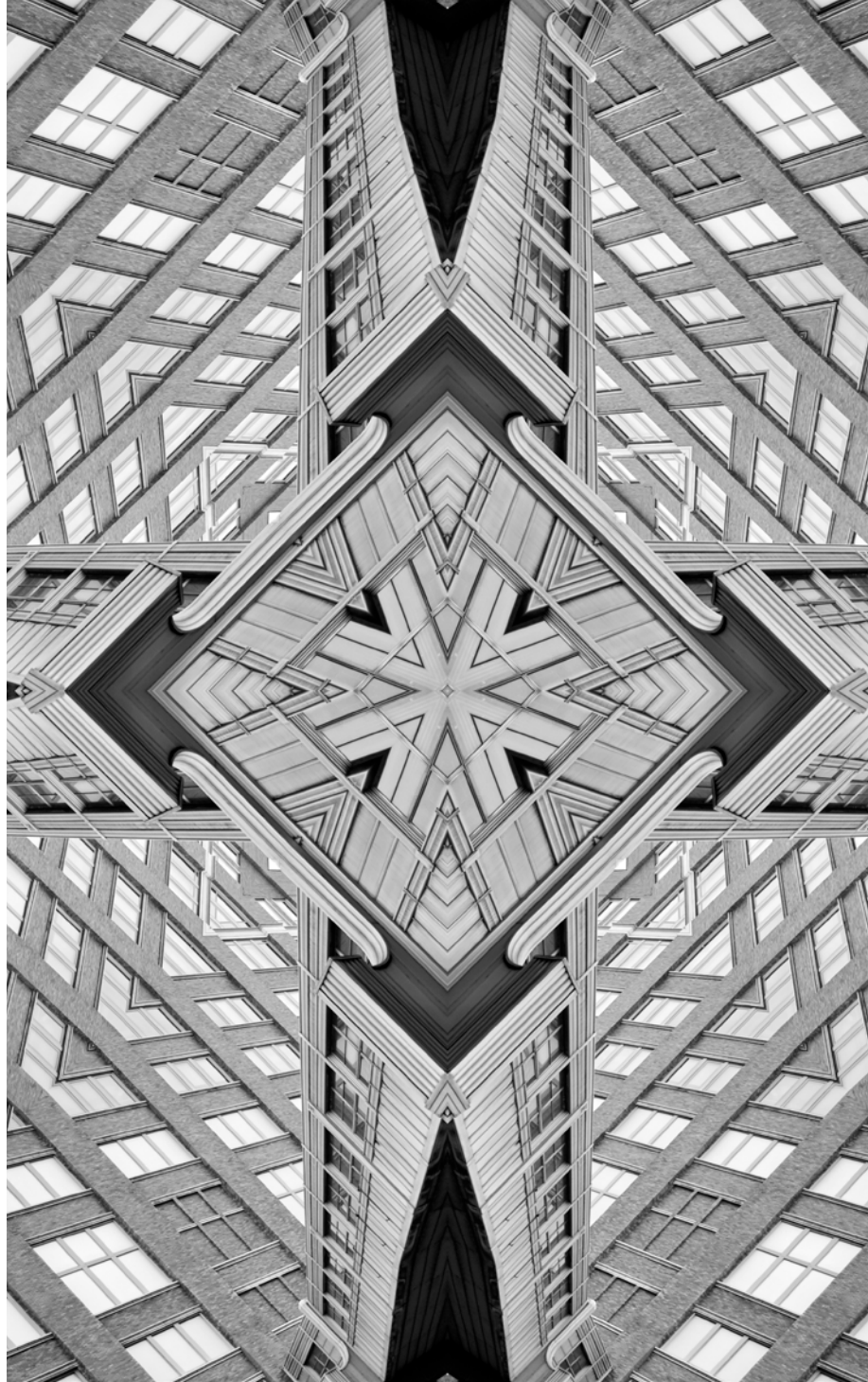


Issue

Brief

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Despite Shifts, Japan's Defence and Security Policy Remains on Pacifist Ground

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Abstract

In the past decade, Japan made certain critical changes in its defence and security policy. These include enhancing the country's defence capabilities, introducing the right to collective self-defence, abandoning the ban on arms exports, strengthening its alliance with the United States, and promoting its vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. Japan has introduced these changes incrementally, as a response to changing strategic circumstances. This brief argues that in spite of these shifts, and others that are forthcoming, Japan continues to adhere to its historical pacifist stance, and remains committed to its non-nuclear principles and an exclusively defence-oriented policy.

Beginning in late 2021, Japan’s ruling party leaders have announced certain intended changes in the country’s defence and security policy. These have provoked intense discussions among analysts, even as more policy shifts are expected this year. These changes will set the country’s defence and security direction for the next three to five years.

Among the likely developments of which senior ruling party figures have hinted, is the doubling of Japan’s defence spending. Ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who was installed in late 2021, has not ruled out developing Japan’s capability to strike at enemy bases. Furthermore, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has raised the prospect of the country hosting US nuclear weapons facilities on Japanese soil. While some of these public positions are mere political posturing unlikely to fructify soon, if at all, others, like PM Kishida’s, indicate a change in defence thinking.

These debates are hardly new—whether about increasing the defence budget, enhancing military capability, or taking the nuclear option. They have taken more salience, though, in the context of radically altered geo-security environments in Japan’s neighbourhood and beyond. Of these, most prominent are China’s military muscle-flexing, North Korea’s expansion of its nuclear and missile arsenal, and today, Japan’s falling out with Russia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, as Tokyo takes a tough stance on President Vladimir Putin. All these developments challenge Japan’s defence and security policy.

Japan is no longer the ‘passive’ and ‘reactive’ state of past decades, or even merely an active ‘civilian power’. It has stopped being hesitant in presenting itself as a proactive—even assertive state, committed to defending its territory and sovereign integrity from potential aggressors, whether perceived or real. Historical, pacifist idealism has given way to a more pragmatic and proactive pacifism—what PM Kishida calls “realism diplomacy for a new era.”¹

To be sure, Japan’s defence and security policy has changed incrementally over the decades. It is highly unlikely that Japan would completely abandon its long-held pacifist and anti-militarist stance to become a full-fledged military nation, equipping itself with nuclear capability and turning its Self-Defence Force (SDF) into a combat-ready offensive military establishment; or even amend the pacifist clause of the Constitution anytime soon.

Japan continues to be pacifist, as the sentiment is deeply ingrained in the minds of the public and the country’s leaders. The pacifist Article 9 of the Constitution remains, despite proposals to revise it, especially during the Abe administration.²

Japan also maintains its security ties with the US through a decades-old security treaty. However, today Japan presents itself as a significantly more confident nation capable of defending its territory while helping maintain the current rules-based global order and preserving world peace via new policy initiatives. These include building a network of strategic and economic partnerships and expanding security links and defence cooperation with regional partners and like-minded nations of the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Tokyo has also taken the lead in the architecture of plurilateral frameworks. For example, it has taken a crucial role in rescuing the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the Trump administration walked away from it. This culminated in the Comprehensive and Progressive Transpacific Partnership (CPTPP) or TPP 11. It has also been a catalyst in reconceptualising the Asia-Pacific region into the new geopolitical and geo-economic geometry that is the 'Indo-Pacific', convincing friends and partners across the globe to embrace the free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept. Foremost, though, and like any other sovereign state, Japan is more than ever committed to defending its national sovereignty within its constitutional limitations.

“It is highly unlikely that Japan would completely abandon its long-held pacifist and anti-militarist stance to become a full-fledged military nation.”

Policy Announcements and Strategic Context

At the LDP leadership contest in September 2021, and a month later during the general election, defence issues were prominent. The heated discussions still reverberate, and a few will find a place in policy documents. Some fundamental proposals are related to defence spending, recalibrating relations with the United States, strengthening partnerships with like-minded nations in the region and beyond, and a revision of the National Security Strategy (NSS) first outlined in 2013 under Abe. There is also a proposal to update both the National Defence Program Guidelines and the Medium-Term Defence Program.

Revisions of the national security strategy and future defence plans revalue Tokyo's assessment of China. In particular, China's activities around the Senkaku islands and its Taiwan designs directly affect Japan's security. Furthermore, North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities directly threaten Japan's security and will also be critical considerations. Tokyo will also vigorously debate how best to develop extra capability to undertake pre-emptive strikes against enemy bases, if necessary. This policy direction will include upgrading Japan's missile technology and capabilities.

The Ukraine crisis, which unfolded in late February 2022, has added a new dimension to Japan's security dilemma. During the second term of PM Abe (2012-2020), his administration tried to 'normalise' relations with Russia by finding mutually acceptable solutions to lingering territorial issues; they failed miserably. In February following Moscow's military invasion of Ukraine, Tokyo imposed tough sanctions on Russia. It has also provided financial and military-related assistance to Ukraine, including supplying bulletproof vests and helmets.³ Any prospect of improvement in Japan-Russia relations has now become virtually impossible. Compounding the security challenge for Japan is the strengthening of Moscow-Beijing ties.⁴

Apart from concerns on territorial and maritime security, Japan is also preparing to establish legislation on economic security. The country is dependent on international trade, both for exports and imports of critical raw materials, especially energy. Japan is worried about facing economic coercion such as trade weaponisation, and supply chain instability. To underscore the importance of these issues, the Kishida government created the post of Minister of Economic Security in 2021. The economic security promotion bill is also likely to be tabled soon in Parliament for discussion and voting.

Policy Announcements and Strategic Context

The 2013 NSS called for Japan to strengthen and expand capabilities; strengthen its alliance relationship with the US; build security cooperation with partners for peace and regional stability; and pursue a proactive contribution towards global peace.⁵ To implement these objectives, various legislative and policy frameworks have been adopted since, including the 2015 security legislation allowing Japan, for the first time, to exercise the right to collective self-defence (albeit partially). In the same year, the revised Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation were issued, and twice—in 2013 and 2018—the National Defence Program Guidelines and the Medium Term Defence Program were adjusted.⁶

In 2014, the Abe administration also lifted the long-standing ban on arms exports, although in a limited way. Not only was Japan's Defence Agency upgraded to ministry level in 2007, new structures within the Ministry of Defence were established to manage arms production and explore the potential of exporting arms. While Abe and the LDP promoted defence reforms, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), in power from 2009 to 2012, also favoured defence reforms. Like the LDP, the DPJ was interested in easing restrictions on arms exports.⁷

In December 2011, the DPJ-led government under Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda announced comprehensive exemption measures, according to which defence exports would be dealt with outside the long-standing 'Three Principles' of arms exports, established during the Sato administration (1964-72). Exempt were those that were "related to peace contribution and international cooperation" (including international missions for peace, disaster relief, or anti-terrorism) and "joint development and the production of defence equipment for Japan's security."⁸ As a result, a bipartisan approach has evolved, supporting a more active defence role.

Current conversations on defence have gone beyond defending Japanese territory through conventional means. There are debates about acquiring capabilities that would protect Japan and US military assets based in the Japanese territory, and to enable Japan to launch strikes at an enemy's base. This strategy involves developing offensive capabilities to secure territorial integrity and the people's safety and security. Offensive capability for defensive purposes was a no-go-zone for many years, but this new consensus is a significant shift. Whether this readily translates into policy, and soon, is yet unclear. The Japanese government must make a solid case to persuade its highly risk-averse public to endorse such changes.

Policy Announcements and Strategic Context

Another vital part of ongoing policy discussions is the defence budget, which is already considerable, and has been rising in recent years. Compared to its neighbouring countries, China and Russia—which are the world’s second and fourth largest defence spenders—Japan’s defence allocations are far smaller. The country is ranked ninth overall, closely followed by South Korea.⁹ This is a vast contrast to Japan’s defence spending and ranking in the late 1980s, when it stood as the world’s third largest defence spender, with allocations almost 20 percent more than China’s.¹⁰

Indeed, Japan’s total defence spending has remained under 1 percent of its GDP against the average 2 percent of NATO countries. In late 2021, just before the general election, the LDP promoted the novel idea of spending an equivalent of the NATO average. This, however, seems impossible to implement any time soon because of Japan’s poor fiscal health and public aversion to significant defence increases. Some 40 percent of respondents in 2018 were of the view that the proportion of 1 percent of GDP was the right level of defence spending; less than 15 percent favoured higher spending, at 2 percent of GDP.¹¹ While the budget will continue to gradually increase, the 2-percent target is a long way off and may be achieved in marginal steps.

For fiscal 2022 (April 2022 to March 2023), the combined defence budget—which includes the supplementary budget approved in fiscal 2021—amounts to 6.1 trillion yen. This combined figure is equivalent to 1.09 percent of GDP. But for fiscal 2022 the budget is set at 5.4 trillion yen, which remains below the 1-percent-of-GDP mark. The 1-percent limit is ingrained in national psyche. It has been breached before, though, and most likely will again be, as Japan needs new-generation technology, defence equipment to deal with cyber security, and deterrence capabilities.¹²

“Current conversations on defence have gone beyond defending Japanese territory through conventional means.”

Incremental Policy Shifts

After its defeat at the end of the Second World War, Japan accepted a foreign-imposed Constitution that renounced war as a sovereign right and constrained the country from acquiring any offensive military capability. The nation thus surrendered the right of belligerency. This was a special clause inserted in the Constitution to ensure that Japan never again indulged in military adventures; it is not seen in any other modern nation-state's fundamental law. The war-renouncing Article 9 has remained since the Constitution came into force in 1947.

As strategic and political circumstances began to change after Japan became 'independent' in 1952, Tokyo introduced legislation that allowed the establishment of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) in 1954. To give defence a low profile, however, a 'defence agency' was founded, instead of a ministry, to oversee SDF's activities under a minister designated as director-general. Although the SDF has land, air, and sea forces, as its name suggests, its function is defensive. Instead of giving these services the names of 'army', 'navy', and 'air force', they were designated as the Ground Self-Defence Force (GSDF), the Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF), and the Air Self-Defence Force (ASDF).

A security pact with the United States largely underwrote Japan's security. Signed in 1951 and revised in 1960, it remains in force. In return for such insurance, including extended deterrence and the US nuclear umbrella, Japan has hosted a large number of US forces on its soil. The number is currently at 55,000 personnel, which is close to one-third of all US forces stationed around the world.¹³

Being a pacifist nation with its security underwritten by the US has worked well for Japan until recently. This grand strategy developed soon after Japan became 'independent' following the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951. Low spending on defence, and greater focus on economic growth, also made Japan's neighbours less uncomfortable because many of them had suffered Japanese military adventurism before and during the war.

To establish its pacifist credentials, Japan introduced self-imposed limitations on SDF activities. Parliamentary resolutions and Cabinet decisions banned the overseas dispatch of the SDF and participation in collective security and defence arrangements. Furthermore, by a Cabinet resolution in 1967, Japan adopted the three non-nuclear principles that prohibit Japan from manufacturing or possessing nuclear weapons, and allowing others to introduce them into the country. (The third principle, however, has often been observed in breach.) In the same year, with slight revisions later in 1976, Tokyo also banned arms exports as a commitment to its anti-militarism policy and embraced the 1-percent ceiling on defence spending in 1976.

Incremental Policy Shifts

While this policy consensus prevailed, debates on Japan's dependence on the US and Article 9 have occasionally flared up as security situations changed. The US demanded that Japan "burden-share" with it instead of doing a mere "free ride". Parts of the increased budget for 2022 is likely to be spent on sharing greater costs for hosting US forces, acquiring missile systems, sourcing new-generation fighter planes from the US, and improving cyber security.

If there was any leader over the decades who had been a leading advocate for "normalising" the Japanese military, it was Yasuhiro Nakasone, one-time director-general of the Defence Agency and later prime minister (1982-87).¹⁴ He wanted Japan to transit from a 'peace country' (*heiwa kokka*) to an 'ordinary country' (*zairaigata kokka*). He believed in amending the Constitution, which to him was an imposed symbol of defeat. He also wanted to remove the 1-percent-of-GDP limit on defence spending. Nevertheless, he favoured continuing close ties with the US. Given the Cold War strategic realities and the perceived threat from the Soviet Union, Nakasone declared that Japan would serve as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" against any Soviet threat. While Nakasone breached the 1-percent spending once, it was largely symbolic, as Japan has continued to spend below that ceiling.

Japan's search for an appropriate global role as the world's second largest economy (that is, until 2010) and a 'peace state' continued in the post-Cold War period.¹⁵ Ichiro Ozawa, prime ministerial aspirant in the 1990s, proposed a reformist agenda. He wanted Japan to become a "normal nation", which would mean willingly shouldering international responsibilities and cooperating fully with others, including militarily.¹⁶ Like Nakasone, he also wanted Japan free from dependence on "another nation's might in the realm of defence" and envisaged an expanded role of the SDF beyond the passive "exclusive defence strategy".¹⁷

By and large, the 1950s Yoshida doctrine of a low defence posture continued up till the end of the 20th century. However, as Japan defence and security analyst Richard Samuels has observed, the so-called "pacifist loaf" that Yoshida had "baked" was slowly being sliced.¹⁸ By the early 2000s, strategists were contemplating the kind of defence and security policy Japan should pursue to make a balanced approach "without being either too dependent on the United States or too vulnerable to China"—or what Samuels has called a "Goldilocks consensus".¹⁹

Incremental Policy Shifts

With China's economic rise and consequent military assertiveness threatening Japan's maritime and air spaces, China's overall political influence globally and military design have forced Japan to consider a range of strategic options. These include engaging in a significant upgrade of its defence capability. Japan is considering strengthening its SDF and giving it a more significant role. It would also like to enhance the security capacity of regional countries to deal with China's expanding maritime footprint, particularly in the South China Sea. To this end, new sets of legislation were passed during the long rule of Shinzo Abe.²⁰

“Being a pacifist nation with its security underwritten by the United States has worked well for Japan—that is, until recently.”

Shinzo Abe: the Catalyst

Abe became the longest-serving prime minister in Japan's parliamentary history of 130 years. In a country where prime ministers have served an average of two years, Abe remained in office for close to nine years in two terms: 2006-2007 and 2012-2020. Abe moved to make some transformative changes in Japan's defence and security policy—what defence analyst Christopher Hughes has dubbed the 'Abe Doctrine'.²¹ This became possible given his extraordinarily long rule, his conservatism and nationalist agenda, the hold of his party in the national parliament, and the broad support from the junior partner, the *Komeito*. His rule coincided with a deterioration of the security environment. China's military designs and North Korea's growing nuclear and missile capabilities helped the Abe government carry out some transformative changes which had been debated many times before him but never implemented.

For example, in his first term, part of Abe's plan was to amend the Constitution including Article 9, to remove the constraints and allow Japan to take a proactive defence role. Then, within a year, he upgraded the Defence Agency into a ministry, marking a transformative moment for defence. However, it was during Abe's second term that fundamental security strategies and defence policy changes were introduced rapidly. He lifted bans on arms exports, established in 1976. The 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security made legal what is broadly known as "collective self-defence".²² A highly controversial state secret law was also passed in 2013 and implemented in 2014, aiming to protect state secrets. However, since these changes had broad support from most LDP parliamentarians and some of them were already being discussed when the opposition DPJ was in power, Abe faced little political opposition.

One of Abe's other strategies was to bring together like-minded nations in a range of bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral formats to form strategic coalitions on specific issues. After all, Japan alone would not have the capacity to ensure that a rules-based order continued and that all disputes could be settled in a peaceful manner, free from coercion. He brought India to the centre of Japan's foreign policy map by visiting the country in 2007 and giving a powerful speech before the Parliament.

His successors kept up the momentum, and when he returned to power in 2012, the bilateral relationship rose to new heights.²³ Abe was also a tour de force in establishing plurilateral frameworks such as the Quad, initially in the mid-2000s and during its rebirth in 2017. He was the driver behind the vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", now widely accepted by most regional powers, the US, and many other states in Europe and elsewhere.

Prime Minister Kishida and the Road Ahead

When Abe stepped down in 2020, his successor Yoshihide Suga followed Abe's broad thinking on foreign policy, including in defence and security matters. Current PM Kishida, who succeeded Suga in 2021, also broadly endorses Abe's defence and security policies.²⁴ It is noteworthy that Kishida became the longest-serving foreign minister of post-war Japan, and also had a stint as defence minister in the Abe Cabinet. Japan observers expect a continuity in defence and security policy.

Although Kishida, like Abe, is from the LDP, the two come from different traditions: Abe belongs to a conservative faction that takes a hawkish approach to defence policy, while Kishida comes from a more liberal faction that believes in a moderate line. Kishida's electoral district is in Hiroshima, one of the two sites of US atomic bombings in August 1945 and thus the heartland of Japan's pacifism. Despite his political background and electoral base, however, it is doubtful that he will backtrack on any of the defence and security policies made in the last decade. Indeed, Kishida will further solidify Japan's relationship with the US and key Indo-Pacific partners and take a more proactive defence stance, as he has shown in dealing with the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

As noted earlier, the Kishida government has already announced a revision of some of the key strategies adopted several years ago to adjust to the rapidly changing geo-political circumstances in Japan's immediate neighbourhood and beyond. The past consensus on 1-percent-of-GDP defence spending is also likely to be revisited, and abrogated, given a new arms race in Asia.²⁵ While the liberal LDP group has always regarded the limit as sacrosanct, Kishida, like Abe, is likely not to be bound by that tradition.

To be sure, Japan's overall dependency on the US will continue, even though US resources are declining. Furthermore, the Biden administration is likely to shift its attention to Europe in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. For Tokyo, China's expansionist designs and North Korea's nuclear sword hang over Japan's head. It is therefore plausible that Japan may move away from "deterrence for Japan by the US", only towards "deterrence for Japan by Japan"— at least partially.²⁶ Thus the need for credible missile defence capability and the upgrade of existing defence assets.

Conclusion

There is no denying that Japan's defence and security policy has undergone a significant transformation since the end of the Cold War, and more substantive changes are certain to happen this year. The shifts so far, however, have been incremental and transparent, and Japan has not crossed the Rubicon of its pacifist commitment.²⁷

The Constitution remains intact and so does its peace clause. Japan has remained a non-nuclear state by largely adhering to its three non-nuclear principles. Its defence capability remains geared towards 'defensive' rather than 'offensive' operations. It is also unlikely that Japan's defence spending will double anytime soon, despite this being an objective of LDP politicians. Nor is Japan going to go nuclear anytime soon or host nuclear weapons facilities on its soil, despite discussions underway on possibly hosting US nuclear weapons.²⁸

Although its security dependency on the US will continue and strengthen, at the same time, Japan has already diversified defence cooperation and is densifying security ties with some key countries. These include the signing of a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Australia in January 2022 and the establishment of closer defence partnerships with European nations while expanding security and defence ties with like-minded partner nations in the Indo-Pacific, such as India. [ORF](#)

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