United States policy toward the Asia-Pacific region has historically, post-1945, been anchored on its relationship with Japan. Although the United States has given a great deal of attention toward establishing relations and trade agreements with Communist China and occasionally has taken the U.S.-Japan security and economic arrangements for granted, the United States should continue to support an Asia-Pacific policy based upon the bilateral partnership with Japan. A Japan-first relationship will allow America to project its power, both military and diplomatic, and its interests, both economic and security, throughout the region.

Japanese and Americans share many ideals and goals in achieving a perfect world and can easily work together. Both countries would base such a world on democracy, human rights and free trade. Japan’s long-standing democracy and economic superpower status make it the ideal partner. Economically, Japan is more stable than China. Although Chinese markets have enormous potential for American companies, the underlying communist economic system is proven less than ideal. Linking the American economy with China is an unwise decision. Any American conflict with the rising power, be it over Taiwan, North Korea or Chinese proliferation, will likely sever economic ties with U.S. companies and severely damage the American economy. Similarly, it seems illogical to build strong economic dependence with a nation whose government its fundamentally against American philosophy, especially when a major U.S. goal is the eventual undermining of the communist regime and democratization of China. If this goal is to be achieved through economics, a governmental collapse and system change will likely hinder economic growth and development sending the country
into deep recession, as was the case with Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, and possibly bringing the U.S. economy with it.

Strategically, an alliance with Japan has been the cornerstone of U.S. Asia-Pacific policy. American bases and forward-deployed troops in Japan allow timely response to a multitude of possible military scenarios in the region and beyond. In contrast, a China-fist policy would entail new security arrangements and the relocation of American bases. Before any such arrangement could come into existence, a diplomatic breakthrough with China would have to occur. The Chinese have historically been wary of the American presence in the region and have viewed the U.S.-Japan alliance as threatening to the rise of China, not to mention the U.S. support of Taiwan further irks the Chinese. Thus, the Chinese have developed a military posture aimed at undermining the American presence, through conventional and unconventional means. Cyber-warfare and Soviet military technology have begun to form the backbone of the Chinese aggressive response toward America. Although the U.S.-Japan alliance makes relations with China more difficult, it manages the stability of the region with greater sophistication than could a relationship with China. Developing a China-first policy would significantly alter the balance of power. Abandoning Japan would require increased militarization and possible development of nuclear capabilities as the American nuclear umbrella fell. Such developments would spur an arms race in the region, as fear of future and remembrance of past Japanese aggression spread.

Rather than solely forming a Japan-first, the U.S. needs to find ways to incorporate China, as well as other nations in the region, into a multilateral relationship that would make conflict both undesirable and unrealistic, much as the interdependence
of the European Union has done for European nations. However, the cornerstone of such a policy would still maintain the strong U.S.-Japan alliance that has successfully sustained stability in the past. It would be important to build upon an already strong relationship to construct a multilateralism that could incorporate the entire region.