

Kishida the Accelerator: Japan's Defense Evolution After Abe

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's January 2023 summit with President Biden capped one of the most significant months for Japanese defense policy in decades. On December 16, Kishida's government announced a strikingly ambitious revision of Japan's national security strategy—the first since 2013. Part of a package of three major security documents also including Japan's new national defense strategy and defense buildup plan, last December's announcements are as remarkable for the substantive ambition and breadth of the pledges contained within as for what they reveal about rapidly worsening concerns in Japan about regional and global geopolitical and geo-economic trends.

Confronting what they call “the most severe and complex security environment since the end of WWII” and stating that the world is at a “historical inflection point,” Japan's new strategies call for “fundamentally reinforcing Japan's capabilities,” “reinforc[ing] joint deterrence and response capability of the Japan-US alliance,” and “reinforce[ing] collaboration with like-minded countries ... to cooperate in upholding and reinforcing a free and open international order.”¹ Included within the three documents are, inter alia, two headline-grabbing and unprecedented pledges: to surge Japan's official defense budget—for decades unofficially pegged to 1 percent of GDP—by nearly two-thirds by 2027, and to acquire long-range missiles capable of striking military targets

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within adversary territory in response to an attack, or so-called “counter-strike capabilities” (*hangeki nōryoku*).

Japan has made historic commitments to surge defense spending and develop “counter-strike”

In mid-January, Kishida was in Washington, where bilateral cabinet- and summit-level meetings collectively asserted the “convergence” of Japan’s new strategies with those of its US treaty ally. The shared goals were “bolstering deterrence” and putting forth a “vision of a modernized Alliance postured to prevail in a new era of strategic competition.”² Reflecting the centrality of democratic treaty allies—especially Japan—to successive US administrations’ goals in the Indo-Pacific, Biden praised Japan’s new strategies and reaffirmed that Washington “is fully, thoroughly, and completely committed to the alliance ... and more importantly, to Japan’s defense.”³

With the release of Japan’s “three documents” and the Biden-Kishida summit now in the rearview mirror, this article reflects on their significance, with particular emphasis on three questions surrounding Japan’s defense policy. First, what do these developments tell us about changing perspectives in Tokyo on Japan’s security environment, its objectives, and the ways and means by which it seeks to achieve them? Especially striking when compared to Japan’s 2013 national security strategy, the 2022 documents reveal far more severe concerns in Japan about the recent activities of China, North Korea, and Russia—amplified by a judgment that the aggression against Ukraine by a permanent member of the UN National Security Council has, as Kishida put it in Washington, “marked the complete end of the post-Cold War world.”⁴ Japan’s leaders aim to, inter alia, ramp up defense spending to develop new capabilities—most notably, counter-strike—and to invest heavily in long-neglected priorities (e.g., munition and parts stockpiles; passive base defenses; unmanned systems; cyber and space capabilities) in order to bolster deterrence and resilience amid a rapidly worsening threat environment. Notably, Japan’s alliance with Washington remains central, and the documents make clear that Tokyo will also continue past efforts to deepen defense ties with other US allies and partners.

The documents reveal far more severe concerns... about... China, North Korea, and Russia

that the aggression against Ukraine by a permanent member of the UN National Security Council has, as Kishida put it in Washington, “marked the complete end of the post-Cold War world.”⁴ Japan’s leaders aim to, inter alia, ramp up defense spending to develop new capabilities—most notably, counter-strike—and to invest heavily in long-neglected priorities (e.g., munition and parts stockpiles; passive base defenses; unmanned systems; cyber and space capabilities) in order to bolster deterrence and resilience amid a rapidly worsening threat environment. Notably, Japan’s alliance with Washington remains central, and the documents make clear that Tokyo will also continue past efforts to deepen defense ties with other US allies and partners.

Second, do the “three documents” mark a fundamental disjuncture in Japan’s defense posture, as so many have asserted? The documents in aggregate

undoubtedly mark a major new chapter in Japan's 21st century defense policy evolution, especially the historic commitments to surge defense spending and develop "counter-strike" capabilities. Outside Japan, however, much commentary has lacked sufficient contextualization and historical baselining, which can confuse more than it enlightens—especially when it highlights only perceived change. Beyond widespread misreading of Japan's actual announcements—e.g., misleading assertions that Japan's defense budget has "doubled" (it has not and will not)—and pervasive media headlines recycling tired and misleading memes of Japan "abandoning pacifism," much recent commentary has overlooked important continuities. Crucially, Japan's new defense strategy highlights the same three pillars as its 2013 predecessor—bolstering Japan's own capabilities, the US-Japan alliance, and ties with other US allies and partners—decades-old core principles of Japan's remarkable self-restraint concerning the circumstances under which the JSDF can use force and self-imposed bans on certain capabilities (e.g., possessing nuclear weapons, bombers, or ICBMs) persist. Additionally, much is to-be-determined regarding pledges made in the "three documents," which are not legally binding commitments, plans, or legislation, and have not yet been fully resourced. Numerous stars will need to align for the national security ambitions expressed by the Kishida government last December to be efficiently, effectively and fully implemented over the next five to ten years.

Lastly, what do the three documents tell us about Japan's trajectory after long-serving former prime minister Shinzo Abe (2006-2007; 2012-2020)—the individual to whom so much of the past decade's ambitious reforms were attributed and who has been out of government for over two years—was shockingly and tragically assassinated last July? The developments of December 2022-January 2023 under Kishida—a politician widely labeled a "dove" (in contrast to Abe as an alleged "hawk") for much of the past decade—provide only the latest evidence that the forces driving Japan's 21st century national security evolution have always been much greater than any single individual leader.⁵ They are both a testament to Abe's remarkable foreign policy legacy, and an indication that Japan is moving beyond it.

Forces driving Japan's security evolution have always been much greater than any individual leader

Japan's Worsening Security Environment

The core driver of Japan's latest and most striking 21st century defense policy shift is its changing external environment. Japan's new national security and defense

strategies as well as PM Kishida's own rhetoric reflect an increasingly pessimistic and mainstream view in Tokyo of a region and world that, amidst "historical changes in power balances and intensifying geopolitical competitions," present Japan with "the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II."⁶ Nine years after Japan's first national security strategy (December 2013), its leaders have judged that their region and the world have fundamentally changed; accordingly, Japan's defense posture, policies, and perhaps most significantly, even its defense spending, must adapt. While highlighting the importance of active diplomacy and cooperation to shape a positive international environment, the National Security Strategy (NSS) also calls for "prepar[ing] for the worst-case scenario by fundamentally reinforcing Japan's defense capabilities."⁷

Destabilizing developments in 2022 contributed to Japan's striking sense of urgency

Though many of Japanese leaders' concerns about a worsening security environment significantly predate 2022, profoundly destabilizing developments in Northeast Asia and Eastern Europe last year contributed to the substance and striking sense of urgency contained within the "three documents," as well as, it seems, the limited backlash among the public. As Kishida noted in speeches in December 2022 and January 2023, in the

wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, "the international community is at a historic crossroads," and "the free, open, and stable international order ... is now in grave danger."⁸ At the January US-Japan 2 + 2, Tokyo signed on to US framing of a "new era of strategic competition."⁹

The 2022 NSS reveals an unprecedentedly expansive conceptualization of Japan's national security, including a new section on "economic security."¹⁰ With a particular focus on defense, this section briefly summarizes changes between Japan's 2013 and 2022 strategies about Japan's evolving perceptions vis-à-vis the three neighboring nation-states that dominate Japanese national security discourse today: China, North Korea and Russia.

China: "An Unprecedented Strategic Challenge"

Deepening worries in Tokyo about many of Beijing's policies were already apparent in Japan's 2013 strategy, which noted "concerns" about China's surging military expenditures, rapid military buildup, and "attempts to change the status quo by coercion."¹¹ The latter referred especially to China's increasingly provocative assertion after 2012 of its vast and controversial sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas, including para-naval operations in Japan-administered territorial waters around the contested Senkaku Islands—which Beijing also claims as the Diaoyu Islands.

By the time of Japan's 2022 strategy, nine additional years of Beijing's surging investment in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including rapid advances in developing a large blue-water navy and massive arsenal of conventionally-tipped ballistic and cruise missiles able to strike Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and US bases in Japan, had accelerated a major shift in the regional balance of power. In the mid-2010s, Beijing also constructed and militarized artificial islands in the South China Sea and ramped up provocative activities in the waters and air around the contested Senkakus. More recently, the PLA has launched a major expansion and modernization of its nuclear weapons and delivery systems (of which Japan has none).

Additionally, whereas circumstances between Beijing and Taipei nine years ago were sufficiently stable that Japan's 2013 strategy highlighted their "deepen[ing]" relationship,¹² since President Tsai Ing-wen's 2016 election the PRC has ramped up coercive pressure on Taiwan, including militarily. In 2022 alone, the PLA conducted large-scale exercises designed to simulate a blockade around Taiwan (which included five missiles that provocatively splashed down in waters several dozen miles from Japan's westernmost inhabited islands); repeatedly sent military aircraft—including bombers—into Taiwan's air defense identification zone; and frequently crossed the so-called median line, an informal boundary between the two sides.

Against this backdrop, Japan's new strategy for the first time labels China's policies "an unprecedented and [its] greatest-ever strategic challenge" (*kore made ni nai saidai no senryakutekina chōsen*).¹³ Though intra-coalition negotiations eliminated proposed language to call China a "threat" (*kyōi*) in the final document—that language was reserved for North Korea's behavior—much of Japanese defense planners' focus is now clearly on Beijing.

Much of Japan's focus...is now clearly on Beijing

North Korea: "a grave and imminent threat"

At the time of Japan's 2013 national security strategy, North Korea was already seen as posing a clear danger to Japan. Pyongyang had already linked threatening rhetoric with tests of dozens of missiles and three nuclear weapons between 2006-2013. In the nine years since, however, Japan's concerns have grown significantly. Between 2014 and 2022, North Korea tested nearly 200 missiles—demonstrating an increasingly large, diverse, accurate, and survivable arsenal newly capable of striking the continental US—and three more nuclear weapons, including a self-described thermonuclear test in 2017. That year also witnessed both a major war scare between Pyongyang and Washington and a North Korea missile

launch over Japan. In 2022, North Korea shattered its previous record for annual missile tests, launching roughly 70—including multiple ICBM tests and another provocative launch over Japan.

Accordingly, Japan's new NSS identifies North Korea's "military activities" as "an even more grave and imminent threat to Japan's national security strategy than ever before." Beyond concerns about possible North Korean aggression directly against Japan or the United States, the document also notes the "confrontation" between South and North Korea—an indication of concern about worsening tensions on the Peninsula.¹⁴

Russia and "The Complete End of the Post-Cold War World"

Compared to its 2013 predecessor, arguably the most striking change in Japan's assessment of its worsening security environment in the 2022 NSS concerns Russia. Whereas the earlier strategy—released months before Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea—emphasized the importance of Tokyo "cooperating" with Moscow, the new strategy was released amidst the shocking brutality of Russia's war of choice against Ukraine, nuclear threats, and an uptick in Russia-China joint military patrols in areas surrounding Japan.

The consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine for Japanese leaders' impressions of geopolitical trends and sense of national security have been profound. The 2022 NSS states that "The foundational rules that shape the international order have been broken by Russia's invasion (*shinryaku*)."¹⁵ At a January speech in DC, Kishida drove home the point, stating that it "marked the complete end of the post-Cold War world." Drawing a link between Japan's own national security and war in Europe against a fellow democracy by a UN Security Council permanent member he added, "If we let this unilateral change of the status quo by force go unchallenged, it will happen elsewhere in the world, including Asia."¹⁶

Japan's new defense strategy also reveals additional sobering lessons from the war and the international community's response: that it was Ukraine's "insufficient" defense capabilities that "failed to discourage and deter Russian aggression."¹⁷ It states that Japan must do more "to avoid inviting foreign aggression," and signal to "its ally and like-minded countries" that it will contribute more to efforts to deter "changes to the status quo by force."¹⁸

Enter Japan's new strategies.

Japan's New Strategies

The new December 2022 strategies and outcomes from the January 2023 meetings in Washington DC reflect a re-evaluation by Japan's leaders of what

Tokyo must do to more effectively enhance deterrence in response to a rapidly worsening security environment, a changing balance-of-power in East Asia, and a “new era of strategic competition.” They are the latest and most striking manifestation of a judgment shared across successive administrations: that Tokyo must adopt a more proactive role in “deter[ring] contingencies and attempts to unilaterally change the status quo in Japan and its vicinity.” The stated goals in the 2022 NSS are, *inter alia*, to ensure Japan’s “sovereignty and independence, “an international environment in which its own economy can grow,” and to “secure a stable, predictable, free and open international order based on the rule of law.”¹⁹ The NDS’ three primary objectives are to “shape a security environment not accepting unilateral changes to the status quo by force”; cooperate with the US and like-minded countries to deter and, if necessary, rapidly respond to, any unilateral changes to the status quo to “prevent further escalation into an invasion of Japan”; and, if an invasion occurs, take primary responsibility to “disrupt and defeat” it.²⁰

In January, Tokyo and Washington jointly acknowledged “a new era of strategic competition,” affirmed “support of shared values and norms that underpin the international rules-based order,” and committed “to oppose any unilateral change to the status quo by force regardless of the location in the world.”²¹ Though rhetoric about convergence in the allies’ more general national security strategies overlooks key differences—especially concerning the relative importance placed on free trade and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as necessary to backstop a “rules-based” Free and Open Indo-Pacific—in terms of defense strategies there is indeed remarkable complementarity. Both Tokyo and Washington appear in full agreement on the exigency of accelerating joint efforts to bolster deterrence along the same three tracks at the heart of Japan’s 2013 NSS: strengthening Japan’s own defense capabilities; improving the joint deterrence and response capabilities of the US-Japan alliance; and deepening Japan’s defense ties with US treaty allies and partners.²²

Track One: Bolstering Japan’s Own Defense Capabilities

Based at least partially on a judgement that it was Ukraine’s “insufficient defense capability” that “failed to discourage and deter” Russia’s aggression both Japan’s new defense strategy and leaders’ rhetoric since its December release contain strikingly sober assessments of shortcomings in JSDF capabilities, coupled with recognition that major new funding will be necessary to address them. This acknowledgment is further reflected in the stated objectives and timeline of Japan’s new defense strategy: to by 2027 be “able to take the primary responsibility for dealing with invasions against its nation, and disrupt and defeat such threats while gaining support of its ally and others”; and by roughly 2032 “to

better attain this defense objective” and acquire capabilities sufficient to “to disrupt and defeat invasions against its nation much earlier and at a further distance.”²³ The apparent implied judgment? Japan does not currently have sufficient independent capability to defend itself.

A planned surge in the defense budget is a profoundly significant development

Distinct from both Japan’s 2013 strategy and the last (2018) National Defense Program Guidelines, the 2022 strategies contain a potent and unprecedented enabler: a planned surge in the core defense budget of nearly two-thirds by 2027. This is a profoundly significant development. Indeed, one major—but vastly underappreciated—storyline of the 2012-2020 period was the extent to which, despite all the Abe government’s accomplishments in the national security space and widespread asser-

tions of the JSDF’s “fundamental transformation,” increases to defense spending were marginal; Japan’s official budget remained around 1 percent of GDP.²⁴ The net result was that an otherwise ambitious and cogent 2013 strategy was vastly under-resourced when Abe left office in 2020.²⁵ Accordingly, questions about JSDF readiness, resilience, and sustainability in a conflict have repeatedly arisen due to, *inter alia*, insufficient manpower, munition and parts stockpiles; passive base defenses; and cyber, space, unmanned, and artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities.²⁶ Supplementary budgets the past couple years had already quietly raised effective spending well over 1 percent of GDP, but the newly announced plan to surge investments through 2027 will take this to another level.²⁷

Though widespread claims that in December the Kishida government pledged to *double* Japan’s defense budget are misleading, the actual expressed commitment—an increase of 60-65 percent (from 5.4 trillion yen in 2022 to 8.9 trillion in 2027) for a combined five-year total of roughly 43 trillion yen—is nevertheless historic, profoundly ambitious, and potentially transformative.²⁸ That official defense budget will be supplemented by additional “national security-related” spending (e.g., Japan Coast Guard; civilian R&D and public infrastructure)—some of which, it should be noted, will not be new. It is the *combination* of the two that is expected to approach the politically symbolic level of 2 percent of *current* GDP within five years.

In his January 2023 policy speech, alongside defense spending Kishida highlighted three additional priorities as part of Japan’s effort to achieve “fundamental reinforcement of defense capabilities” (*bōeiryoku no bapponteki kyōka*): acquiring “counter-strike” capabilities, improving cyber capabilities, and further bolstering defense posture near Japan’s southwestern islands.²⁹ Although the Kishida government’s unprecedented December pledge to acquire long-range “counterstrike”

capabilities was unsurprising—more robust “stand-off” defense capabilities have been discussed for years and mentioned in past official documents—it is nevertheless a landmark moment. It marks the first time that Japan's government has formally and unambiguously asserted that the ability to respond to an attack by launching strikes on *military* targets in adversary territory is necessary for deterrence and Japan's self-defense.

The three documents and government explanations express a clear logic: the transformative “qualitative and quantitative” advances in “regional” (read: China's and North Korea's) nuclear and missile capabilities mean that hypothetical “saturation attacks” could easily overwhelm Japan's existing missile defense systems; accordingly, effective deterrence now necessitates the ability to interrupt the launches at their source.³⁰ Though the idea of possibly striking even military targets on another country's territory remains controversial, after a year witnessing PRC missiles splashing down in Japan's EEZ east of Taiwan and over 70 North Korean missile tests, one of which flew over Japan, a bare majority of the Japanese public supported counterstrike capabilities, provided they were exclusively for “self-defense.”³¹

Though Japan's government has for years highlighted the importance of bolstering capabilities in new domains such as space, cyber and electromagnetic waves, last December's strategy also for the first time calls for adopting “active cyber defense” (*nōdōteki saibā bōgyō*).³² It also continues to emphasize the need to improve JSDF and JCG presence in Japan's southwestern islands, a remote but inhabited area of Okinawa prefecture that is close both to the contested Senkaku islands and Taiwan. One other historic commitment under Track One: Japan has pledged to establish a permanent joint headquarters for its ground, maritime and air self-defense forces—something which many outside experts have long advocated.³³

Track Two: Strengthening the US-Japan Alliance

Enhancing cooperation with Japan's sole treaty ally also receives significant attention in Japan's new defense strategy. As an indicator of the alliance's continued centrality, after identifying Japan's four aforementioned priorities from “track one” in the January 2023 policy speech, Kishida added, “With respect to all that I just mentioned, the Japan-US Alliance is the anchor.”³⁴

At the January 2023 US-Japan meetings, Washington offered robust support for Japan's new strategies, planned defense budget increases, and procurement plans. The allies also jointly expressed their shared views of a “new era of strategic competition” and China's behavior as the “the greatest strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.”³⁵ Notable outcomes included the Biden Administration explicitly extending the US' Article V treaty commitment to

“attacks to, from, or within space”—albeit with a vague caveat (“in certain circumstances”). Additionally, it offered a full-throated endorsement of Japan’s pursuit of counterstrike capabilities and pledged to “deepen bilateral cooperation toward [its] effective employment.”³⁶

These commitments are significant, and counter-strike in particular may require unprecedented cooperation and adjustments to the alliance’s decades-old “shield/spear” division-of-labor in a contingency, under which the JSDF traditionally focuses on fending off attacks against Japanese territory, while the US military carries out offensive operations. But they also reflect the decades-old trend of the US-Japan alliance becoming ever closer as the security environment worsens. Even when it comes to counter-strike, for the foreseeable future Tokyo will rely heavily on the US for weapons (e.g., Tomahawks), intelligence, targeting, and damage assessment. Meanwhile, as concerns the stated priority of deterring “unilateral changes to the status quo by force”—often code for Beijing’s designs on the Senkakus or Taiwan—allied efforts underway since at least 2010 to bolster deterrence around Japan’s southwestern islands are accelerating. So, too, reportedly, is bilateral contingency planning.³⁷

Track Three: Deepening Defense Ties with Third Parties

The third major track of Japan’s national security strategy since 2013, also reaffirmed in the new defense strategy, is Tokyo’s ongoing effort to bolster defense ties with major US treaty allies and partners. Together with Washington and through its own policies and outreach, Japan has supported and complemented efforts across several US administrations to deepen a multilateral “web” of security partnerships across the Indo-Pacific and with Europe. Under the Biden administration’s preferred label of “integrated deterrence,” these US-led efforts are accelerating, with significant support from Tokyo.

Kishida has picked up where his predecessors left off, including major new announcements with key US allies even before the three documents’ December release. For example, during 2022 Tokyo and Canberra signed a reciprocal access agreement (January), which will greatly facilitate visits and exercises involving the two militaries; a major new joint security declaration (October); and joined Washington for the first-ever coordinated trilateral asset protection mission (November). In December, Canberra and Washington invited Japan to “increase its participation” in force posture initiatives in Australia.³⁸

Though Japan’s efforts to bolster defense ties with US allies in Europe are also not new,³⁹ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has introduced greater urgency. Last year, Kishida became the first sitting Japanese prime minister to attend a NATO summit, and in December agreed to partner with the UK and Italy to develop a next-generation fighter jet—Japan’s most ambitious military program with

non-US partners ever. Immediately before his January 2023 summit with Biden, Kishida visited the capitals of all five other G7 members. Concrete fruits included a new defense agreement with Italy and yet another historic reciprocal access agreement—with the UK.

Japan's accelerating efforts to deepen ties with US allies in Europe are not just about democratic and G7 solidarity in response to Russia's aggression, however. As Kishida noted in Washington, "it is absolutely imperative for Japan, the United States, and Europe to stand united in managing our respective relationship with China [sic]."⁴⁰ This trend of deepening Japanese defense ties with US Indo-Pacific—including South Korea, with whom Japan has long had a tense relationship—and European allies and partners is also accelerating. For example, the past year witnessed a trilateral missile defense exercise with Washington and Seoul, yet another new 2 + 2 dialogue between Tokyo and a US ally (Manila), the first deployment of JASDF fighters to the Philippines, and Japan's first-ever aerial combat exercise with key "Quad" partner India.

Amidst Significant Change, Important Continuities

That the vision encapsulated in Japan's historic "three documents" reflects striking ambition is clear. Japan's pledge to surge defense spending and acquire "counterstrike" capabilities are particularly important indicators of Tokyo's seriousness about ramping up its defense capabilities in response to what Japanese leaders clearly see as a rapidly worsening security environment. Together with a push for active cyber defense and other new capabilities and investments, this is clearly a new era for Japan's defense strategy.

However, a tendency among many commentators to focus selectively—and sometimes superficially—on perceived change while overlooking essential continuities in Japan's basic defense trajectory and core positions and policies often oversimplifies a more complicated and nuanced reality. Though this tendency is hardly new—exaggerated claims of "radical" change in Japan's defense posture under former PM Abe were especially pervasive—it nevertheless remains problematic and risks inappropriately skewing perceptions, and expectations, about the pace and scale of reforms.⁴¹

Despite the understandable public attention on the Kishida Cabinet's historic pledges, Japan's reform trajectory mostly continues along the same three tracks highlighted in the 2013 national security strategy—albeit at a significantly accelerated pace enabled by large increases in defense spending. For all the talk of

A tendency to focus on perceived change overlooks essential continuities in Japan's defense

“independent capabilities,” the US-Japan alliance remains central. Japan’s leaders continue to exercise remarkable self-restraint by limiting the circumstances under which the JSDF can engage in combat to those in which its own national security is fundamentally threatened and by eschewing “offensive” capabilities long considered unconstitutional. The proactive threat or use of kinetic force in pursuit of Japan’s self-interest or to change undesirable status quos (sometimes called “compellence”) remains fundamentally anathema. And no JSDF member has ever died in combat.

Indeed, though the decision to pursue “counterstrike” capabilities is undoubtedly historic, lost in much of the commentary are two important facts: First, such capabilities have been considered constitutional since the 1950s, provided there is no “alternative means” to defend against incoming missiles. Until last December, eschewal of them was a *policy choice*. Second, the Kishida government has explicitly disallowed preemptive strikes, which is why the capabilities Japan has are literally called “counter-strike.”⁴² Kishida himself asserted a continued commitment, echoed in the documents themselves, to what Japan’s government refers to as “exclusive self-defense” (*senshu bōei*). For example, when asked at his December 16 press conference Kishida replied that “Japan will only use force after it has suffered an armed attack” (*aite kara buryoku kōgeki wo uketa toki hajimete bōeiryoku wo kōshi*).⁴³ Though the definition of “preemptive” is notoriously fuzzy, sequencing articulated in the NDS suggests that the adversary would have had to at the very least made the decision to launch an attack on Japan before a counterstrike could be allowed.⁴⁴

To be sure, there are legitimate questions about how counter-strike will be operationalized in practice, especially as Japan acquires US-made Tomahawks and develops its own long-range missiles. And there is no denying that long-range missiles constitute a “threshold capability” that reflects a historic judgment repeatedly avoided for nearly 70 years: that possessing the ability to strike back against military assets in an adversary’s territory in response to aggression is now necessary for Japan to defend itself.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the policy of “exclusive self-defense” has never been about only what *capabilities* Japan possesses (or not), but also the circumstances under which it is acceptable to *employ* them. At least for now, a core principle appears to persist, even if it is (yet again) stretched. Undoubtedly, as counterstrike, active cyber defense, and other new capabilities come online this will be an important space to watch.

More broadly, the so-called Article 9 “peace clause” of Japan’s 1947 constitution, whose revision would seem necessary for a more radical, unambiguous departure from Japan’s longstanding commitment to “exclusive self-defense,” remains untouched.⁴⁶ Accordingly, as the NSS itself notes, any JSDF “use of force”—including “counter-strikes”—must still meet three longstanding threshold conditions (*san yōken*): Japan’s “national survival” must be threatened

by a “clear danger”; no alternative means of addressing the threat exist; and whatever force Japan uses must be limited to “the minimum necessary.”⁴⁷ Despite Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Moscow’s nuclear saber-rattling, and deep concerns in Tokyo about Beijing’s and Pyongyang’s rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, Japan continues to eschew its own nuclear deterrent—officially considered constitutional, if “defensive”—and key capabilities long officially deemed “offensive” and therefore unconstitutional: ICBMs, strike carriers, and bombers.

A Long Road to Full Implementation

While these key continuities should limit some of the illusion of radical, although still very significant, change contained in Japan’s new strategic documents, the NSS itself also ends with a candid, if largely ignored, acknowledgment: that the strategy’s objectives “will be achieved only after its contents have been executed.”⁴⁸ To fully implement the strategies, manifold political, budgetary, legislative, and other stars will need to align over the next 5-10 years. In many ways, releasing the documents themselves—a decision of a Cabinet self-appointed by Kishida—was but the first, if extremely significant, step.

To be sure, Japan’s three documents represent a clear and authoritative signal of the Kishida government’s political and policy intent. But these documents are not legally-binding commitments, plans, or legislation that have received the imprimatur of Japan’s National Diet, much less been fully resourced through through 2027, much less 2032. Put simply, a motley assortment of factors will determine how much of the Kishida government’s December 2022 vision will ultimately be realized between now and then, and how quickly.

Over the next five years, especially from a US perspective, and beyond the obvious aforementioned implications of how “counterstrike capabilities” will be developed and operationalized for the alliance itself, five additional spaces will be important to watch:

Resourcing

As of this writing, there is remarkable optimism in Tokyo that the government’s pledge to increase the official defense budget by 65 percent by 2027 is achievable. The funding plans under consideration—to include tax increases, debt spending, expenditure cuts, and moving resources around from other budgets—are gradually coming into focus, and the government’s FY2023 request for a whopping 26 percent increase looks set to be approved. But things may get harder over time, and how politically and fiscally sustainable the planned surge will be in the long-run is an open question.

To fully implement the strategies, manifold stars will need to align over the next 5-10 years

The Kishida government has postponed some important debates about resourcing, and some tax hikes under consideration appear deeply unpopular, even within the LDP. Last December a striking 87 percent of the public felt Kishida had failed to explain the plan sufficiently.⁴⁹ Especially in a country facing severe demographic headwinds and the highest public debt burden among major economies, current and future administrations may have their work cut out for themselves.

The challenges are not only economic and fiscal. Significant political capital may also be necessary to raise taxes and pass new relevant legislation—capital that Kishida, with a Cabinet support rating stuck under 40 percent since October 2022, does not obviously have. Given the 5-10-year time horizon, future cabinets may have different spending priorities and/or comfort levels concerning options for raising revenue (e.g., tax increases). To be sure, Japan may achieve its ambitious defense spending targets, as planned, and sustain them thereafter. But it is not inevitable.

Opportunity Costs

Especially since the political debate about how to resource the planned defense budget increase is unsettled, it will be important to keep an eye on the ultimate source of the money. Some combination of raising debt, tax increases, and cuts to other budgets seem likely. Theoretically, they could yield negative net consequences for Japan's leadership stability and/or other aspects of its national security strategy. Possibilities include a more inwardly-focused political leadership and/or reduced resources available for other foreign policy priorities of interest to Washington—e.g., support for rebuilding Ukraine or capacity building in Southeast Asia.

Coalition Political Dynamics

An oft-ignored subplot of Japan's 21st century defense policy trajectory is the significant role that Komeito, the LDP's junior coalition partner whenever in power (since 1999), and its pacifistic support base have repeatedly played in forcing LDP leaders to dial back their national security ambitions. Perhaps the most significant recent examples are Komeito's effective sinking of the LDP's vision for fundamentally revising Article 9 and its imposition of relatively strict limitations on exercise of the (UN-sanctioned) right of collective self-defense during Abe's second prime ministership (2012-2020).⁵⁰ Though a dramatic worsening of Japan's security environment caused Komeito to ultimately support "counter-strike" in principle in 2022, it still played—and is all but sure to continue to play—an important role imposing conditions and shaping that and other aspects of Japan's new defense strategy in practice. For example, Komeito forced the LDP to declare that preemptive strikes would not be allowed and

blocked reference to China as a “threat.”⁵¹ When it comes to setting policy, resourcing defense budgets, passing new secrecy- and security-relevant legislation, or a possible future LDP attempt to revise Article 9, it will be important to watch intra-coalition negotiations on key issues. The actual precise *substance* of policy decisions and legislation—not just the superficial headlines—matters.

Alliance Command and Control

Unlike the US-ROK alliance or NATO, the US and Japan have neither explicit reciprocal alliance obligations—the 1960 Security Treaty’s Article V applies to “an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan” (emphasis added)—nor a joint operational command. As the security environment worsens and Japan pursues new capabilities (e.g. counterstrike), some leading analysts have highlighted the challenges that parallel and separate command structures could present for alliance coordination in a fast-moving 21st century crisis.⁵² Though Japan has announced plans to establish a permanent joint operational headquarters by 2027, it does not currently have a US counterpart in Japan. And though some experts have advocated for a bilateral operational command and integrated military operations, recent Japanese media reports suggest that no such arrangement is under consideration.⁵³ Whether, how, and how quickly Japan and the US establish and/or modify these arrangements will be a significant variable in the alliance’s future evolution.

The Taiwan Strait

As regional balances of power continue to shift and concerns in both Tokyo and Washington about Taiwan have surged, there is increased awareness of the significant—arguably critical—role Japan has to play in cross-Strait deterrence, or an effective US-led response if deterrence fails. Especially over the past two years, Japanese political leaders, defense planners, and even the general public are increasingly attuned to the importance of the Taiwan Strait for Japan’s national security.⁵⁴ Both Japan’s December 2022 documents and January’s Biden-Kishida statement highlight “the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”⁵⁵

Although for complicated constitutional, political and other reasons Japan’s postwar leaders have historically resisted robust discussions with the US concerning the alliance’s role vis-à-vis Taiwan, accelerating efforts over the past decade-plus to bolster deterrence around Japan’s southwest islands have clear implications for alliance-centered deterrence and response options in the nearby Taiwan Strait today.⁵⁶ Recent media reports, though unconfirmable, suggest US-Japan discussions and planning specifically for a “Taiwan contingency” may be advancing.⁵⁷ How both US-Japan discussions and planning and outreach to third parties advance in the years ahead will likely have significant

implications for both Japan's and the alliance's role in deterring "unilateral changes to the status quo through force," and contributing to regional security more generally.

Japan After, and Beyond, Abe

A recurring theme in commentary about Japan's security strategy and defense policy during the 2012-2020 tenure of Japan's longest-ever serving prime minister, the late Abe Shinzo, was identification of the then-prime minister as a uniquely "dominant," "transformative," and "hawkish" (or for critics from the left, even "militarist") political leader. The extent to which Abe was *individually* given credit for Japan's national security reforms while in office was arguably without precedent in the post-Cold War period. Though he was undoubtedly a remarkably visionary, assertive and influential prime minister, this pervasive "all-powerful Abe" (*Abe ikkyō*) narrative within and outside Japan often distracted from the much larger international *and domestic* forces motivating, enabling *and constraining* his government's ambitious national security agenda.⁵⁸

For all Abe's many accomplishments, often overlooked were two important realities: First, he built on and accelerated a national security reform agenda already well underway when he (and his LDP) returned to power in December 2012.⁵⁹ Second, far from being "all-powerful," by his own admission Abe left office having failed to achieve key goals fundamental to his pursuit of a more robust transformation of Japan's national security posture (e.g., Article 9 revision). Widespread narratives of "radical transformation" and "dominance" during the Abe years obfuscated the fact that even many of his concrete achievements fell far short of his original ambitions due to internal political opposition. This includes both his signature accomplishment—the 2014 Article 9 reinterpretation to enable collective self-defense under "limited" conditions—and increases to defense spending, which remained around 1 percent of GDP throughout his tenure.⁶⁰

Against this baseline, it is revealing that it has been Kishida—often contrasted as a "dove" against Abe's "hawk"—who has pushed through an unprecedentedly ambitious and proactive security strategy for Japan, despite far lower public support than Abe's cabinets typically enjoyed. Kishida has already achieved two major goals that proved elusive for Abe: a surge in Japan's defense budget and getting Komeito to approve "counterstrike" capabilities. Abe's efforts while in power—and after—played a major role in paving the way, but it actually happened under Kishida, and with remarkably limited public backlash. In addition to his Cabinet's historic decision to directly address the Achilles heel of Japan's national security strategy between 2013 and 2021—the disconnect between stated policy ambition and actual resourcing—in these latest documents, his

government's robust response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ambitious and energetic summit diplomacy, and major new defense agreements with the US, Australia, UK and other major democratic partners make clear that Kishida is charting his own "proactive" foreign policy and global leadership agenda. (Even the short-lived Suga administration (2020-2021) also championed an ambitious national security agenda, including on economic security and mainstreaming government recognition of a direct link between peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and Japan's national security.)

None of this is to deny the late Abe's significant impact. Indeed, many of the initiatives now underway can be traced back to Abe-era efforts. Rather, the point is that the forces driving Japan's 21st century national security evolution have always been much greater than any single individual leader. The substantive ambition of the three documents released in December and outcomes from the US-Japan meetings in January are both a testament to Abe's remarkable foreign policy legacy, and an indication that Japan is already moving beyond it.

The Next Chapter in Japan's Security Strategy

Japan's unprecedentedly ambitious December 2022 strategic documents and outcomes from the January 2023 US-Japan meetings in Washington reflect a historic re-evaluation by Japan's government of what it can and must do to more effectively enhance deterrence in response to a rapidly worsening regional and global security environment. The documents and subsequent Kishida government rhetoric are also noteworthy for their acknowledgment that decades of relatively stagnant defense spending mean Japan must not only develop new capabilities but also expeditiously and "fundamentally" reinforce its existing ones. In a country that has for decades effectively pegged the defense budget to an arbitrary ceiling of 1 percent of GDP, the authoritative coalition government's call to surge spending by two-thirds by 2027 to enable this, as well as new capabilities, is extraordinary.

The historic decisions to acquire "counterstrike capabilities" and "active cyber defense" for *self-defense* are particularly compelling testaments to how rapidly Japanese leaders' sense of their nation's security environment—and what is necessary for effective deterrence—has changed. Also remarkable but less commented upon: against the backdrop of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, Japan's public appears to recognize a changed reality. Though there is clear discomfort with some key measures (e.g., counterstrike), and how to pay for them, the Kishida Cabinet's strategies have to date attracted far less domestic resistance than would have been likely in previous eras.

That these strikingly ambitious pledges occur under the administration of a prime minister heretofore almost universally identified by media as a “dove” not only reveals how much regional geopolitics and Japan’s domestic political terrain have shifted in recent years, but also exposes the pitfalls of *excessive* focus on individual leaders as the primary determinants of Japan’s national security trajectory. Leaders of course matter greatly, but other potent factors are also at play.

While Japan’s new national security and defense strategies are unprecedentedly ambitious and potentially transformative, core, unique pillars of Japan’s decades-old defense orientation also persist. Rather than marking an across-the-board “disjuncture,” the developments of the past few months are the opening pages of the latest chapter—sure to be a major and fascinating one—in a multi-decade story of reforms to Japan’s national security-relevant institutions and policies amidst a rapidly changing external environment.

The rest of this chapter is not yet final, however. Numerous stars will need to align over the next five to ten years for Japan to achieve the goals contained within these three documents. Domestic and international political vicissitudes will have a lot to say about whether Japan’s new national security ambitions will be sufficiently resourced, supported by robust new legislation, and efficiently and effectively implemented. The specifics of implementation, not just the headlines, will matter greatly. Even if fully resourced and legislated, key components of Japan’s vision, including active cyber-defense and counter-strike capabilities, may take years to fully come online. Amid what the documents themselves call “the most severe and complex security environment since the end of WWII” and with the world at a “historical inflection point,” the implications of these initiatives for Japan’s region and the world, to say nothing of its US ally’s own strategic objectives, are potentially profound. Watch this space.

Notes

1. *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku* [National Security Strategy; below, NSS (2022)], Naikaku Kanbō, December 16, 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou.html>; *Kokka Bōei Senryaku* [National Defense Strategy; below, NDS], Naikaku Kanbō, December 16, 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou.html>; *Bōeiryoku Seibi Keikaku* [Defense Buildup Program; below, DBP], Naikaku Kanbō, December 16, 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou.html>. Quoted language comes from NSS, 3-4; NDS, 7. Throughout this article, quotations from the three documents are the author’s translations from the authoritative Japanese-language texts. In some instances, but not all, these will align with the provisional English-language translations released by Japan’s government.
2. Ministry of Defense, “Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee (“2+2”),” January 11, 2023, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2023/01/e595130b273955f65e436fa3a8150eb06bfc42a3.html>.

3. The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida of Japan Before Bilateral Meeting," January 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/01/13/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-kishida-of-japan-before-bilateral-meeting/>.
4. Fumio Kishida, "Kisha Kaiken," Shusho Kantei, December 16, 2022, https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/101_kishida/statement/2022/1216kaiken.html; Fumio Kishida, "Policy Speech," Prime Minister's Office of Japan, January 13, 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202301/_00005.html.
5. Adam P. Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy: Abe the Evolutionary," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 79–99; Adam P. Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe: Assessing Institutional and Policy Change," in *The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms*, ed. Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Y. Lipsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 479–510; Adam P. Liff and Phillip Y. Lipsky, "Japan Transformed? The Foreign Policy Legacy of the Abe Government," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022): 123–47.
6. NSS (2022), 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 4.
8. Kishida, "Policy Speech."
9. Joint Statement.
10. For a recent analysis focused specifically on economic security in the NSS, see Yoshiyuki Sagara, "Japan integrated economic security into its new National Security Strategy," Asia-Pacific Initiative, December 26, 2022, <https://apinitiative.org/en/2022/12/26/42919/>.
11. *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku* [National Security Strategy; below, NSS (2013)], Naikaku Kanbō, December 17, 2013, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou.html>, 11.
12. *Ibid.*, 13.
13. NSS (2022), 8-9.
14. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
15. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
16. Kishida, "Policy Speech."
17. NDS, 5.
18. *Ibid.*, 1.
19. NSS (2022), 10-11.
20. NDS, 7.
21. "Joint Statement," 2023.
22. NDS, 7.
23. NDP, 1.
24. Despite repeated media hype about historically high defense budgets under Abe, by the MOD's own accounting the FY2019 budget was the first budget to exceed the previous high-water mark: in 1997; see *Defense Programs and Budget of Japan: Overview of FY2022 Budget* (Ministry of Defense, December 2021), https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_budget/pdf/20220420.pdf, 3.
25. Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe," 493.
26. For a discussion of some challenges in these areas that may persist, see Jeffrey W. Hornung and Christopher B. Johnstone, "Japan's Strategic Shift is Significant, but Implementation Hurdles Await," *War on the Rocks*, January 27, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/japans-strategic-shift-is-significant-but-implementation-hurdles-await/>.

27. *Defense Programs and Budget of Japan*, 59.
28. DBP, 30-31.
29. Kishida, "Policy Speech."
30. NDS, 9-10.
31. "64% Disapprove Tax Hikes to Cover Japan's Rising Defense Budget: Poll," *Kyodo News*, December 18, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/12/173edc4cc0c1-breaking-news-64-disapprove-tax-hikes-to-cover-japans-rising-defense-budget-poll.html>.
32. NSS (2022), 21.
33. NDS, 23.
34. Kishida, "Policy Speech."
35. "Joint Statement," 2023.
36. Ibid.
37. "'Heiwa kokka' wa doko e?," *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 3, 2023.
38. "Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations 2022," Australian Government, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/joint-statement-australia-us-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2022>.
39. Jeffrey W. Hornung, "Allies Growing Closer" (RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif: 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA186-1.html.
40. Kishida, "Policy Speech."
41. Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms Under Abe."
42. "Japan ruling bloc agrees on need for 'counterstrike capability,'" *Nikkei Asia*, December 2, 2022.
43. Kishida, "Kisha Kaiken."
44. NDS, 9-10; 17-18.
45. "Christopher Johnstone, "Japan's Transformational National Security Strategy," CSIS, December 8, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-transformational-national-security-strategy>.
46. Article 9 reads: "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. 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." "The Constitution of Japan," http://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.
47. NDS 9-10; three conditions are here: Cabinet Secretariat (Japan), "Kuni no sonritsu wo mattoshi, kokumin wo mamoru tame no kireme no nai anzen hosho hosei no seibi ni tsuite" [Cabinet Decision on the Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan's Survival and Protect Its People], July 1, 2014, <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/anpohosei.pdf>.
48. NSS (2022), 31.
49. "64% Disapprove Tax Hikes to Cover Japan's Rising Defense Budget."
50. Adam P. Liff and Ko Maeda, "Electoral Incentives, Policy Compromise, and Coalition Durability: Japan's LDP-Komeito Government in a Mixed Electoral System," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2019): 64-69.
51. "Kōmeitō, chūgoku " kyōi " ninshiki ni nanshoku bōei 3 bunsho kaitei de," *Nikkei*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA129WT0S2A211C200000/>.

52. Christopher Johnstone, "To Make Japan Stronger, America Must Pull It Closer," *Foreign Affairs*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/13/joint-statement-of-the-united-states-and-japan/>.
53. "Jieitai no jinin ni 2000nin, riku kara umi sora e," *Nikkei*, January 11, 2023.
54. Adam P. Liff, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan," *Asia Policy* 29, no. 3 (July 2022): 125–160, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2022.0038>.
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56. Liff, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan."
57. "'Heiwa kokka' wa doko e?," *Mainichi Shimbun*.
58. Liff and Lipsy, "Japan Transformed?"
59. Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy."
60. Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe."