

Shaping a New Alliance: Japan's Defense Evolution and Strategic Shift towards NATO and Europe



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Recommendations

This report offers the following recommendations to policy makers involved in the collaboration between NATO and Japan, and Europe and Japan:

- Build on Japan's decision to establish an independent NATO office by ensuring their active participation in NATO meetings and shaping agendas that reflect Japan's security priorities such as countering hybrid threats and boosting maritime security.
- Conduct joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific region involving European forces and Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF).
- Both Japan and Europe aim to reduce overreliance on the United States for defense, ensuring greater strategic autonomy while maintaining their respective alliances. By co-developing defense technology, Japan and Europe can strengthen their autonomous defense capacity.
- Develop a framework for coordinated economic sanctions, particularly in response to a Taiwan contingency. Early alignment on sanctions against China or other actors can ensure economic measures are impactful.
- Europe should recognize Japan's intermediary role in the Indo-Pacific and provide support through co-sponsoring dialogues or offering diplomatic backing in regional forums, such as ASEAN and PALM.
- Emphasize the shared commitment of Europe and Japan to liberal democratic values and the rules-based international order through joint statements and public diplomacy.

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Executive Summary

This report examines Japan's evolving defense and security policies within the context of intensifying regional and global challenges, focusing on its role in the Indo-Pacific and expanding partnerships with Europe and NATO.

Japan perceives its strategic environment as becoming increasingly unstable. It has identified several major risks to its national security: North Korea's advanced missile program, China's militarization of the East and South China Seas, and Russia's destabilizing regional activities. In fact, for Japan, the invasion of Ukraine is not solely an issue of Euro-Atlantic security but has further underscored the interconnected nature of global security, amplifying Japan's concerns over a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's assertion that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" emphasizes Japan's position on what it considers shared vulnerabilities, and its determination to proactively bolster both regional and global security frameworks.

Under Kishida, Japan has therefore enacted transformative defense reforms, including the 2022 National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Plan. These call for the doubling of defense spending by 2027. This includes targets such as expanding cyber and electronic warfare capabilities and acquiring counterstrike weapons. These measures represent a significant departure from Japan's postwar defense posture. Public opinion has shifted noticeably in favor of this policy direction, with recent polling indicating a diminishing pacifist sentiment and increasing approval for broader international security partnerships.

In this context, Japan has pursued deeper engagement with NATO and European partners, emphasizing shared values such as a "rules-based international order", and seeking to enhance collaboration in areas including maritime security, cybersecurity, and defense technology. Japan's role as a member of the "Indo-Pacific Four" highlights how it considers the diversification of security partnerships a priority. However, the realization of these partnerships remains constrained by NATO's limited capacity-building efforts in the Indo-Pacific and internal divisions within Europe regarding the scope of engagement in the region.

While the U.S.-Japan alliance remains central to Japan's defense strategy, this reliance also has vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of intelligence, logistics, and access to advanced military technology. To address these dependencies, Japan has prioritized co-developing defense capabilities with European nations and existing multilateral security forums, such as the AUKUS partnership, and diversifying its security relationships, particularly through its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. Through this approach Japan is not only attempting to strengthen its strategic autonomy, but also to project itself as a proactive contributor to regional and global stability.

Japan's engagement with ASEAN and Pacific Island nations further illustrates its commitment to cultivating partnerships beyond traditional security frameworks. Through infrastructure development, maritime capacity-building, and disaster resilience initiatives, Japan has sought to counterbalance China's growing regional influence while presenting itself as a reliable and trusted partner in the Indo-Pacific.

This report concludes that Japan's strategy of deepening cooperation with Europe and NATO, while simultaneously reinforcing its alliance with the United States, underscores its departure from a solely defensive posture. In conclusion, Japan has shifted to, what it considers, a more proactive safeguarding of regional stability while it confronts worsening global security challenges.

Preface to “Shaping a New alliance: Japan’s Defense Evolution and Strategic Shift Towards NATO and Europe”

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As America’s traditional allies reel from US President Donald Trump’s rapid-fire bombasts, the core message of this report – which is to enhance cooperation between NATO and Japan (and Asia) – has become pertinent in ways not, nor dared be, originally envisioned. In less than two months in office, President Trump’s abrasive attack on NATO pushed it to the cusp of total reinvention, if not disintegration, with US leadership and commitment to European security increasingly in doubt. While much of Trump 2.0’s wrath has been directed at the European Union (EU) and NATO (including Canada), Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), two of the US’ key allies in Asia, have not been spared his accusations towards the allies’ over-dependency on the US for their security.

While such accusations may not be totally unfounded, Trump has also made the US an unpredictable and unreliable partner at the same time by entering dubious negotiations with Russia’s Vladimir Putin over Ukraine. Combined with the equally disruptive threats to impose 25% tariffs on imports to the US, a move that could trigger a global trade war, the Oval Office has become the epicentre of disruption to the post-1945 international system. Past talks about the decline of US hegemony had not foreseen a situation where the US itself would wantonly undermine it.

In such a dire situation, America’s allies in Europe and Asia have both the interest and the responsibility to protect the bedrock of the rule-based international order from the Trump administration. If such an endeavour is to be undertaken seriously, however, it needs to start by sharing the recognition that this is an historically significant challenge that brings together two geopolitical groupings of states that have not shared a habit of working together in the past.

As the relatively new geopolitical concept, the Indo-Pacific, brings together two sides of the Eurasian continent, cultivating the habit of sharing strategic concerns, threat perceptions and future visions would be a meaningful undertaking, especially for Europe and East Asia. Given the past, especially during the Cold War, when the US was in the middle, eyeing both the

European and Asian theatres, Western Europe's and Asia-Pacific's security communities were the weakest link in this trilateral security relationship. This needs to change.

There is an urgent need for Europe and Japan (plus South Korea) to work toward building a more robust epistemological community to navigate the complex and uncertain Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape. This is not simply as a response to the current Trump administration's misguided ways to put America first, but to meet the challenges of China's growing power, its desire to reshape the current international order, and the growing China-US discord that could have adverse effects on the already weakened multilateral institutions in the international system.

In fact, how to engage with China in a constructive way would be an important aspect to balance US actions under Trumpism, given the US' propensity to treat China in more adversarial terms than the European or Asian counterparts are comfortable with. It is important to remember that the previous Biden administration had essentially kept the anti-China policies of Trump's first presidency, while the EU cautioned against "decoupling" from China.

The binary worldview (democracy versus authoritarianism, or us versus them) often espoused by Biden did not work, even among US and its allies (Europe, Japan, and Republic of Korea alike), let alone countries in Southeast Asia that refuse to take sides. Exploring ways toward a "multipolar world" that Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi recently elaborated should not be dismissed outright.¹

However, this is more than about dealing with the potential fallout from China-US tensions. First, the Indo-Pacific region is itself a regional concept reflecting changes in the international environment in the past few decades. As such, major powers – existing and emerging, rivals and friends – converge, making the alignment of interests among the varied stakeholders a major challenge.

Second, it is not all about traditional military security, even though the region is home to existing and potential flashpoints, including those with nuclear implications. Economic

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China. "Wang Yi Elaborates on an Equal and Orderly Multipolar World and a Universally Beneficial and Inclusive Economic Globalization", 7 March 2025. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202403/t20240308_11256418.html

development continues to be a major policy objective for most countries, from South, Central to Southeast Asia.

Third, the differences in political regimes aside, it is crucial to remember also that most of these countries are post-colonial and “non-aligned”, with a built-in memory that resists the embrace (or imposition) of Western liberal democratic values as universal. This is not to say that the global south is necessarily anti-global north, but merely to caution that such a layer of resistance exists. Or put another way, these states in the Indo-Pacific prefer to be more in control of their own destinies than ever before (and this includes Japan).

These are some of the reasons why the countries in the Indo-Pacific region are resorting to “minilaterals” that focus on enhancing functional, policy-issue based dialogue and cooperation. These are less beholden to the patterns of political partnership and regional frameworks that arose and set during the Cold War era. Most build on the existing web of historical economic development cooperation and trade relations among countries in East Asia – particularly Northeast and Southeast Asia. More specifically, Japan’s ties with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states are critical, as Japan has been the top donor state supporting Southeast Asian economic development since the late 1970s, after the US retreated from Southeast Asia in the wake of the Vietnam War.

As the Japan-US alliance continues (hopefully) to deepen, Japan’s outlook is also slowly becoming global. Japan’s need to be a closer partner to NATO reflects this incremental change in the way Japan conceives its role in alliance with the US in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. On the other hand, it is crucial to note that Japan’s relations with China, South Korea and the ASEAN countries are *strategic* assets in Japanese foreign policy that are not necessarily the corollary of American policies toward them.

This is where Japan’s intermediary role between Europe and Asia is most useful. Nonetheless, beyond the Japan-US alliance being the “cornerstone of US presence in Asia” and/or “the pillar of Japan’s security policy”, an informed understanding of how this alliance works among the far-reaching and diverse stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region is indispensable to any cooperation between Europe and Asia in the Indo-Pacific.

Foreword: Japan's Shift toward NATO and Europe

Frans-Paul van der Putten – Founder of ChinaGeopolitics

This report by Anoma van der Veere highlights significant developments in Japan's foreign security policies. These are particularly relevant for Europe as it reassesses its strategic options in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

While Japan remains strongly committed to its military alliance with the United States, it is diversifying its security partnerships and adopting an increasingly proactive approach to regional stability in Asia. This shift is driven by a deteriorating security environment. North Korea continues to expand its nuclear capabilities, Russia has been engaged in a large-scale military intervention in Ukraine for the past three years, and China is growing stronger both militarily and economically. These developments not only alter the balance of power between Japan and China but also reshape the dynamic between the United States and China.

As the world's leading military power, the United States remains capable of protecting its allies, including Japan, from direct military threats. However, in most cases, economic instruments have been more effective than military means in exerting U.S. influence. In the past, Washington was able to use economic sanctions – or the threat thereof – to discourage states from challenging the U.S.-led global order, often referred to as the rules-based international order. When sanctions failed, the U.S. could often isolate or marginalize non-compliant states economically and diplomatically.

However, the rise of China as a global economic powerhouse, alongside other emerging economies such as India, is fundamentally reshaping this order. The U.S. no longer possesses the same economic leverage to dictate global norms and enforce sanctions effectively. This shift became particularly evident following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As Russia's largest trading partner before the war, China chose not to participate in Western-led sanctions, thereby limiting their effectiveness. This, in turn, has emboldened other nations to challenge the existing governance system. The United States itself has also become less committed to upholding multilateral institutions and norms. Under President Trump's first term, the U.S. distanced itself from several international agreements and institutions; under his second term, this trend is accelerating.

For U.S. allies such as Japan, American military protection has long been complemented by the strategic advantages of being closely aligned with the U.S.-led global order. However, as the influence of that order wanes, the military alliance remains the primary pillar of Japan's security strategy. While the alliance with the U.S. remains crucial, Japan now operates in a less stable international environment where multilateral institutions are losing effectiveness. Moreover, the U.S. may not always be the most committed or aligned partner in areas beyond bilateral defense cooperation.

As this report highlights, Japan is responding to these challenges by pursuing a more autonomous and proactive role in Asia. This includes strengthening ties with regional partners, including China. In the weeks leading up to Trump's second inauguration in January 2025, high-level diplomatic engagements between Japan and China began to intensify. Moreover, as Van der Veere outlines, a significant shift in Japan's defense and security policy had already begun under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (2021–2024).

For European governments and the European Union, this moment presents a crucial opportunity to deepen security cooperation with Japan. During my visit to Tokyo in January 2025, just before Trump's second term began, I observed a strong interest among Japanese experts in strengthening security ties with Europe. This is an opportunity Europe cannot afford to overlook. Stability in East Asia and Europe is increasingly interconnected, and it is clear that both regions must take greater responsibility for maintaining security and preventing instability.

1. The Transformation of Japan's Defense Posture

The most extensive reforms of Japan's defense posture in the postwar period occurred recently, under the administration of former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (2021-2024). In December 2022, his cabinet announced three pivotal documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Plan (DBP). Together, these outlined a plan to double Japan's defense budget by 2027 (to the NATO norm of two per cent of GDP), to enhance its cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, and to acquire so-called "counterstrike weapons" that can target adversary bases.²

Although these changes were dubbed a defensive move by the Kishida administration, the development of counterstrike capacity entails the acquisition of weapons and other military assets that have the ability to reach far beyond the national boundaries. They therefore mark a departure from Japan's traditional exclusively defensive military posture.³ These reforms were years in the making, however (see also Appendix I and II). For many years, a deteriorating security environment had accelerated parliamentary discussions on whether to reconsider the country's current defense capabilities. An overview of Japan's security environment, as formulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, details Russia's "aggression against Ukraine," North Korea's "nuclear and missile development," China's "wide-ranging and rapid strengthening of military power" that is perceived as a "unilateral escalation" of military activities in the region, issues concerning the East and South China Seas, and tensions around the Taiwan region as increasingly "concerning situations."⁴

Kishida has in fact argued that the security environment in its immediate vicinity has devolved to the extent that he thinks that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow", as stated during his keynote address at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 10, 2022.⁵ While the comparison warrants careful scrutiny, Kishida's statements highlight Japan's

² Kanehara, Nobukatsu. "Reading Japan's National Security Strategy," *Asia-Pacific Review* 30, no. 1 (2023): 7–9.

³ Liff, Adam P. "Kishida the Accelerator: Japan's Defense Evolution After Abe," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2023): 65.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs documentation, December 2024. Lotje Boswinkel. "Forever Bound? Japan's Road to Self-Defense and the US Alliance," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 66, no. 3 (2024), 107.

⁵ https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202206/_00002.html

concerns about the potential for similar conflicts in its own region⁶ and signals its willingness to broaden the country's defense partnerships. As Takuya Matsuda notes:

Japan is afraid of another conflict happening in its own region, as it is surrounded by authoritarian regimes (China, North Korea, and Russia). The partnership you see among these regimes actually enables protracted conflict, which would have devastating long-term effects for the global economy. [...] In the case of Ukraine, those effects were also felt in Japan. That's why cooperation between Europe and Japan is critical to counter these dynamics.⁷

Tsuyoshi Goroku adds that shared security interests are considered a priority issue by Japanese policy makers, as they continue to actively approach European counterparts:

High-level diplomacy like summits is essential to maintain and enhance Japan-NATO relations [...]. The intersection of Europe and Asia's security, seen in North Korea's arms transfers to Russia, underscores the necessity of Japan-Europe collaboration.⁸

From the perspective of Japan, the "indivisibility of security" between the two regions – as Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa formulated it during the G7 diplomatic summit in Italy in April 2024 – is an underappreciated aspect of defense cooperation between Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

The deployment of North Korean troops to Russia and Ukraine a few months after this statement underscored this point, as European nations suddenly became acutely aware of the connectivity between the two regions.⁹ For Japan, this was simply a continuation of an already

⁶ Heginbotham, Eric, Samuel Leiter, and Richard J. Samuels. "Pushing on an Open Door: Japan's Evolutionary Security Posture," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2023): 49.

⁷ Interview Takuya Matsuda, university lecturer on International Security and Foreign Diplomacy at Aoyama-Gakuin University. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁸ Interview Tsuyoshi Goroku, Associate Professor at Nishogakusha University focusing on NATO, European Security and Alliance Politics. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁹ See for example: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c14le0p4310o>, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2542939-deelname-noord-korea-aan-oorlog-oukrajne-leidt-ook-tot-spanning-bij-zuid-korea>, and https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/11/10/war-in-ukraine-western-embarrassment-at-north-korean-involvement_6732271_4.html

perceived problem: the growing threat of North Korean participation in global conflicts. As an official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs argues, this should capture Europe's attention:

One of the reasons that Japan continues to fully support Ukraine is that the conflict shows us that global security is indivisible. For years [Japan and Europe] have considered the different regions as separate theaters, but we need to return to the idea that security in Europe cannot be realized without security in the Indo-Pacific region, and vice versa.¹⁰

Following the release of the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, Japan made North Korea's "systemic challenges [...] to Euro-Atlantic security" a priority point for deepening defense cooperation with NATO member states. The strategic partnership between China and Russia that has developed in recent years is the second priority,¹¹ as Japan views these developments as "mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based order."¹² Ken Jimbo argues that these challenges call for closer engagement, as both Japan and European NATO members perceive these as major existential threats to their own region:

Europe and Japan both face similar kinds of security problems: one is the rise of authoritarianism. For us, it's China and North Korea; for Europe, it's Russia and Iran. Europe and Japan's cooperation can extend to shared deterrence strategies, ensuring responses in Asia consider European perspectives and vice versa.¹³

It is a continued sense of urgency of these matters, in fact, that has motivated Japan to acquire counterstrike capabilities, although long considered a politically sensitive issue in the country.¹⁴ This represents a significant development, as it has not only allowed it to bolster its own defense capacity but also allowed the country to share more of the burden of its own

¹⁰ Interview with an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Japan. Transcribed on 18 December 2024. The official position of Japan is that the aggression against Ukraine by Russia is "an outrageous act shaking the very foundation of international order", and the government has backed these words by providing over 12 billion USD for humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts.

¹¹ Although fraught with tensions and diverging interests, the bilateral ties continue to be strengthened. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-jinping-will-visit-russia-2025-russian-ambassador-says-2024-12-27/>.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs documentation, December 2024.

¹³ Interview with Ken Jimbo, Professor of International Security and Japan's Defense and Security Policy at Keio University, and former Special Advisor to the Minister of Defense, Japan Ministry of Defense (2020) and Senior Advisor to the National Security Secretariat (2018-2020). Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

¹⁴ Liff, "Kishida the Accelerator: Japan's Defense Evolution After Abe," 66. Important to note is that these decisions remain highly divisive issues among the Japanese public, despite increasing support for the changes.

national security and thus to create a more balanced role for itself in the alliance with the U.S. (see also Appendix I).¹⁵

While the U.S. remains Japan's most critical ally, the Kishida administration has actively sought to diversify its security partnerships. One of these policies is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, under which Japan has strengthened ties with, among others, Australia, India, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and countries in the European Union.¹⁶ The FOIP is a strategic framework that aims to promote "a rules-based international order" by emphasizing principles such as freedom of navigation, the rule of law, and economic prosperity through partnerships among regional and global actors, including the Quadrilaterals (Japan, the United States, Australia, and India).¹⁷

Originating during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration and further refined under the Kishida administration, FOIP addresses the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region by strengthening multilateral cooperation.¹⁸ Japan's Reciprocal Access Agreement with Australia for example, following the FOIP strategy and signed in 2022, facilitates closer military collaboration, including joint exercises and logistical support.¹⁹ A similar agreement was signed with the Philippines and Germany in July 2024.²⁰ Japan also signed an agreement with the U.K. in 2023 to enhance defense interoperability. This cooperation with the U.K. further extends into AUKUS, an existing multilateral security framework that includes the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand.²¹ This is part and parcel of Japan's attempt to transform its defense policy from reactive to active, and to carve out a larger role for itself as an autonomous military power.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Takenaka, Harukata. "Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's FOIP Initiative," *Asia-Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2023): 129.

¹⁷ The Quad, formally known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, is a strategic partnership comprising Japan, the United States, India, and Australia, aimed at promoting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region through collaboration on security, economic, and humanitarian initiatives.

¹⁸ See: https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html

¹⁹ https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/au/page4e_001195.html

²⁰ https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00427.html and https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00432.html

²¹ See, for example: "AUKUS Partners Consider Cooperation With Japan," U.S. Department of Defense, 8 April 2024. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3734336/aukus-partners-consider-cooperation-with-japan/>

2. Enduring Reliance on the U.S. and the Diversification of Strategic Partnerships

Despite these expanded partnerships, the practical capabilities and institutional depth of the aforementioned arrangements are limited compared to Japan's alliance with the United States. Most of these partnerships focus on specific areas, such as maritime security or cybersecurity, and lack the comprehensive scope of the U.S.-Japan defense framework.²² This alliance provides critical deterrence, including a nuclear umbrella, the exchange of (advanced) military technology, and logistical support for military operations.²³

Japan's newly acquired counterstrike capabilities, for instance, are integrated into the U.S. military command system, which underscores Japan's dependence on American intelligence and logistical infrastructure.²⁴ Crucially, Japan's promised defense buildup relies heavily on the interoperability of the JSDF with U.S. forces, as demonstrated by the alignment of the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy with U.S. strategic objectives.²⁵

This dependency highlights how Japan cannot currently achieve genuine autonomy in its defense posture, especially given its constitutional and resource constraints. Noteworthy is that, while Kishida's reforms represent a significant evolution in Japan's defense strategy, they do not signal a decoupling from the United States. Instead, they reflect an effort to complement the U.S.-Japan alliance with additional partnerships, ensuring a more robust regional security architecture while mitigating some of the risks associated with over-reliance on a single ally.²⁶

This is, in addition to the perceived deterioration in its security environment, the consequence of the Trump-shocks: a series of comments by President Donald J. Trump, during both of his terms, about allies' failure to contribute sufficiently to bilateral and multilateral defense arrangements with the U.S.²⁷ The Trump administration's rhetoric about reducing U.S. commitments in Asia during the era evoked fears in Tokyo reminiscent of earlier, Cold War

²² Singh, Bhubhindar. "Front-line Guardian of the Status Quo: Japan under the Kishida Government," *International Affairs* 100, no. 3 (2024): 1290.

²³ Kanehara. "Reading Japan's National Security Strategy," 8.

²⁴ Boswinkel. "Forever Bound? Japan's Road to Self-Defense and the U.S. Alliance," 107.

²⁵ Liff. "Kishida the Accelerator: Japan's Defense Evolution After Abe," 67.

²⁶ Heginbotham, Leiter, and Samuels. "Pushing on an Open Door: Japan's Evolutionary Security Posture," 52.

²⁷ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Take-Trump-seriously-when-he-bashes-Japan-US-security-treaty>

era concerns about abandonment (see Appendix I and II).²⁸ Although Yoichiro Sato points out that these concerns have not always existed, but arose as the result of several policy turns that have made U.S. commitments inconsistent over the past decades:

*For example, Japan feared that the U.S. would pivot to Europe during conflicts, leaving the western Pacific vacant. Although that perception changed during the Obama era.*²⁹

Under the Obama administration, the U.S. introduced a new strategy for the Asia-Pacific region dubbed “Pivot to Asia” strategy, later termed “Rebalance” (although still commonly referred to as The Pivot). This was a significant reorientation of U.S. foreign policy, aiming to address the growing influence of China and reassert U.S. leadership in the Asia-Pacific region.

The post-2008 Pivot underscored a renewed commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance, leading to closer military cooperation and joint initiatives, such as the relocation of U.S. Marines to Guam (located near Japan) and the deployment of advanced missile defense systems in Japan.³⁰ According to security scholar Michael Green, Japanese leaders viewed the strategy as a way to counterbalance China’s perceived assertiveness closer to home, specifically in the East China Sea, providing the country with a reinforced strategic umbrella while minimizing the risk of direct confrontation with China.³¹

It is important to note here that the Pivot was a realist reaction to what the U.S. framed as a “rising China” that needed to be countered, while Japan was largely framed as a reactive, even passive actor with decreasing power in the region.³² Accepting this narrative uncritically, as Green (and U.S. policy makers) frequently do, creates the risk of framing Sino-

²⁸ See: Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo’s Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 135-136, and Cha, Victor D. “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea.” *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2000): 261-291.

²⁹ Interview with Yoichiro Sato, Professor of International Relations at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, and former lecturer at the U.S. Department of Defense’s Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

³⁰ Samuels, Richard J. “Japan’s Goldilocks Strategy,” *Washington Quarterly* (2006): 111-127.

³¹ Michael J. Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan’s Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō* (Columbia University Press, 2022), 77-105.

³² Linus Hagström, “‘Power Shift’ in East Asia? A Critical Reappraisal of Narratives on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Incident in 2010,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5 (2012): 296-297.

Japanese relations within a narrative that emphasizes a binary “power shift” dynamic between the two countries that requires outside intervention to balance; i.e., the U.S.³³

However, much of the military resources and attention originally intended to go towards the Pivot were redirected toward U.S. commitments in the Middle East and Europe, particularly after the rise of ISIS and Russia’s annexation of Crimea.³⁴ Predictably, the lackluster U.S. containment efforts during the Obama-era failed to deter China’s activities in the South China Sea, such as island-building and military base construction, raising questions about the efficacy of the policy.³⁵

In the economic domain the Pivot seemed to book more progress. Policy makers relied on the formulation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), aiming to create a high-standard trade bloc that excluded China. Japan eagerly joined the TPP negotiations, marking a significant step toward economic integration among U.S. allies and partners.³⁶ However, these economic ambitions suffered a critical blow when the Trump administration withdrew from the TPP in 2017.

This withdrawal weakened the U.S. ability to shape regional trade norms and ceded economic leadership to China, which has since advanced initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a comprehensive free trade agreement (FTA) among fifteen countries in the Asia-Pacific region, that includes both Japan and China.³⁷ These developments, or ‘shocks’, also contributed to Japan’s willingness to look beyond the U.S. for partnerships, as Jimbo posits:

*Japan sees multilateral cooperation, not just bilateral ties, as the way forward for balancing power in Asia and beyond.*³⁸

³³ As Hagström cautions, accepting these narratives uncritically is a misrepresentation of the motivations and actions of the involved states, and contributes to the construction of self-fulfilling prophecies that legitimize further militarization and exacerbate tensions in the region. Ibid.

³⁴ Makoto Iokibe, *The Diplomatic History of Postwar Japan*, trans. Robert D. Eldridge (New York: Routledge, 2013), 200-215.

³⁵ Keiji Nakatsuji, *Japan’s Security Policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 120-140.

³⁶ Sheila A. Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 180-200.

³⁷ See: https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/page1e_kanri_000001_00007.html and <http://fta.mofcom.gov.cn/list/rcepen/enrcepenews/1/encateinfo.html>

³⁸ Interview with Ken Jimbo. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

At the same time as the Trump administration reneged on its economic commitments, their demands to Japan for increased defense spending and a greater role in regional security further shifted the alliance's dynamics, leading to policy makers in Tokyo to question the reliability of its security umbrella.³⁹ Although critics have argued that the complaints about subpar defense contributions lodged with NATO members by Trump were fended off by Prime Minister Abe in the case of Japan – as a result of his personal relationship with President Trump – they nevertheless had major effects on how policy makers viewed the alliance,⁴⁰ as Goroku points out:

*Trump's demands for host-nation support caused unease in Japan, emphasizing the need for stronger ties with Europe.*⁴¹

Historically, Japan has balanced fears of abandonment and entrapment in its alliance with the U.S. with agility.⁴² These fears are justified, as the U.S. for instance remains reluctant to share the latest weapons technology, even with key ally Japan.

Currently, Japan produces defense equipment for the U.S. Army, an agreement that was broadened in 2024.⁴³ This cooperation is based on licensing, meaning that Japan does not own, nor have control over the technology. As the domestic market for military equipment is small, and heavy export restrictions on weapons remain in place, Japanese companies are unable to invest heavily in research and development, limiting the domestic production and innovation of advanced weapons technology.⁴⁴ There have been some relaxations in these regulations, but Sato points out that the current build-up of the JSDF remains precarious under these circumstances:

³⁹ Green, *Line of Advantage*, 77.

⁴⁰ Teraoka, Ayumi, Ryo Sahashi, "Japan's Revolutionary Military Change: Explaining Why It Happened Under Kishida," *Pacific Affairs* 97, No. 3 (2024): 531.

⁴¹ Interview with Tusyoshi Goroku. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁴² See: Richard J. Samuels, *Rich Nation, Strong Army: National Security and the Technological Transformation of Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 22.

⁴³ See for example: <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/japan-steps-up-missile-production-in-deal-with-u-s/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/08/new-opportunities-and-old-constraints-for-japans-defence-industry/>

Japan has been very dependent on the U.S. for arms... Previously, Japan tried more domestic production, but now it's a mix of joint development and off-the-shelf purchases like the F-35.⁴⁵

Moreover, the military equipment that Japan has managed to buy from U.S. suppliers has not performed up to par. The country struggled for years to acquire the latest generation fighter jets from the U.S. The successfully purchased F35 planes immediately ran into mechanical issues resulting in accidents,⁴⁶ exacerbated by slow maintenance and repair,⁴⁷ as the producer is running into financial difficulties and production delays.⁴⁸ This is another one of the factors behind Japan's push to diversify its defense partners, exemplified by its joint-development project for the new generation fighter jet, together with the U.K. and Italy.⁴⁹ As Sato argues:

Japan's collaboration with the U.S. on fighter planes reflects its struggle between technological independence and reliance.⁵⁰

This growing awareness of the vulnerabilities in relying primarily on U.S. for its military assets and advanced weapons production reinvigorated Japan's mission to recalibrate its strategic priorities and invest in greater defense self-reliance. This is again the case in the present, as the recent re-election of Trump has reignited the fear for increased demands in terms of defense spending.⁵¹ As Kei Koga posits:

Japan continues to prioritize its relationship with the United States, given its critical reliance on the U.S. for security. However, there is an increasing recognition that U.S. support on key issues cannot be taken for granted in the future, signaling potential divergences in strategic interests.⁵²

During Trump's first term in office, and amidst these uncertainties in U.S. commitments, Abe particularly advocated the integration of Japan's Indo-Pacific vision with Euro-Atlantic

⁴⁵ Interview with Yoichiro Sato. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁴⁶ <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15291430>

⁴⁷ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/09/24/world/politics/us-military-f35-fighter-jets/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2024/10/22/lockheed-feels-financial-pinch-from-f-35-upgrade-contract-delays/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15473937>

⁵⁰ Interview with Yoichiro Sato. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁵¹ <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15498459>

⁵² Interview with Kei Koga, Associate Professor at the Public Policy and Global Affairs Program, School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Transcribed on 18 December 2024.

security frameworks such as NATO, emphasizing shared democratic values.⁵³ As a result, Japan and NATO signed the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) in 2014, which was upgraded in 2020.⁵⁴ The IPCP concerns a framework agreement between NATO and a partner country, outlining areas of mutual cooperation to address shared security challenges.

For Japan, the IPCP has focused on enhancing political dialogue, cybersecurity, maritime security, and collaboration on global security issues, reflecting shared values such as the rule of law and democratic governance. This cooperation laid the foundation for Japan's institutional presence in NATO's strategic dialogues⁵⁵: an important development for Japan for aforementioned reasons. As an MFA official argues:

*There are no projects that have started up yet as the cooperation with NATO is still in its nascent stages. The most important thing for us is, however, that we continue to be included as one of the IP4 [Indo-Pacific Four] countries [these are: Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand]. We are particularly interested in working together in the defense industry, so for practical purposes we want to be part of the discussions on NATO standards when it comes to the development of defense equipment.*⁵⁶

The 2022 National Security Strategy, laid out by the Kishida administration, explicitly prioritizes partnerships with “like-minded nations”, which includes the majority of European countries, and by extension NATO, with an emphasis on countries who have expressed a similar policy to “uphold a rules-based international order”. This is how Kishida was able to expand upon Abe's earlier initiatives as part of Japan's broader strategy to counterbalance the growing number of regional and global threats.⁵⁷ This trend is unlikely to change, as Koga posits:

⁵³ https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page22e_000373.html

⁵⁴ See: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2014_05/20140507_140507-IPCP_Japan.pdf and https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/6/pdf/200626-ipcp-japan.pdf

⁵⁵ Ramirez, Carlos. “Japan's Foreign and Security Policy under Abe: From Neoconservatism and Neoautonomy to Pragmatic Realism.” *The Pacific Review* 34, no. 1 (2021): 158.

For an overview of Japan's presence at NATO events up until 2022, please see: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000049189.pdf>

⁵⁶ Interview with MFA official. Transcribed on 18 December 2024. Highlights by author.

⁵⁷ Teraoka and Sahashi. “Japan's Revolutionary Military Change,” 520.

Current Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba exerts limited influence over the bureaucracy and lacks a comprehensive foreign policy agenda. However, there is widespread agreement within the bureaucratic framework on the necessity of upholding a rules-based international order, which requires collaboration with allied nations. Ishiba's relatively weak political influence provides bureaucrats with the latitude to advance their established priorities without significant political interference.⁵⁸

At the time of writing, the stability of the Ishiba administration was still uncertain. The new leader of Japan has, for now, chosen to tone down his most controversial propositions, such as establishing an Asian version of NATO.⁵⁹ Even if leadership changes hands, the likelihood of Japan deviating from its current course as a result of political choices is low, albeit not completely dismissible considering recent election results.⁶⁰ The most uncertain variable appears to be public opinion, as Japan continues its struggle in reconciling its alliance with the U.S., and now its defense build-up, with post-war pacifist sentiments. There have, nevertheless, been significant new developments in this area as well.

⁵⁸ Interview with Kei Koga. Transcribed on 18 December 2024.

⁵⁹ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-s-new-PM/Japan-PM-Ishiba-tempers-tone-on-Asian-NATO-nuclear-energy-reduction>.

⁶⁰ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-election/Japan-s-ruling-LDP-coalition-loses-majority-for-first-time-since-2009>; <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-votes-election-expected-punish-pm-ishibas-coalition-2024-10-26/>.

3. Public Opinion in Japan and International Defense Cooperation

Following its defeat in World War II, Japan adopted a pacifist constitution (see Appendix I). In the postwar decades this constitution came to symbolize widespread societal support for a minimal defense policy, relying on the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance for national security, and emphasizing economic growth and diplomacy over military expansion. This attitude was deeply entrenched in Japan's political culture, largely shaped by the catastrophic consequences of its militaristic past.⁶¹

However, a 2024 survey by ROLES, a research institute of the University of Tokyo, shows that this pacifist consensus has weakened. According to the study, less than half of the respondents (45%) agreed with the statement, "Japan must not use force under any circumstances." This indicates a significant shift toward more proactive views on national defense among the public.⁶² As Goroku argues, this is a major reason why the broadening of strategic cooperation with allied countries, not just the U.S., has been able to take root in Japan's foreign policy in recent years:

*Japanese public opinion increasingly supports [...] collaboration, seeing it as necessary to counter threats from China and North Korea. Polls show growing public support in Japan for partnerships with Europe, Australia, and NATO on defense issues.*⁶³

The survey highlights a growing sense of insecurity in Japan, particularly regarding perceived threats posed by North Korea, China, and Russia, with the latter being ranked the largest threat to national security due to its proximity. As Goroku argues:

It was surprising to find that Russia is ranked above China. For all intents and purposes, China is the largest threat to Japanese security. At the same time, we need to consider that there is a long history of conflict between Russia and Japan dating back to the 19th century and World War II. There are still active territorial

⁶¹ Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "Explaining Japanese Antimilitarism: Normative and Realist Constraints on Japan's Security Policy," *International Security* 35, no. 2 (2010): 123-160.

⁶² UTokyo ROLES Survey, "Security, Alliance, and Foreign Engagement Research Project," October 2024.

⁶³ Interview with Tsuyoshi Goroku. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

disputes as well. Importantly, Russia has already shown the Japanese public that they are willing to use force, as evidenced by the invasion of Ukraine.

Perceived provocations, such as North Korea's missile tests and China's activities in the East and South China Seas, have also contributed to the erosion of public antimilitarism. Importantly, as Buchmeier argues in his study on Japan's media landscape: although freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed, historical, structural, and cultural factors, including political interference, are hindering the development of an independent media capable of fostering robust democratic debate. These challenges are particularly significant in the context of defense and security, where coverage often aligns with government narratives.⁶⁴

The combination of the aforementioned factors has led to the alignment between public opinion and government policy concerning defense build-up,⁶⁵ and the relationship with NATO has become particularly pronounced in this discussion. This is an important development, says Saya Kiba:

The Embassy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs secured the budget last year [for a NATO ambassador]. So now the Japanese Embassy in Brussels [...] is in charge of NATO representation. The problem is that right now, because the ambassador in Brussels is covering everything, he's too busy. [...]. But next year, we will have an independent NATO office of the Japanese government, and we will have a NATO ambassador. [...].

[Having] a dedicated ambassador [will] improve attendance and preparation for key NATO meetings. [...]. So, we will have an independent office and probably we will provide ten or more staff who will watch NATO affairs and regularly attend [...] conferences as an observer. [...]. For Japan, this expanded NATO role will help ensure its perspectives on Asia are represented in European security discussions.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Yosuke Buchmeier, "Media politics in Japan: News journalism between interdependence, integrity, and influence," *Medienpolitik International* 69 (2024): 512-513.

⁶⁵ Singh, "Frontline Guardian of the Status Quo," 1287-1301. For an example of the government narrative from a defense perspective, see for example: Matthew Brummer and Eitan Oren, "'We Must Protect This Peace with Our Hands': Strategic Culture and Japan's Use of Force in International Disputes as Depicted in Ministry of Defense Manga Promotional Materials," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* (2022): 88-111.

⁶⁶ Interview with Saya Kiba, Associate Professor at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies and advisor on the Ministry of Defense Expert Panel on Capacity Building. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

For Japan, its decades-long attempt at building a partnership with NATO finally came to fruition at the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, which saw Japan’s participation as one of the “Asia-Pacific Four,” alongside Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand. The meeting highlighted NATO’s recognition of the Indo-Pacific’s strategic importance,⁶⁷ which was affirmed in NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the same summit.

This document directly identifies China as a potential threat and underscores the importance of collaboration with Indo-Pacific partners, including Japan, to address global security challenges.⁶⁸ This is an area from which partners across the aisle can gain, as argued by Jimbo, Matsuda, and Goroku.

Jimbo: Europe and Japan’s cooperation can extend to shared deterrence strategies, ensuring responses in Asia consider European perspectives and vice versa. [...]. Europeans and Japanese often face difficulty aligning views due to distinct regional priorities, yet shared values bridge this gap.⁶⁹

Matsuda: As global power balances shift, Japan and Europe must innovate their approaches to deterrence and allied politics [...]. Intellectual exchanges between contested regions [...] are valuable for updating [mutual] deterrence strategies.⁷⁰

Goroku: Prime Minister Kishida participated in three NATO summits and emphasized that the Indo-Pacific and Europe are closely linked. As a result, Japan-NATO relations have produced many documents outlining specific priorities for practical cooperation. This will not be reversed, cooperation at the government and military levels will continue to progress.

These efforts have not been reciprocated by NATO, although attempts have been made by several NATO-members and Japan to establish a Tokyo-liaison office.⁷¹ However, France has come out strongly against its creation, with President Emmanuel Macron arguing that

⁶⁷ Heginbotham, Leiter, and Samuels. “Pushing on an Open Door,” 47-49. See point 14 in the NATO Declaration here: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm

⁶⁸ For a more recent reiteration of this position, see: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_183254.htm

⁶⁹ Interview with Ken Jimbo. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁷⁰ Interview with Takuya Matsuda. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁷¹ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-misread-the-signs-in-pushing-plan-for-a-NATO-office>

“geographical expansion would risk shifting the alliance’s remit too far from its original North Atlantic focus.”⁷²

Considering NATO’s willingness to establish its first liaison office outside of this focus in Amman, Jordan, in 2024,⁷³ it is clear that blocking the creation of a Tokyo office is an attempt to quell Chinese fears of NATO expansion to the Indo-Pacific, as the country has voiced sharp criticism of the possibility of a representative permanently based in Japan.⁷⁴ The cooperation is therefore likely to remain limited in terms of physical representation in the Indo-Pacific.

As an MFA official argues, this is not a development that will impede further cooperation, but it is critical for Japan that EU member states remain invested in upholding a presence in the Indo-Pacific:

*We wish to have a NATO office in Tokyo, and we think the presence of EU member states in the Indo-Pacific is a good thing. We welcome further presence. It shows that the EU can play a role in the Indo-Pacific. This is not only good for signaling to allies that they are invested and willing to protect and uphold the rules-based order, but it also signals to the U.S. that the EU can play a role in the region. This will become increasingly important as the U.S. reconsiders its security priorities in the future.*⁷⁵

Sato explains that this stated signaling is an increasingly important aspect of deepening cooperation between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions:

*Europe and Japan both want to anchor U.S. commitments to their respective regions while demonstrating they can do more on their own. [...] But Japan and Europe have moved away from competing for U.S. security guarantees, focusing instead on shared strategies for independent action. [...] The U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific, in this sense, doesn’t mean abandoning Europe; it means all allies must shoulder more regional responsibilities.*⁷⁶

⁷² <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-block-nato-outpost-japan-china-complaints/>

⁷³ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_230292.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁷⁴ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347538.html

⁷⁵ Interview with MFA official. Transcribed on 18 December 2024.

⁷⁶ Interview with Yoichiro Sato. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

The cooperation between Japan and NATO currently focuses on three key domains: cybersecurity, intelligence sharing, and maritime security. Joint initiatives to combat cyber threats have been a priority, particularly in the context of heightened risks from state and non-state actors.⁷⁷

In addition, enhanced intelligence-sharing arrangements aim to address shared concerns such as terrorism and cyberattacks and can thus be seen as an extension of engagement in the first domain.⁷⁸ More concretely, Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force has participated in NATO-led exercises in the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic. These have focused primarily on freedom of navigation and counter-piracy operations.⁷⁹

Beyond NATO-based cooperation, concrete steps have also been taken to further engagement with individual European countries, particularly the U.K., France, and Germany. For example, the Japan-U.K. Reciprocal Access Agreement mentioned above, signed in 2022, marks a milestone in defense cooperation, facilitating joint training, operational deployment, and logistical support between the military forces of the two countries.⁸⁰

Repeated joint naval exercises and coordinated operations with France in the Indo-Pacific are another example,⁸¹ and even Germany has deployed a frigate to the Indo-Pacific for the first time in nearly two decades, symbolizing growing alignment with Japan on security matters.⁸² As multiple experts argue, these developments are largely symbolic, but valuable for Japan:

Jimbo: The more European presence in East Asia, the better, because it demonstrates global concerns beyond just Japan and the United States. [...] Europe's naval and air force activities in the Indo-Pacific are normative demonstrations of global security issues, not just regional. Europe's involvement in Indo-Pacific security is not about playing side by side with Japan but signaling normative global leadership.⁸³

⁷⁷ Singh, "Front-line Guardian of the Status Quo," 1287-1288.

⁷⁸ Harukata, "Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative," 135-138.

⁷⁹ Boswinkel, "Forever Bound?," 106.

⁸⁰ Teraoka and Sahashi, "Japan's Revolutionary Military Change," 521.

⁸¹ https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20241129_04/

⁸² <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Germany-to-send-naval-frigate-to-Japan-with-eye-on-China>

⁸³ Interview with Ken Jimbo. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

Goroku: Not only the government but the public in Japan sees NATO cooperation positively because it addresses threats like Russia and China. This aligns with the country's broader strategic interests.⁸⁴

Importantly, Japanese policy makers realize that there are significant limitations to the presence of European allies, and by extension NATO, in the Indo-Pacific. The government emphasizes that such symbolic support is currently satisfactory, as it symbolizes shared norms. As an MFA official states:

We do not expect too much, meaning we do not have expectations that go beyond the EU's or NATO's capacities for engaging in the region. The EU's presence is currently on an ad hoc basis, which is good. It would be good if there is some EU presence somewhere in the Indo-Pacific at all times.⁸⁵

To reiterate: there is no expectation in Japan that European allies, or NATO, will engage with potential military conflicts in the Indo-Pacific by sending military assets. Japan regards European allies' engagement as *ad hoc* activities that help signal shared norms concerning a rules-based international order and freedom of navigation. Koga posits that the primary concern for NATO should not be in the area at all, but should focus on showing Asian allies that its commitment in the region is not temporary or provisional:

We understand that Europe is grappling with its own challenges, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine and the uncertainty surrounding its resolution. While European countries often reassure Asian partners of their sustained commitment to the region, these assurances alone are not enough to inspire confidence. To make their commitment truly credible, Europe must prioritize building tangible, functional cooperation and advancing strategic initiatives that demonstrate their dedication in practical and measurable ways.

As deploying military assets to the Indo-Pacific might be challenging under these circumstances, prioritizing connectivity and consistent capacity-building efforts would demonstrate Europe's genuine commitment to the region. NATO's focus on dialogue is valuable, but without concrete actions, its presence lacks impact. By

⁸⁴ Interview with Tusyoshi Goroku. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

⁸⁵ Interview with MFA official. Transcribed on 18 December 2024.

concentrating on specific areas like capacity-building, Europe and NATO could lay a foundation for extended and meaningful cooperation over time.⁸⁶

As regards NATO, the organization has expressed its commitment to the Indo-Pacific through various statements over the last few years, and it will require time for confidence-building to take place as concrete projects for collaboration are still in the making. However, the fragmentation among European member states has led to difficulties in engaging with Europe in the same fashion, as one MFA official points out:

We want to realize a Japan-EU defense partnership. [...] We have good contact with the big countries, but less so with the smaller countries. We are still trying to figure out how to best deal with all European partners, preferably through Brussels. Now it's mostly based on bilateral ties, there is no EU-broad cooperation with Japan.

The rapidly evolving security dynamic in the Indo-Pacific and Japan's difficulties in engaging with the EU as a uniform actor, highlights the need for European countries to consider the implications of growing uncertainties for allies in the Indo-Pacific, if these circumstances continue. As Koga explains:

Misalignment or misunderstandings between Japan, Europe, and the United States regarding policies and priorities could undermine collective efforts to maintain the rules-based order. Effective communication channels between Europe and Japan are, therefore, of paramount importance. Without them, European partners may mistakenly perceive Japan as overly dependent on U.S. policies, potentially diminishing Japan's credibility as a cooperative and independent actor in the global security framework. Strengthening these communication mechanisms is essential to fostering trust and ensuring coordinated responses to shared challenges.⁸⁷

To conclude, Japan's evolving relationship with NATO underscores a strategic alignment to address global security challenges, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Japan's establishment of a dedicated NATO office and ambassador reflects a deeper integration into NATO's

⁸⁶ Interview with Kei Koga. Transcribed on 18 December 2024.

⁸⁷ Interview with Kei Koga. Transcribed on 18 December 2024.

frameworks, enhancing its presence in European security discussions and ensuring representation. While NATO's physical presence in Japan, such as a Tokyo liaison office, remains contested due to concerns over geographic expansion, Japan continues to value symbolic European engagement.

European allies, such as the U.K., France and Germany, have engaged in symbolic military exercises, signaling shared norms on a rules-based international order. However, Japan acknowledges the limitations of European military involvement and stresses the importance of consistent capacity-building and effective communication to prevent misunderstandings and to ensure coordinated global security efforts.

It is important to understand that, for Japan, recent reforms and partnerships reflect a broader strategic shift toward what some scholars have termed “pragmatic realism” – a balancing act between increasing autonomy and maintaining alliance dependence. Japan's efforts to diversify its security partnerships and enhance its regional influence show a proactive strategy to adapt to a rapidly changing geopolitical environment without abandoning its historical alliance with the U.S.⁸⁸

This strategic recalibration not only defines Japan's approach to its alliances, but also informs its complex and often fraught relationship with China, where historical tensions and economic interdependence intersect with shifting geopolitical realities.

⁸⁸ See for example: Ramirez, “Japan's Foreign and Security Policy under Abe: From Neoconservatism and Neoautonomy to Pragmatic Realism.” And <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/pragmatic-realism-japans-new-national-security-strategy-and-its-implications-for-australia/>

4. Japan and China: Engaging with Southeast Asia and the Pacific

The relationship between Japan and China has been shaped by a legacy of historical animosities and economic interdependence. Over the past few decades this has oscillated between cooperation and confrontation. Importantly, the end of the Cold War coincided with a period of heightened nationalism in both countries, often exacerbated by contested narratives of history.

Disputes over Japan's wartime past, exemplified by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's (2001-2006) visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine where Class A war criminals from World War II are enshrined, have frequently sparked public outrage in China and hindered diplomatic progress. Such visits symbolize Japan's struggle with its imperial legacy and strained relations with China during critical periods of their post-Cold War interactions.⁸⁹ Additionally, events such as anti-Japanese protests in China in the mid-2000s showcased deep-rooted public antagonism against perceived Japanese insensitivity to historical grievances.⁹⁰

Despite this continued political discord, economic interdependence has remained a cornerstone of Sino-Japanese relations. Japan's extensive investments played a critical role in China's modernization during the 1990s, while China emerged as Japan's largest trading partner by the 2000s. However, strategic rivalry underpins this economic partnership, especially as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and assertive stance in the South and East China Seas is increasingly challenging Japan's regional influence. This has led Japan to adopt what Mike Mochizuki dubs a "dual hedge" strategy: engaging economically with China while strengthening security ties with the United States.⁹¹

The past two decades, especially, saw increasing confrontation over territorial disputes, particularly concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This small group of uninhabited islands, claimed by both China and Japan, has become a flashpoint in their bilateral

⁸⁹ Shibuichi, Daiki. "The Yasukuni Shrine Dispute and the Politics of Identity in Japan: Why All the Fuss?" *Asian Survey* 45, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 204-205.

⁹⁰ For a more comprehensive overview of this complicated history, please see: Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China*.

⁹¹ Mike M. Mochizuki, "Japan's Shifting Strategy toward the Rise of China," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4-5 (2007): 742-746.

relationship. China's regular deployment of coast guard vessels, military frigates, and fishing fleets near the islands has led to tense stand-offs,⁹² prompting Japan to bolster its maritime defenses and surveillance capabilities.⁹³

Although the strategic significance of these islands is, in Japan, framed mostly in territorial terms,⁹⁴ their surrounding waters are rich in natural resources and serve as crucial sea lanes for regional and global trade, and therefore hold significant economic value as well.⁹⁵ China's engagement with the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is driven by their strategic importance in the East China Sea, offering control over critical maritime routes and exclusive economic zones (EEZs), their potential for undersea resources like oil and gas crucial for China's energy needs, and, importantly, nationalistic motivations rooted in historical claims to the territory.⁹⁶

The fortification of Japan's maritime capacity to counter China's perceived assertiveness regarding the islands marks a pivotal shift in Japan's security posture and reflects broader concerns over China's expanding military footprint. This extends beyond the East China Sea and includes concerns over the development of artificial islands and military installations in the South China Sea.⁹⁷ In fact, Samuels argues that Japan's dual strategy of deterrence and alliance-building within a U.S.-led framework is specifically designed to counterbalance China's growing regional assertiveness, and not just China's activities in Japan's own immediate environment.⁹⁸

As a consequence, Japan has over the past two decades proactively engaged in trilateral security dialogues, such as the Japan-U.S.-Australia framework, and has increased defense cooperation with India under the Quad, in order to counterbalance China's growing military

⁹² See for example: https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html

⁹³ Paul J. Smith, "The Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Controversy: A Crisis Postponed," *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 2 (2013): 28-30.

⁹⁴ See for example: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/06/22/japan/china-ship-senkaku-island-intrude/> and <https://nos.nl/artikel/408246-weer-onrust-over-eilanden-bij-japan>

⁹⁵ Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Uncharted Waters: Extended Deterrence and Maritime Disputes," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2015): 128-130.

⁹⁶ Hagström, "Power Shift in East Asia," 267.

⁹⁷ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 192-195.

⁹⁸ Samuels, *Securing Japan*, 141.

presence.⁹⁹ For Japan, these multilateral arrangements are directly aimed at strengthening its own security position and deterring unilateral actions by China in contested regions.¹⁰⁰

Japan's bolstered defense policies also extend domestically, with significant increases in defense spending and the acquisition of advanced military technologies, such as F-35 fighter jets and Aegis-equipped destroyers.¹⁰¹ These developments signify a broader strategic recalibration as Japan positions itself as a proactive contributor to regional stability. The country's measures are not only aimed at deterring China but also at reassuring other regional actors of its commitment to upholding maritime security and international norms.¹⁰²

This includes Japan's outreach to countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. As part of its FOIP strategy, Japan has cultivated a multifaceted approach to engaging ASEAN states and Pacific nations. While emphasizing the importance of maintaining a free and rules-based maritime order, critical sea lanes, and regional stability,¹⁰³ Japan has focused primarily on infrastructure development as a means of deepening partnerships.

Through its Official Development Assistance (ODA) program, it has supported projects such as railways, ports, and energy facilities across the region. Notable examples include Japan's financing of the Jakarta Mass Rapid Transit system in Indonesia and the Thilawa Special Economic Zone in Myanmar.¹⁰⁴ These projects showcase Japan's commitment to sustainable development and its effort to provide an alternative to China's BRI.¹⁰⁵ Although China's recent investments far outweigh Japan's, the long-term strategy has created high levels of trust among ASEAN countries.¹⁰⁶ In fact, as Kiba argues, this approach can inform Europe's attempts to rebuild their own ties in the same region.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁹ Mochizuki, "Japan's Shifting Strategy toward the Rise of China," 752-755

¹⁰⁰ Nanae Baldauff, *Japan's Defense Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: Deterrence, Strategic Partnership, and Stable Order Building* (Cham: Springer, 2024), 67-75.

¹⁰¹ Takenaka, "Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Initiative," 130-134

¹⁰² Adam P. Liff, "Kishida the Accelerator," 71-75.

¹⁰³ Takenaka, "Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Initiative," 130

¹⁰⁴ Peng Er Lam, *Japan's Relations with China: Facing a Rising Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 178-180.

¹⁰⁵ Liff, "Kishida the Accelerator," 72-74.

¹⁰⁶ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-most-trusted-by-ASEAN-despite-low-influence-study-shows>

¹⁰⁷ <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/07/reimagining-eu-asean-relations-challenges-and-opportunities?lang=en¢er=europe>

Japan's engagement with Southeast Asia surpasses Europe's, offering a template for broader collaboration in the region. Japan's engagement in ASEAN, including embassy roles, sets a strong example for regional diplomacy.¹⁰⁸

Jimbo adds that such efforts, aimed at building a sense of shared global security norms among like-minded democracies in the region, will help with this effort:

Linking transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security highlights the shared responsibility of democracies in countering global authoritarianism. [...]. Europe's naval and air force activities in the Indo-Pacific are normative demonstrations of global security issues, not just regional.¹⁰⁹

Although cooperation in the domain of security remains a sensitive issue for most countries in the Southeast Asian and Pacific regions, as they still rely heavily on China for economic interests, Japan has nevertheless actively engaged in capacity-building initiatives, albeit in piecemeal fashion.¹¹⁰

These efforts have included joint maritime exercises, technological transfers, and the donation of coast guard vessels to nations such as the Philippines and Vietnam, which face territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.¹¹¹ As Nanae Baldauff shows, these capacity-building measures are designed to empower regional actors to uphold freedom of navigation and international law in contested waters,¹¹² while simultaneously functioning as a means for Japan to facilitate strategic dialogues, such as the ASEAN-Japan Summit.¹¹³

In its engagement with the Pacific Islands, Japan prioritizes climate resilience and disaster management initiatives.¹¹⁴ The Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) serves as a key platform for Japan to promote development cooperation and strengthen diplomatic ties,¹¹⁵ with the tenth edition being held in Tokyo earlier this year.¹¹⁶ These efforts have created

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Saya Kiba. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Ken Jimbo. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

¹¹⁰ ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is a regional organization comprising ten Southeast Asian countries aimed at promoting political, economic, and cultural cooperation and regional stability. See: <https://asean.org/asean-charter/>

¹¹¹ Baldauff, *Japan's Defense Engagement in the Indo-Pacific*, 75-77.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 78-80.

¹¹³ Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan*, 145-147.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2024/08/12/japan-helpt-eilandstaten-in-oceanie-graag-maar-heeft-daarbij-een-eigen-agenda-a4862601>

¹¹⁵ Baldauff, *Japan's Defense Engagement in the Indo-Pacific*, 82.

¹¹⁶ https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/pageite_000001_00481.html

goodwill among the island nations, as Japan shows clear restraint with respect to domestic politics, in contrast to China.¹¹⁷

Although only three out of fourteen Pacific Island Nations have armed forces, Japan has promised Tonga to deepen ties in defense cooperation,¹¹⁸ provided support in early disaster warning systems to, among others, Vanuatu and Fiji,¹¹⁹ donated a maritime patrol vessel to Nauru,¹²⁰ and formulated plans to further bolster maritime security in the region.¹²¹ While China's presence is growing rapidly in the Pacific, as illustrated by its security pact with the Solomon Islands,¹²² these efforts continue to reinforce Japan's presence in the Pacific while reflecting its broader strategic objective of deterring Chinese dominance in what it considers to be vulnerable regions.¹²³

¹¹⁷ See: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/2024/07/15/special-supplements/pacific-island-nations-harbor-high-expectations-japan/> and <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2024/04/24/chinas-sleutel-tot-de-pacific-de-salomonseilanden-we-zijn-een-slaaf-van-de-grootmachten-a4197085>

¹¹⁸ https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/to/pageite_000001_00471.html

¹¹⁹ https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/fj/pageite_000001_00466.html and https://www.dailypost.vu/news/japanese-environment-minister-visits-vanuatu-to-review-climate-change-aid-and-early-warning-systems/article_9aad86a0-55fe-11ef-9554-57b1ed2daf1a.html

¹²⁰ https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/nr/pageite_000001_00480.html

¹²¹ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100700069.pdf>

¹²² <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Nov/14/2003340194/-1/-1/1/VIEW%20HAMMOND%20-%20JIPA.PDF>

¹²³ Takenaka, "Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Initiative," 135-137.

5. The Taiwan Scenario: A Case for Extended Cooperation with Europe

Taiwan is also a vulnerable region that sits at the heart of the Indo-Pacific's security architecture, and a potential invasion by China would have profound consequences for global stability. This applies particularly for neighboring Japan, situated only 110 kilometers from Taiwan at its nearest point. A military conflict would not only directly threaten Japan's southwestern islands in Okinawa, but also disrupt critical sea lanes that form the country's most active trade routes.

Japan will face challenges in formulating an immediate response, not only because of its newly adopted "collective self-defense" principle, but by extension also its dependence on U.S. military forces stationed in Okinawa, and the high likelihood of direct economic and military repercussions for allies both in- and outside the Indo-Pacific.¹²⁴ Sato warns that this is an issue that requires urgent consideration among Japanese policy makers:

If China moves against Taiwan, Japan will have to decide quickly on its response.

The proximity of Okinawa and other islands means we could see direct consequences, including economic disruptions and a greater need for defense coordination with the U.S. The potential for increased refugee flows or military escalations can't be underestimated.¹²⁵

This is the reason why Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy identifies Taiwan's stability as crucial for its regional and economic security. The government's 2022 National Defense Program Guidelines explicitly identify the Nansei Islands, which include Okinawa, as key areas for enhanced military deployments.¹²⁶ Japan has significantly bolstered its defense capabilities in this region over recent years.¹²⁷

Overriding local opposition, the JSDF has built bases on Ishigaki Island,¹²⁸ Yonaguni Island, and Miyako Island.¹²⁹ One of the defense initiatives there has been the deployment of surface-

¹²⁴ Liff, Adam P. "The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan," *Asia Policy* (2022): 127.

¹²⁵ Interview with Yoichiro Sato. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

¹²⁶ Erik Isaksson, *Japan's Expanding Diplomatic and Military Horizons*, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (2024): 6.

¹²⁷ Watanabe, Tsuneo. "Japan's Security Policy Evolution," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 3 (2022): 111

¹²⁸ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2451160-japan-vaart-nieuwe-koers-en-bouwt-raketbasis-dichtbij-taiwan>

¹²⁹ <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/presiding/law/sdf.html>

to-air missile units and anti-ship missile systems.¹³⁰ These are designed to create a defensive perimeter capable of countering Chinese military advances. Japan has also deployed advanced radar systems to enhance surveillance capabilities.

This military build-up is not only aimed at deterring potential aggression and conflict in Taiwan, but also to ensure the protection of territorial sovereignty as the Chinese marine and air forces regularly cross over into Japanese seas and air space.¹³¹ In this sense, Japan is proactively preparing for a possible conflict in the region as a way of deterrence. As Kiba explains:

*We've started discussing scenarios for sanctions against China in case of aggression. But there's recognition that any such measures will hit Japan particularly hard due to our economic ties. Still, readiness [for any potential scenario] is seen as essential for maintaining stability in the region.*¹³²

The world relies heavily on the Taiwan Strait for trade and relies on Taiwan itself for critical goods such as semiconductors. This means that stability in the area is also of growing concern for European nations.¹³³ The convergence of these interests with Japan reflects the growing interconnectedness of global security, but also highlights the importance of preemptive coordination, something that is still missing in certain domains, as Matsuda argues:

*A Taiwan conflict would force Japan into unprecedented decisions, particularly in economic and defense realms. Japan and Europe need to align now on how to approach such a scenario to ensure effectiveness and mitigate blowback. That's something that we need to talk about but are not talking about yet.*¹³⁴

Europe, for its part, is exploring the possibilities and limitations of its role in the Indo-Pacific. While constrained by its One China-policy, not recognizing Taiwan as an independent state,

¹³⁰ Isaksson, *Japan's Expanding Diplomatic and Military Horizons*, 6

¹³¹ O'Shea, Paul, and Sebastian Maslow. "Rethinking Change in Japan's Security Policy," *Policy Studies* 45, no. 3-4 (2024): 665. For recent incursions, see: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-admits-military-plane-unintentionally-entered-Japan-air-space> and <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/08/583fae03735f-china-enters-japan-waters-days-after-air-violation-protested.html>

¹³² Interview with Saya Kiba. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

¹³³ See, for example: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/perspectives-innovation/taiwans-semiconductor-dominance-implications-cross-strait-relations> and <https://leidenasiacentre.nl/dutch-global-semiconductor-interests/>

¹³⁴ Interview with Takuya Matsuda. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

the EU has gradually adopted a more assertive stance on Taiwan's democracy and security, as shown in the EU's formulation of an Indo-Pacific Strategy.¹³⁵ Although these developments are important for aligning interests, it is also necessary to consider what concrete steps need to be taken in case of an escalation in the Indo-Pacific, as Matsuda points out:

Such strategies and joint exercises are important for capacity-building, but the question remains, to what end? Japan is not expecting Europe or NATO to come to the Indo-Pacific in the case of escalation. But if there is a military escalation in the region this would have devastating consequences for both the Indo-Pacific and Europe, that is clear. How do we proceed from there? [...]. A concrete step would be to talk about a sanction regime against China. And this would be far more complex than the one against Russia. Sanctioning China would ripple through global economies, demanding intricate coordination. Japan and Europe must prepare now.¹³⁶

Europe's response to a Taiwan crisis will be shaped by its broader strategic concerns, including its relationship with the U.S. and the stability of the global economy. However, Europe's capacity for direct intervention is limited. While NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept identifies China as a challenge to global stability,¹³⁷ European member states are more likely to contribute through economic measures, technology sanctions, and diplomatic efforts than military commitments.¹³⁸ Goroku argues that this is why it is important not to overlook the potential mitigating effects of better coordination with Japan:

Given the interconnectedness of Europe and Asia's security dynamics, a Taiwan contingency would amplify the importance of Japan-Europe collaboration. The challenge lies in ensuring unified responses across Europe while balancing Japan's own dependencies and risks with China.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Krumbein, Frédéric. "Leaving the Dragon's Shadow: Normative Power Europe and the Emergence of a Taiwan Policy in the EU," *Journal of European Integration* 46, no. 2 (2024): 175

https://www.eas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf

¹³⁶ Interview with Takuya Matsuda. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

¹³⁷ <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>

¹³⁸ Lee, Sheryn, and Benjamin Schreer, "Will Europe Defend Taiwan?" *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2022): 164-165. See also: <https://www.atlcom.nl/artikel-atlantisch-perspectief/indo-pacific-security-after-the-us-elections/>

¹³⁹ Interview with Tsuyoshi Goroku. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

Moreover, any perception of U.S. weakness will embolden China and destabilize regional alliances.¹⁴⁰ In the early months of Trump's presidency, these concerns have, in fact, materialized, putting U.S. security commitments at risk in both Europe and East Asia.¹⁴¹ As a result, cooperation has become more urgent than ever., says Jimbo:

*There's fear [in Japan] that if the U.S. falters in Ukraine, it may cast doubt on their commitment to Taiwan, which in turn heightens Japan's anxiety. A Taiwan crisis would pressure Japan, Korea, and others to significantly boost their defense expenditures, testing their economic resilience and strategic autonomy.*¹⁴²

A potential Taiwan conflict shows the pressing need for robust international collaboration. For Japan, the stakes are existential, with its security and economic stability intertwined with the fate of Taiwan. The proactive defense build-up in Okinawa and the surrounding islands reflects Japan's recognition of the gravity of the situation, and highlights the limitations posed by its dependency on the U.S. for national security and the economic challenges of a potential conflict with China.

While direct military intervention may not be feasible for Europe, economic sanctions and diplomatic measures provide alternative avenues for meaningful involvement. However, as emphasized by experts like Matsuda and Jimbo, preemptive coordination between Japan and Europe is critical to mitigating the potential fallout of a conflict. Such alignment would strengthen global stability and ensure that the systemic consequences of U.S. policy shifts or perceived weaknesses do not unravel decades of gradual build-up in international security cooperation.

¹⁴⁰ Sacks, David. "Enhancing U.S.-Japan Coordination for a Taiwan Conflict," *Council on Foreign Relations* (2022): 4.

¹⁴¹ See, for example: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-on-red-alert-as-Trump-rocks-international-alliances>; <https://apnews.com/article/europe-defense-ukraine-russia-us-military-spending-dbc6133a2412ec02adf87078f2f2f5cc>

¹⁴² Interview with Ken Jimbo. Transcribed on 3 December 2024.

Conclusion

Japan's rapidly evolving defense posture reflects a recalibration of its security policies in response to what it perceives as an increasingly volatile regional and global environment, with escalating threats from North Korea, China, and Russia. As a consequence, Japan has pursued reforms that include the doubling of its defense budget and the acquisition of counterstrike weapons.

These measures signal a decisive shift away from Japan's historically constrained defense posture, driven by constitutional limitations and decades of pacifist sentiment. Public opinion in Japan has increasingly supported these changes, as a sense of insecurity over regional instability continues to spread in public discourse.

Japan's continued alliance with the U.S. remains a cornerstone of its defense strategy, providing critical capabilities such as intelligence, advanced technology, and logistical support. However, this dependency has also exposed vulnerabilities, leading Japan to prioritize greater strategic autonomy by co-developing defense technologies with European partners and strengthening regional frameworks under its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.

The deepening of Japan's relationships with NATO and European partners shows that this is a critical dimension of the country's strategy to diversify security partnerships. Through enhanced cooperation in areas such as maritime security, cybersecurity, and defense technology, Japan is attempting to position itself as a bridge between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security spheres.¹⁴³

By balancing its dependence on the U.S. with broader multilateral engagements, Japan is actively working to mitigate risks associated with over-reliance on a single ally while expanding its role as a regional security leader. However, these partnerships remain constrained by NATO's limited engagement capacity in the Indo-Pacific and internal divisions within Europe over the scope of its commitments to the region. Despite these

¹⁴³ It is important to note that the emphasis in this development of security ties with allies is on maintaining a 'status quo' in the region, in order to negate any negative connotations associated with militarization and military build-up.

challenges, Japan's outreach to NATO and individual European nations shows its intent to become a more proactive and independent actor in global security.

Appendix I: Japan's Strategic Dependence on the US

The ties between Japan and the United States can be traced back to the mid-19th century and the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854. This marked the opening of Japan for foreign trade after centuries of relative isolation. Diplomatic exchanges and trade started over the course of the modernization of Japan during the Meiji Restoration, a period of significant political upheaval.

The relationship between the two nations grew increasingly strained in the years prior to World War II, and the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor proved a watershed moment in bilateral relations. The subsequent war between the two nations culminated in Japan's defeat and subsequent occupation by U.S.-led Allied Forces between 1945 and 1952. This period laid the groundwork for Japan's postwar democracy and economic recovery, and also saw the implementation of a new constitution in which "war as a sovereign right" was renounced, and the maintenance of armed forces was prohibited (Article 9).¹⁴⁴ This established the foundation for Japan's reliance on U.S. military protection, which has continued to the present day.

The alliance between the U.S. and Japan was formalized following the end of the war and the signing of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty and the subsequent Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. Although these treaties marked the reestablishment of Japan's sovereignty, it also included a continued U.S. military presence in the country. For the U.S. it meant that it was able to maintain military bases in the country.

Under the administration of former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, Japan formed the basis of the "Yoshida Doctrine": prioritizing postwar economic recovery over military build-up. Dependence on the U.S. military for national security would allow the country to avoid the militaristic policies that led to Japan's role in World War II, according to Yoshida.¹⁴⁵ This doctrine was reinforced by the earlier ratification of the constitution, a legal framework that indirectly institutionalized a reliance on the U.S. for defense.

The original 1951 Alliance Treaty was revised in 1960 and renamed the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Although it was an attempt to create more reciprocity within the

¹⁴⁴ https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

¹⁴⁵ Shigeru Yoshida, *The Yoshida Memoirs: The Story of Japan in Crisis* (London: Heinemann, 1961), 263.

alliance, it expanded U.S. defense obligations to Japan. Public backlash to the revision was immense and triggered protests across the country. This widespread dissatisfaction among Japanese citizens underscored the public's ambivalence towards the alliance and highlighted the fragility of Japan's constitutional pacifism through a reliance on a foreign military. This sentiment would resurface sporadically over the course of the Cold War.¹⁴⁶

At the same time, Japan fundamentally reshaped its economy. Rapid industrialization led to double digit national growth in the 1960s and 1970s, a period now more commonly known as Japan's "economic miracle". As Richard J. Samuels notes, the arrangement with the U.S. enabled Japan to focus on economic goals, while further cementing itself as a critical ally for the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁴⁷

In return, the U.S. military was allowed to establish a major military presence in the country, concentrated in the southern prefecture of Okinawa, an archipelago colonized by Japan in the 17th century. Okinawa's governance remained in U.S. hands, a major point of domestic tension, until its reversion to Japan in 1972. Its return thus marked a significant juncture in the alliance.¹⁴⁸ Although formally now returned to Japanese control, Okinawa remained important for U.S. strategic interests over the course of the Cold War, serving as a support hub for its regional operations during for instance the Korean War and Vietnam War.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Iokibe, *The Diplomatic History of Postwar Japan*, trans. Robert D. Eldridge (New York: Routledge, 2013), 53.

¹⁴⁷ Richard J. Samuels, *Rich Nation, Strong Army: National Security and the Technological Transformation of Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 154.

¹⁴⁸ Gerald L. Curtis, *The Logic of Japanese Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 65.

¹⁴⁹ Kazuhiko Togo, *Japan's Foreign Policy, 1945–2009: The Quest for a Proactive Policy* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010), 55.

Appendix II: The Post-Cold War Alliance and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF)

Under pressure from the U.S. to take on some of its own national security burden, Japan established the National Police Reserve in 1950. It was a stop-gap measure to enhance domestic security during the Korean War when U.S. forces were redeployed to the Korean Peninsula.¹⁵⁰ Eventually, the force was turned into the National Safety Force in 1952, which formed the precursor to Japan's Self Defense Forces (JSDF), established in 1954 following the enactment of the Self-Defense Forces Law. This was, however, a contentious process, as Aaron Skabelund argues: it was “fraught with legal and ideological disputes” and “many Japanese viewed the SDF as an unconstitutional remnant of imperial militarism. However, by emphasizing non-combat roles and aligning with Japan's pacifist values, the SDF gradually carved out a legitimate role in society” over the course of the postwar period.¹⁵¹

The end of the Cold War, however, forced Japan to reconsider the role of the JSDF, as international tensions diversified and required more strategic decision-making. Notably, Japan's response to the 1990-1991 Gulf War highlighted its inability to contribute in terms of military manpower, and instead it decided to finance a large portion of the costs of the war by donating 13 billion USD.

This “checkbook diplomacy” drew heavy criticism from participating nations. After Japan was not included in the list of countries thanked by Kuwait following the end of the conflict, despite its sizable contribution, the government was again forced to reconsider how it would deploy the JSDF in cases of international conflict.¹⁵² This eventually led to the 1992 International Peace Cooperation Law, enabling the JSDF to participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations.¹⁵³ This signaled Japan's willingness to play a more active role in global security.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Aaron Skabelund, *Inglorious, Illegal Bastards: Japan's Self-Defense Force During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 25.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵² <https://www.nippon.com/en/features/c00202/>

¹⁵³ Makoto Iokibe, *The Diplomatic History of Postwar Japan*, trans. Robert D. Eldridge (New York: Routledge, 2013), 173.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

Following the September 11 attacks in the U.S., Japan passed further legislation to allow for the deployment of JSDF troops in support of U.S.-led missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Under the new laws, however, JSDF personnel were only allowed to perform non-combat roles and engaged mostly in grant-aid programs and recovery and infrastructure projects.¹⁵⁵ Although Japan moved towards more active engagement in global security following the end of the Cold War, it remained a tense process in which constitutional restraints on the role that the JSDF could play internationally continued to play a big part. Interestingly, such contributions by the JSDF to global peacekeeping missions contributed significantly to a positive image of the organization among the Japanese public.¹⁵⁶

This is notable, as its initial establishment was directly followed by domestic fears of a resurgence in militarism, resulting in decades-long criticism of its existence. Over the past thirty years this perception has changed dramatically. The JSDF's response to the 1995 Kobe earthquake, which killed thousands and left tens of thousands homeless, was well-received among the public. Similarly, the deployment of troops for logistical support and search-and-rescue missions following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake was a major factor in boosting a positive reputation. As Nakatsuji argues: "Disaster relief operations [...] demonstrated the institution's value to Japanese society. Public opinion shifted as the [JSDF] proved its ability to contribute positively to both national and international crises."¹⁵⁷

The increased trust in the JSDF among the public set the stage for hawkish Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to advance a broader and more active security agenda on the international stage in the 2010s. Although Abe's personal mission of changing the constitution was out of reach, as that would require a two-thirds majority in the Japanese parliament, he managed to 'reinterpret' Article 9 in 2014 to add that Japan could aid allies, such as the U.S., if Japan itself was not directly attacked. Abe justified this "collective self-defense" principle by pointing at the growing threat from North Korea's nuclear missile program and an increasingly assertive Chinese military.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ https://www.afg.emb-japan.go.jp/ODA/ODA_pdf/compre_aid_eng.pdf

¹⁵⁶ Iokibe, *The Diplomatic History of Postwar Japan*, 182.

¹⁵⁷ Nakatsuji, *Japan's Security Policy*, 117.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel M. Kliman, *Japan's Security Strategy in the Post-9/11 World: Embracing a New Realpolitik* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 82.

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