This summer, I had the experience of a lifetime as an American Delegate to the 75th Japan-America Student Conference (JASC). From small moments of laughter with newfound friends to presentations in front of government officials, JASC had it all. Now, a couple of weeks after its conclusion, I cannot help but feel immense joy and gratitude for having been fortunate enough to spend a life changing month in Japan.

Before the in-person portion of the conference began, I had numerous Zoom meetings with my fellow American and Japanese international politics roundtable members. With almost a century of history, JASC is unique in that it is an entirely student-run conference. Amidst discussions ranging from our favorite foods to the Taiwan contingency, I grew to admire and respect my fellow delegates; I could not wait to see them in Japan.
Before Japan, however, every American Delegate gathered at California State University, Los Angeles, for three days of orientation. After weeks of Zoom meetings, it was wonderful to finally see my fellow American roundtable members and meet the rest of the American Delegation. For me, a highlight of our time in LA was taking a walking tour of Little Tokyo. Given its significance to the Japanese-American community, every street corner and building has its own, rich history. Still today, amidst the hustle and bustle of LA, it is a place of beauty and safety.

As our bus entered the outskirts of Kyoto City, the conference’s first site, I was immediately struck by the surrounding serenity. The sight of traditional Japanese homes nestled in between rolling, green hills and the interwoven calls of thousands of cicadas complemented each other perfectly. Japan’s natural beauty wasted no time in greeting us.

In Kyoto, we had the privilege of touring the Kyoto State Guest House, visiting the iconic Kiyomizu-dera temple, and participating in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. For our roundtable’s site forum presentation, we made sure to emphasize Kyoto’s rich history and how in an ever-changing world, the city serves as a model for cultural preservation.

One of my fondest memories from Kyoto and the entire conference is when a few friends and I took a spontaneous morning bike ride through the city, ultimately in search of a cozy breakfast spot. By the end of the journey, we were covered in sweat and running late to our scheduled programming. The food, conversation, and laughter made it all worth it.

After ten or so days in Kyoto, we flew down to Japan’s southern island of Kyushu. Upon landing in Nagasaki and boarding our bus to a hostel in Sasebo, I could not help but notice all of the palm trees. As someone with family in Hokkaido where the temperature
dips far below freezing in the winter, seeing palm trees in Japan reminded me of the country’s extensive climate.

In Sasebo, we visited a military base. It was a somewhat stark reminder that the global situation is volatile and that in many regards, Japan is on the front line of an emerging conflict. For our roundtable’s Kyushu presentation, we emphasized the importance of the US-Japan alliance in promoting peace in East Asia and the world at large.

In Nagasaki, *hibakusha*, or atomic bomb survivors, conveyed to us their sobering firsthand accounts of the horrors of the worst kind of warfare. Upon hearing their stories and experiencing the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, it became clearer to myself and others that true world peace requires nuclear abolition. I want to work in the international affairs sector, and what I learned in Nagasaki will guide my thinking and actions into the future.

A fond memory from Kyushu is when a group of us woke up at 6 AM to catch the two-hour long express train from Sasebo to Fukuoka, a bustling city in northern Kyushu with delicious food. Shopping for sunglasses and hats in the train station, swimming at the beach, and eating Hakata ramen are small moments that I will treasure forever.
For our final site, we spent just over a week in Tokyo. Having gotten minimal sleep the night before, landing in Tokyo and witnessing the never-ending sprawl and controlled chaos of the world's largest city left me especially dumbfounded. While cities like Kyoto and Nagasaki are by no means small, Tokyo makes them seem tiny.

In Tokyo, we were privileged to visit the headquarters of Mitsubishi Corporation, attend talks at the US Embassy, and tour the historic district of Asakusa. Although I got sick and could not attend some programming, with the support of my friends, I learned a lot and had great fun exploring the shops and restaurants of places like Shibuya and Shinjuku.

Saying goodbye to the Japanese Delegates was very emotional. Given the physical distance between Japan and the US, in the future, it will be difficult to visit many of them on a regular basis. For me, and I think for everyone else, the greatest gift of JASC is the friendships it forms. I am so fortunate to write that I met delegates that are now friends for life. For a month across Japan, we experienced so much together, and small moments of joy and laughter made JASC a truly life changing experience. While I am sad that it is over, I am overjoyed by what JASC has provided me moving forward.

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