

Risk and Threat Perception in the Indo-Pacific

Japan

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JAPAN

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I. Introduction: Identifying and Evolving Risks and Threats of Japan

Japan currently faces a multitude of threats and risks, including a declining population attributable to low birth rates and an aging society; natural disasters such as major earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods exacerbated by climate change; and energy security concerns linked to a high dependence on imported oil and natural gas. According to the Munich Security Index 2024,^[1] Japanese respondents express heightened concern regarding the threat posed by Russia, which remains Japan's most serious threat, as in the previous year. Furthermore, there is pronounced apprehension about the risks associated with China, which have escalated in recent years, placing China just below Russia in terms of perceived threat levels. The implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have catalyzed security discussions within Japan, prompting the revision of strategic documents with a particular focus on potential crises involving Taiwan. Consequently, defense issues are currently regarded by both the government and the public as the most urgent and significant threats and risks.

Table 1. Top 15 risk concerns in Japan. Taken from Munich Security Index 2024, Munich Security Report 2024: Lose-Lose? (The "Change in index score" reflects changes in the risk index score since the last Munich Security Index 2023).

	Index score	Change in index score	Share thinking risk is imminent	Share feeling unprepared
Russia	74	+0	55	36
China	73	+2	50	34
Cyberattacks on your country	72	+5	63	29
Climate change generally	70	+4	57	26
North Korea	69	+2	48	34
Extreme weather and forest fires	68	+5	58	26
Destruction of natural habitats	68	+5	53	27
Use of nuclear weapons by an aggressor	66	-1	33	46
Rising inequality	65	+2	53	31
Use of biological weapons by an aggressor	63	+1	30	46
Use of chemical weapons and poisons by an aggressor	62	-1	29	46
Energy supply disruption	62	-1	35	34
International organized crime	61	+10	52	31
Disinformation campaigns from enemies	61	+5	57	31
Economic or financial crisis of your country	61	+2	40	30

[1] Tobias Bunde, Sophie Eisentraut, & Leonard Schütte (eds.), "Munich Security Report 2024: Lose-Lose?" Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2024.

Japan's security environment has become increasingly complex and severe, shaped by the actions of three key regional actors: China, North Korea (DPRK), and Russia. Over the past three decades, Japan's security risks and threats have shifted significantly. The Soviet Union and then Russia represented the greatest security threats during the Cold War and after. However, in the post-Cold War era, the DPRK emerged as a primary concern because of the development of its nuclear and missile capabilities. Recently, China's rapid military expansion and territorial assertiveness in the East China Sea have elevated it to the forefront of Japan's security priorities. While the DPRK remains of paramount concern because of its advancing missile capabilities, Russia's military activities in the Asia-Pacific region have added another layer of complexity to the regional security.

Among these threats, China poses the most comprehensive and pressing challenge owing to its military build-up, economic coercion, and assertive actions in the East and South China Seas. At the same time, the DPRK, with its nuclear and missile capabilities, combined with the unpredictability of its regime, continues to pose a volatile threat. Russia's military activities in the Asia-Pacific region and its strategic alignment with both China and the DPRK further complicate the regional security landscape. The broad geographical scope and advanced military capabilities of these actors, combined with their evolving patterns of military cooperation, complicate Japan's ability to adopt a unified policy approach by risking the overextension of its defense budget and hindering the efficient allocation of resources to the Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

1.1 Security Threats and Risks Facing Japan

1.1.1 China

China's rapid military build-up and assertive actions in the Indo-Pacific region constitute the most significant destabilizing factors for Japan's security environment. Over the past decade, China has developed a formidable array of military capabilities, including advanced missile systems and a rapidly expanding naval force. These advancements, along with China's assertive territorial claims in the East China Sea and mounting pressure asserted on Taiwan, escalated regional tensions. Chinese naval vessels and military aircraft frequently enter Japan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) and the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, directly challenging Japan's sovereignty. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, where it has territorial disputes with several nations, reflects its broader ambition to reshape the regional order in its favor.

For Japan, maintaining security is directly related to ensuring stable sea lanes

in both the East and South China Seas, making countering China's actions in the First Island Chain a key strategic priority. China's long-term goal to surpass the US as a global superpower by 2049 underpins its continuous military expansion. As a result, it now possesses a range of conventional and nuclear missiles capable of striking Japan and is expanding its missile arsenal to target US assets in Hawaii and Guam. Further, China's navy has surpassed the US in terms of the number of warships, signifying its challenge to established maritime powers. China's increasingly coercive actions, including the militarization of disputed reefs and large-scale military exercises around Taiwan, have heightened conflict risk. Should a military invasion of Taiwan occur, it could easily extend to Okinawa and Japan's southwestern islands, severely disrupting the sea lanes and affecting the strategic mobility of US forces. China's growing military strength, coupled with its ambitions for cross-strait unification, is a critical and urgent challenge to Japan's security and regional stability.

1.1.2 North Korea

DPRK's ongoing nuclear and missile development poses substantial challenges to Japan's national security. Recently, the DPRK launched ballistic missiles capable of reaching the Japanese territory with unprecedented frequency, raising concerns about the potential for a seventh nuclear test. Moreover, if the DPRK acquires the ability to strike the US with nuclear weapons, it could undermine the credibility of US's extended deterrence, leading to fears of a potential decoupling of the Japan-US alliance and, thus, potentially destabilizing the security framework in East Asia.

DPRK's nuclear ambitions have advanced rapidly, with the leadership of Kim Jong-un committing to simultaneous economic and nuclear development in 2016. The DPRK subsequently conducted three nuclear tests and numerous ballistic missile launches and declared its nuclear program completed. Although a shift toward economic development and a temporary suspension of nuclear tests followed during the diplomatic talks with the US and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 2018, the DPRK has since resumed its strategic weapons development, reiterating its commitment to nuclear deterrence. Despite international sanctions, the DPRK has made considerable progress in missile development by relying on domestic resources and strengthening its ties with Russia in exchange for military technology. In 2022, the DPRK formalized a nuclear strategy that expanded the conditions for preemptive nuclear strikes, further complicating the denuclearization efforts and escalating regional tensions. These advancements reflect DPRK's commitment to regime survival through military capability, exacerbating the security challenges in the region.

1.1.3 Russia

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has continued its aggression against Ukraine, markedly escalating with the 2022 invasion. This involved a combination of military and non-military tactics aimed at unilaterally altering the status quo in violation of other nations' territorial sovereignties. Russia's actions, including veiled nuclear threats, constitute a serious breach of international law and pose a fundamental challenge to the international order. These aggressive measures undermine global stability and set dangerous precedents for the use of military force to resolve territorial disputes.

In addition to the war in Ukraine, Russia significantly bolstered its military presence in the Northern Territories as part of its deterrence, driven by the strategic importance of the Sea of Okhotsk, which is home to its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. Over the past 15 years, Russia has enhanced its military capabilities in this region by expanding the operations of submarine- and air-launched cruise missiles on the Kamchatka Peninsula and modernizing its anti-ship and air defense systems on the Kuril Islands, reinforcing its sea denial capabilities. The Kuril Islands and surrounding Northern Territories remain key strategic outposts for Russia, which continues to intensify its militarization efforts in these areas. Simultaneously, Russia escalated its military activities around Japan, as exemplified by large-scale exercises in the Eastern Military District and joint naval operations with China in the waters near Japan. The growing military cooperation between Russia, China, and the DPRK further exacerbates Japan's security challenges, highlighting the increasing militarization of the Asia-Pacific region and the complexities that Japan faces in ensuring its national security amid the deepening geopolitical tensions.

1.1.4 New Non-Traditional Security Threat: Economic Security and Emerging Technology

In addition to traditional security threats and risks, Japan now faces significant non-traditional security challenges related to economic statecraft, as well as critical and emerging technologies (CETs). The fierce power competition for technological dominance poses serious challenges to the rules-based international economic order, with the increasing implementation of economic coercion and unfair trade practices undermining established global economic norms. The rapid development of advanced technologies, particularly dual-use technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum information science (QIS), complicates the global security environment, especially given the concomitant disinformation campaigns (cognitive warfare) and the militarization of space and cyberspace.

In response to the intensifying US–China competition, Japan has heightened its focus on economic security as a means of safeguarding its national interests, introducing the Economic Security Promotion Act in 2022 to enhance supply chain resilience, protect critical technologies, and secure infrastructure. National security concerns now extend to critical sectors such as semiconductors, energy infrastructure, communication networks, and advanced technologies. It is imperative for Japan to be able to counter various forms of economic interference, including cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and technological espionage. A key vulnerability is Japan's heavy reliance on external supply chains, particularly for energy and essential materials such as semiconductors and rare-earth elements. This dependency, especially on China, has made Japan vulnerable to economic coercion, as illustrated by China's restrictions on rare-earth exports during territorial disputes.

1.2 The Perception of Threats and Risks in the National Security Strategy

The Japanese government officially recognized these problems in the 2022 revisions of the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program. These documents outline Japan's strategic approach to the three-pronged challenge posed by those nuclear-armed revisionist powers. When the NSS was revised in December 2022, significant attention was paid to how Japan would depict its security environment both domestically and internationally, especially in terms of its threat perception of China and the alignment with US's threat perceptions based on the US National Security Strategy released in October 2022.

China, which continues to attempt unilateral changes to the status quo in the East and South China Seas, was identified as a “serious concern for Japan and the international community” and “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge,”^[2] which aligns with the US view describing China as a “pacing challenge.”^[3] However, Japan's NSS sparked considerable debate within the ruling coalition between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito regarding how to address China's growing military power. The LDP, alarmed by China's increasing assertiveness, pushed for stronger language, proposing that China be labeled a “serious security threat.” By contrast, Komeito resisted such strong terminology, stressing the need for stable and constructive relations with China. By December, a compromise was reached with the introduction of the term “the greatest strategic challenge” to describe China. While Komeito accepted this phrasing in the NSS, it opposed using the word “threat” in the NDS, fearing it would further aggravate regional tensions, particularly after the August 2022 missile landings in Japan's exclusive economic zone.

[2] Cabinet Secretariat, “National Security Strategy of Japan,” December 2022.

[3] The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States,” October 2022.

In response, the LDP softened the language in the NDS, focusing on “regional residents”^[4] rather than on Japan directly. This compromise highlights Japan’s broader challenge of balancing robust defense measures with the need for stable economic and diplomatic relations in an increasingly volatile East Asia. The DPRK, which had already been designated as a threat in Japan’s 2013 NSS, was described even more critically in 2022. Owing to its rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, the DPRK is now considered an “even more grave and imminent threat”^[5] to Japan’s security, consistent with the US characterization of the DPRK as a “sustained threat.”^[6] Regarding Russia, which continues its military aggression in Ukraine, Japan described the country as “the most significant and direct threat” to Europe and a “strong security concern”^[7] in the Indo-Pacific because of its strategic alignment with China. By contrast, the US views Russia as an “immediate and persistent threat.”^[8] This difference reflects the distinct security environments of the two nations; that is, whereas the US, as a NATO member, faces a direct military threat from Russia in Europe, the Russian threat to Japan is more indirect, which explains the less direct language.

[4] Ministry of Defense, “National Defense Strategy,” December 2022.

[5] Cabinet Secretariat, “National Security Strategy of Japan.”

[6] The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States.”

[7] Cabinet Secretariat, “National Security Strategy of Japan.”

[8] The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States.”

II. Analysis of the Selected Issues and Current Perceptions

2.1 Emergence and Evolution of the Issue: China

Since the normalization of their diplomatic relations in 1972, Japan and China maintained relatively stable relations throughout the Cold War, primarily driven by their mutual interest in counterbalancing the Soviet Union with the US. However, the geopolitical landscape underwent a profound transformation following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which eliminated the shared enemies that formed the foundation of their cooperation. While Japan and the US continued to strengthen their bilateral alliance, China increasingly viewed this partnership as a growing security threat. This shift marked the beginning of heightened tensions between Japan and China in the post-Cold War period, which were exacerbated by rising nationalism and an anti-Japanese sentiment through patriotic education campaign in China.

Despite ongoing political friction, the economic relationships between Japan and China have deepened, particularly after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Nevertheless, by the 2010s, security concerns dominated this bilateral relationship, with the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands becoming a central issue. A key turning point occurred in 2010, when China imposed rare-earth export restrictions on Japan following a maritime incident, signaling China's readiness to use economic measures as political leverage. This event marked a shift in China's strategic priorities in that national security began to outweigh economic engagement. Tensions escalated in 2012 when Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands provoked a strong reaction from China, including increased maritime patrols and a heightened anti-Japanese sentiment. Security issues subsequently overshadowed economic ties, signaling a clear transformation in the Japan–China relations.

China's military expansion in the South and East China Seas also became a critical security concern for Japan. China's military modernization and its assertive territorial and maritime claims have fundamentally altered the regional security environment. Since the 1970s, China has gradually expanded its influence in the South China Sea, taking advantage of the reduced US military presence following the Vietnam War. In the 1980s and 1990s, China strengthened its territorial control through military skirmishes with Vietnam and pressure on the Philippines. By the late 2000s, emboldened by its growing economic power, it also intensified its efforts to assert claims in the South China Sea by employing a combination of naval and coastguard forces to enforce its territorial claims, while avoiding direct military confrontation.

China's objectives in the East and South China Seas revolve around securing territorial sovereignty, gaining control over marine resources, and ensuring the security of sea lanes, which are vital to its economic and military interests. Control over fishing grounds and seabed oil and gas deposits in the South China Sea is especially crucial because China relies heavily on imported energy resources that traverse key maritime routes, such as the Malacca Strait. In response to these challenges, China has focused on enhancing its military presence and capabilities. Through military modernization, assertive actions, and "gray-zone" tactics blurring the lines between military and civilian operations, China aims to challenge the maritime order maintained through US naval power.

China's growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas poses significant security risks to Japan. The broader strategy underlying China's actions, particularly its aim to establish military dominance over the South China Sea, threatens Japan's strategic interests. Such dominance could hinder the US military operations in the region, especially in the event of a conflict over Taiwan, and would enable China to disrupt or block the maritime routes vital to Japan's economic stability and energy security.

Regarding a potential Taiwan crisis, the conventional military balance already favors China. Unbound by the limitations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, China has been rapidly expanding its arsenal of intermediate-range missiles, a trend expected to continue. These capabilities form the core of China's anti-access area denial (A2/AD) operation. In terms of gray-zone operations, China's proposed peaceful reunification with Taiwan, while often associated with high-intensity scenarios such as an amphibious invasion, could plausibly involve alternative strategies aimed at coercing, punishing, or annexing Taiwan without direct military confrontation. Recognizing the immense costs of large-scale operations, China may focus on subduing Taiwan through non-lethal means, targeting the morale of its people, and achieving unification without damaging the infrastructure or causing loss of life. Recent military exercises suggest a shift toward law-enforcement-style measures such as quarantine and inspection led by the Coast Guard rather than the Navy. These measures aim to demonstrate control over Taiwan's maritime and aerial activities without imposing a full blockade, selectively restricting critical imports like US arms, while allowing the flow of essential goods. By leveraging such measures, China could exert significant pressure on Taiwan, potentially forcing it into dialogue without direct military force. This ambiguous strategy complicates the potential US and Japanese responses, as it does not provide clear grounds for military intervention.

In conclusion, China's growing military capabilities and assertive actions pose a significant security challenge for Japan. In aiming to surpass the US as a global superpower, China's military build-up, supported by economic

growth, is heightening regional tensions. The expansion of its ballistic missile capabilities targeting Japan, Guam, and Hawaii, along with a larger navy than the US, highlight China's strategic ambitions and unilateral actions in the East and South China Seas, as well as its intent to dominate the region. This trajectory complicates Japan's security strategy, underscoring the importance of its alliance with the US and partnerships with like-minded nations. To address the military imbalance and, in particular, gray-zone threats in the context of a potential Taiwan crisis, it is essential for both Japan and the US to engage in focused and substantive discussions aimed at effectively countering these challenges. Simultaneously, they must strengthen their deterrent and operational capabilities by enhancing coast guard operations and prioritizing the stockpiling and prepositioning of air defense missiles and long-range precision-guided munitions.

2.2 Key Public Opinion Surveys on Japan–China Relations

Since 2020, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has conducted annual public opinion surveys on China, offering valuable insights into the Japanese public's views on foreign policy.^[9] These surveys consistently demonstrated that the Japanese public's foremost concern is China's territorial incursions, particularly in contested regions such as the East China Sea. In 2020, 69.3% of the respondents emphasized the need for Japan to take a firm stance on these issues; this percentage has gradually decreased, reaching 58.4% by 2023. Despite this decline, territorial security remains a primary focus, illustrating ongoing anxiety regarding China's regional activities. Following territorial concerns, the second-most frequently cited issue involves the advocacy of values such as human rights, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. While slightly declining in prominence, this concern remains substantial, accentuating the importance of normative or ideological differences in shaping Japan's policy approach toward China. By contrast, economic relations consistently ranked lower on the public agenda, reflecting that the Japanese public prioritizes security and values over economic considerations in the Japan–China relations. These trends suggest that the Japanese public sentiment increasingly stresses the security and ideological concerns in its perception of China, reflecting a broader shift toward a value-based diplomacy less constrained by economic considerations. As territorial and ideological issues dominate, public opinion shows a growing apprehension toward China's expanding influence in the region.

In addition to the MOFA surveys, the Cabinet Office (CO) conducts annual polls on foreign relations, including a focus on Japan–China relations. These surveys revealed several key trends in the public sentiment between 2020 and 2023, highlighting the growing sense of distance between the two

[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "FY2023 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy," April 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "FY2022 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy," May 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "FY2022 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy," April 2022.

countries.^[10] The Japanese public's sense of affinity toward China has steadily eroded over the past few years. In 2020, 22.0% of the respondents reported feeling some level of closeness with China, but this figure dropped sharply to 12.7% by 2023. Conversely, those expressing no closeness reached 86.7% in 2023—a record high value. This growing emotional distance is likely the result of escalating political tensions that have deepened the public skepticism toward China. In comparison to 2003, when 47.9% of the respondents recorded some affinity toward China, this decline marked a dramatic shift in the public perception over the previous two decades.

The public's assessment of the bilateral relationships has also worsened. In 2020, 17.1% of the respondents viewed the relationship as positive, but by 2023, this figure had fallen to 5.6%. The percentage of those who perceived the relationship as negative increased from 81.8% in 2020 to 90.1% in 2023. These numbers reflect a stark deterioration in the perceptions of Japan–China relations driven by rising geopolitical tensions.

Despite the increasingly negative views on the current state of Japan–China relations, the Japanese public continues to recognize the importance of maintaining future relations with China. In 2020, 78.2% of the respondents opined that Japan–China relations were important, and although the sentiment has slightly declined to 68.2% in 2023, it remains significant. This enduring acknowledgment suggests that, while public opinion may be shaped by contemporary security and ideological tensions, there is still recognition of China's long-term importance to Japan's national interests.

Based on the 2023 Survey of 100 Japanese Companies on Economic Security conducted by the Institute of Geoeconomics, Japanese firms are increasingly cognizant of the risks associated with conducting business in China.^[11] In response to the question, "What are important topics to be attentive to for developing business in China? Select all that apply," 90.7% of the respondents identified geopolitical risks as their primary concern. This was followed by 76.0% citing the need to prepare for potential changes in Chinese policy that pose business survival risks and 77.3% highlighting the importance of preparing for a possible Taiwan contingency. Additional concerns included supply chain disruptions (73.3%) and cyberattacks (72.0%). These findings underscore the heightened awareness of the multiple dimensions of risk in relation to China among Japanese businesses, prompting the need for more robust risk-management frameworks to safeguard their operations and ensure continuity.

Regarding preparations for a potential Taiwanese contingency, more than 70.0% of the companies surveyed had either completed or were actively planning simulation exercises. Specifically, 25.7% reported having completed these simulations and preparing a business continuity plan, while

[10] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy (September 2023 Survey)," January 2024.

[11] Institute of Geoeconomics, "Results of the Survey of 100 Japanese Companies on Economic Security," May 2023.

7.1% had completed both simulations and a business continuity plan. An additional 38.6% were in the planning phase for conducting simulations, whereas 12.9% indicated that they had no plans for simulations at present. These results accentuate the increasing recognition of the necessity of being prepared for potential regional conflicts within Japanese corporate strategy, especially given the geopolitical tensions surrounding Taiwan.

Together, these findings illustrate a broader strategic shift among Japanese businesses for maintaining their operations in China while also prioritizing contingency planning and risk mitigation. The emphasis on both Taiwan-related contingencies and the broader geopolitical risks reflects an acute awareness of the uncertainties in the region and a focus on strengthening economic security and resilience in the face of these challenges.

A 2023 nationwide public opinion survey on media-related issues conducted by the Central Research Services revealed growing anxiety among the Japanese public regarding national security, particularly in the context of the geopolitical tensions surrounding China and Taiwan.^[12] When asked about the likelihood of Japan being attacked by another country, 78.5% of the respondents expressed varying levels of concern. Of these, 24.6% were “very concerned” and 53.9% were “somewhat concerned.” This represents a notable increase of 5.8 percentage points for the “very concerned” category compared with the previous year, indicating growing public unease about Japan’s national security. Only 20.3% of the respondents expressed little or no concern about a potential attack.

The survey also gauged the public perception of a possible military crisis involving Taiwan and China. An overwhelming 79.1% of the respondents indicated concerns over the prospect of China using military force against Taiwan, with 25.7% expressing a “strong sense of crisis” and 53.3% stating they were “somewhat concerned.” By contrast, only 19.7% felt little or no sense of crisis regarding Taiwan, reflecting widespread apprehension about the security implications for Japan. Furthermore, the survey explored the public opinion on Japan’s role in a potential Taiwan contingency. The most popular response, chosen by 31.2% of the respondents, was that Japan’s SDF should provide logistical support to US forces, such as the supply of weapons and ammunition, but without engaging in direct combat. An additional 26.9% believed that Japan should not be involved militarily at all, including prohibiting the use of US military bases in Japan. Another 23.3% supported US military action from bases in Japan, provided the SDF were not involved. These responses indicate that approximately 80% of the public is opposed to SDF’s direct involvement in military combat, with only 13.3% supporting the SDF joining US forces in military action against China.

In conclusion, public opinion surveys highlight a clear shift in Japan’s perception of its relationship with China, emphasizing territorial security and

[12] Central Research Services, “The 16th National Public Opinion Survey on Media (2023),” October 2023.

ideological concerns over economic ties. While the public continues to recognize the importance of maintaining diplomatic and economic relations with China, the increasing anxiety about China's regional ambitions, particularly regarding territorial incursions and a potential Taiwan contingency, underscores a more cautious and security-focused stance. This evolving sentiment is mirrored not only in the Japanese public's declining affinity toward China but also in the increased strategic attention paid to these risks by Japanese businesses. The heightened awareness of geopolitical tensions demonstrates a broader societal and corporate acknowledgment of the risks associated with China's regional presence. Ultimately, these trends indicate that Japan's foreign policy toward China is likely to remain shaped by the concerns over territorial integrity and the preservation of democratic values. While economic considerations remain significant, they play an increasingly secondary role in determining the direction of Japan's security strategies. Despite the inherent challenges in severing economic ties with China, Japan is advancing its economic security policies by carefully balancing economic and security objectives while actively seeking to mitigate geoeconomic rivalry between the US and China, recognizing that stability in great power relations is indispensable for regional prosperity.

2.3 Emergence and Evolution of the Issue: North Korea

Japan's relations with the DPRK have been shaped by two key issues: the abduction of Japanese citizens and DPRK's development of nuclear and missile technologies. The turning point in addressing these issues was Prime Minister Junichi Koizumi's historic visit to Pyongyang in 2002, which was the first direct government-level negotiation between Japan and the DPRK. During the summit, DPRK's leader Kim Jong-il acknowledged the abductions and explained them as actions taken by overzealous elements within DPRK's special agencies. The two leaders signed the Pyongyang Declaration, which included agreements on normalizing diplomatic relations, Japan's economic cooperation following this normalization, and DPRK's commitment to abide by international agreements on nuclear issues. Additionally, the DPRK expressed its intent to extend its moratorium on missile tests beyond 2003.

However, the revelation that several abductees had died under suspicious circumstances led to further tension. Diplomatic talks stalled over the issue of abductees' families, leading to a breakdown in negotiations. Despite DPRK's repeated claims that the abduction issue was resolved, Japan remained firm and viewed the matter as unresolved. Prime Minister Koizumi made a second visit to the DPRK in 2004, resulting in the return of a few family members of the abductees. Although the DPRK promised to reinvestigate the fates of other missing Japanese citizens, concrete evidence

was never provided. In the subsequent years, negotiations continued sporadically but with little progress. The 2014 Stockholm Agreement briefly rekindled hope, as the DPRK agreed to comprehensively investigate all Japanese citizens of concern and Japan agreed to lift certain sanctions. However, DPRK's nuclear and missile tests in 2016 led Japan to reinstate and strengthen sanctions, which resulted in the DPRK halting the investigation and dissolving its special committee on the issue.

Throughout these developments, DPRK's nuclear and missile programs remained a pivotal issue for Japan. DPRK's continued nuclear tests and missile launches, particularly after 2016, deepened mutual distrust. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan adopted a more hardline stance, emphasizing the need for pressure over dialogue. In the two nuclear tests conducted in 2016, the DPRK announced that it had successfully carried out its first hydrogen bomb test and nuclear warhead detonation. In 2017, the DPRK declared that it had successfully tested a hydrogen bomb designed for mounting on an Intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Given the success of such large-scale explosions, coupled with its longstanding commitment to the development of missile delivery systems for nuclear weapons, subsequent nuclear tests are expected to focus on the miniaturization of nuclear warheads. This shift suggests that the DPRK is pursuing the development of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) for potential use in regional conflicts. Until the 2000s, nuclear and missile development was largely perceived as a tool for diplomatic bargaining and the gradual shift indicated that actual deployment was becoming an increasingly tangible reality.

Although Prime Minister Abe later signaled a willingness to engage in unconditional talks with the DPRK, Pyongyang showed limited interest, particularly considering its active diplomatic talks between US President Donald Trump and ROK President Moon Jae-in. Ultimately, despite repeated assertions by Prime Minister Abe that resolving the abduction issue was a top priority, he left office without achieving any concrete progress in the matter. This prolonged stalemate highlights the persistent distrust between the two countries, particularly regarding the abduction and missile development issues. The DPRK, for its part, has viewed Japan's focus on the abduction issue and its imposition of sanctions as politically motivated, designed more for political gain domestically than for genuine diplomatic resolution. Consequently, the two nations remain locked in a cycle of distrust and unfulfilled diplomatic efforts.

DPRK's ongoing nuclear weapons development and missile programs have long posed a serious threat to Japan. Recently, the DPRK launched ballistic missiles at an unprecedented frequency, raising concerns regarding the possibility of a seventh nuclear test. Given that DPRK missiles can reach Japanese territory, the nuclear issue remains a vital concern for Japan's national

security. In May 2016, DPRK leader Kim Jong-un reaffirmed his commitment to concurrently advance both economic development and nuclear weapons capability while maintaining a strong military posture. During this period, the DPRK conducted three nuclear tests and launched numerous ballistic missiles between 2016 and 2017, ultimately declaring the completion of its nuclear weapons program.

In early 2018, Kim announced a shift in policy, stating that the dual goals had been achieved and redirecting national efforts toward economic development. During a period of increased diplomatic engagement between the DPRK, the US, and the ROK, Kim suspended nuclear tests and long-range missile launches and publicly dismantled a nuclear test site. At the US-DPRK summit in 2018, Kim expressed the commitment toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Despite these overtures, the 2019 summit between the US and the DPRK concluded without agreement, and Kim announced that the DPRK would continue to develop strategic weapons until the US ceased its perceived hostile policies. In 2021, Kim reiterated the importance of strengthening DPRK's nuclear deterrence capabilities, signaling the continuation of the country's nuclear and missile development.

In recent years, the DPRK has made significant advancements in missile development, leveraging its domestic resources and technology, despite international sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. These advancements include the development of ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic glide missiles, as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), all of which are outlined in its 2021 five-year plan to enhance deterrence by diversifying nuclear delivery systems. In 2022, the DPRK formalized its nuclear strategy, marking a substantial shift by expanding the conditions under which it would carry out preemptive nuclear strikes. Article 6 of the newly introduced legislation permits preemptive nuclear strikes, representing a significant departure from the prior policies that largely focused on retaliation. This doctrine now allows for the use of nuclear weapons not only in response to nuclear attacks but also in situations where the DPRK perceives existential threats, including conventional military attacks. Such broadening of the conditions for nuclear power use heightens the risk of conflict escalation, particularly in scenarios where misinterpretation or miscalculation could lead to a rapid and uncontrollable escalation.

The DPRK, having observed the invasion of non-nuclear Ukraine by nuclear-armed Russia, has adopted a more assertive stance, particularly following the inauguration of the Yoon administration in the ROK, which decisively rejected the conciliatory policies of its predecessor toward Pyongyang. In response, the DPRK made explicit its readiness to employ nuclear weapons in actual combat, including in preemptive strikes. A noteworthy development in this context is DPRK's shift in its reunification policy toward

the ROK, evident from late 2023. This shift reframes the ROK as DPRK's permanent adversary, departing from the previous strategy based on "one ethnicity, one nation, two systems, two governments." Acknowledging the significant challenges of achieving reunification, this policy also aims to prevent the infiltration of ROK's popular culture into the DPRK. This profound change is deemed essential for the perpetuation of the DPRK regime.

Moreover, the DPRK bolstered its ties with Russia, as evidenced by the signing of a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty" in 2024, which includes military cooperation in exchange for DPRK support in the Ukraine conflict. This treaty is significant, as it signals a deepening of military and economic relations between the two countries, reminiscent of Cold War-era alliances. Article 4 of the treaty commits both nations to provide mutual military assistance in the event of an attack, drawing parallels with the defunct 1961 Soviet-DPRK defense pact, which also included an automatic intervention clause. This provision underscores both countries' willingness to engage in military cooperation, heightening the concerns about regional stability in Asia. This partnership reportedly enabled the DPRK to acquire missile and satellite technologies, contributing to the development of its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities for future missile operations. Russia plays an essential role for the DPRK as a potential counterbalance to China's influence, which Pyongyang has long regarded with caution. This strategic significance extends beyond economic considerations; it is particularly important given historical precedents such as the strengthening of the US-China sanctions following DPRK's nuclear test in 2017. Securing Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council is, thus, a key objective for the DPRK to ensure a more favorable international environment. Overall, DPRK's missile development aligns with its broader security objectives, further complicating denuclearization efforts and exacerbating regional tensions.

A contingency on the Korean Peninsula involving the DPRK, which is equipped with advanced missile capabilities, could rapidly escalate into a simultaneous, multifaceted crisis, particularly given the complex dynamics of its relationships with China and Russia. Such a crisis could coincide with a conflict in the Taiwan Strait or large-scale military exercises in the Sea of Okhotsk, potentially triggering a broader regional security emergency. In the event of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, whether the DPRK supports China in a Taiwan contingency or misinterprets the perceived weakening of trust in the US-ROK alliance, particularly in relation to nuclear deterrence, the likelihood of missile attacks, potentially including nuclear threats against Japan, the US, and the ROK is not only plausible but widely anticipated. Should DPRK's nuclear capabilities extend to the US mainland, the risk of decoupling in the Japan-US alliance would increase, as would the potential for misinterpretation or miscalculation by the DPRK.

DPRK's military capabilities, including its advanced missile systems and potential weapons of mass destruction, pose a multifaceted threat to regional stability, particularly in the event of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Its extensive missile arsenal, coupled with its saturation-strike capabilities, as well as the use of transporter erector launchers (TELs) and rail-mobile missiles presents substantial challenges to the defensive and retaliatory measures of Japan, the US, and the ROK. Of even greater concern is the belief that the DPRK possesses biological weapons such as smallpox and plague alongside chemical agents such as sarin, which have a lower threshold for use than nuclear arms and can be deployed through acts of terrorism.

In the event of a military conflict, the DPRK may resort to coercive measures, thereby heightening the threat to these three countries. This risk is aggravated by the likely involvement of US forces stationed in Japan, making Japan's national security particularly vulnerable. The potential for DPRK's preemptive nuclear strikes, alongside its deepening military cooperation with Russia, has provoked significant responses from both Japan and the ROK. In the ROK, this has led to renewed discussions on nuclear armament and the possible redeployment of TNWs. Should the DPRK successfully deploy TNWs, capabilities that neither the ROK nor US forces stationed in the country currently possess, it would establish a position of escalation dominance, enabling it to deter US military intervention. In this context, it is vital for the US to sustain a credible deterrence posture against the DPRK, while also providing reassurance to its regional allies, particularly the ROK.

2.4 Key Public Opinion Surveys on Japan–North Korean Relations

The public opinion surveys conducted by the CO on the SDF and defense issues reveal a growing perception of the DPRK as a significant security threat, particularly in relation to its missile and nuclear programs.^[13] In the 2022 survey, 68.9% of the respondents identified "DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile development" as their primary concern, highlighting the heightened awareness of the immediate risks posed by Pyongyang's military advancements.

This concern surpassed other pressing issues such as "Japan's defense capabilities" (64.0%) and "China's military modernization" (61.3%). The results suggest a consensus within Japan that DPRK's missile and nuclear programs represent some of the most urgent challenges to national security. Additionally, 52.1% of the respondents expressed concerns about the "situation and impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine," underscoring the influence of global conflicts on Japanese security perceptions. Notably, "DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile development" was also the top concern

[13] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on the Japan Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues (November 2022 Survey)," March 2023.

in the 2018 survey, indicating the persistent nature of this issue.

Furthermore, the public opinion surveys on foreign relations conducted by the CO show a significant shift in public focus—from the longstanding issue of the abduction of Japanese citizens by the DPRK to concerns over its missile program.^[14] In 2017, for the first time, the missile threat overtook the abduction issue as the primary concern, with 83.0% of the respondents identifying it as their top concern compared with 78.3% for the abduction issue. This trend persisted, the missile threat remaining the dominant concern in subsequent surveys. By 2023, 77.9% of the respondents still cited the missile threat as their primary concern, followed by the abduction issue (73.6%) and the nuclear issue (65.7%). Despite some fluctuations in ranking, the missile, abduction, and nuclear issues consistently dominate public concerns regarding the DPRK, reflecting an enduring perception of the country as a threat to Japan's security.

These findings illustrate a crucial shift in Japan's public perception in that missile and nuclear threats have replaced the abduction issue as the primary focus. This shift mirrors broader global anxieties regarding DPRK's expanding military capabilities and suggests that Japanese citizens are increasingly aware of the existential threats posed by the regime's missile program. The persistence of these concerns indicates that DPRK's actions have continued to shape Japan's national security discourse and defense policies.

2.5 Emergence and Evolution of the Issue: Russia

The territorial dispute over the Northern Territories and the security threat posed by Soviet Russia originated in the aftermath of World War II in 1945 when the Soviet Union occupied the Northern Territories—the islands of Etorofu, Habomai, Kunashiri, and Shikotan—which are territories recognized as Japanese under the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda. Despite Japan's ongoing claims to the islands, the Soviet Union effectively annexed them, creating a dispute that remains unresolved. In August 1945, despite the Japan–Soviet Neutrality Pact, the Soviet Union launched a surprise invasion of Manchuria, southern Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands, forcibly detaining Japanese civilians and deporting them to Siberia. Although the 1956 Japan–Soviet Joint Declaration included a promise to return the Habomai and Shikotan Islands, no comprehensive resolution of the broader territorial issue was achieved. Tensions escalated after the 1960 revision of the Japan–US Security Treaty, leading to a halt in negotiations and the Soviet militarization of the islands, which intensified Japan's security concerns. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union fortified its military presence in East Asia by deploying nuclear submarines and missiles.

[14] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy."

The conclusion of the Cold War ushered in a period of improved Japan–Russia relations, characterized by increased economic cooperation. However, since the 2010s, Japan’s perception of Russia has changed, driven by regional and global developments. In 2013, Japan established its National Security Secretariat and released its inaugural NSS, which identified Russia as a potential partner for addressing the regional security challenges posed by China and the DPRK. Japan aimed to strengthen its bilateral relationship with Russia, viewing it as a counterbalance to China’s growing influence in East Asia.

The 2014 Ukraine crisis posed a dual challenge for Japan: maintaining its commitment to the international order while avoiding the deterioration of its relationship with Russia. Japan’s imposition of sanctions on Russia, although aligned with the international response, was perceived as moderate, reflecting Tokyo’s desire to preserve its diplomatic ties. In response, Russia adopted a more adversarial stance toward Japan and deepened its strategic alignment with China, expanding military and economic cooperation, including joint military exercises and advanced arms sales. This cooperation culminated in incidents such as the 2019 joint air patrols by Russian and Chinese bombers over the East China Sea, prompting formal protests from Japan and the ROK over violations of their airspace.

Japan’s approach toward Russia shifted decisively after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In solidarity with G7 nations, Japan imposed stricter sanctions, recognizing the invasion as a flagrant violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and a direct threat to the international order. Tokyo also acknowledged that its previous approach toward Russia had produced limited strategic benefits, as Moscow continued to deepen ties with China while showing no willingness to address Japan’s territorial or regional security concerns. Moreover, there was increasing apprehension that Russia’s successful use of force to alter the status quo could embolden other actors to pursue similar aggressive territorial revisions, further destabilizing the already complex security environment in East Asia.

A significant security threat to Japan stems from Russia’s military activities in the Asia–Pacific region and its deepening strategic alignment with China, characterized by an increasing frequency of joint military exercises since 2019, including naval drills, bomber flights, and live-fire exercises near Japan’s borders. These activities underscore the potential for coordinated military actions that could weaken Japan’s defense posture, particularly as the partnership between Russia and China raises the risk of simultaneous threats from both powers. The global power dynamics following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine have further solidified this alignment, heightening the concerns over coordinated actions in potential conflicts involving Taiwan. Russia’s large-scale military exercises in the Eastern Military District,

including those near the Northern Territories, highlight its expanding presence in the Indo-Pacific and its growing tensions with Japan. Joint naval operations coordinated air patrols, and recent cooperative training with China on quarantine and inspection measures reflect a deepening maritime operational alignment, potentially relevant in a Taiwan contingency. Compounding these challenges, Russia's closer ties with the DPRK extend the security threat for Japan from Europe to the Asia-Pacific, necessitating a reevaluation of Japan's defense strategy by considering the increasingly integrated Russia-China partnership.

Russia's military presence in East Asia, particularly its naval bases and air force capability, constitutes a direct threat to the Northern Territories. Tokyo is particularly alarmed by the growing number of Russian military exercises near the Northern Territories. The deployment of advanced military assets, including long-range bombers and submarines, further complicates Japan's security considerations. This escalation is driven in part by the strategic significance of the Sea of Okhotsk, home to Russia's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, which are a key component of its strategic deterrence. Following the 2019 dissolution of the INF Treaty, Russia has modernized its military capabilities and prepared for the potential redeployment of intermediate-range missiles. While Europe is expected to be the primary focus of such deployments, there is a possibility that these missiles could be stationed in East Asia, particularly on the Kamchatka Peninsula, by the early 2030s, with considerations extending not only to East Asia but also to the Alaska region. Over the past 15 years, Russia has expanded its strategic deterrence operations in the Sea of Okhotsk, particularly those involving submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) from the Kamchatka Peninsula. In addition, it has modernized the antiship missiles and air defense systems in the Kuril Islands, creating an A2/AD network. The Kuril Islands and adjacent Northern Territories remain strategically significant military positions for Russia, which has consistently reinforced its military presence in the region.

Japan's energy relationship with Russia presents significant economic vulnerability, particularly because it relies on Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG), despite ongoing efforts to diversify its energy sources. This reliance has intensified since the 2011 Fukushima disaster, resulting in the shutdown of many nuclear power plants. A substantial proportion of Japan's LNG imports originates from Russia and the country's sanctions on Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, including restrictions on energy imports, have further underscored the risks associated with this reliance. Nevertheless, energy and security experts continue to emphasize the strategic importance of maintaining LNG imports from Russia. Japan's limited domestic energy resources and the critical role of Russian gas in ensuring a stable energy supply have made Tokyo cautious about fully severing the energy ties with Russia. While there are calls within Japan to ban

Russian LNG imports in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, the ongoing instability in the Middle East highlights the necessity of securing alternative energy sources that do not depend on this volatile region. Japan's involvement in the Sakhalin-2 project, in which Japanese companies such as the Mitsubishi Corporation and Mitsui & Co. collectively hold a 22.5% stake, further complicates this issue.

In the future, Japan may need to explore new energy partnerships, particularly with the US. Both Japan and Taiwan have been interested in increasing imports of oil and gas from the US, especially that the shipping routes between Alaska and Japan are largely insulated from the risks of a potential Chinese blockade. Should political developments such as the re-establishment of the Trump administration facilitate greater access to US energy, Japan would likely seek to capitalize on this opportunity by securing additional supplies from Alaska. The next critical step for Japan is to assess the volume of energy that can be realistically imported from the US and develop the necessary investment and mechanisms for stable and efficient export logistics.

2.6 Key Public Opinion Surveys on Japan–Russia Relations

As discussed in a previous section, the 2022 public opinion survey on the SDF and defense issues conducted by the CO revealed that 68.9% of the respondents identified "DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile development" as a significant security concern, followed by 61.3% expressing apprehension about "China's military modernization and activities."^[15] Additionally, 52.1% of the respondents voiced concerns regarding the "situation and impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine." However, international surveys present a different perspective, particularly in relation to the perceptions of Russia as a security threat.

The most recent international public opinion survey conducted by the Munich Security Conference revealed a marked shift in global threat perceptions.^[16] While concerns over Russia's military actions had been predominant in 2022, non-traditional security threats such as climate change and large-scale migration became more pressing in many countries by 2023. Notably, among G7 nations, only Japan and the UK continue to regard Russia as the most significant threat. Japan remains distinctive in its continued focus on Russia as its primary security concern, separating it from most G7 countries. This sustained apprehension toward Russia can be partly attributed to Japan's unique geopolitical circumstances. Unlike European nations, Japan is less directly affected by issues such as climate change and large-scale migration, which are more prominent in Europe. As a result, despite its geographical distance from the conflict in Ukraine, Japan continues to prioritize the Russian threat and its ramifications in the region.

[15] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on the Japan Self-Defense Forces."

[16] Bunde et al., "Munich Security Report 2024."

Japan's proximity to Russia, coupled with the strategic importance of the surrounding region, necessitates a heightened level of vigilance regarding Russian military activities. Therefore, even as global attention shifts toward emerging non-traditional security threats, Japan remains focused on Russia as a critical national security issue.

2.7 The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on US Grand Strategy

Russia's invasion of Ukraine initially raised concerns about its potential impact on stable US commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. It is a matter of the reputation and prioritization strategies of the US and part of the broader framework of the US grand strategy, specifically regarding the allocation of its military resources and the credibility of its extended deterrence commitments.^[17] The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has significantly tested the capacity of the US to uphold its reputation as a dependable security guarantor while concurrently managing its prioritization of commitments across multiple strategic regions.

As the war progressed, questions were raised among US allies about the extent to which American resources and attention could be stretched, particularly considering the growing security challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific and the persistent tensions induced by Russia in Europe. A critical dimension of this concern is the potential reputational consequences of US action, even in areas where no formal alliance obligations exist. This is underscored by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's assertion that "Ukraine may be the East Asia of tomorrow," reflecting a broader apprehension that the US response to Ukraine could serve as an indicator of Washington's future commitment to defending Taiwan against aggression.

The ongoing war heightened these concerns, with US allies being wary of prolonged engagement in Europe possibly diverting crucial military resources away from other pressing strategic priorities. While there is widespread appreciation for Washington's robust support for Ukraine under the current US administration, apprehensions persist that this focus may undermine the capabilities of the US to deter adversarial actions by China. Nevertheless, despite these concerns, there has been no significant erosion of allied support for US policies. The US administration's efforts to maintain a strong military presence in Europe, while concurrently signaling a sustained commitment to Indo-Pacific security, have mitigated some of these anxieties. However, the long-term efficacy of this reassurance hinges on the eventual resolution of the Ukraine conflict.

[17] Tongfi Kim & Luis Simón, "Power and Perceptions: How Allies View America's Reputation and Prioritisation after Ukraine," CSDS Policy Brief, May 2023.

Should the war in Ukraine prolong, several critical risks may emerge. Extended involvement in the conflict may lead to weakening the political will to sustain military assistance among US policymakers. A drawn-out war could increase the probability of a broader confrontation between NATO and Russia, complicating US's ability to reorient its focus toward the Indo-Pacific and diminishing their capacity for global engagement and responsiveness to emergent threats in other regions. Compounding these concerns is the ongoing conflict between Israel, Hamas, and Hezbollah, which has the potential for further regional escalation involving Iran. If this situation deteriorates, the US may find itself increasingly stretched as it seeks to address simultaneous crises, thereby exacerbating the strain on its resources and strategic focus.

In conclusion, while the US has thus far succeeded in reassuring its allies in the face of the challenge posed by the war in Ukraine, the prospect of a protracted conflict and simultaneous escalation of tensions in the Middle East present significant risks. These developments could severely strain US military resources and challenge the credibility of US global security commitments. The war in Ukraine exposed the underlying tensions in US foreign policy between maintaining its international reputation and managing prioritization trade-offs. As the conflict continues, its potential to erode the ability of the to balance competing global priorities highlights a critical inflection point in the US grand strategy. For Japan, the US' commitment to the Indo-Pacific remains indispensable, but the trajectory of the conflict in Ukraine and its implications for global order make European security a matter of vital interest, with potential consequences for Asia's stability and security dynamics.

III. Current and Future Security Policy Approaches in the Indo-Pacific Region

3.1 Relevant Official Documents and Policies

The revised NSS is organized by key components such as the purpose and rationale for formulating the strategy and the fundamental principles underpinning national security. In the section addressing the security environment and national security challenges, the strategy identifies two primary concerns: the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the threats and risks posed by China, the DPRK, and Russia. First, Japan positions the FOIP vision as central to its foreign and security policy, emphasizing the critical need to uphold this vision based on the rule of law. Second, considering the increasing threats and risks posed by China, the DPRK, and Russia, the NSS asserts that Japan, in collaboration with allies and like-minded nations, will actively promote the FOIP vision to ensure regional peace and stability and prevent any unilateral attempts to altering the existing international order.

The FOIP vision, first articulated in 2016, reflects the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Indo-Pacific, covering Asia, Africa, and the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Originally based on three core pillars, it has evolved to address the changing dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. The initial framework focused on (1) promoting the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade through collaboration with like-minded nations; (2) fostering economic prosperity by enhancing “physical connectivity” through quality infrastructure, “human connectivity” through capacity building, and “institutional connectivity” through trade facilitation; and (3) ensuring peace and stability by supporting coastal nations through capacity building and cooperation in areas such as humanitarian assistance and maritime security.^[18] In 2023, the Kishida administration updated this vision to reflect the new global challenges, reconfiguring it around four pillars:^[19] (1) “Principles of Peace and Rules of Prosperity,” which emphasize upholding freedom, transparency, and the rule of law to protect weaker nations from coercion; (2) “Indo-Pacific Approaches to Global Challenges,” which addresses critical issues such as climate change, cybersecurity, and public health; (3) “Multilayered Connectivity,” which focuses on deepening regional ties through enhanced infrastructure and institutional collaboration; and (4) “Security and Safe Utilization from Sea to Air,” which expands the efforts to secure both maritime and air domains as global commons through advanced technology and law enforcement. This shift highlights Japan’s commitment to fostering a more resilient, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region tailored to meet the needs of Southeast Asian countries caught amid great power rivalry.

[18] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan’s Effort for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” March 2021.

[19] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP),” March 2023.

Interestingly, unlike in the past, the strategy explicitly states Japan's intention to contribute to the maintenance and development of a free and open international order that extends beyond the Indo-Pacific. Japan aims to play a leading role in the global efforts to universalize the FOIP vision by promoting rules for a fair economic order, enhancing connectivity, and expanding maritime security initiatives. More importantly, Japan seeks to expand its diplomatic outreach to emerging and developing countries, recognizing their growing economic and political influence.

By engaging with these nations, Japan aims to garner support for its FOIP vision and reinforce the rule of law on a global scale. This strategy reflects its intention to strengthen the international order not only by maintaining relations with its traditional partners but also by forging new partnerships across diverse regions.

The section outlining Japan's national security objectives marks a notable strategic shift toward achieving "a new balance in international relations," especially within the Indo-Pacific region. Although not widely covered by the domestic and international media, this objective reflects a sincere and determined approach, emphasizing the need to prevent scenarios in which a single state can unilaterally alter the status quo. Japan is committed to the FOIP vision, adopting a proactive stance in shaping regional and global dynamics in the face of rising authoritarianism and power politics. This is clearly reflected in its Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework. Aimed at enhancing Japan and its partners' deterrence capabilities, the MOFA launched this new international cooperation initiative to provide equipment and infrastructure support to the armed forces of like-minded nations separately from the Official Development Assistance (ODA) intended for economic and social development in developing countries. While current funding limits cooperation on equipment and supplies, a budgetary increase could enable broader military-related infrastructure support.

The strategic approaches prioritized by Japan further elaborate on the methods used to achieve these security objectives. Central to this idea is the concept of comprehensive national power, which integrates Japan's diplomatic, defense, economic, technological, and intelligence capabilities to strengthen national security. This strategy emphasizes the holistic deployment of these capabilities to prevent crises, proactively foster a peaceful international environment, and reinforce a free and open global order. Among the seven strategic approaches, the most closely related to the FOIP vision is the first, namely "Develop Efforts Centered on Diplomacy to Prevent Crises, Proactively Create a Peaceful and Stable International Environment, and Strengthen a Free and Open International Order," which includes strengthening the Japan-US alliance and maintaining and developing a free and open international order by collaborating with like-minded nations. From a defense perspective, in response to the increasing

threats and risks, Japan's strategy emphasizes the need to enhance its defense architecture through three key initiatives. The first is the fundamental reinforcement of defense capabilities. Specifically, Japan plans to significantly enhance its defense capabilities through the development of standoff and unmanned systems and cross-domain operational capacities. A commitment to increase the defense budget to 2% of the GDP by fiscal year 2027 underscores this effort. The second is strengthening the coordination between the SDF and Japan Coast Guard to ensure a seamless response to maritime security threats and other contingencies such as gray-zone tactics. Finally, the defense technology and equipment transfer strategy emphasizes the need to revise legal frameworks for defense equipment and technology transfers to facilitate smoother transactions, while ensuring transparency and adherence to the principles governing such exchanges.

The revision of Japan's strategic defense documents marks a significant shift in its defense policy by the introduction of advanced standoff defense capabilities, enabling it to conduct counterattacks within adversary territories. Related to these capabilities, the revised strategy focuses on three key principles: strengthening Japan's capacity to independently repel invasions, deterring adversaries by demonstrating that the costs of aggression will be too high, and integrating these new capabilities with US military power to enhance regional stability. To realize this transformation, Japan's defense strategy emphasizes three key operational functions and capabilities. The first refers to standoff defense and integrated missile defense. Japan will develop the ability to intercept and neutralize adversary forces from long distances, effectively preventing incursions before they reach Japanese territory. This includes the deployment of advanced missile defense systems designed to intercept threats at extended ranges. The second includes cross-domain superiority and unmanned systems. Should deterrence fail, Japan plans to integrate cross-domain operational capabilities, including unmanned defense assets, to secure superiority across multiple domains such as land, sea, air, cyber, and space. This approach ensures asymmetric responses to aggression, thereby securing operational advantages over adversaries. The third entails command, control, intelligence, and resilience. Japan will enhance its command, control, and intelligence systems to enable swift and decisive action. Additionally, maintaining mobility, rapid deployment, sustainability, and resilience are critical to ensure the ability to deter or repel aggression over prolonged periods under various scenarios.

Most importantly, these new capabilities are part of a broader "denial strategy" aimed at neutralizing an adversary's ability to conduct successful military operations at an early stage. By demonstrating the futility of further escalation, Japan seeks to compel adversaries to abandon any aggressive intentions. This strategic shift marks a significant departure from its traditional defense posture. Historically, Japan has refrained from acquiring

offensive strike capabilities, relying instead on the US for broader strike options because of the constitutional constraints and the division of roles within the Japan–US defense alliance. However, given the widening missile capability gap between the US and China, exacerbated by the limitations imposed by the INF Treaty, Japan’s decision to develop its own counterstrike capabilities holds critical strategic importance for the Japan–US alliance.

3.2 Formulation Process, Budget Considerations, and Public Interest

When summarizing Japan’s foreign and security policies, three core pillars emerge: (1) the management of the Japan–US alliance, (2) cooperation with like-minded countries, and (3) the enhancement of national defense capabilities. Although the MOFA leads the first two pillars, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) primarily oversees the latter. However, under the concept of comprehensive national power, numerous government ministries are involved. The NSS complements the fundamental enhancement of defense capabilities and, as an integral part of this effort, promotes initiatives across four areas: (1) research and development, (2) public infrastructure development, (3) cybersecurity, and (4) international cooperation (the OSA framework). Collaboration with ministries such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism is essential.

The National Security Secretariat and National Security Council play crucial roles in the planning process. The review and drafting of Japan’s three key strategic documents involved 18 meetings of the National Security Council since late 2021, notably those with four key ministers (the Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defense, and Minister of Finance). In addition to internal deliberations, consultations with external experts played a vital role in the yearlong process that culminated with the publication of strategic documents in December 2022. The process officially commenced in October 2021 when Prime Minister Kishida announced during a Diet policy speech that discussions on revising these key documents would begin a year earlier than scheduled. In December 2021, Prime Minister Kishida elaborated on the need for pragmatic and swift enhancements to Japan’s defense capabilities.

In June 2022, the Cabinet approved the “Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2022,” highlighting the necessity of fundamentally strengthening Japan’s defense capabilities within five years by framing defense as the ultimate guarantor of national security. This document emphasized the need to align budget allocation and defense planning with the newly formulated strategic documents. The budget for fiscal year 2023 incorporated corresponding measures, with the Prime Minister reiterating the focus on the content, scale, and financial resources

required for implementing the defense strategy.

Starting from January 2022, the exchanges between government officials from the National Security Secretariat, the MOFA, the MOD, and external experts culminated in 17 sessions by July 2022. Concurrently, the MOD held 15 sessions of the “Defense Capability Enhancement Acceleration Council,” chaired by the Minister of Defense since its establishment in November 2021. These discussions were critical for identifying and organizing the key issues related to the NSS and associated documents. In September 2023, the “Council of Experts on Comprehensive National Defense as National Power,” chaired by the Prime Minister, was established to explore the reinforcement of Japan’s defense posture in conjunction with economic and fiscal policies. In addition to the Prime Minister, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defense, and all other key ministers participated in these discussions, leading to a report submitted to the Prime Minister on November 22, 2023.

The report emphasized the importance of an integrated approach to all facets of national power from a national defense perspective: research and development, public infrastructure, cybersecurity, and international cooperation. It also called for seamless coordination between enhanced defense capabilities and a robust complementary defense system. The report underscored that securing critical supplies, particularly energy, and maintaining international financial credibility are vital for Japan’s economic stability. A strong economic foundation and fiscal surplus are essential for sustaining the defense capabilities as core components of national power in times of crisis. As the revised NSS elaborates, while Japan will prioritize strengthening cybersecurity, maritime security, and space security to protect its national interests across multiple domains, economic security plays a critical role in its comprehensive strategy by promoting policies to achieve autonomous economic prosperity and securing vital supply chains, thereby ensuring long-term national stability and resilience.

In terms of budgetary support, the Japanese government has committed to secure 43 trillion yen over five years starting from fiscal year 2023 to maintain defense expenditure at a level equivalent to 2% of the GDP, concomitant with the related expenses from other ministries. To finance this initiative, the government plans to implement spending reforms, utilize surplus funds from fiscal settlements, create a fund for defense capability enhancement through non-tax revenue, and consider tax measures (including potential tax increases). However, while the legislation for establishing a defense funding source has been promulgated, the timing of additional tax measures remains uncertain.

The latest public opinion survey on the SDF and defense issues, conducted by the CO in 2022, indicates significant shifts in the Japanese public’s perception

of national defense.^[20]

Specifically, there is a growing awareness and support for defense policies, reflecting a multifaceted understanding of defense issues. The survey indicates that 41.5% of the respondents are in favor of expanding the SDF, the highest recorded level, marking a notable 12.4-point increase from the previous survey of 2018 and representing the highest percentage since the question was first posed in 1991. This sharp increase is believed to stem from specific threats, such as China's military expansion and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These developments have heightened the public's awareness of security threats and risks, fostering greater support for Japan's defense capabilities. While 53.0% of the respondents still viewed the current size of the SDF as adequate, this figure represents a decrease of approximately seven points from the previous survey, suggesting a shift in the public perception. As Japan is still confronted with increasingly tangible security threats and risks, a growing segment of the population recognizes that the current level of defense preparedness may be insufficient.

3.3 Advancing a Rules-Based Order: Japan's Role in Strengthening Global and Regional Security Partnerships

Japan's security policy is firmly anchored in its alliance with the US. The US has announced its plans to restructure the US Forces Japan (USFJ) and establish a joint force headquarters for expanded missions and operational responsibilities. This development is expected to deepen the operational-level cooperation between the two countries through closer coordination between the headquarters and Japan's Joint Operations Command (JJOC); it is scheduled to be established by the end of the fiscal year, thereby addressing concerns related to information sharing and cooperation during crises. This is required by the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, responsible for commanding the USFJ, which is operating at a significant distance and time difference from Japan. Unlike the US-ROK alliance under which command structures are unified during times of crisis, the Japan-US alliance maintains separate command chains for the SDF and USFJ. Therefore, it is imperative that Japan and the US develop a coalition-based AI-enabled Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) system. This system would integrate various sensors and shooter assets across allied nations, while maintaining individual control over national assets. The primary objective of such an integrated command and control framework is to outpace adversaries, particularly China and the DPRK, by accelerating the observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) loop. By enabling faster observation, situational assessment, decision-making, and execution, the alliance would be better positioned to successfully employ long-range precision strikes and other advanced military capabilities, for a higher overall strategic effectiveness in the event of a crisis.

[20] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on the Japan Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues," March 2022.

Japan has been simultaneously expanding its cooperation with like-minded nations through multilayered frameworks, including bilateral cooperation, ASEAN-led multilateralism, and minilateral initiatives. Given the prevailing complex security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, cooperation with a range of countries is essential, as underpinned by the FOIP. Japan has sought to expand its role in key bilateral frameworks such as Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), agreements on the transfer of defense equipment and technology, and the OSA framework to enhance its regional deterrence capabilities and enable like-minded countries to engage more actively in defense cooperation.

Japan has also progressively adapted to the shifting geopolitical landscape by diversifying its partnerships, particularly through the strategic use of minilateralism. Characterized by small issue-focused coalitions, minilateralism has become a central pillar of Japan's foreign and security policy in responding to the evolving power balance and rising tensions between major powers. The rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is driven by two primary objectives: addressing non-traditional security challenges and strengthening military cooperation to preserve the regional balance of power. Functional minilateralism, as exemplified by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), focuses on non-traditional security issues such as counterterrorism, maritime domain awareness (MDA), and disaster relief. These functional partnerships enable states to address specific security concerns with greater agility than traditional multilateral institutions, which often suffer from slow decision-making processes because of divergent and sensitive national interests. By contrast, strategic minilateralism, in initiatives such as SQUAD (a grouping between the US, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines) and AUKUS (a grouping between Australia, the UK, and the US), is more defense oriented, aiming to bolster military cooperation and uphold a rules-based regional order in the face of China's military assertiveness. Minilateralism thus offers significant opportunities for medium-sized powers such as Japan and Australia. By participating in smaller, more focused coalitions, these states can assert greater strategic autonomy and assume a more prominent role in regional security. The flexibility inherent in minilateral frameworks allows for quicker and more targeted responses to specific security challenges, circumventing the bureaucratic inertia often associated with larger multilateral organizations. This approach has proven particularly effective in the Indo-Pacific, which is marked by diverse national interests among small- and medium-sized countries and complex security dynamics.

Japan's strategic partnership with Australia exemplifies this approach. The Japan–Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation highlights the close strategic alignment between the two countries, second only to Japan's alliance with the US. Bilateral initiatives such as the Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting ("2+2"), joint military exercises, and defense technology

collaboration are steadily advancing. The RAA facilitates joint training and rotational deployments in Australia, while also enhancing trilateral cooperation with the US to ensure coordinated responses to crises. Japan, the US, and Australia are also working on improving logistical frameworks and information-sharing mechanisms to further strengthen their collective defense capabilities, as well as new initiatives for cooperating with the Philippines.

In Europe, Japan has expanded its defense cooperation with key partners such as the UK, France, Germany, and Italy. Japan has also supported European countries' monitoring of economic sanctions against the DPRK and assisted with safeguarding the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea through joint air and maritime activities. The UK is a prominent leading partner in this regard. In 2021, a UK carrier strike group led by its newest aircraft carrier was deployed in the Indo-Pacific region (including in Japan) for joint exercises. A second deployment of the carrier strike group is planned for 2025. The UK has also partnered with Japan and Italy in the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) for the development of next-generation fighter aircrafts, underscoring the momentum behind the UK's "Indo-Pacific tilt," as outlined in its 2021 Integrated Review. Additionally, future cooperation with Japan under the AUKUS alliance technology pillar (Pillar 2) pertinent to deterrence capabilities is anticipated. France, positioning itself as an Indo-Pacific nation, has also expanded its naval and air force presence and continues to pursue joint exercises and other forms of cooperation with Japan. These joint efforts contribute to aligning regional security goals with shared objectives of maintaining a free, open, and rule-making objectives in the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan's Special Strategic and Global Partnership with India underscores their shared commitment to regional security and economic cooperation. The "2+2" dialogue framework between Japan and India serves as a pivotal platform for advancing collaboration in critical areas such as maritime security and cybersecurity. Beyond the Quad framework and Exercise Malabar, the two nations have intensified their joint military exercises and defense equipment cooperation to enhance stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Both have also advocated for the Quad's growing strategic alignment as a constructive force delivering tangible benefits to the people and nations of the Indo-Pacific region. This approach emphasizes the respect for the leadership of regional institutions such as ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the Pacific Islands Forum, while underscoring the importance of capacity-building initiatives for Southeast Asian, Indian Ocean, and Pacific Island nations.

For securing vital sea lanes, Japan's cooperation extends to Southeast Asia, Pacific Island nations, the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, and Middle Eastern countries. In Southeast Asia, Japan promotes ASEAN centrality through

regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus. These mechanisms support and bolster capacity-building, confidence-building, and maritime security. Japan's partnerships with Pacific Island nations focus on capacity-building aimed at enhancing regional resilience, notably in response to the increased Chinese diplomatic activity in the region. For instance, following the 2022 Solomon Islands security agreement and 2023 police agreement with China, in 2023, Japan announced the provision of small patrol boats and rescue vessels to Fiji, facilitated through the OSA framework in coordination with Australian training efforts. This initiative illustrates Japan's broader strategy of offering coordinated support for regional security through the OSA framework in collaboration with other nations. In the Indian Ocean and Middle East, Japan's defense cooperation centers on the strategic importance of safeguarding stable sea lanes, which is crucial for its energy supply and economic interests. China's expansion in the region, marked by major port construction projects in Sri Lanka and Pakistan and the establishment of a base in Djibouti, has accelerated Japan's engagement with regional partners. Under the pressure of great power competition and the inherent challenges of severing economic ties with China due to different geographical and historical conditions, advancing high-politics security agendas at the multilateral level in the Indo-Pacific remains difficult, highlighting the critical importance of bilateral and minilateral initiatives for Japan's security and foreign policy.