

POLICY BRIEF

# Japan's National Security Strategy: Responding to Unprecedented Challenges

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## JAPAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: RESPONDING TO UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES

Alexandra Sakaki

At the end of 2022, Japan published a new National Security Strategy along with two defence-related strategic documents in which the government under Prime Minister Kishida Fumio announced historic policy changes.<sup>1</sup> These include a significant increase in the defence budget to 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by fiscal year 2027 and the acquisition of so-called counterstrike capabilities. Overall, the goal of Japan's new strategy is to harness all available national instruments of power in facing security challenges, including in the realms of diplomacy, military, economy, technology and intelligence.

Given the country's decades-old anti-militarist identity that emerged in the wake of World War II, the announced changes testify to a deep sense of concern and urgency by which Japan views its deteriorating security environment. Against the background of Sino-US rivalry, growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait and North Korea's incessant missile launches, the war in Ukraine has served as a powerful catalyst in Japan's defence and security thinking over the past year. Russia's invasion illustrated to the Japanese public that real conflict remains a distinct possibility, thereby underlining the importance of defense efforts to ensure deterrence.

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<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Japan, "National Security Strategy of Japan 2022," (16.12.2022), <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2023); Ministry of Defense Japan, "National Defense Strategy," (16.12.2022), [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy\\_en.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf) (accessed February 17, 2023); Ministry of Defense Japan, "Defense Buildup Plan," (16.12.2022), [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program\\_en.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program_en.pdf) (accessed February 17, 2023).

Japan's shifting security strategy has important implications for the alliance with the US as well as for relations with other countries, which will be outlined below. While the announced changes are by no means insignificant, it would be incorrect to portray them as a break with past policies. The country is not "scrap[ping]"<sup>2</sup> its postwar defense strategy or proceeding to "ditch"<sup>3</sup> its self-defence focused policy through endorsement of counterstrikes, as some media reports have suggested. Rather than marking a sudden shift, Japan's security policy innovations represent the culmination of years of discussions and incremental policy adjustments. Moreover, actual policy implementation of the changes will face a number of hurdles and thus will likely be more slow-coming than initial announcements may suggest.

### Heightening security concerns

The new National Security Strategy (NSS) – published almost ten years after Japan issued its first such strategy – leaves little doubt about Japanese unease in facing regional and international security developments. Japan is confronted with "the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II," the strategy notes.<sup>4</sup> International politics is characterized by intensifying geopolitical competition and the free, open, and stable international order is

<sup>2</sup> Kana Inagaki, "Japan Scraps Pacifist Postwar Defence Strategy to Counter China Threat," *Financial Times*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/1180f72c-b7aa-48cc-817b-69e7400fc6d3> (accessed February 17, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> *Korea Herald/ The Straits Times*, "Japan's Rearmament a Dramatic Policy Change: Korea Herald," December 21, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-s-rearmament-a-dramatic-policy-change-korea-herald> (accessed February 17, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Japan, "National Security Strategy of Japan 2022," 2.

being challenged by Russia and other countries, according to the document. In the Indo-Pacific region, Japan is faced with concurrent challenges from three countries – China, North Korea, and Russia – each of which is engaging in arms-buildup and intensifying military activities.

The new NSS describes China as unprecedentedly posing the “greatest strategic challenge in ensuring peace and security” for Japan.<sup>5</sup> This language reflects significant apprehension when compared to the 2013 version of the NSS, which noted that China was an “issue of concern.”<sup>6</sup> Tokyo is particularly unnerved about the shifting balance of military power. China's official defence budget for 2022 was almost five times larger than Japan's, although actual spending was likely even higher.<sup>7</sup> By comparison, Japan's defence spending still exceeded that of China at the beginning of the century.<sup>8</sup> As Beijing has invested in capabilities to deny access to the region or to restrict freedom of operation in it (anti-access/ area denial), the United States – Japan's treaty ally – no longer enjoys the unchallenged status of being the superior military power in the region. At the same time, China has become increasingly assertive in Japan's vicinity, intensifying military activities in the East and South China Seas as well around Taiwan.

China is clearly the center of focus in Tokyo's threat assessment, but North Korean and Russian capabilities and activities heighten concern while also placing additional burden on operational planning. Having launched around 100 missiles in 2022, more than in any other year on record, North Korea has

demonstrated rapid progress in technologies and systems that make tracking and interception more difficult.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the regime has been bolstering its nuclear arsenal.

Russia's war against Ukraine is seen in Japan as a clear breach of international rules, thereby shaking the foundations of the existing world order. Consequently, Tokyo has fundamentally changed its policy towards Russia compared to the last version of the NSS. The previous document had called for increased cooperation with Russia, based on the hope that stabilized bilateral ties would incentivize Moscow against aligning too closely with Beijing in the region. However, such hopes have been brought to an end by the apparent solidarity between China and Russia against the West in the Ukraine war. Russia's Far Eastern military buildup forces Tokyo to direct some resources to defending its northern region, thus slowing down efforts to shift defence towards a southwestern focus to address the challenge from China. In that way, Russia is seen in Tokyo as acting as a spoiler and operational burden in defence planning.

### **Japan's hike in defence spending**

In response to its deteriorating security environment, Japan intends to “fundamentally reinforce its defence capabilities.”<sup>10</sup> The government under Prime Minister Kishida will allocate 43 trillion Yen to defence over the coming five years, an increase of more than 50% from the 27.5 trillion Yen in the previous five-year plan.<sup>11</sup> Spending is projected to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Japan, “National Security Strategy 2013,” <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2023), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Defense Japan, “National Defense Strategy,” 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ken Jimbo, “Changes in the Security Environment Surrounding Japan Shifting Power Balance and the Three Front Threats Posed by China, North Korea, and Russia,” <http://ssdpaki.la.coocan.jp/en/proposals/122-1.html> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Sang-Hun Choe, “Tracking North Korea's Missile Launches,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/north-korea-missile-launches.html> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Japan, “National Security Strategy of Japan 2022,” 18.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse Johnson, “Kishida Seeks to Hike Defense Spending by More Than 50% over Five Years,” December 6, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/12/06/national/japan-kishida-defense-spending-43-trillion-yen/> (accessed February 18, 2023).

increase in a stair-step manner until reaching the 2-percent goal from fiscal year 2027 onward.

The planned budget hike has caused international headlines, because the country has for decades maintained annual defence spending at around 1 percent of GDP – a ceiling established through a cabinet decision under Prime Minister Miki Takeo in 1976 in recognition of widespread anti-militarist public sentiments.<sup>12</sup> Successive administrations refrained from veering far from this level, even though the limit was officially abolished in 1986 by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro and became a subject of recurrent debates. Nevertheless, criticism of this convention had grown over the past few years. In fact, during their respective terms Kishida's two prime ministerial predecessors Suga Yoshihide and Abe Shinzo both stated that their administrations were not bound by the limit.<sup>13</sup> The recent decision to hike spending is thus remarkable when viewed in the context of Japan's long-lasting inflexibility and resistance to change even in the face of a rapidly deteriorating security environment. By contrast, regional counterparts such as South Korea, India, and Taiwan have maintained annual defence budgets of around 2.5 percent of GDP per year over the past thirty years.<sup>14</sup>

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 triggered fears in Japan that the increasingly self-confident China might similarly use force to try to change the status quo in its surroundings. Prime Minister Kishida repeatedly warned that "Ukraine today could be East Asia tomorrow."<sup>15</sup> In particular, tensions in the Taiwan Strait have grown significantly in recent years, as exemplified by the military exercises conducted by China in the island's vicinity in reaction to the visit by then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in August 2022. In a military contingency, US military bases in Japan would likely become military targets if China intended to foil US efforts to provide support to Taiwan.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the Kishida government's historic commitment to the 2-percent level of defence spending, several caveats are in order. First, part of the budget increase actually represents a recapitalization of items that previously were counted as outside of the defence budget, such as financing for the Coast Guards, certain public infrastructure, and science and technology-related research.<sup>17</sup> Rather than a doubling of defence expenditure, the actual increase may thus be

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<sup>12</sup> Junnosuke Kobara, "Japan's Defense Spending on Brink of Breaking 1% GDP Cap," *Nikkei Asia*, August 18, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-s-defense-spending-on-brink-of-breaking-1-GDP-cap> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> *Reuters Media*, "Japan PM Abe Says No Defense Budget Ceiling as 1 Percent to GDP," March 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-budget-idUSKBN1690EZ> (accessed February 18, 2023); Miki Nose, "Japan Defense Spending Isn't Bound by 1% GDP Cap, Suga Says," *Nikkei Asia*, August 13, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-defense-spending-isn-t-bound-by-1-GDP-cap-Suga-says> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Kavanagh, "Japan's New Defense Budget Is Still Not Enough," (08.02.2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/08/japa>

<n-s-new-defense-budget-is-still-not-enough-pub-88981> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Josh Rogin, "Japan's Prime Minister Warns of a Historic — And Dangerous — Moment in Asia," *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/11/japan-prime-minister-rearmament-china-north-korea/> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Hanns Günther Hilpert, Alexandra Sakaki and Gudrun Wacker, eds., *Dealing with Taiwan*, SWP Research Paper 9 (2022), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/dealing-with-taiwan> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Ken Moriyasu, "Japan's 'Linchpin' Role in Taiwan War to Feature in 2+2 with U.S.," *Nikkei Asia*, January 11, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Japan-s-linchpin-role-in-Taiwan-war-to-feature-in-2-2-with-U.S> (accessed February 18, 2023).

closer to 1.6 times the previous level, according to estimates.<sup>18</sup>

Second, while the public mood has clearly shifted in favor of greater defence efforts, anti-militarist sentiments have not dissipated. A public opinion poll conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper in December 2022 found that a majority of 51% of respondents approved of the planned budget increase, while 42% rejected it.<sup>19</sup> While showing historically high support, this result also underlines that scepticism regarding the utility of military means is still widespread.

Third, unresolved questions of financing cast uncertainty over the planned budget hike. Three options are under consideration to ensure funding, namely tax increases, debt financing, and reallocation of budgets from other areas. Prime Minister Kishida himself objects to the issuance of additional government bonds, given the country's high national debt at around 230 percent of GDP. He has proposed financing about a quarter of the defence hike through additional taxes and the rest through budgetary reallocations.<sup>20</sup> However, aside from the opposition parties, members of Kishida's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are also criticizing this plan. Some of these politicians argue announcements of tax increases could negatively affect the economy, which is already struggling with the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in

Ukraine. Identifying specific items for budgetary cuts in other areas will similarly face severe resistance. Thus, it remains to be seen to what extent Tokyo can actually secure funding towards the 2-percent target.

Irrespective of the spending level, Japan will have to address a large number of shortfalls in its defence posture which have accumulated over the years due to underinvestment. Japan's military forces are facing aging physical infrastructure, low munitions stockpiles, and old and insufficient air- and sealift and refueling capabilities.<sup>21</sup> Beyond that, another challenge for Japan is recruitment and retention of personnel for the armed forces, especially in the context of a rapidly declining population.<sup>22</sup> Some observers are raising doubts about whether Japan's armed forces at their current level have the capability to simultaneously expedite the many ambitious projects envisaged for the coming years.<sup>23</sup>

## Counterstrike Capabilities as a Defensive Strategy

As part of its defense buildup, Japan plans to acquire capabilities for "effective counterstrikes against the opponent."<sup>24</sup> Towards that end, the country seeks to procure various missiles with ranges of at least 1000 kilometers, including the American

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<sup>18</sup> Ken Moriyasu, "Xi's Incoherent Policies Signal Danger, Former Japan General Warns," *Nikkei Asia*, January 17, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Xi-s-incoherent-policies-signal-danger-former-Japan-general-warns> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun Online*, "Bōeihi Zōgaku 'Sansei' 51%, Genpatsu Enchō 'Sansei' 51%, Yomiuri Yoron Chōsa," December 4, 2022, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/election/yoron-chosa/20221204-OYT1T50120/> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> *Japan News / Yomiuri Shimbun*, "Dissent Emerges Within LDP over Tax Hike to Finance Higher Defense Spending," December 11, 2022, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/politics-government/20221211-76336/> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey W. Hornung, "Japan's Upcoming Defense Efforts," (13.12.2022), <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/12/japans-upcoming-defense-efforts.html> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Porter, "Missiles Are No Substitute for Japan Self-Defense Forces' Manpower Shortage," *The Diplomat*, January 9, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/missiles-are-no-substitute-for-japan-self-defense-forces-manpower-shortage/> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, "Interview - Yoji Koda: Rash Defense Programs Look Like Wish List of Greedy Child," January 11, 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14800076?s=03> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Japan, "National Security Strategy of Japan 2022," 19.



Tomahawk cruise missile. While Japan already has missiles with shorter ranges of around 200 kilometers in its arsenal, it has so far refrained from acquiring those with greater ranges that can reach other countries. Tokyo argues that this abstention to date was a matter of policy choice, rather than a legal requirement. Japan has interpreted its post-war constitution as allowing only an exclusively defence-oriented policy (*senshu bōei*), which in turn has influenced the force posture of the military. However, the government ruled already in 1956 that counterstrikes against missile bases are constitutional in the event of an armed attack, assuming they are kept to a minimum and only used if there are no other appropriate means of defence.<sup>25</sup>

For some years now, Japanese security experts have been questioning whether their country's missile defence system offers sufficient protection in view of the sophisticated and large missile arsenals held by China and North Korea. Particularly worrisome is the fact that China possesses about 2,000 medium-range missiles capable of reaching Japanese territory, while the United States has not deployed such ground-based conventional intermediate-range missiles to Asia in accordance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia that was in effect until 2019.<sup>26</sup> That missile gap is seen in Tokyo as posing a considerable risk for stability.

Japan's new counterstrike capabilities are intended to deter potential enemy attacks in conjunctions with the US. The aim is not to achieve deterrence by threatening retaliatory

strikes with unacceptable losses for the opponent (deterrence by punishment), however. Rather, deterrence is ensured by reducing the chances of success of an attack through active resistance (deterrence by denial).<sup>27</sup> Enemy command centers or ammunition depots could be targets for counterstrikes. Following this logic, the Japanese government does not see a contradiction between the new capabilities and Japan's long-held exclusively defence-oriented policy.

## Implications for the Alliance with the US

Japan's new security policy orientation has far-reaching significance for its bilateral alliance with the US. Washington has shown unambiguous support for the announced changes, as could be seen in the summit talks between US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Kishida in January 2023.<sup>28</sup> The defence budget hike will make Japan a more capable ally for the US. This is significant, given the fact that Japan is playing an increasingly important role in US security and defence strategy. The focus on China as the key challenger to American supremacy heightens the strategic value of the alliance with Japan and the US troops stationed there. Moreover, both Tokyo and Washington closely align in their assessments of security challenges and required responses.

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<sup>25</sup> James L. Schoff, David Song, "Five Things to Know About Japan's Possible Acquisition of Strike Capability," (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18.02.2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/08/14/five-things-to-know-about-japan-s-possible-acquisition-of-strike-capability-pub-72710> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Yuka Koshino, "Japan's Transformational National-Security Documents," (21.12.2022), <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2022/12/japan-s-transformational-national-security-documents> (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed explanation, see Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018), [https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/118651/isec\\_a\\_00313.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/118651/isec_a_00313.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>28</sup> White House, "Joint Statement of the United States and Japan," *The White House*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/13/joint-statement-of-the-united-states-and-japan/> (accessed February 18, 2023).

The acquisition of counterstrike capabilities should not be seen as a move by Japan towards creating greater autonomy vis-à-vis the US. The military imbalance vis-à-vis China is too great for Tokyo to contemplate such a course. However, Japan will gain more political weight within the alliance context with new capabilities. Furthermore, the alliance partners will need to rethink and reform their bilateral consultations, planning, and decision-making mechanisms. The traditional division of roles in the alliance has been for Japan to act as the 'shield' by holding up invading forces, and the US functioning as the 'sword' with offensive capabilities. The two sides have not set up joint planning or integrated command structures thus far. However, given that the shield-and-sword division of labor is blurred with Japan's acquisition of counterstrike capabilities, the two allies must cooperate far more closely to ensure alignment on how those capabilities are incorporated into a joint strategy. Beyond that, the alliance partners have also announced a long list of bilateral projects for the coming years, including the sharing of infrastructure such as airports and ammunition depots and closer cooperation on cyber security policy, technology development, and intelligence sharing.

### **Implications for Partners around the World**

In the past, Japan's security outlook was often narrowly focused on the country's immediate

neighborhood as well as its partnership with the US. However, the new National Security Strategy shows that Japan's perspective has widened over the years, especially in the context of the recent war in Ukraine and the perceived linkages between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security orders. While the strategy is focused on mapping out how Japan can comprehensively draw on its own national strengths in facing challenges, it also emphasizes the need to work with partners around the globe.

Therefore, it is likely that Tokyo will continue to pursue closer relations with Western partners as well as other countries that it perceives as like-minded. In particular, the defence strategy names Australia, India, European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy, as well as South Korea among the many partners with which Tokyo seeks to deepen cooperation.

Shedding its Cold War-era passiveness in security-related international politics, Japan has over the past years emerged as a pivotal state shaping the Indo-Pacific region. It has shown its willingness to bear responsibility globally as reflected in the swift implementation of tough sanctions on Russia. Furthermore, in 2023 Japan's influence is further elevated as convener of the G7 summit and as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Thus, for many countries around the world, closer ties with Tokyo offer significant opportunities to influence global dynamics.



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