

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 17 April 2023

Japan's Role in Regional Security: Recalibration and Regional Reactions

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The aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN 68) steams alongside the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) Hyuga-class helicopter destroyer JS Ise (DDH 182) in the Philippine Sea. Photo: Samuel Osborn, USINDOPACOM. Source: <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Photos/igphoto/2003188294/>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While anti-militarist sentiments have been pervasive among ordinary Japanese since World War Two, the country has not been stuck in the pacifist mould. In the ensuing decades after the war, Tokyo has been cognisant of new realities in its strategic environment.
- Japan's historic reinterpretation of the Constitution in 2015 to allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces' participation in collective self-defence missions was spearheaded by the late premier Shinzo Abe, who believed that such a step was necessary for Japan to deepen its contribution to regional peace and security.
- The recent recalibration of Japan's security and defence policy was in part enabled by changes in the constellation of domestic politics, which gave the ruling Liberal Democratic Party a freer hand in policy discussions, enabling it to continue setting Japan on the course set by Abe.
- Recent survey data show that the Japanese public in general has warmed to the view that their country's national defence capacity needs to be enhanced, given the changing security environment.
- There appears to be greater receptivity in the wider region for a more engaged and proactive Japan. However, Japan's forging of a durable regional order is not without risks.

INTRODUCTION

Since its defeat in the Second World War, Japan's role in the Asia-Pacific has been something of an enigma. A resurgent regional economic power by the early 1970s if not before, Japan had nonetheless demurred from making active contributions to foreign and security affairs beyond the realm of economic policies. This restraint was largely a response to residual concerns among its neighbours whose memories of the Japanese occupation remained fresh, and also due to Japanese reticence rooted in a strict interpretation of the 1947 Constitution. That document was written primarily by American authors to head off any prospect of resurgent Japanese aggression. The resultant narrative of constitutional constraint was deepened by domestic sentiments of anti-militarism, and came to govern post-war defence and security policies.

This is not to say that Japan has been stuck in the pacifist mould. Over time, as the regional strategic environment grew more complex, Japanese leaders had always been mindful of new realities, be it North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities, Russia's hold on the disputed Northern Territories and China's accelerated military build-up.¹ Yet, corresponding national discussions about Japan's development of its defence capabilities and participation in international security initiatives have always been deeply divisive affairs. In 2004, the question of the deployment of Japanese forces to Iraq for reconstruction and humanitarian operations was hotly debated in the Japanese parliament and media. According to polls conducted by Asahi Shimbun and the Kyoto News Agency at the time, approximately half of those surveyed opposed the deployment even though it was conducted under supposedly strict conditions, i.e. Japanese troops would only be deployed to "non-combat zones."² More recently, efforts by the government to propose legislation in 2015 predicated on a reinterpretation of the Constitution to allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces to take part in collective self-defence missions (primarily in partnership with the US) even when Japan was not attacked were met with sizeable anti-war protests and demonstrations. It is against this backdrop that the release of three historic documents by the Japanese government last December assumes greater significance for the apparent absence of customary controversy.

THE LONG ARC OF NORMALISATION

It is worth noting that the reinterpretation of the Constitution in 2015 was spearheaded by the late premier Shinzo Abe, who believed it a necessary step to take to deepen Japan's contribution to regional peace and security. It was Abe's post-war predecessor, Shigeru Yoshida (1948-1954), who cynically used the aegis of the US-imposed pacifist Constitution to serve as a shield against collective self-defence, which the 2015 reinterpretation eventually wrought. But it was the same Yoshida who predicted that Japan could depend on Washington for its security for a time; Japan's rearmament would in due course "come naturally" after its economy recovered from the ruins of the Second World War.³ Therein, Japan embarked on a gradual but long arc of normalisation as a typical military power.

There have been a few notable milestones in this journey. In the landmark 1959 Sunagawa case, Japan's Supreme Court established that Japan's Constitution did not prohibit its acting in self-defence.⁴ In 1997, revised guidelines for US-Japan defence cooperation stated that Japan could provide logistical and other types of non-combat support to the US. The two alliance partners also made it a point to note that military cooperation was 'not geographic but situational'⁵ – a statement that provoked concerns in Beijing⁶. (In April 2021, the two allies became more specific, saying that they underscored the "importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait"). In 2006, Japan elevated the Japan Defense Agency to become a full-fledged ministry, giving defence officials greater control in national policymaking and decisions over the budget.⁷ In 2019, Japan revealed that its largest warships — the Izumo-class helicopter destroyers — would be retrofitted to carry F-35B fighters. This made the vessels in all senses and purposes light aircraft carriers – power projection tools which have long been the preserve of bigger military powers.

Yoshida and Abe's vision of Japan as a more muscular power forms the foundation of Prime Minister's Kishida's new security strategy. On 16 December 2022, Kishida unveiled the National Security Strategy, the National Defence Strategy, and the Defence Build-up Program. Together, the three documents collectively articulated the strategic outlook of Japan for the coming years and outlined commensurate defence postures and policies. To some extent, these documents were but a culmination of what has been a gradual shift in thinking in Japanese security and foreign policy circles that goes back a number of years. Their discussion had been gravitating away from earlier reluctance to assume a conventional regional security role (and to revise defence plans and postures to accommodate that wider purpose) towards a more candid political debate on the need for piecemeal reforms that would facilitate a considered contribution to regional security. Indeed, cautious attempts had already been made to sharpen national security policy in consonance with a changing external environment, such as with former foreign minister Taro Aso's "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" idea in 2006 and the 2015 Peace and Security Legislation, as Japan inched towards a review of its collective defence posture pursued under the auspices of its longstanding alliance with the US.

These three landmark documents are also pathbreaking for how they signal a shift away from reliance on US security guarantees as the first line of defence towards greater self-reliance predicated on a realisation that Japan needed to assume "primary responsibility" for its own security. Arguably the most profound expression of this shift is the intention to enhance capacity to perform this task through the acquisition of counterstrike missile capabilities, as indicated in the Defence Build-up Program.⁸ The consideration of such putatively offensive capabilities would not have been possible without conflating the concepts of self-defence and pre-empting potential threats around Japan's periphery.

WHAT PRECIPITATED THIS RETHINK?

This recent recalibration of Japan's security and defence policy was at least in part enabled by changes in the constellation of domestic politics. The last general election in Japan, held in October 2021, saw the Liberal Democratic Party win a resounding majority in the Lower House. Meanwhile, left-leaning opposition groups such as the Japanese Communist Party and

the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan continue to find themselves confined to the margins of Japanese politics. This changing constellation had at least two effects on Japanese foreign and security policy making. First, the strong majority paved the way for the LDP and Prime Minister Kishida to have a freer hand on standing committees and, by extension, greater influence in policy discussions leading up to the formulation of the new strategic documents. Second, this political leverage was parlayed by the LDP leadership for the continuation of the strategic direction set in motion by Abe when he was prime minister. In fact, even before the October 2021 general election, Prime Minister Kishida had already articulated plans to review the 2013 National Security Strategy, the 2018 National Defence Programs Guidelines, and the 2018 Mid-term Defence Plan.

Underpinning this need for change in Japanese strategic thinking was the transformation of Tokyo's external security environment, which added a sharp new edge to old apprehensions. Foremost has been the rise of China, expressed not only in its expansion of economic influence into areas in the region where Japan has traditionally been dominant, such as infrastructure development, but also in its growing military capabilities that has caused Tokyo no small measure of concern. For Japanese security planners, this was acutely demonstrated in 2022, when the security situation in the Taiwan Strait deteriorated in the aftermath of the visit by then-US Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan. China responded with large-scale military drills which involved firing of ballistic missiles that landed near Japan's southwestern islands and in its Exclusive Economic Zone. While Japan has always been cognisant of the fact that any conflict in the Taiwan Strait would invariably impinge on its security interests, the events of 2022 were another harsh reminder of that reality.

Much in the same vein, developments in the Korean Peninsula have also catalysed a deeper rethink in Tokyo about their strategic vulnerabilities. The North Korean regime has persisted in its conduct of repeated ballistic missile tests which have landed projectiles in the Sea of Japan on numerous occasions. Meanwhile the National Security Strategy also noted that "Russia's aggression against Ukraine has easily breached the very foundation of the rules that shape the international order." This echoed Prime Minister Kishida's speech at the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, which put forth the point that the contemporary state of affairs in Ukraine could be "East Asia tomorrow." These multiplying challenges are rendered more acute by two further realities: first, many of the powers that share Japan's strategic space are in possession of nuclear weapons, and second, the regional order Japan had grown accustomed to was at risk of unravelling, with no certainty of what would be taking its place.

DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL RECEPTION

What has been striking about the release of the three strategic documents and the assumptions underpinning them is the lack of vocal domestic opposition in Japan. Long known for their pacifist stance, it appears that most of the Japanese public has warmed to the view that national defence capacity needs to be enhanced given the changing security environment. This has been evident from recent survey data, which show decidedly steady upward trends on this issue. A poll conducted by Nikkei Shimbun in December 2022 showed a majority of Japanese (55 percent) supporting efforts to strengthen defence capabilities, while another conducted by

Asahi Shimbun that same month showed a majority (56 percent) supporting the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities.⁹ This level of support is higher than what was recorded in earlier polls in 2015, when protestors gathered outside the Diet building to protest legislation related to collective self-defence. Likewise, a poll by Yomiuri Shimbun had 68 percent of respondents expressing the view that Japan should enhance its defence capabilities.¹⁰ What is further notable is the fact that these views straddle the political spectrum: Asahi Shimbun is traditionally pacifist and left-leaning whereas Yomiuri Shimbun is conservative. Of course, securing popular support for plans to enhance national defence capabilities is only half the battle won. The other half, securing the necessary funds, is proving a more challenging proposition. To that end, the same surveys that show majoritarian support suggest that opinion is more divided over how to fund the purchase and development of counterstrike capabilities as part of a larger proposal to increase defence spending to 2 per cent of GDP, although the bulk of the spending will be targeted at improving readiness (i.e. ammunition, maintenance, better training, etc) and not changes to their force structure (i.e. purchasing more equipment). Another matter that will need to be resolved is the role that foreign defence companies can play in Japan's relatively underdeveloped defence industry sector.

Of the two issues – securing funding for increased defence spending and the role of foreign defence companies in Japan – the former is more pressing. Japan's debt at 232 per cent of GDP is the highest in the OECD, and debt servicing requires more than a fifth of the government budget annually.¹¹ Kishida has recommended that defence taxes be funded by corporate, income and tobacco taxes, which could rake in over 1 trillion yen annually. Due to rare and open dissent from his Cabinet colleagues, however, the prime minister has decided that such tax increases will not take place before 2024.¹² The decision to kick the can down the road has bought Kishida some time, but domestic opposition to higher taxes could affect political fortunes come Lower House elections later in 2023.

On the flip side, Japan's defence tilt is not just a matter of domestic sentiment. There also appears to be greater receptivity in the wider region for a more engaged and proactive Japan. The annual survey on the opinion of foreign policy intellectuals in Southeast Asia conducted by the Singapore-based ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute consistently demonstrates positive trust levels towards Japan in the region.¹³ These findings reinforce those of a Pew survey conducted in 2018 on perceptions of Japan. That survey included public opinion in the Philippines and Indonesia, both of which were very favourably inclined towards Japan (83 percent in the case of the Philippines and 68 percent in the case of Indonesia).¹⁴ It stands to reason then that as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, the historical baggage of the Second World War no longer casts as foreboding a shadow over relations with Japan as it did in the past.

The recognition of Japan as a trusted regional power by Southeast Asian countries should not come as a surprise. It was Abe who saw that Japan's security and prosperity hinged on a well-functioning rules-based order. It was also Abe who argued that the future of the region depended on the melding of the Indian and Pacific oceans (which eventuated in Tokyo's 'free and open' Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, later adopted by Japan's partners in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), Australia, India, and the United States). Japan's economic and investment linkages with Southeast Asia are well known, and in recent years, the country has played a major role in landmark trade agreements: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership

(CPTPP). In fact, Tokyo played a major role in getting the then Trans-Pacific Partnership back on track to become the CPTPP, after the US withdrew from the agreement in 2017. Japan also pulled its weight in forging multilateral arrangements that sought to bolster regional peace and security: the Quad, and the FOIP strategy that underpins it. The strategy calls for a regional order based on freedom of navigation and overflight, connectivity, adherence to international law and restraint from the use or threat of force.

CONCLUSION

Japan's foray into building a durable regional order is not without risks. For years, Japanese diplomats and scholars have called for the maintenance of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, in particular, the South China Sea. Since 2019, Japan has on an annual basis deployed flotillas led by its Izumo-class carriers to train with regional navies to "contribute to peace and security of the region."¹⁵ The rhetoric and deployments have not gone unnoticed by China, whose nine-dashed claim covers about 90 per cent of the South China Sea area. While the South China Sea will remain a hotspot for years to come, developments in the Taiwan Strait would likely engender Japanese involvement. On this, Japan would need to communicate with Southeast Asian countries on the two-edged facet of its emerging counterstrike capabilities, which are meant not only to deter attacks on the home islands, but also to dissuade a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.¹⁶ The latter would portend serious implications for Southeast Asian countries.¹⁷ In a Taiwan Strait contingency, the Philippines would likely give access to US forces.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, ties between Japan and the Philippines, two US allies most likely to contribute to US operations during a conflict in the Strait, have grown. Between the two countries, there is now an increasingly enmeshed web of coast guard assistance, port calls and joint military exercises.¹⁹

The escalation risks in the region's hotspots and Japan's involvement remain hypothetical for now. What is more certain is that Japan is poised to significantly redefine its role in regional and international security, and commensurate with that, popular perceptions in the country towards national security are also changing. As Japan takes a bigger role in regional security, however, it behoves Tokyo to maintain a fine balance between deterrence and diplomacy. This will be a task which will require consistent effort and strategic nous. The former would dissuade potential adversaries from taking actions detrimental to regional peace and stability; the latter would keep channels of engagement open to lower the risk of escalation.

ENDNOTES

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