sam Perlo-Freeman, Aude Fleurant, Pieter Wezeman, and Siemon Wezeman, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2015," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, April 2016, accessed online.

¹³ Japan Ministry of Defence. "Defense of Japan 2015". See especially part III, chapter 1, "Building a Dynamic Joint Defense Force." Accessed online.

Defence Forces and their restrictions on the use of force have given Japan's armed forces an uncertain status, and Frühstück notes how service members have faced "a distinct lack of appreciation, and potentially hostile public opinion."¹⁴ Although Japan analyst Richard J. Samuels has noted that the appreciation and public approval of the SDF improved significantly after their disaster relief operations in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that hit the north-eastern part of Japan,¹⁵ their proper organization and the desired scope of their activities remains fiercely contested in the discourse on Japanese security policies.

2.2. Competing narratives of the Self-Defence Forces

Various actors within the discourse on Japanese security construct and project competing narratives of the status and roles of the Self-Defence Forces to change the discursive environment in which they operate to further their political objectives. In other words, they use narratives strategically. Political scientists are increasingly attentive to how this has implications for the contestation and legitimization of common understandings and policies. Scholars of political communication Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle examine how this works in relation to global order. They argue that strategic narratives are "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors."¹⁶ A crucial part of strategic narratives, in their view, is that they "articulate end states and suggest how to get there."¹⁷ What distinguishes narratives from the wider discourse is that narratives contain a strong sense of temporal movement that "orient audiences to a future." Political elites and thought leaders draw on the prevailing understandings contained in a discourse and craft these into a "causal transformation that takes actors from one status quo to another".¹⁸ Narratives thus plot events in a sequence to provide commonsensical understandings. Miskimmon et al. argue that it is important to distinguish between three types of narratives, which they refer to as "system narratives", "identity narratives", and "issue narratives", respectively. The first type of narrative conveys specific understandings about the nature of

¹⁴ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013): esp. pp. 80-81.

¹⁶ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013): p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the structure in which actors find themselves; the second narrates how the character and behaviour of these actors are understood; and the third type of narrative constructs the issues that need to be addressed.¹⁹ These are key components to keep in mind when examining strategic narratives, but I disagree with Miskimmon et al. that these need to be conceptually considered as separate types of narratives. Instead, I argue that the boundaries between them are not that clear-cut and that these components are inherent to any narrative.

The narratives that are crafted around the SDF also contain these components. Indeed, based on diverging understandings of the nature of Japan's security in contemporary world politics, the identity of Japan's armed forces, and what kind of issues they are confronted with, one can distinguish a number of competing narratives in the discourse on Japanese security. The work of Samuels is particularly helpful in considering these diverging understandings and the competing narratives that are based on them. Samuels has gone a long way into mapping out the specific ideological positions various individuals and groups take up in discussions of Japanese security.²⁰ In his study, he argues Japan's security discourse is mostly centred around two issues: (1) whether or not it is acceptable for the SDF to use force, and (2) how close Japan and its military should cooperate with the US.²¹ Samuels has also considered narratives surrounding the SDF more specifically in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.²² He argues that, besides the narrative to "stay the course" that defends the status quo, there are two compelling narratives that construct alternative visions of Japan's armed forces, which he refers to as the "putting it in gear" and the "back to the future" narratives.²³ These narratives largely agree with the competing visions of the SDF that Frühstück identifies in debates of the armed forces in her study. She finds that these visions and the discourse surrounding them, given the SDF's unclear status, are permeated in particular by wrangling assumptions and persistent discussions of normality—what it means for a state and its military to be 'normal'.²⁴ In the next section, I will draw upon their work to single out the essential characteristics of these competing narratives of the SDF, guided by the three narrative components provided by Miskimmon et al.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰ Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007): see esp. chapter 5, "The Discourse," pp. 109-132.

²¹ Ibid., p. 111.

²² Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, esp. pp. 80-88.

²³ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁴ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, esp. pp. 182 and 185.

2.3.1 *The Self-Defence Forces as a 'normal' combat military*

The first narrative envisions an end to the unclear status of Japan's armed forces by lifting its constitutional restrictions on the use of force and fully transforming it into a 'normal' combat military like most other states have. This narrative positions Japan in a very realist conceptualization of an anarchical world in which states remain fundamentally at odds with each other and often actively hostile. The main issue Japan then faces is a conventional military attack by its enemies. Samuels describes how proponents of this narrative suspiciously look towards a 'rising' China with which Japan has long-standing territorial disputes; Russia's provocative anti-Japanese policies; and a belligerent North Korea that kidnaps Japanese citizens and doggedly pursues its development of nuclear weapons.²⁵ He argues that this narrative presents Japan as dependent on the United States. Because of "Japan's infantilization" it is "dangerously unable to imagine war".²⁶ Japan's fighters in the armed forces are considered "heroic", Samuel finds, but due to their dependence on the United States and the constitutional restrictions on the use of force, the SDF are not properly equipped and cannot protect Japan's citizens and territory. According to Frühstück, this narrative is permeated with a sense of 'abnormality'. Its proponents feel that, due to the Japan's restrictions on the use of force by their military, they are an anomaly in the international system and a deviation of global norms.²⁷ Somehow, the SDF are not a "real military" and Japan not a "normal state".²⁸ Thus, Samuels concludes, the recommended course for the future for the advocates of this narrative is "to make the military more muscular, more capable and more independent of the United States."²⁹ Or, as Frühstück summarizes it: the SDF "should become a full-blown combat military."³⁰ The prime objective of Japan's armed forces should then be to more effectively deter hostile action against Japan, and, in the worst case scenario, be ready to defend the state and its territorial waters and airspace—including the disputed Senkaku (or Diayu) islands. Frühstück explains how discussions of 'normalizing' Japan in this way were launched in great part by the conservative politician Ozawa Ichirō's 1993 book *Nihon kaizō keikaku (Blueprint for a New Japan)*,³¹ and

²⁵ Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, pp. 83-84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁷ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 181 and 186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁹ Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, p. 82.

³⁰ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

Samuels singles out right-wing cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori and conservative national security scholar Nakanishi Terumasa as prominent advocates of this narrative.³²

2.3.2. *The Self-Defence Forces as a global disaster relief force*

The second narrative proposes to fundamentally transform the SDF into a nonmilitary force specialized in disaster relief that can be deployed globally to assist countries in need. This narrative is undergirded with a more constructivist perspective towards the nature of the international system and seems to be determined to break free from conventional security dilemmas and arms build-ups that are the result of a more realist outlook on world politics. Its proponents also have a completely different conception of the main security issues that Japan is confronted with. According to Samuels, subscribers to this narrative argue that “natural disasters and nuclear power are greater threats than foreign states”.³³ Frühstück also points out how advocates of this narrative note the more frequent occurrence of large-scale natural disasters. They argue that the successful deployment of the SDF in cases of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, both domestically and abroad, illustrates that global security challenges in the twenty-first century are “much better handled by nonmilitary means”.³⁴ Samuels describes how, according to this narrative, the increasing experience and adept handling of such cases “points the way forward toward a more appropriate role for Japan in world affairs.”³⁵ Japan should thus reaffirm the original antimilitarist nature of its post-war security identity and reorient the SDF from its current unclear status back into the nonmilitary organization that it was supposed to be. This reorientation should turn the SDF into a force specialized in disaster relief. Both Samuels and Frühstück single out Waseda University professor Mizushima Asaho as one of the chief proponents of this view. He proposes to reinvent the SDF as what he calls a global Disaster Relief Force (DRF).³⁶ The main role of this force would shift from defending the state to protecting people. This would not be limited to Japan. Samuels describes how Mizushima and like-minded people argue that Japan can fulfil a leading role in providing its services to the rest of the world. This would also have a pacifying effect. Since Japan can no longer be perceived as a military security threat, no nation would have any reason to attack it, so the narrative goes. Japan would thus no

³² Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, p. 82.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁴ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 187.

³⁵ Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, p. 87.

³⁶ *ibid.*; Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 187.

longer be reliant on the security umbrella of the United States. This means that the funding of the US military presence in Japan can be transferred to equipping the newly established DRF with more advanced disaster response capabilities.³⁷ Other proponents of this narrative besides Prof. Mizushima are, for example, Kawasaki Akira (activist of the non-governmental organization Peace Boat) and members of the Communist Party.³⁸ In fact, Frühstück herself seems to support this narrative as well. She argues that Japan's armed forces "have been hesitant and cautious pioneers among military establishments."³⁹ The missions that they have been entrusted with so far, she claims, encompass precisely the kinds of roles and activities other military establishments are increasingly moving towards as well. Frühstück supports the earlier judgement by Thomas U. Berger that, instead of being an international anomaly, Japan's armed forces can be a "harbinger of attitudes to come."⁴⁰

Thus, the 'disaster relief force' narrative envisions a more heartening future view of Japan's security policies amidst increasing tensions in regional relations than the 'normal combat military' narrative does. For now, the Abe administration seems to be hedging its bets and steering a middle course between the two alternative visions of the SDF proposed by the narratives that challenge the status quo. The government holds on to the extant position of maintaining the constitutional restrictions on the use of force and continuing Japan's security alliance with the US, while incrementally adapting their policies within the boundaries of acceptable discourse to evolve the activities of the SDF to react to new security challenges. This involves, for instance, deployment abroad for noncombat missions under the aegis of the United Nations. These gradual evolutions in policies and expansion of the activities of the SDF, however, still fit awkwardly with the constitution, and they remain contested.

2.3. The Self-Defence Forces and popular culture

A domain that has become increasingly relevant as a site where the contesting narratives of Japanese security and the role of the armed forces are projected is that of popular culture. Over the last two decades, in particular, the amount of cultural works that address the Self-Defence Forces has gone up. Moreover, the understandings of Japan's military that are communicated through these works has become increasingly more complex.

³⁷ Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, p. 87.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-88.

³⁹ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Despite this recent proliferation, however, the unclear legal status of Japan's armed forces and their constraints on combat have long inhibited popular attention for the SDF. This is not only the case for reportage by television stations and newspapers, but also for producers of popular culture. Frühstück briefly considers the appearance of the SDF in popular culture in her discussion of the defence establishment's public relations campaigns. She explains that "most producers of popular culture in Japan have been wary of addressing the Self-Defense forces in their work. Whether in cinema, video games, animated films, or comics," she finds, "glorifying representations of Japan's military present have been conspicuously subdued in Japan's popular culture."⁴¹ One reason for this, she argues, is the pervasive anti-militarist sentiments in Japanese society that prevents cultural productions around the SDF to find an audience. Another reason is the trouble cultural producers seemed to have in constructing compelling plotlines around the armed forces. Frühstück quotes manga artist Matsumoto Reiji, in particular, who says that it is hard to feature the SDF in works of fiction because "their function is not quite clear."⁴² It is due to what Frühstück even terms "a vacuum" of popular representation of the SDF that the army launched its public relations campaigns to actively shape their popular image.⁴³ Her study demonstrated how the military has followed other government agencies in drawing on cultural codes and forms to communicate to various audiences, and her argument has resonated (albeit less refined) in a few recent articles as well, most notably by Jonathan Gad for *Vice News* and Matthew Brummer in *The Diplomat*.⁴⁴

Despite the long-standing hesitance on the part of cultural producers themselves to address the SDF, however, the number of works of popular culture that represent Japan's contemporary military have steadily increased over the past two decades, and the contents of their messages have become more complex. A particularly notable example of cultural works addressing the SDF is the *Sengoku Jieitai* series. This body of works spanning across multiple media centres around a plotline in which members of a battalion of the GSDF are accidentally sent back in time through a 'time slip' to the Warring States period, where they become entangled in a struggle for the rule of Japan by competing feudal lords. The story is based on a 1974 novel by science-fiction and fantasy writer Hanmura Ryō. A manga adaptation illustrated by Tanabe Setsuo was serialized in the manga magazine *Play Comics*

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 117.

⁴² Ibid., p. 117.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 118.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Gad, "The Japanese Military is Getting Offensively Cute," *Vice News*, 13 April 2015, accessed online; Matthew Brummer, "Japan: The Military Manga," *The Diplomat*, 19 January 2016, accessed online.

between 1975 and 1976 and was continued for a sequel from 2000 onwards. In 1979, a feature film was released by Tōhō that was also distributed outside of Japan as *G.I. Samurai*. A remake of the original film was released in 2005 as *Sengoku Jieitai 1549* (known outside of Japan as *Samurai Commando: Mission 1549*) and a manga of the same name was published by Kadokawa Shoten. The remake has also spawned a television miniseries that was aired by NTV in 2006. In the case of *Sengoku Jieitai*, there are significant differences in the manner in which the SDF are displayed throughout the various installments in the franchise, and the messages conveyed through these works has become increasingly complex.

The proliferating multi-media franchise that is sprouting around the work of Yanai's *Gate* is a more recent example of the continuing proliferation of works addressing the SDF. The “vacuum” Frühstück identified is thus slowly being filled. As we will see, *Gate* represents the army in a sophisticated way and attempts to address a number of political issues through its contents. Its growing popularity and spin-off into multiple media indicates the work resonates with various audiences, which is indicative of shifting attitudes towards the SDF in Japanese society, and a willingness to accept more representations of the armed forces in popular culture.

2.4. The politics of popular culture

The stories that are presented in works of popular culture such as *Sengoku Jieitai* or *Gate* are not innocent fantasies. Novels, feature films, television series, pop songs, video games, comic books, etc. construct particular views of the world while closing off other imaginings. The communication of these views through popular culture contributes to the production and maintenance of common-sensical understandings that in turn shape how social and political life are constituted. This is but only one of the many conceptual approaches to popular culture, but it is one that is increasingly adopted by a wide range of scholars. Elisabeth Bronfen likens popular culture to a sort of collective imaginary. She argues that through works of popular culture “we make sense of the world by producing coherent narratives, which in turn serve as the basis for any sense of community and political action.”⁴⁵ Stuart Hall argues it can be seen as a site where “collective social understandings are created”.⁴⁶ Daniel Nexon and Iver Neumann argue that popular culture is “a crucial domain” in which “morality is shaped, identities are produced and transformed, and effective analogies and narratives are structured

⁴⁵ Elisabeth Bronfen, “Reality Check: Image Affects and Cultural Memory,” *Differences* 17, no. 1 (2006): p. 23.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall (2009), quoted in John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (London: Pearson Longman, 1994): p. 4.

and altered.”⁴⁷ These scholars share the assumption that meaning is not something that is fixed and constant but socially constructed. Views of how we see the world and ourselves in it are thus contested and they change over time. Popular culture is one of the sites in which these contestations over meaning take place.

An important implication of conceptualizing popular culture as a site in which collective understandings are shaped and contested is that this turns a realm of supposedly frivolous entertainment into a sphere of politics. If what we naturally consider to be political reality is actually socially constructed through representations in e.g. popular culture, then this bestows tremendous power on the practices and texts that represent certain norms and ideas since these effectively contribute to common understandings. How texts then struggle over competing meanings is what Hall refers to as the “politics of representation”.⁴⁸ John Storey argues that “all texts are ultimately political” since “they offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is or should be.”⁴⁹ Since works of popular culture thus represent diverging and competing views of the world, we can follow Jutta Weldes in arguing that popular culture can thus be seen as “composed of potentially contested codes and representations”, which “designates a field on which battles over meaning are fought.”⁵⁰ Bronfen even stresses that the “real political battles are fought ... within the parameters of our collective cultural imaginary.”⁵¹ How these battles in the imaginary are fought out more concretely is explained well by Weldes. She argues that works of popular culture can either reinforce or challenge the extant political order and its power relations. Works that are supportive of the status quo reconfirm the views of government officials and facilitate public acceptance of government policies since these are aligned with common-sensical knowledge. However, works of popular culture can also challenge the status quo by providing “alternative visions of world politics [and] possibilities for transformation ... [that] allow us to imagine how we might better organize and structure local and global politics.”⁵²

A compelling example of how collective understandings can be reproduced in cultural imaginations is Mark Fisher’s discussion of what he calls “capitalist realism”. He highlights

⁴⁷ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver Neumann, *Harry Potter and International Relations* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006): p. 6.

⁴⁸ Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, *Representation* (2nd Ed.) (Los Angeles etc.: SAGE, 2013): p. xxiv.

⁴⁹ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Jutta Weldes, “Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics,” in *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics*, edited by Jutta Weldes (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003): p. 5.

⁵¹ Elisabeth Bronfen, “Reality Check: Image Affects and Cultural Memory,” p. 23

⁵² Jutta Weldes, “Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics,” pp. 7-8.

how even in the post-apocalyptic scenario of the science-fiction film *Children of Men*, its characters still display patterns of behaviour associated with capitalism. Fisher wryly notes how it reminds him of Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek's phrase that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."⁵³ According to Fisher, the film demonstrates how hard it is to unthink common understandings. That is precisely what he means with "capitalist realism", he says. It refers to "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."⁵⁴ The same obstinate common understandings are noticeable in the case of security policy and what it means to be a 'normal' military.

2.5. Manga as a medium of political contestation

A particularly noteworthy medium of political culture that has long been used as a vehicle for vibrant social and political commentary is that of comics. Manga, as contemporary Japanese comics are called, is one of the most extensive forms of popular culture in Japan. Manga is widely read by a broad range of readers. However, it is primarily a medium, and as such, it encompasses a vast range of thematic material, including politics, security, and—increasingly—the SDF.

However, whether manga as a medium actually has the potential to criticize or impact social and political processes in Japan has been a topic of fierce scholarly discussion. In particular, these discussions focus on *otaku* subculture as a specific type of manga readership, how its members relate to Japanese society at large, paying attention especially to the concept of *moe*. Both *otaku* and *moe* are (and remain) contested concepts, and their meanings have shifted over time. An accurate definition of *otaku* is captured by Jonathan E. Abel and Kono Shion, who describe them as "those Japanese, usually males and generally between the ages of 18 and 40, who fanatically consume, produce, and collect comic books (*manga*), animated films (*anime*), and other products related to these forms of popular visual culture and who participate in the production and sales of derivative fan merchandise."⁵⁵ A working definition for *moe* is provided by Patrick J. Galbraith, who describes it as "an affectionate response to fictional

⁵³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009): p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Jonathan E. Abel and Kono Shion, "Translators' Introduction," in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, written by Azuma Hiroki, and translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Kono Shion (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): p. xv.

characters.”⁵⁶ Important participants in the debate on *otaku* and *moe* are psychologist Saitō Tamaki and cultural critic Azuma Hiroki. Both share an open attitude towards the *otaku* phenomenon and propose critical analytical engagement with its social characteristics in a period when *otaku* still had negative connotations attached to it and, as Azuma notes, were mostly associated with anti-social youth who had lost touch with reality.⁵⁷ However, Azuma and Saitō differ fundamentally in their views and assumptions.

Azuma draws on the philosophical concept of the ‘postmodern’ in his work to claim that national identity in Japan has slowly disintegrated and splintered when the country’s society moved to mass-consumption from the 1970s onwards. In an interview with Galbraith, he explains how this fractured sense of identity means that Japanese people no longer buy into “a grand narrative that is shared by everyone and holds society together.”⁵⁸ Instead, he argues that *otaku*, in particular, are not so much interested in the narratives that manga convey, but rather in the particular manifestations of *moe* that they contain, such as cat and bunny ears, lolitas, maid costumes, etc. He likens them to postmodern “database animals” that deconstruct works of culture to the elements they favour.⁵⁹ This means that the political nature of the narratives in manga such as *Gate*, which, as we will see, contains some elements of *moe* and targets a readership that encompasses people considered to be *otaku*, will not have such a big impact as the aforementioned cultural theorists have proclaimed. Saitō takes a more sympathetic view, however. He draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to argue that the *otaku*’s interest in elements of *moe* stem from sexual desire more than a rejection of grand narratives in a postmodern society.⁶⁰

Despite Azuma and Saitō’s divergent positions in the debate regarding *otaku* and *moe* in manga consumption, what they have in common is that both focus on the production and reception of the manga texts by a specific type of readership more than on the actual contents and potential ideological biases of cultural works. This is part of a broader trend in manga scholarship in Japan. In discussing the rise of manga studies after adult manga came to be

⁵⁶ Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2014): p. 5.

⁵⁷ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Kono Shion (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): p. 4. Also, see: Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (Surrey: Routledge, 2000.): esp. chapter 4, “Amateur Manga Subculture and the Otaku Panic,” pp. 102-138.

⁵⁸ Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming*, pp. 170-177.

⁵⁹ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*.

⁶⁰ Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, translated by Vincent J. Keith and Dawn Lawson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

seen as a serious aesthetic and informative medium in the 1990s, Sharon Kinsella points out how most scholars tended to focus on the nature of the medium in their analyses, while neglecting to connect their textual studies to broader developments in Japanese society, economy, and politics.⁶¹ This point is repeated more recently by Jacqueline Berndt, who describes contemporary manga studies in Japan as a “narrow circle ... that chooses to avoid macropolitical claims.”⁶² She argues that the possibilities for sociopolitical impact and critique inherent in manga as a communicative and aesthetic medium are still often neglected by Japanese scholars.⁶³

Berndt herself does consider manga an appropriate medium for sociopolitical criticism. According to her, the triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis that rocked Japan in 2011 have “raised not only the question of how to resist the status quo but also of how to picture an alternative future.”⁶⁴ She argues that “manga may be expected to make important contributions in this regard” because of its nature as “a site of imaginary worlds rather than direct depictions of social reality.”⁶⁵ Some scholars have made some valuable contributions to the examination of how manga’s potential as a site of imaginary worlds can facilitate the communication of political messages. Matthew Penney and Mizuno Hiromi have even studied how the fantasy genre enables alternate visions of the Japanese military.⁶⁶ However, both of them focus on competing narratives of wartime history and past military battles more than on engagements with contemporary understandings of Japan’s security and its armed forces. Their studies do pave the way in considering how fantastical settings facilitate the communication of political messages. Thus, let us consider how *Gate* constructs its narratives with regards to Japanese security and the armed forces by deploying the military in an imaginary world.

⁶¹ Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society*, p. 101.

⁶² Jacqueline Berndt, “The Intercultural Challenge of the ‘Mangaesque’: Reorienting Manga Studies after 3/11.” In *Manga’s Cultural Crossroads*, edited by Jacqueline Berndt and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (New York and London: Routledge, 2013): p. 66.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 65-66.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Matthew Penney, “‘War Fantasy’ and Reality—‘War as Entertainment’ and Counter-narratives in Japanese Popular Culture,” *Japanese Studies* 27, No. 1 (2007): p. 35; Hiromi Mizuno, “When Pacifist Japan Fights: Historicizing Desires in Anime,” in *Mechademia, Vol. 2: Networks of Desire*, edited by Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007): p. 105.

3. Methodological framework:

Textual analysis of manga as visual source material

3.1. Selection of case study

I have selected Yanai Takumi's *Gate* as a case study because, first, it is a series that has been increasingly popular in Japan. The original online stories by Yanai have been published as light novels, which were then adopted into both a manga and anime television series, the latter of which has also seen release in North America. The original series has also spawned several spin-offs across all media. I have decided to focus on the manga adaptation because of its particular visual and stylistic characteristics. Second, the multimodal semi-fictional universe presented in *Gate* contains extensive and clear analogies to both the SDF and Japanese international security policy. It presents the SDF centre stage in a clash of interests between various domestic and international interest groups—including the United States and the People's Republic of China. The fictional dimension of the series is interesting because it allows it to consider 'what-if?' scenarios whose moral implications are highly insightful. The final reason for the selection of *Gate* is that it is a recent series and, as such, engages with contemporary views and debates of security, political identity, and state policy—most notably surrounding Japan's constitutional restrictions on its armed forces.

3.2. Textual analysis of visual source material

This thesis employed textual analysis as a research method to draw out the latent political content of the texts in order to make connections between them and tie them to the broader discourse. To reiterate, the aim of my analysis is to find out how representations of the SDF in *Gate* convey particular understandings of Japan's armed forces and its role in international security policy. In my theoretical framework, I have established how narratives are an intuitive and compelling form of representation. Based on the work of Miskimmon et al., I have set out three crucial components that are crucial to determining the security narrative around the SDF: system, issues, and identity. Thus, my driving questions are: what is the nature of the system in which the SDF operates, what are the key issues it faces, and how does it behave to solve these issues?

In order to conduct the "close analysis of texts for detailed analysis of meaning" that my research question calls for, I follow the advice of Jane Stokes in using semiotics as a qualitative

set of research methods to study the patterns of signification in the manga to be able to break down the ideas and conceptualizations that are captured in the visual images and relate them to the broader discourse on Japanese security and the role of its armed forces.⁶⁷ Since the scope of my research project as a research project for a MA thesis was limited, I chose to rely on secondary literature to map out the discourse instead of doing a full discourse analysis myself. This is also due to the fact that the eight volumes of *Gate* that were published when I started my research already consisted a significant amount of textual primary source material to translate and analyze. The series is still ongoing, but the main political value of its plot and narrative is firmly established within these volumes, and I suspect that, due to its popularity, the series will keep its plot open and continue serialization for a while.

I have focused my attention mostly on the site of the text itself, while leaving aside the sites of the production and reception of texts. In this, I respond to Berndt's proposed research agenda of paying more attention to the sociocritical potential of manga instead of solely examining it for its manner of consumption and production. However, I will keep in mind manga's specific form in examining its representational content. This means I have kept in mind how manga relies on its own aesthetic preferences and how the visual language used in Japanese comics employs different signs and techniques to convey meaning than those in, for example, Europe or North America—as Neil Cohn has stressed.⁶⁸ Since manga is a multimodal medium that not only relies on visual images but also text to convey its meaning, I have also followed the insistence by Toni Johnson-Woods to pay close attention on the use of language in manga, as the use of honorifics in the Japanese, for example, can provide “subtle clues as to the relationships between the characters.”⁶⁹ Besides the focus on the multimodal nature of manga and the cultural specificity of the codes with which it signifies meaning, I have considered how genre conventions and targeted audiences might inhibit or facilitate the signification of meaning by the manga.

Finally, to situate my text in its political and historical context, I have emulated Mizuno's recommendation to treat the manga “as a historical text that needs to be contextualized yet embodies context within itself.”⁷⁰ In other words, *Gate* needs to be considered in its context,

⁶⁷ Jane Stokes, *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2013): p. 119

⁶⁸ Neil Cohn, “Japanese Visual Language,” in *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): pp. 153-171; Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993): pp. 77-82.

⁶⁹ Tony Johnson-Woods, “Introduction,” in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: Continuum, 2010): p. 7.

⁷⁰ Mizuno Hiromi, “When Pacifist Japan Fights: Historicizing Desires in Anime,” p. 104.

but it also reflects that context itself. In this case, Yanai wrote the main part of the original content of the franchise between 2004 and 2010, and as a result the series clearly reflects events and attitudes from the period in which Koizumi Junichirō still held office. However, the increasing popularity of the series and especially its spin-offs into a growing amount of other media during Abe's incumbence suggests that the issues addressed in the series still resonates strongly within the current discourse on Japan's security and the role of its armed forces.

The next chapter will present the findings of the analysis. I will first briefly consider the production context of the original work, after which I will describe its main plot and genre. The subsequent sub-chapters will, in order, present the components that together constitute the security narrative that *Gate* as a manga series constructs around the SDF.

4. Analysis:

Japan's Self-Defence Forces fight in Yanai's *Gate*

4.1. Yanai Takumi's *Gēto: jieitai kano chi nite, kaku tatakaeri*

Gate is a multimedia franchise revolving around a story that centres on the deployment of Japan's Self-Defence Forces in a fantasy world that mirrors our own. It can thus be considered as belonging to the genre of military fantasy. The original content of the franchise was written by Yanai Takumi, who himself is a former member of the Ground Self-Defence Forces (GSDF). After his period in the armed forces, Yanai studied professional writing while working as a medical social worker and later founding his own company. In between April 2004 and June 2010, he published *Gate* in the form of a series of web novels on the user-generated content website of *Arcadia*. Yanai's web novels were first published in print by Alphapolis in April 2010. He has since also written a range of other original works, which were published by Kōdansha.⁷¹ The manga adaptation of Yanai's novels are illustrated by graphic artist Sao Satoru. The manga is serialized montly on the Alphapolis' website, and the first *tankōban* (collected volume) was published in June 2012. The Alphapolis website states that the manga is targeted towards a general male readership (*ippan dansei muke*).⁷² *Gate* has proven to be quite a popular series. In the Amazon.co.jp manga sales ranking for July 2016, the newest *tankōban* (volume 9) ranked 33 in the top 100,⁷³ and the franchise as a whole has now sold more than four millions copies.⁷⁴ The manga adaptation has also spawned an anime tv serialization that premiered in July 2015, which has been licensed by Sentai Filmworks for distribution in North America.⁷⁵ Both the light novels and the manga and anime adaptations are still ongoing.

Due to Yanai's background as a former member of the armed forces and the central position of the SDF in *Gate*'s plotline, the franchise has recently been hailed as an example of how collaboration between Japan's creative industries and the military has become more pervasive. In his article for *The Diplomat*, Brummer even claims that the manga adaptation of

⁷¹ Japan Self-Defence Force Tokyo Provincial Cooperation Office, "*Gensakusha—Yanai Takumi-san kara* [A word from author Yanai Takumi]," accessed online.

⁷² <http://www.alphapolis.co.jp/manga/viewOpening/138000030/>

⁷³ Amazon Komikku Ranking, 5 July 2016, online, cited 5 July 2016, available from <https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/bestsellers/books/2278488051#2>.

⁷⁴ <http://www.alphapolis.co.jp/manga/viewOpening/138000030/>

⁷⁵ <http://www.sentiafilmworks.com/news/sentai-filmworks-licenses-gate>

Gate is “[p]roduced, designed, and funded in coordination with the JSDF”.⁷⁶ This, however, is a gross overstatement. It is true that Yanai wrote the novels partly based on his experiences in the armed forces, and he said that he modeled some of the characters after people he actually knew during his time in the armed forces.⁷⁷ It is also true that the series at some point collaborated with the SDF. When the tv anime series of *Gate* started to air in July 2015, the Tokyo Provincial Cooperation Office (TPCO) of the SDF made use of *Gate* imagery in two of their recruitment posters.⁷⁸ It makes sense for the SDF to capitalize on the fact that one of their former members portrays the military prominently and engagingly in works of popular culture, especially given the growing popularity of *Gate* as a multimedia franchise. However, I could not find any other evidence for any other links or collaborations between the armed forces and the production, designing or funding of *Gate*. I have tried to contact Brummer via multiple communication channels to ask where he found evidence to support his claim but have received no answer. Moreover, I find his (admittedly brief) discussion of the content of *Gate* superficial, and it seems Brummer is too quick to interpret *Gate* as simply another example of how Japanese society is being ‘militarized’ through its popular culture. He does not make an effort to probe the complexity with which *Gate* is trying to engage issues with regards to the status of the SDF and the way the military relates to Japanese society. Brummer even misreads a key part of *Gate*’s central message. Therefore, let us move on to consider how *Gate* presents its narrative on Japan’s security and its armed forces.

4.2. Plot: The Self-Defence Forces are deployed beyond the gate

The narrative of *Gate* is launched when a mysterious gate appears in the Ginza district in central Tokyo, from which an army of monsters and human soldiers flood that invade and attempt to capture the city. Japan’s military is quickly mobilized to assist the local police forces, who repel the invaders. Japanese Prime Minister Hōjō (clearly resembling former prime minister Koizumi Junichirō—see fig. 1) resolutely proclaims that, since the gate appeared in Tokyo, whatever territory lies behind can be considered a part of Japan’s domestic territory (*nihon kokunai*). He proclaims that whatever powers reside in what he refers to as the special region (*tokubetsu chiiki*), they need to be brought to the negotiation table, by

⁷⁶ Brummer, Matthew, “Japan: The Manga Military,” *The Diplomat*, 19 January 2016, accessed online.

⁷⁷ Japan Self-Defence Force Tokyo Provincial Cooperation Office, “*Gensakusha—Yanai Takumi-san kara* [A word from author Yanai Takumi],” accessed online.

⁷⁸ Japan Self-Defence Force Tokyo Provincial Cooperation Office, “*Wadaibuttōchū! Terebi anime “gēto” to kiseki no korabo* [Wonderful collaboration with tv anime Gate],” accessed online.

force if necessary. Thus, he states that the government of Japan deploys the SDF beyond the gate to investigate the special region, arrest the ones responsible for invading Ginza, and secure compensation for the incident.⁷⁹



Figure 1

The development of the plot is narrated in particular through the role of *Gate's* protagonist, an *otaku* named Itami Yōji. He is a second lieutenant in the SDF, but he is introduced as someone who is in the military solely to support his hobbies and interests—manga, anime, and web novels in particular. Itami is off-duty and on his way to the well-known Comic Market (*Komiketto*) in Tokyo when the invasion takes place, but he resolutely acts based on his training, saving many lives. His performance earns him praise by Japan's Minister of Defence, and he is appointed as leader of the 3rd reconnaissance squadron to scout the special region and gather intelligence (see fig. 2).

It is not made clear as to how the gate appeared to form a passageway between Japan and the special region, nor who is responsible for it and with what purpose in mind. More curiously, the appearance of the gate is accepted as a *fait accompli* in Japan and the government quickly orders the deployment of the Self-Defence Forces without having done research to what the gate itself might be, how it might work, and if can be determined whether it would stay open or close or disappear after some time. The unquestioning attitude by all the characters towards the appearance and nature of the gate tells us its sole function is to start the narrative—not unlike an inversed *deus ex machina*—and is of no further consequence to the rest of the story at this point in the series. Both Penney and Mizuno have already noted how popular works can use fictional narratives that allow readers to imagine a ‘what-if’ scenario with the potential of questioning alternatives to social or political realities.⁸⁰ *Gate* draws on the same possibilities of combining military affairs with fantasy to set up its main plot.



Figure 2

There are several significant things to note about this plot at the outset. First, *Gate* does not mention anything with regards to the constitutional restrictions on the use of force by the

⁷⁹ Yanai Takumi, *Gēto: Jieitai kano chi nite, kaku tatakaeri 1* (Tokyo: Alphapolis, 2012): pp. 20-21.

⁸⁰ Matthew Penney, “‘War Fantasy’ and Reality—‘War as Entertainment’ and Counter-narratives in Japanese Popular Culture,” p. 35; Hiromi Mizuno, “When Pacifist Japan Fights: Historicizing Desires in Anime,” p. 105.

SDF. Japan's military is deployed and allowed to use force if necessary to achieve its objectives. Second, *Gate* completely ignores the security alliance between Japan and the United States. The Japanese army members defending Ginza against the foreign aggressors coming from the gate were not assisted by their American allies. This is remarkable, since there are still many troops stationed in US bases on Japanese soil. In fact, Yokota Airbase, headquarters of the United States Forces in Japan (USFJ), and Camp Zama, headquarters of the United States Army in Japan (ASAJ) are both located no more than 50 kilometers away from central Tokyo.⁸¹ This means that *Gate* makes it clear at the outset that it presents a vision of Japan that is both autonomous in its defence and is not bound by any constitutional restrictions on the use of force when necessary.

4.3. System: Great power politics and a scramble for the gate

The appearance of the gate to another world in Japan not only allows for the deployment of the Self-Defence Forces abroad in combat situations, but also sets the stage on this side of the gate for a geostrategic struggle at the international level and political in-fighting at the national level.

The United States publicly announces its support for the Japanese government in its deployment of the military beyond the gate. However, the US president laments the appearance of the gate in Japan and what he sees as the defensive and cautious approach of the Japanese government. In cowboy rhetoric mirroring that of George W. Bush, the fictional president Diller views the gate as a “frontier” that provides access to vast amounts of resources beyond. The US supplies Japan as an “ally” but demands a share of the loot (see fig. 3).



Figure 3

⁸¹ <http://www.usfj.mil/AboutUSFJ.aspx>

Although US involvement in the middle east inhibit the president to send in his own troops through the gate to secure access to the special region’s resources, he orders a unit of special forces to kidnap diplomatic envoys from the empire beyond the gate in order to have them “invite” US representation in the special region. When that fails, the US attempts to blackmail Japan’s new prime minister (who now resembles Shinzō Abe— see fig. 4).



Figure 4

The EU is also interested in the natural resources beyond the gate, but that vexes Russian leadership, who rely on their exports of oil and gas to Europe. The ficitional prime minister Motoi even suspects Russia to fire a Submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) at the gate to get rid of the EU’s potential alternate energy supplier (see fig. 5).



Figure 5

The People’s Republic of China also has set its sights on the special region behind the gate. After relying on its promise of affluence to legitimize its leadership to Chinese citizens, the Communist Party has become a massive importer of natural resources. However, the Prime Minister ponders, China is filled with inequality and corruption and Japan thus needs to respond very cautious to its approachment (see fig. 6).

China is also one of many countries requesting that the gate be placed under international supervision. However, the Japanese prime minister questions the motives for this move. Most of these countries simply want a share in the resources found at the other side of the gate, he suspects, and they fear that Japan has sole access. The prime minister thus dismisses requests for multilateral supervision of the special region under the aegis of the United Nations (UN) as

an “absurd request”. This would only be an excuse for the presence of foreign armies in the middle of Tokyo (see fig. 7).



Figure 6

Thus, Gate constructs a system narrative that presents an zero-sum world of finite natural resources in which state leaders are mostly driven by their material self-interest, sparking a fierce scramble for resources. International organizations such as the UN and multilateral frameworks for collective action and security are dismissed as mere vehicles for great power interests and meddling in domestic affairs. These attitudes position Japan’s government and its armed forces centre stage in a tense geostrategic struggle between the great powers that all attempt to gain access to the vast amount of resources that lie beyond the gate in Japan’s capital.



Figure 7

4.4. Issues: Hostile foreign forces and natural disasters

The most obvious security threat that is presented in *Gate* is the invasion of a foreign power in the form of the army marching through the gate. This fantastical scenario aside, however, the manga also engages a range of other threats that resonate directly with issues that feature heavily in Japanese discourses on security.

The gate connects Japan with the continent of Falmart on the other side. The extant political constellation on the continent consists of a range of kingdoms that are assimilated into and answer to a larger empire. The political structure, and especially the imagery used to graphically depict it, clearly connote the Roman Empire (see fig. 8). This is nothing new. For one, it coincides with a common trope in public relations strategies of the Japanese defence establishment. Frühstück explains how the manga series surrounding the SDF mascot Prince Pickles (*Pikurusu ōji*) also employs an “Evil Empire” as a means of



Figure 8

explaining how, even in a peaceful country, a defensive military force is always necessary to deter malign foreign forces.⁸² The appearance of what looks like the Roman Empire also corresponds with manga genre conventions. Manga scholars Mio Bryce and Jason Davis explain how the fantasy genre in Japanese fiction—as elsewhere—draws heavily on mythology and folklore from a range of historical civilizations.⁸³ However, choosing the Roman Empire, in particular, sets up the plot and narrative in a way that favours one of Yanai’s main messages. Confronting Japan with an enemy that resembles the ancient Romans creates a scenario in which the Japanese armed forces can challenge (successfully, due to the advancements in military technology) one of the most powerful empires in human history.

The SDF are also confronted with natural disasters and humanitarian threats during their deployment in the special region. Most of this results from the re-awakening of a particularly powerful and ferocious fire-breathing dragon that coincides with the deployment of the SDF beyond the gate. The destruction that the dragon leaves in its wake drives many people from their homes and villages, causing large flows of refugees throughout the special region. At

⁸² Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, esp. pp. 128-135. Unlike *Gate*, this is one of the few manga series actually produced, designed, and funded by the Self-Defence Forces. However, as the name of the mascot suggests, Prince Pickles is mainly targeted towards explaining the role of the SDF to a younger audience.

⁸³ Mio Bryce and Jason Davis, “An Overview of Manga Genres,” in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: Continuum, 2010): p. 35.

some point, the region also suffers from a severe earthquake. I will discuss the role of the SDF in response to these issues in the next sub-chapter.

The most pressing security issues, however, are a direct result of the nature of world politics constructed in the manga. As each country is purely driven by material self-interest and pressured by domestic factors, they are willing to employ a range of means to exert their influence in international affairs. In the manga, the US, the PRC, and Russia are all engaging in hostile behaviour towards Japan to get access to the gate. As mentioned, Japan has to consider direct attacks on its territory through a potential SLBM by Russia, fend off covert special military operations by all three states, and engage in counter-intelligence. There is also the indirect threat of foreign military presence and interference in domestic affairs through a UN-mandated multinational force being deployed in Japan. Ironically, the clearest threat to Japan's security emanates from its supposed security ally—the US. President Diller blackmails prime minister Motoi with sensitive information the US intelligence agency has intercepted regarding a corruption scandal that could blow up Motoi's government (a clear reference to Abe's resignation after his first time in office). He attempts to coerce the Japanese prime minister into aligning his policies with US interests. The imbalanced dynamics of the US-Japan relation are not just made explicit through the sequence of events; they are also connoted by the more subtle use of language. The various official registers of politeness of speech in the Japanese language are sometimes hard to translate accurately, but the usage of these registers is an important signifier of interpersonal relations in Japanese comics. Whereas Prime Minister Motoi speaks in a formal register when addressing his American counterpart, President Diller replies to him in a casual and blunt manner, which is highly inappropriate and patronizing in this context (see fig. 9).

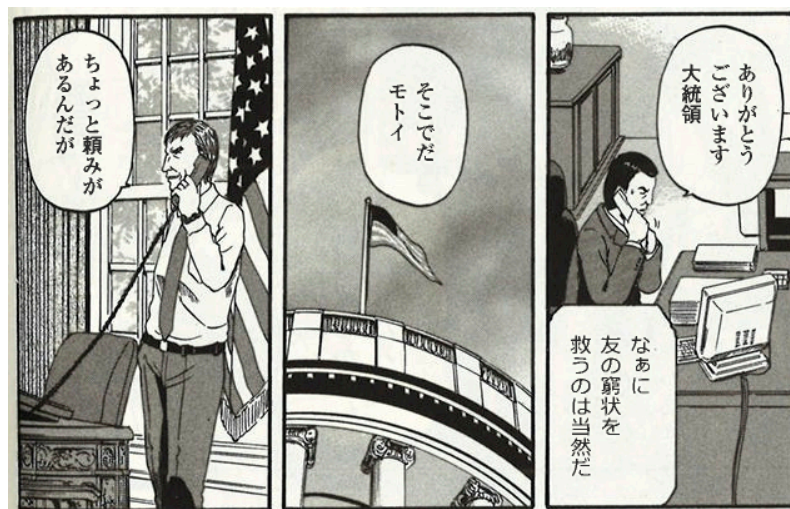


Figure 9

Thus, despite the SDF engaging in being presented by a range of threats, the key one emanates from hostile behavior by other political actors. Since the main source of humanitarian concern in the special region is a fire-breathing dragon, this sets up the plot in the advantage of a ‘normal combat military’, as the root cause of the humanitarian threats can only be taken away by slaying the dragon (Itami eventually manages to do so in volume 7). In other words, this scenario again pits the Japanese military against a mighty adversary, which it is only able to successfully counter through the use of force and sophisticated military equipment.

4.5. Identity: Individual members of the military that defend the public

Gate takes a significantly more nuanced view on the organization of the SDF, their missions and sphere of activities, and the individuals that make up its ranks than it does on the nature and organization of world politics. In particular, it highlights the variety of the activities Japan’s armed forces engage in and the divergent views and characters of its members. However, the manga indicates a clear preference over the primary and secondary functions of the military.

4.5.1. Missions and activities of the Self-Defence Forces

Allow me to reiterate the primary missions of Japan’s armed forces in *Gate*. The government deployed the SDF to investigate the special region, arrest the ones responsible for the invasion of Japanese territory, and to secure compensation for the incident. Upon moving through the gate, however, the military encounters another hostile army. After a resounding victory due to their incomparably superior weaponry (infantry and cavallery are no match for armoured vehicles and heavy artillery), the SDF establishes an organized and well-defended perimeter around the gate. The area is referred to as Arnus Hill (*Arunusu no oka*) and becomes the main base of Japan’s military presence in the special region.

Itami is sent out from the main base to scout the region as squad leader of one the army’s reconnaissance units. His main objectives are to gather information and win over the “hearts and minds” of the local population (mirroring rhetoric from the US when its armed forces—and those of Japan—were deployed in Iraq). Itami’s squadron quickly runs into refugees fleeing from the rampaging dragon, and his unit assist some of these refugees in their migration to safety elsewhere. Upon encountering the dragon themselves, they engage the beast in order to protect the people—and are able to damage the dragon considerably, to the

amazement of the local inhabitants. Itami's unit (initially against the wishes of his superiors) decides to bring back some of the refugees to host them within the main base, where the armed forces then soon create a refugee camp for other displaced people (see fig. 10).

These initial missions set the stage for a recurring pattern throughout the series. Wherever Itami and his squad go, they establish friendly relations with the locals and attempt to set up diplomatic channels through which Japan's military and envoys from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) attempt to seek compensation and justice for Japan's victims. In the meantime, they continue to scout, build,

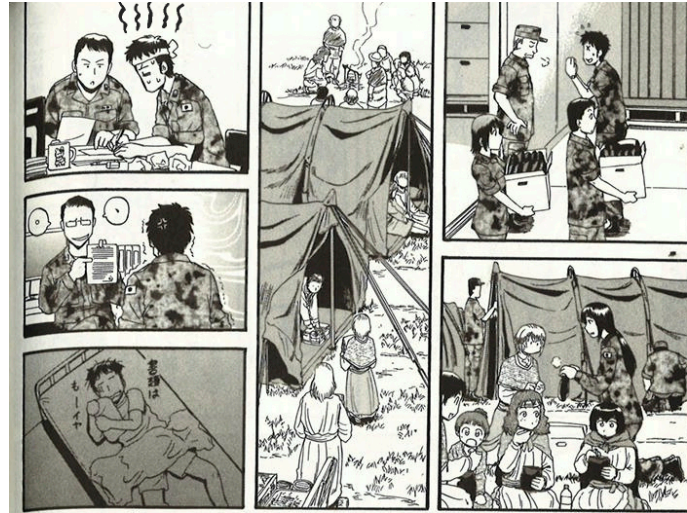


Figure 10

trade, offer medical assistance, learn more about (and respect) local languages and customs, and perform more mundane tasks such as filing paperwork. However, Itami and his troops are often forced into scenarios in which they have to engage in military combat to keep them safe (see fig. 11). This distinguishes *Gate* significantly from earlier works of popular culture that considers the implications of the restrictions on the use of force by the armed forces for their (in-)ability to defend themselves and others when deployed abroad. A good example of this is Oshii Mamoru's animated film *Kidō keisatsu patoreibā the movie 2 (Patlabor 2: The Movie, 1993)*. In a critical response to the SDF's first deployment on a UNPKO in Cambodia, *Patlabor 2* opens with a Japanese unit under attack somewhere in Southeast Asia, unable to defend itself and suffering heavy casualties. As mentioned earlier, instead of challenging the constitutional restrictions on force, *Gate* ignores Article 9 completely, and allows the reader to envision a Japanese military able to defend itself and others when necessary through military combat.



Figure 11

In fact, the ability to fall back on military combat and the use of force is a key condition for the military to live up to its primary role: the defence of the people. A good illustration of this distribution of priorities is the occasion of a strong earthquake in volumes 4 and 5 of the series. When warning signs of a major earthquake are detected, the army does not hesitate for a single moment and quickly sets in motion an early warning plan to prepare the citizens of Falmart's capital. Since the content of this part of *Gate* was written in between 2004 and 2010 and the major earthquake and tsunami of 2011 had not taken place yet, this event can be read as a critique of the army's initial slow response to the Kōbe earthquake in 1995. However, *Gate* does not elaborate on the advanced disaster relief capabilities and experiences the SDF has increasingly accumulated, both domestically and abroad. Instead, this scenario is quickly steered into a plotline in which Itami and his group discover that Japanese citizens have been secretly abducted through the gate and enslaved in the special region by hawkish factions within the empire. This development mirrors the North Korean abduction cases, and in a reflection of the importance prime minister Abe placed on this issue, one of the surviving kidnapped citizens in *Gate* is rescued with brute force. This event is also one of the rare occasions when the normally tolerant and kind-hearted Itami loses himself into a wrathful frenzy. Both as an act of retaliation, and to strongly convince the empire not to aggravate the Japanese nation any further and accept the conditions for a peace treaty, fighter jets of the Air Self-Defence Forces (ASDF) then bomb Falmart's imperial senate (at night, without making casualties). This seemingly contradictory and overly hostile plot development undergirds *Gate*'s insistence on the importance placed above all else for the military to protect Japanese citizens.

4.5.2. *Capabilities and equipment of the Self-Defence Forces*

A key prerequisite for the fulfilment of the SDF's primary role to safeguard Japan's citizens in *Gate*'s narrative is the military's sophisticated weaponry. It has enabled the SDF to repel the invaders from Tokyo and defeat the imperial army, empowered Itami and his squad to protect the refugees from (and later kill) the dragon, allowed for the successful rescue of its kidnapped citizens, and successfully deterred many hawkish senators from challenging Japan again. Sophisticated weaponry also safeguards people since less lives are lost when Japanese troops actually have to engage in combat. *Gate* envisions a military in which hardly any Japanese soldiers lose their lives due to their overwhelming technological advantage.

The manga's insistence on the merit of sophisticated hardware is also supported by the aestheticization of military equipment and weaponry. The amount of painstaking detail invested in the accurate graphic representation and the amount of frames dedicated to the

display of the SDF's military hardware is quickly noticeable (see fig. 12). However, it is important to note that part of this is simply consistent with audience expectations and genre conventions of the manga, and need not necessarily indicate a clear political statement. Penney reminds us that “technological details bordering on the fetishistic” and “selling ‘war as entertainment’ to members of Japan’s military fan subculture” is a key part of the military fantasy genre.⁸⁴ However, in the case of *Gate* there is overwhelming textual evidence to support a reading of the manga as strongly favouring a stronger military that is allowed to use its advanced weaponry to actively deter and, when needed, do battle with hostile forces.



Figure 12

In fact, the manga implies that the humanitarian character and role that seems to constitute the secondary role of the SDF directly flows from the Japanese troops having the strength to deter and repel its enemies. Only when that condition is met can they effectively guarantee people's safety. It also enables the manga to highlight the controlled and professional character of the members of Japan's armed forces. Their training and Japan's long-standing pacifistic stance has equipped them—perhaps more than other nations, the manga clearly implies—to handle a mandate to use force with great caution and responsibility, and allows them to contribute to peace and safety more actively and effectively.

4.5.3. Individual soldiers with diverging views and personalities

An important part of what *Gate* conveys to its readers deals with the character and roles of the SDF's service members. This resonates with Frühstück's studies on Japan's armed forces. An important part of her work examined how the uneasy status of the military impacts the professional self-perception of Japanese soldiers. She finds that many members of the SDF find it hard to balance between their military training for war on the one hand, and their exclusive experience of being deployed on non-combat missions in which the exercise of

⁸⁴ Matthew Penney, “‘War Fantasy’ and Reality—‘War as Entertainment’ and Counter-narratives in Japanese Popular Culture,” p. 35.

violence is strictly prohibited. She describes how soldiers deal with this unease in different ways. She argues that some “service members share the desire to be associated with the more conventional military side of the Self-Defence Forces—its powerful technology, its associations with the U.S. military, and its potential for making war.”⁸⁵ However, Frühstück stresses that other Japanese soldiers share with the majority of the Japanese public an unwillingness to buy into the supposed valid equation between the state and the legitimate use of military violence. Instead, she describes how the self-perception of soldiers such as these “has more in common with the (military) hero of a forest fire than with the soldier of conventional modern nation-to-nation warfare. Neither aspires to kill or die for the nation,” she finds, “even though both might risk their lives.”⁸⁶

This ambivalent position towards the self-perception and professional identity of members of the Self-Defence Forces is also reflected in *Gate*. In particular, it is represented in a personal clash between Itami and another important character in the series, first lieutenant Yanagida Akira. The two characters, despite the sense of duty they both share, hold very different ideas about how to represent the interests of the Japanese government and public best in the special region, and they clash on numerous occasions.



Figure 13

Yanagida (who strikingly resembles Kobayashi Yoshinori’s cartoonist self-representation—see fig. 13) is one of the most Machiavellian characters in the manga. He continuously attempts to persuade Itami to start mapping the resources for Japan’s benefit in his squadron’s reconnaissance missions, but Itami refuses. In volume 5, Yanagida proposes to Itami to hunt down and get rid of the dragon. This idea catches Itami’s interest, as he and his troops have seen the destruction and suffering that the dragon left in its wake. However, when Yanagida hints that hunting down the dragon would conveniently legitimate the military’s presence in a region that is filled with oil, Itami reacts furiously, questioning Yanagida’s motives for risking

⁸⁵ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*, p. 186.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

the lives of his squad members just to get access to natural resources. However, the calculating Yanagida already knows that Itami will still push ahead with the mission in order to save people. Instead of risking his squad, however, Itami goes alone and joins a small band of locals whose homeland the dragon has made its nest. Again, the use of military weaponry—in this case rocket launchers and carefully planted explosives—lead the way to victory.

Besides re-emphasizing how advanced weaponry leads to victory and saves lives, this plotline allows *Gate* to illustrate the diversity of views of the individual SDF members and their sense of duty and self-sacrifice. Itami's desire to protect other people conflicts with the responsibility he feels towards his squad members, and he does not make decisions lightly with regards to their lives and well-being. His moral dilemma makes him ponder on the various individuals that make up his squadron and their personalities, interests, and ambitions (see fig. 14). In fact, the attention *Gate* spends on giving the many individual service members that are deployed in the special region their own unique character traits and personalities—both graphically and in speech—rivals the level of detail spent on the portrayal of military hardware. It is no wonder Yanai's light

novels and manga also found an avid readership amongst SDF personnel, according to the website of the TPCO. Members of the SDF said they were amazed by the realism with which equipment and operations of the armed forces were displayed in the series, but they also appreciated the relatability of the characters and situations.⁸⁷ This is not surprising, given Yanai's service in the armed forces himself. *Gate* thus strongly suggests to his audiences that the armed forces, in the end, simply consist of individuals doing their job and taking pride in what they do—protecting people.



Figure 14

⁸⁷ Japan Self-Defence Force Tokyo Provincial Cooperation Office, “Wadaibuttōchū! Terebi anime “gēto” to kiseki no korabo [Wonderful collaboration with tv anime Gate],” accessed online 5 July 2016, <http://www.mod.go.jp/pco/tokyo/tokusetu/tokusetu.html#>.

A final note on the personality of the service members of Japan's armed forces in *Gate I* want to make concerns the character and interests of Itami himself. As a self-proclaimed *otaku*, Itami is often looked down upon by his team members and other members of the SDF. This is



Figure 15

facilitated by his tolerant personality and easy-going demeanor. He and Kurata Takeo, a sergeant first class in Itami's squad, discuss their preferences for specific elements of *moe*. While Kurata is a fan of cat ears, Itami favours gothic lolitas. The fantasy universe of *Gate* present various elements of *moe* in the races that inhabit the continent of Falmart, and Kurata and Itami at times rejoice in discovering inhabitants that display elements of *moe* they like (see fig. 15). Despite Itami's interest in *otaku* culture and his slacking attitude, however, the reader discovers throughout the series that Itami is highly skilfull and professional. It turns out he has even successfully passed the rigorous ranger training—to the surprise of some of his unsuspecting squad members. This all seems to suggest that Yanai is aware of the discussions surrounding *otaku* subculture in Japan and its troubled relationship with broader society. *Gate* rejects Azuma's view that *otaku* are mere postmodern "database animals" and stresses that they, too, can both enjoy *moe* and partake in the grand narrative of state security by serving in the military forces to defend the Japanese public.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Visions of a ‘normal’ country

Through its fictional narrative, *Gate* constructs an alternative future for Japanese security policies and the role of its armed forces. By drawing on manga’s potential to construct imaginary worlds for its readers, *Gate* allows for a thought experiment. It ignores Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, allowing Japan to deploy its military abroad without constitutional restrictions on the use of force. It also ignores Japan’s security treaty with the United States, granting Japan autonomy in its own defence. In other words, it presents what the Self-Defence Forces *could* be: a normal military.

This means that *Gate* clearly resonates with the narrative envisioning a ‘normal’ combat military in Japanese security discourse. Although the Self-Defence Forces are represented as engaging in a wide variety of activities, ranging from humanitarian assistance to filing paperwork, these moments are sparse. Instead, the plot outline and narrative of the manga convey that *Gate* favours a strongly equipped military that can effectively deter hostile forces and is allowed to use force when necessary to defend its territory and people. The manga is particularly critical of the security alliance with the United States and multilateral action through international organizations such as the United Nations. This severely undermines Japan’s current security position and also challenges Abe’s new security legislations and its envisioned ‘collective self-defence’ so as to allow the Self-Defence Forces to come to the aid of the United States when it is under attack.

However, *Gate*’s messages are conflicted. On the one hand, it needs to leave out the US military presence on Japanese soil to facilitate a vision of Japan that is autonomous in its defence. On the other hand, however, it still presents the Japanese prime minister as being coerced into aligning his policies with US interests to demonstrate the unequal relationship between the two countries. The same is true for its relationship between violence and safety. *Gate* is highly mistrustful of great power politics and wants to safeguard its territory and people, but proposes to arms itself with advanced military equipment and the means to use force in order to achieve this aim—resulting in the classic realist security dilemma.

5.2. Opening up and closing off imaginations

I argue that this is not *Gate*’s main message, however. Its portrayal of world politics and possible security threats is less sophisticated than the manga’s depiction of the varied

individuals who make up the members of Japan's Self-Defence Forces. I thus read Yanai's work mainly as a response to the continued ambivalence and ambiguous standing of Japan's armed forces and the implications this has for the professional self-perception of its members that Frühstück so accurately captures in her work. *Gate* is thus more about identity than system or issues.

Gate can instead be read as opening up space for his readers to imagine the daily lives of people working (and risking their lives) for the Japanese public. Through his representation of individual service members, he invites his audience to consider their different personalities and even divergent self-perceptions as soldiers. He challenges Azuma's claim that *otaku* cannot partake in grand narratives of the state and also opens up space for both the continuing social acceptance of *otaku* subculture as well as its return into a broader nationalist narrative.

It is ironic that *Gate*—in its attempt for societal acknowledgement—closes off the imaginings of the SDF that have recently earned it more widespread recognition, namely its disaster relief and reconstruction activities after the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. Thus, despite the claim by Frühstück and Berger that many spheres of activities and roles similar to Japan's armed forces are increasingly being adopted by military establishments across the world, *Gate* conveys the continued ambivalent feelings of the SDF's service members towards their unclear status. Yanai leans towards positioning himself in the 'normal combat military' narrative and thus closes off imaginings of Japan's armed forces in roles more oriented towards advanced disaster relief capabilities. To repeat Fisher in paraphrasing Jameson and Žižek, it is easier to imagine an imaginary fantasy world than it is to imagine the end of the 'normal' military.

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As is the case with most things in life, I am partly indebted to other people for the completion of this project. First, I would like to thank Dr Bryce Wakefield for his supervision of my thesis project. It was a pleasure to work with someone whose research interests coincide so much with those of my own. My girlfriend, Marte, also deserves much credit for guiding me through the process of having to conduct too many research projects at the same time. She has been there to provide much needed words of encouragement and has proven an excellent sparring partner in testing ideas and arguments. She has also prepared awesome home-cooked meals when I had less time to do so—I intend to fully return the favour. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unrelenting support in my personal and educational development. They encouraged (and sometimes pressured) a teenager with a lot of potential but also an excessive range of interests and the attention span of a goldfish to pull himself up by his shoelaces, graduate from high school, make it into university, pull off an internship at a renowned research institute, and graduate from two master programmes at the same time. I love you.

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