

RESEARCH REPORT | China Policy Initiative

THE U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE SETS THE STANDARD FOR SUCCESSFUL AMERICA FIRST FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ Thanks to the strategic vision of the late Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan has built itself into the diplomatic and military cornerstone of the American-led alliance system in Asia.
- ★ It is in America's vital interest that Japan continues its evolution into a responsible stakeholder with global influence that transcends Asia and takes its natural place as a potent force for the advancement and protection of democracy and capitalism worldwide.
- ★ The U.S., Japan, and Taiwan must develop a joint military command to defend the First Island Chain from Communist Chinese attack, as it is an existential question for all three.

"Japan alone cannot balance China's military power, so Japan and America must cooperate to achieve a balance. The U.S.-Japan alliance is vital for America too." – Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

A STRONG JAPAN AUGMENTS A STRONG UNITED STATES IN ASIA

Over the past two decades, Japan has built itself into the diplomatic and military cornerstone of the American-led alliance system in

Asia. In the coming years, it must continue its evolution into an indispensable, responsible stakeholder with global influence that transcends Asia and takes its natural place as a potent force for the advancement and protection of democracy and capitalism worldwide.

Post-World World Two United States policy treated Japan as a dependency and a platform for strategic U.S. bases, unintentionally restraining Japanese potential. But

as the 21st century progressed, with the U.S. distracted by optional wars in the Middle East and having wasted a decade posturing over a “pivot to Asia” that never quite happened, Japan stepped into the breach and came into its own geopolitically. America now has an interest in engaging in this process with the added benefit of not needing to dictate or micromanage the Japanese trajectory, because they have already cleared a path and are already sharing the burden.

Under Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan moved actively in the direction of building its armed forces and exerting its influence in the region. After leaving office, Abe’s rhetoric was only becoming more assertive until an assassin snuffed his voice. His successor Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has shown a willingness to continue the same aggressive trajectory, which has angered China, Russia, and North Korea—a positive sign. This evolving situation is good for the United States, good for Japan, and good for Asia. The world of power politics has changed, Japan will increasingly have a central role, and it is in the American interest to help guide it into the future.

JAPAN’S PACIFIST TRADITION

Japan’s traditionally modest geopolitical profile was a result of its American-crafted post-war constitution which came into effect

on May 3, 1947, with Article 9 enshrining an indefinite “Renunciation of War”:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

However, with the victory of Mao’s forces in China in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Japan was left virtually defenseless against the expansion of militant Communism in East Asia. The Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) were established in 1954 in a pragmatic effort to provide an independent military deterrent while maintaining the pacifist spirit of Article 9. 1960 saw the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (U.S.-Japan Security Treaty) committing the two nations to mutual defense in case Japan came under attack.



In 1967, Japan set a red line on weapons of mass destruction, announcing the "Three Non-Nuclear Principles," of "not possessing, not producing and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan."

21ST CENTURY THREATS SPARK CHANGE

This ambivalent defense posture, splitting the difference between a pacifist constitution and the pragmatic need to maintain some sort of self-defense force, sufficed for several decades. However, the rapid acceleration of China's military capabilities, increased harassment and intimidation by Russia and North Korea, and the relative diminishment of American deterrence in the Pacific has changed Japan's calculus.

In the summer of 2021, the CCP warned Japan that it would "use nuclear bombs continuously" until "Japan declares unconditional surrender for a second time" – a reference to Japan's crushing defeat in World War Two- if it dares to defend Taiwan. China's missile and nuclear arsenals are growing rapidly, giving it greater ability to deliver on this threat.

Another preferred method of CCP intimidation has been their relentless penetration of Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), and Japan has received the same treatment. The Yaeyama

Islands lie just 67 miles from Taiwan, making Japan and Taiwan's ADIZs adjacent. Japan's Ministry of Defense says that during FY 2021 their fighters were scrambled 1,004 times, with 722 of those against Chinese warplanes and the remainder mostly against Russians. That marks a substantial increase from just 725 total in FY 2020. China's August 2022 live-fire military drills following House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan saw five Chinese missiles land in Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) for the first time.

Russia has controlled the northern Kuril Islands since they opportunistically occupied them in the closing stages of World War Two. A state of war has formally existed between the two nations since, with Russia recently pulling out of peace talks following Japan's sanctioning of Moscow over their invasion of Ukraine. In March 2022, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially declared the entire Kuril Island chain as a part of Japan for the first time.

North Korea has tested several nuclear devices and Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) whose flight path occasionally takes them over or near Japanese territory. As recently as March 2022, Japanese PM Kishida condemned the test of a missile that likely landed near Japanese territorial waters.



TAIWAN'S DEFENSE IS JAPAN'S DEFENSE

Both the United States and Japan view Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aggression in East Asia as their most important geopolitical challenge in the 21st Century. For Japan, it is even more fundamental, with the prospect of a CCP conquest of Taiwan being a serious threat to the future of Japan. Beijing has openly threatened to invade and occupy the democratic island nation. Their success would imperil the 80% of Japanese energy and other imports that transit the South China Sea and perhaps cost the Japanese some territory in the Ryuku Islands abutting Taiwan, causing economic decline, political instability, and potentially the ultimate toppling of the Japanese government. Unsurprisingly, a 2022 poll showed that 9 of 10 Japanese feared that China will invade Taiwan, with 56% of those expressing “strong concern.”

In addition, the Japanese and Taiwanese people are connected by a genuine cultural and neighborly bond. A 2021 poll found that nearly 76% of Japanese felt “close” to Taiwan while nearly 65% believed Taiwan to be “trustworthy.” In a high-profile 2022 Japanese defense whitepaper, Taiwan was described as “an extremely important partner for Japan, sharing the same fundamental values such as freedom and democracy.” In July 2022, a prominent delegation of

Japanese lawmakers including two former defense ministers met with Taiwan’s president to discuss regional security. Their trip included a visit to the grave of Taiwan’s first popularly elected president Lee Teng-hui, who was a fluent Japanese speaker known for his pro-Japan views. In fact, the Japanese colonial period was a generally positive experience for Taiwan, which makes it nearly unique among Japan’s Asian and Pacific neighbors, many of whom were brutalized by the Japanese regime in the decades leading up to World War Two. The Japanese language was compulsory in school as part of “Japanization” between 1895 and 1945, and for many, it was their first language.

The collective territorial integrity of Japan and Taiwan is also essential to U.S. interests in the Pacific. The Japanese archipelago and Taiwan form the northern section of the so-called First Island Chain that effectively limits the ability of the CCP’s navy and air force to challenge U.S. forces beyond the East China Sea. The breaching of this wall in any place would allow the Chinese to outflank Japanese defenses and isolate them from outside help. The Second Island Chain is more thinly populated, includes vulnerable and strategic U.S. territories like Guam and the Northern Marianas and brings the Chinese military closer to the U.S. mainland. Japan also houses 50,000 U.S. troops including a



permanent aircraft carrier task force and important air bases. The neutralization of Japan would be a strategic disaster for America, pushing our Pacific defense perimeter back to Hawaii, Alaska, and California.

NATIONAL RENEWAL AND MATURATION IN THE ABE ERA

The late and longest-serving Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe devoted his ambitious career to lifting his nation out from the shadows of World War Two to take its rightful place as a modern, democratic, and responsible force for good in Asia and around the world. He had a vision of a “normal” Japan, no longer a junior partner to the U.S. and no longer hindered by pacifist constitutional restrictions. While some gradual evolution started before his second term in office (2012-2020), Abe was the personification of the new Japan and a singular figure, and his assassination made him a martyr to the movement that he animated. He enacted unprecedented policies during his term, engaged in unprecedented rhetoric after his term, and influenced the trajectory of his party so that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida seems sure to carry on his legacy.

Massaging laws and building alliances

Abe correctly saw the U.S.-Japan alliance as the indispensable

guarantor of Japanese security and believed that strengthening that relationship required Japan to be able to contribute more as an ally.

In spring 2022, he observed:

Since the Obama administration, the American military no longer acts as the world’s policeman... I still believe America must take the lead, but we must change our attitude of leaving all military matters to America. Japan must take responsibility for peace and stability and do our utmost by working together with America to achieve it.

Painfully aware of constitutional restrictions and the skepticism he faced from the political class on this point, he pursued a strategy of legal gradualism and “proactive pacifism.”

In September 2015, the Upper House of Japan’s Diet (parliament), led by a majority coalition of Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Komeito party passed a package of laws that “watered down” Article 9 of the constitution. The package allowed the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) to be deployed abroad to aid the United States and other allies even if Japan was not directly attacked and permitted Japan to participate in UN peacekeeping operations.



In the wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Abe floated the idea of engaging in a NATO-style "nuclear-sharing" program with the U.S., despite the three non-nuclear principles and Japan's being a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It would involve the stationing of American nuclear weapons on Japanese soil with Japan being actively involved in the decision-making process in case of the weapons' possible use.

Abe also excelled at building and leveraging alliances to accomplish security goals and popularized the phrase "free and open Indo-Pacific," broadly meaning a region free of malign CCP influence, to encapsulate his vision. He was the prime mover behind the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which he initially framed as "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," comprised of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. He is credited especially with bringing India into the strategic picture, as a counterweight with a massive population and growing military and economic heft on China's western frontier. In an essay explaining the "Diamond," he observed that "peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean."

The Quad is not yet a formal alliance, but China has recognized

its potential strength, decrying it as an "Asian NATO." All four navies conducted major exercises in November 2020. In May 2022 the Quad announced that it would enact a maritime surveillance program meant to defend territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of regional nations that are threatened by China, primarily by using commercial satellite imagery to monitor the CCP's aggressive, destructive and massive fishing fleet.

In 2022 Japan even attended a NATO summit in Spain, showing the new global purview of Japan's security interests and the mutual interest in Japan from the world's premiere defense alliance.

JAPAN'S MILITARY REVOLUTION

Abe's creative massaging of laws and rhetorical scene-setting have been crucial, but a true geostrategic transformation also requires "facts on the ground," and in recent years Japan has been making tangible steps toward a revolution in its military capabilities.

Increased spending and enhanced equipment

Japan's defense budget ranked ninth in the world in 2021 at \$54.1 billion. Still, this budget reflected a cap of a mere 1% of GDP. Abe was unable to meaningfully increase defense spending, but he did halt



defense spending decreases for a decade, instead achieving modest increases.

Abe's successor Fumio Kishida appears to have brought a spending breakthrough to fruition, as the Defense Ministry's fiscal 2023 budget request is set to double defense spending over five years. This would facilitate Kishida's goal of reaching the minimum NATO standard of 2% of GDP. Support for this massive increase is strong in Kishida's ruling Liberal Democrat Party as well as the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party, and a majority of the Japanese public supports an increase in defense spending.

Japan is already ranked fifth globally in overall military power according to the Global Firepower Index, after the United States, Russia, China, and India. Japan possesses over 900 warplanes, 48 destroyers, including eight with Aegis anti-missile systems, and 20 submarines, exceeding the inventories of the United Kingdom and Germany. Japan is set to acquire 147 F-35 combat aircraft making it the largest user of American stealth fighters outside of the U.S.

Tokyo is now retrofitting two flattop helicopter carriers, the Izumo and Kaga—the latter named brazenly after a carrier sunk in the 1942 Battle of Midway—which thanks to the F-35's vertical take-off capability

will become the country's first aircraft carriers since the end of World War Two.

An indispensable player in the Indo-Pacific alliance system

Highlighting Japan's increasing integration into regional naval defense, the Izumo led the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's (MSDF) four-ship Indo-Pacific Deployment, an annual event since 2019. The small task force, rounded out by two destroyers and a submarine, will tour throughout the Pacific and Southeast Asia to conduct exercises and engagements. Most importantly they will also take part in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise, presided over by the U.S. military in Hawaii. They will also participate in a variety of other military, cultural and civil interactions with the U.S., Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and most notably in JIMEX, a dedicated Japan-India Joint Exercise.

Tokyo started developing a ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability comprised of Aegis-equipped destroyers and land-based Patriot missile batteries in 2004, but by the summer of 2020 Abe's government began publicly considering the procurement of long-range cruise missiles with the capabilities to take out launch sites in enemy nations. This offensive capability would be unprecedented. The



Japan Ground Self Defense Force (GSDF) is set to deploy missile units to Ishigaki Island in the Ryukyu chain, just 186 miles off the coast of Taiwan. In the wake of China's unprecedented August 2022 military exercises near Taiwan, Japan announced its intention to acquire more than 1,000 long-range cruise missiles.

Enhanced missile capabilities are key to the rapid and ongoing fortification of Ishigaki and Japan's southern islands in general, positioning a credible military deterrent meant to effectively bottle up the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and prevent it from expanding into the Pacific. Senior Fellow Felix K. Chang of the Foreign Policy Research Institute summarizes recent developments:

Japan's bases suggested a strategy whose intention was to not only fully deter China from seizing the Senkaku Islands, but also frustrate China's wider naval ambitions. In 2014, Tokyo set up a coastal observation base on Yonaguni Island, near the disputed islands. Soon after, it began preparations to construct new bases with anti-ship missile batteries on several Ryukyu Islands, which run from the Japanese mainland to Yonaguni Island. The first base was built on Amami Oshima Island. It was armed with a

Type 12 anti-ship missile battery and defended by a Type 03 surface-to-air missile battery. Tokyo then built similar bases on Miyako Island in 2020 and Ishigaki Island in 2022. The missile bases cover the disputed Senkaku Islands as well as all the transit points for the Chinese navy into the Pacific Ocean, including the Miyako Strait.

Japan now has the strategic sophistication, motivation, and equipment to be the lynchpin of the democratic defense against the CCP's expansion in Asia and the Pacific.

LESSONS FROM THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE FOR JAPAN AND TAIWAN

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked a marked shift in Japanese strategic thinking and behavior. In March 2022 Japan broke a 75-year tradition by modifying its military export rules to send material to Ukraine to defend against the Russian invasion. Chinese and Russian military activity near Japan has increased 2.5 times since the invasion, causing alarm in Tokyo. As mentioned above, Japan and Russia have an adversarial history and Japan still claims territory that Russia occupies. Japan receives 10% of its natural gas from Russian-occupied Sakhalin Island, and



Japanese companies are invested in the project.

Japan's Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said the Ukraine invasion must not be repeated elsewhere and that it must go down as a “clear failure,” or other countries (implying China) would attempt to change the status quo using the “logic of brute force.” Referring to Chinese and Russian joint bomber flights near Japan in May, Hayashi said stronger military coordination between China and Russia was emerging as a security concern. In addition, a 2022 Japanese defense department whitepaper warned against China’s ties with “aggressor nation” Russia.

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, obvious analogies have been drawn between that dynamic and the potential hot conflict to break out between China and Taiwan. In this geostrategic context, post-Abe Japan sees itself as part of the same united front with Taiwan against CCP expansionism.

Shinzo Abe wrote an elegant treatment of the similarities and differences between the predicaments of Ukraine and Taiwan, and called for a decisive change in the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, in an April 2022 *Los Angeles Times* op-ed:

...there is a very large military power gap between Taiwan

and China, just as there was between Ukraine and Russia... neither Ukraine nor Taiwan has formal military allies... both Russia and China are permanent, veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council, the U.N.’s mediation function cannot be relied upon for conflicts in which they are involved...

[The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 has required] the United States to provide Taiwan with the military equipment and supplies “necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capacity.” ... it remains unclear whether the U.S. would intervene by force in a crisis...

The American policy of ambiguity toward Taiwan is now fostering instability in the Indo-Pacific region, by encouraging China to underestimate American resolve...

The time has come for the U.S. to make clear that it will defend Taiwan against any attempted Chinese invasion. [Emphasis added]

Whenever I met President Xi Jinping during my time as prime minister, I always made it a rule to convey



clearly to him that he should not misjudge Japan's intention to defend the Senkaku Islands, and that Japan's intentions were unwavering.

Abe's rhetoric and conduct in the face of CCP aggression were exemplary, and his tactics must be adopted by American and Indo-Pacific leaders in the coming years as China's pressure on Taiwan increases.

CONCLUSIONS

Japan has been a model of economic success and democratic responsibility over the past 75 years, and its continued military and diplomatic ascendancy bolsters a core tenet of a successful America First foreign policy, in strengthening and modernizing the U.S.-led coalition facing off against Communist China. Fears based on past Japanese imperialism are unfounded, as the most fitting analogy to Tokyo's 1930s military buildup is the CCP's aggressive quest to construct its own 21st-century version of a Beijing-centric Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

As Japan ramps its military spending up to 2% of GDP, the U.S. should help supply its growing air, missile, sea, and marine assault assets and capabilities, and develop a joint military command composed of the U.S., Japan, and

Taiwan to defend the First Island Chain which is an existential question for all three. The U.S. and Japan should openly engage in military exercises with Taiwan, train Taiwanese troops, and assist Taiwan in international forums and in seeking increased diplomatic recognition. Indigenous nuclear weapons may be a bridge too far for the Japanese government. If so, hopefully, it would be able to consent to U.S. nuclear weapons stationed on its soil as Abe suggested and as NATO countries already do, or at least allow nuclear cruise missiles to be placed on U.S. ships and subs in the region after this practice was discontinued in 1991. It should also continue its exemplary tough rhetoric with both China and Russia, alongside a growing credible kinetic deterrent.

Central to this reform program would be a codification of Japan's departure from pacifism with a repeal of Article 9, and this may come soon. The July 2022 legislative elections in the wake of Abe's death resulted in a decisive win for his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that should provide for political stability through the next scheduled election in 2025 and with it a strong chance to amend the constitution to explicitly allow for a Japanese military. Beijing's primary English-language propaganda mouthpiece the *Global Times* expressed fear that "the obstacles for Japan to change its pacifist Constitution have been



basically cleared,” that the U.S. has given Japan permission to act so boldly and wants to “indulge Japan to play the role as a geopolitical thug.”

While the *Global Times* characterization is cartoonish, the CCP is correct that American and Japanese fates are tied together. Given Japan’s geographic proximity

to China and relative strength among our allies in the region, in some ways the question regarding the opening stages of a CCP assault is “what will Japan do and how will the U.S. follow,” not vice-versa. As Former PM Abe observed, “No country fights alongside a nation that is not defending itself.”

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