



Emerging strategic risks in the Asia-Pacific and the impact on the nuclear non- proliferation regime

The Japanese perspective

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Executive summary

Structural factors are not yet sufficient to prompt Japan to choose the nuclear option, but if the Japan-US alliance were to falter this could change.

Japan's security concerns, priorities, and perceptions of strategic risk:

- The strategic environment surrounding Japan is becoming more challenging and complex.
- China is significantly increasing its capabilities in nuclear and conventional forces, as well as in new domains such as cyber and outer space.
- The risk of China's invasion of Taiwan has become more frequently discussed in Japan after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and could pose a vital or even an existential threat to Japan.
- North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons, frequently testing various types of delivery systems and moving closer to acquiring a more robust nuclear capability.

Major policy changes and continuities in Japan:

- Japan released its new National Security Strategy, the National Defense Program Outline, and the Mid-term Defense Force Development Plan. In the revision process, there are ongoing discussions regarding how to deal with the growing threat of China and North Korea's nuclear capability, and how to create a more favourable security environment for Japan.
- Three major issues have emerged in response to the growing threats in East Asia and in the wake of the war in Ukraine: Defense spending, "counter-strike capability", and the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence.

Factors that could affect Japan's approach to nuclear weapons and their impact on the nuclear non-proliferation regime:

- There is growing concern about the credibility and reliability of the extended nuclear deterrence offered by the United States but, to date, this has not changed current alliance arrangements.
- Three scenarios – US retreat from Asia, nuclear armament of South Korea, or a situation in which Japan is left behind in a US-China rapprochement – could potentially alter this situation and lead to Japan to consider developing its own nuclear weapons.
- Structural factors are not yet sufficient to prompt Japan to choose the nuclear option, but if the Japan-US alliance were to falter this could change.
- A decision by Japan to possess nuclear weapons would make the security dynamic in Asia more complex and riskier and would destroy the global nonproliferation regime. To prevent this, it is necessary to work to maintain the credibility of extended deterrence between Japan and the United States.
- In the medium to long term, diplomatic efforts are also needed to encourage China to engage in arms control and risk management dialogue, with Japan and the United States taking joint steps with South Korea and Australia to reduce nuclear threats in the region. It will also be necessary to engage in risk management dialogue with Pyongyang, while aiming for North Korea's denuclearisation.

The Kishida Government's security concerns, priorities, and perception of strategic risks

The strategic environment surrounding Japan is becoming more challenging and complex.

The strategic environment surrounding Japan is becoming more challenging and complex. China is significantly increasing its capabilities within the nuclear and conventional domain, as well as in new spheres such as cyber and outer space. North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons, frequently testing various types of delivery systems and moving closer to acquiring a more robust nuclear capability.

China

The Japanese threat perception when it comes to China is not merely composed of quantitative factors of military capability. Instead, events from further afield are seen as an indication of risks within Japan; most notably, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has attracted great attention and the fact that a nuclear-armed superpower invaded a neighbouring non-nuclear-weapon state is considered everyone's business, with implications for states in East Asia, including Japan.

In March 2021, Commander Davidson of the Indo-Pacific Command stated that China may "invade Taiwan within six years"¹. The risk of a Taiwan Strait crisis is also taken ever more seriously in Japan, where Russia's invasion of Ukraine is seen as a striking example of that risk. The increasingly dictatorial tone of the Xi Jinping administration in China is exacerbating these fears. While Commander Davidson's prediction was likely based on his assessment of China's military buildup, the political and social situation in China also seems to be influencing perceptions of the risks of a forthcoming Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

The concern that China could gain maritime dominance in the East China Sea and occupy the Senkaku Islands is not small within Japan. If this was to happen, Japan would be placed in a very vulnerable position. This concern is particularly acute since the future of Taiwan seems to be a higher priority for China.

In terms of capabilities, China is steadily building up its nuclear arsenal, improving its deterrence capability, and overcoming vulnerabilities to the United States. The liquid-fueled DF-5 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs; 12,000 km range) have traditionally served as a nuclear deterrent to the United States. The DF-5B version, which has an extended range and is capable of carrying multiple individually guided reentry vehicles (MIRVs), were first deployed in the 2010s. The DF-31, a solid-fueled, transport-erected-launcher (TEL) version was introduced in the 2000s. The DF-41, a longer-range, MIRV-enabled version, has also been introduced. In addition, six strategic nuclear-powered submarines carrying the JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM; 8,000 km range) are in service, and the H-6K strategic bombers carrying the CJ-20 nuclear-powered cruise missile are in operation. As for SLBMs, if their range is 8,000 kilometers, they would have to go beyond the First Island Chain and enter the western Pacific in order to strike the US mainland. To overcome this problem, China is developing SLBMs with a range of 12,000 km, while also attempting to secure a route into the Western Pacific – which would pass through the waters around Japan.

In Japan, the risk of China's invasion of Taiwan has become more frequently discussed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In addition, as reported last year, hundreds of silos are reportedly under construction in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.² Even if ICBMs will not be deployed from all of these silos, they can be expected to complicate US calculations, allowing China to overcome vulnerabilities to the United States.

In addition to these challenges, China is developing and deploying medium- and intermediate-range missiles capable of carrying new nuclear warheads at the sub-strategic level. The DF-21, a solid-fuel MRBM (2,000 km range), is capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads, and the latest nuclear variant, DF-21E, which was revealed in 2016. The road-mobile DF-26, also revealed in 2016, is a solid-fuel IRBM with a range of 4,000 kilometers. It is considered an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) capable of hitting large ships sailing at sea (the anti-ship variant DF-26B was tested in 2020), and is also believed to be capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.³ In 2021, China deployed the DF-17, an MRBM equipped with a hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV), a weapon that glides through the atmosphere at more than five times the speed of sound and hits its target while evading enemy missile defence systems. The HGVs aboard the DF-17 are said to be capable of launching nuclear warheads.⁴ If China is increasing the number of nuclear warheads, as predicted by the US Department of Defense, it may be logical to assume that nuclear warheads would be carried not only on strategic, but also on sub-strategic delivery vehicles.

China is also reportedly developing a new system that can launch HGVs from any location in space towards the ground; in August 2021, China is believed to have conducted a launch test of a partial orbital bombardment system (FOBS) with HGVs on board. Meanwhile, some have expressed scepticism on whether this capability would be a strategic game changer by providing China with an advantage over the United States.⁵

With regard to political and economic factors, Xi Jinping declared in his political report, at the beginning of the 2022 Communist Party Congress, that he would never renounce the use of force as an option for Taiwan reunification.⁶ This declaration was perceived as a change from the previous Chinese policy of using military force to block any attempt by the Taiwanese side to change the status quo, to one that suggests willingness on the Chinese side to use force to change the status quo in its favour.⁷

Socioeconomic factors add to these concerns. Some predict that the Chinese economy will soon enter a phase of decline over the long term due to the setback in economic growth, as seen in the bursting of the bubble economy, an ageing population, and the rapid decline of the population. If this outlook is realised, China's ambition to surpass the United States in economic power and become the world's dominant power will become remarkably difficult to achieve. If this scenario appears to become more likely, China might be tempted to take action before the situation worsens. The prospect of a preemptive attack has also been discussed in this context. This view was expressed even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine began.⁸ It is worth noting that it is uncertain at this moment to what extent such socioeconomic factors affect the psyche of Chinese leaders. However, in Japan, the risk of China's invasion of Taiwan has become more frequently discussed after the Russian invasion started in February, 2022. The configuration of an authoritarian superpower with nuclear weapons

invading a non-nuclear-weapon state neighbour for reasons of its own security was enough to remind the Japanese public of the risk that China might pose in East Asia.

If China was to invade and unify Taiwan, China could gain control of the sea lanes not only in the Taiwan Strait but also in the waters off the east coast of Taiwan. In that case, the security of Japan's sea lanes would be severely hampered for as long as the relationship between Japan and China remains unstable. If this is the case, China's control of Taiwan could pose a vital or even an existential threat to Japan.⁹

In response to the visit of former US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022, the Chinese People's Liberation Army conducted military drills by setting up six exercise zones surrounding the main island of Taiwan. One of the exercise zones covered a part of Japan's exclusive economic zone, and according to analysis by Taiwanese authorities, the targets envisioned in the exercises included attacks on Okinawa and other parts of Japan.¹⁰

Former Prime Minister Abe stated in December 2021, that a Taiwan contingency is a Japan-US alliance contingency.¹¹ If the United States were to provide assistance to Taiwan in the event of an attack on Taiwan, US military bases in Japan would be used for US operations to extend assistance to Taiwan. Additionally, the Japanese Self-Defence Forces would be responsible for logistical support operations and escorting US forces. It is inevitable that Japan would be involved if Taiwan was invaded. In that case, it would make sense, in military terms, for China to attack US military assets and SDF bases in Japan in order to neutralise American and Japanese support for Taiwan. Even if China does not actually launch an attack against Japan, and instead simply threatens Japan to dissuade Japanese support for the United States, US assistance operations against Taiwan would not be sustainable. For Japan, improving its deterrence would therefore also mean building resilience against such an attempt to decouple Japan from the United States.

North Korea

In addition to the risk that comes from a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, there is also a significant risk of American bases and SDF bases in Japan becoming targets of attack if a conflict breaks out on the Korean Peninsula. This risk is likely to increase.

As North Korea's ultimate goal appears to be regime survival, the regime recognises that building its own nuclear deterrent capability is essential to counter the modern conventional forces of the United States and South Korea, as well as the US nuclear threat. To this end, North Korea continues to develop ballistic missiles, with the means to deliver nuclear warheads.

Kim Jong Un has emphasised that North Korea continues to strengthen its nuclear capability by developing 'tactical nuclear weapons', improving ICBM's hit rate within a 15,000 km range, and upgrading nuclear first-strike and retaliatory strike capabilities. He has stated that North Korea has successfully undertaken a program to miniaturise, lighten and standardise nuclear weapons and that it would continue to "make nuclear weapons smaller and

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lighter for more tactical uses.”¹² In addition, in 2022, North Korea resumed ballistic missile launches of IRBM-class missiles and above, which it had not done since 2018. It has also launched new ICBM-class ballistic missiles and is working to strengthen its nuclear capabilities.

Based on the technological maturity of its nuclear weapons, estimated through nuclear tests to date, we cannot rule out the possibility that it has already achieved miniaturisation of nuclear warheads and already possesses the capability to at least mount these on ballistic missiles, such as the Nodong missiles, which would enable nuclear strike against Japan. Furthermore, in May 2019, it resumed and repeatedly tested new short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) capable of flying at low altitudes and on irregular trajectories. Diversifying its launch modes, for instance by adding rail-launched and submarine-launched types, would improve the survivability of weapons, while adding an irregular trajectory would improve the survivability against missile defence systems. Recently, Pyongyang has also pursued the operationalisation of long-range cruise missiles. In April 2022, it tested a missile it called a “new tactical guided missile” to enhance the effectiveness of tactical nuclear operations.

These developments are driven by a strategy of acquiring nuclear deterrence through the possession of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, with the aim of securing the survival of the regime. Additionally, there is a desire to acquire tactical nuclear capabilities to deal with possible armed conflicts with South Korea and the United States, in the face of inferiority to their conventional forces. It seems that there is a strategy objective within North Korea to take the lead in managing the situation at all stages.¹³

Thus, China and North Korea are building up their nuclear capabilities, and both of their nuclear weapons policies foreshadow the development of assertive regional strategies.¹⁴

Major policy changes and continuities in Japan

In 2022, Japan has released its new National Security Strategy, the National Defence Program Outline, and the Mid-term Defence Force Development Plan.

In 2022, Japan released its new National Security Strategy, the National Defence Program Outline, and the Mid-term Defence Force Development Plan. In the process of revising these documents, discussions took place on how to deal with the growing threat of China and North Korea's nuclear capabilities, as well as how to create a more favourable security environment for Japan. In particular, there has been active discussion on the possible conflicts in Japan's vicinity, such as a Taiwan crisis or a Korean Peninsula contingency.

During these debates, three major issues emerged in response to the growing threats in East Asia and in the wake of the war in Ukraine; the first is the issue of defence spending, the second is 'counter-strike capability', and the third is the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence. Other issues include the question of improving resilience through deterrence denial and mitigation, including missile defence, and combat continuity capabilities such as the ability to supply ammunition. The first three issues are briefly discussed below, as these were the ones identified as being the most pressing.

The United States has gently, but persistently, demanded an increase in defence spending as a means of strengthening deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region. But the Japanese government has generally maintained a spending ceiling of 1% of its GDP, due to concerns over fiscal policy and public opinion. However, there is now a growing consensus within the ruling coalition that this ceiling should be raised and defence spending be increased to 2% of GDP over the next five years. This is supported by public opinion, with 55% of respondents to a NHK poll and 62% of respondents to a Sankei Shimbun survey supporting an increase in Japanese defence spending. In light of these changes, Prime Minister Kishida instructed relevant cabinet members to increase defence budget up to 2% of GDP by 2027.

In addition, Japan has traditionally adopted an 'Exclusively Defence-Oriented Policy (EDOP)' or *Senshu Boei*, more strictly, maintaining only the ability to intercept or prevent attacks within Japan's own territory, as opposed to launching an offensive attack. Until now, under the Japan-US Security Treaty, Japan has taken on the role of defensive shield, leaving the role of spearhead attacks on the enemy to the United States military. However, as China and North Korea's missile capabilities improve, and US military assets and Self Defence Force bases in Japan are increasingly likely targets in the event of conflict breaking out either in Taiwan or the Korean Peninsula, existing missile defences alone will be insufficient to prevent an attack. Therefore, in order to reduce the incentive for China to carry out an attack to neutralise US and SDF assets in Japan, the Japanese Government aims to change this policy and improve deterrence by adding a second-strike capability. This would consist of the capability to attack ballistic missiles and other missiles, as well as other military assets, in the opponent's territory. Possessing a counterattack capability would allow Japan to delay or suppress an adversary's second-strike capability while it could wait the arrival of support from the United States and partner countries, or re-establish its counter-attack posture. Thus it could complicate the strategic calculus of the adversary by demonstrating that their strategic objectives are more difficult and more costly to achieve. According to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's proposal, such counter-attack capabilities would also be

consistent with EDOP as the minimum necessary self-defence capability. Japanese public opinion on this issue is also changing, with 62.1% of respondents to a joint survey by the Sankei Shimbun and the Fuji News Network supporting the proposal, outnumbering those who disapprove.¹⁵

Another major issue is how to ensure the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence. In the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the nuclear deterrence of the United States and NATO did not extend to Ukraine. This suggests that if Ukraine had been covered by an ally's nuclear deterrence, it seems unlikely it would have been attacked by Russia. Of course, the US commitment to extended nuclear deterrence would naturally differ between Japan, a treaty ally, and Ukraine, which does not have any legal arrangements for collective self-defence. There is no indication that confidence in the support of the United States has declined at this point. However, in February 2022, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe indicated that Japan should discuss the possibility of some form of nuclear sharing arrangement in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In a Mainichi Shimbun survey, 57% of respondents agreed that nuclear sharing should at least be discussed (if not actually done).¹⁶

However, many Japanese security experts question whether a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement, in which US nuclear weapons are deployed in Japan on Japanese-operated fighter aircraft, and decisions on their use are made jointly through the Nuclear Planning Group, would enhance the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence or not. What Japan actually needs for nuclear assurance would be closer and more institutionalised consultation with the United States on operational planning that includes discussion on scenarios in which nuclear weapons would be used by the United States, and a strengthened posture for joint operations.

Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe indicated that Japan should discuss the possibility of some form of nuclear sharing arrangement in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Events that could change Japan's approach to nuclear weapons and the nuclear non-proliferation regime

If the United States no longer competes with China and no longer fulfills its treaty obligations on collective defence to its allies in Asia, Japan will be forced to consider having a nuclear element in its own defence and deterrence capabilities.

To date, concerns about the salience of nuclear weapons and deterrence offered by the United States has not led to actual changes to alliance arrangements. That is, it has not resulted in the pursuit of nuclear sharing or a decision to build an independent Japanese nuclear capability. However, there are at least three scenarios that could potentially alter this situation.

The first is a possible US retreat from Asia. If the United States no longer competes with China and no longer fulfills its treaty obligations on collective defence to its allies in Asia, Japan will be forced to consider having a nuclear element in its own defence and deterrence capabilities.

The second scenario is the nuclear armament of South Korea. If South Korea was to acquire nuclear weapons, Japan would likely develop nuclear weapons as well, or be left as the United States' only major non-nuclear weapon state ally in East Asia. In a scenario, in which the relationship between Japan and South Korea had deteriorated, there would be growing concern in Japan over being left behind, and public calls for Japan to arm itself with nuclear weapons would increase.

Third, a situation may arise in which Japan is left behind in a Nixon Shock-like, surprise US-China rapprochement. Stability in the US-China relationship is generally favourable to Japan's security. However, rapprochement could end the constraints on China's regional assertiveness, giving rise to the stability-instability paradox and making it more likely that Japan would resort to developing its own nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

The growing nuclear capabilities of China and North Korea bring structural changes which have prompted Japan to strengthen its defences. On top of this, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered a shift in government and public opinion, in support of more robust defence capabilities and posture. However, despite the calls of more hawkish voices, the argument that Japan itself should possess nuclear weapons has not gained traction. This can be attributed to the very good state of Japan-US relations. While doubts about the credibility of the United States' extended nuclear deterrence can never be completely dispelled, strengthening deterrence through the Japan-US alliance would be a more realistic and effective option than Japan possessing its own nuclear capabilities or engaging in a NATO-style nuclear sharing agreement.¹⁷ As reported, a former minister of defence would not consider it feasible to introduce a NATO-like system as it is, but important to strengthen deterrence (under the US nuclear umbrella).¹⁸

In other words, although the structural factors that could alter Japan's nuclear future are brewing, they are not yet sufficient to prompt Japan to choose the nuclear option. It is unclear what the ultimate trigger would be, but it can be inferred from the discourse surrounding Japan's security since the start of the Russian war in Ukraine that the nuclear option would become more attractive to Tokyo if the Japan-US alliance were to falter. However, a decision by Japan to possess nuclear weapons would not only make the security dynamic in Asia more complex and riskier, it would also destroy the global nonproliferation regime.

In order to prevent this, it is necessary, first of all, to maintain the credibility of extended deterrence between Japan and the United States. That is, to strengthen deterrence against China and North Korea as an alliance. This alone, however, is not enough. In the medium to long term, diplomatic efforts are needed to encourage China to engage in arms control and risk management dialogue, with Japan and the United States taking joint steps with South Korea and Australia to reduce nuclear threats in the region. It will also be necessary to engage in risk management dialogue with Pyongyang, while aiming for North Korea's denuclearisation.

Although the structural factors that could alter Japan's nuclear future are brewing, they are not yet sufficient to prompt Japan to choose the nuclear option.

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