



International Politics and Security After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Japan:

From the Perspective of Middle-
Power Diplomacy

Yoshihide SOEYA

Introduction

The long transition period in international politics following the end of the Cold War in 1989 came to an end when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Not only is the invasion likely to continue to impact international politics for years to come, it will also have an important influence on China's strategy in Asia. Here I consider how developments in Russia and China in relation to the invasion will affect international politics and European and Asian security. I look particularly at the role of Japan and other advanced democracies exploring cooperation centered on their relationship with the United States, examining their position and role from the perspectives of middle-power democracy and middle-power cooperation.

The Russian invasion appears to be motivated by imperialist ambitions, with China pursuing a very similar impulse in Asia. And in both Europe and Asia, the United States is fronting the defense against the Russian and Chinese challenge. In other words, the invasion of Ukraine has again foregrounded the centrality of the three great powers—the United States, China, and Russia—in rivalry in international politics and security. Rather than encroaching on the relationship among the three superpowers, the advanced democracies are exploring cooperation within that framework centering on their respective relationships with the United States—namely, middle-power cooperation.

This perspective will be important particularly when considering Japanese diplomacy. Conservative discourses on diplomacy and security in Japan have traditionally underscored autonomy and self-help, often arguing as though Japan could have its own independent strategy. Since the invasion, there has been a lot of bold talk directly linking the Ukraine lesson to Japan's safety and defense.

Such talk will not, of course, translate directly into Japanese foreign policy. For the current administration, however, it represents a domestic factor that cannot be ignored, potentially obscuring the reality of Japanese policy as a consequence. I have continued to argue that, while burdened with this structural complication, postwar Japanese diplomacy has effectively remained within the framework of middle-power diplomacy. This article is based on the conviction that the same analytical perspective remains valid in considering the actual state and future vision of Japanese diplomacy since the invasion. I begin by revisiting Japan's middle-power diplomacy.

Japan's middle-power diplomacy: Domestic and international perspectives

Viewed analytically, what has always kept postwar Japanese diplomacy within the framework of middle-power diplomacy is its underpinnings in the postwar Constitution (particularly

Article 9) and the Japan-US Security Treaty. This framework can be considered in terms of the domestic structure of foreign policy making and the position of Japanese diplomacy in international politics.

Postwar Japanese politics and society split into left and right from the base points of the 1946 Constitution and the Japan-US Security Treaty (signed in 1951 and revised in 1960), the two main pillars of Japanese diplomacy. Importantly, while the Constitution was rooted in the logic of postwar settlement prior to the 1947 outbreak of the Cold War, the Security Treaty emerged in response to the Cold War. This produced a clash between morality—the remorse over Japan's wartime actions which lies at the heart of the Constitution—and pragmatism centered on the Security Treaty that nursed ambitions for constitutional revision in the face of Cold War realities.

Given this domestic structure, as the product of compromise between the Constitution and the Security Treaty, the foreign policy of successive governments has embodied neither the left nor right position but has rather remained moderate. I have therefore argued that, empirically, postwar Japan has consistently pursued neither major-power nor small-power but rather middle-power diplomacy. For decades after the war, that diplomacy was muddled by domestic political conflict, and was essentially introverted in nature.

The situation gradually began to change as of the 1980s with the labelling of Japan-US relations as an alliance. The end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the Gulf War in January 1991, however, exposed the problems of Japan's introverted diplomacy to the international gaze. The Japanese government was traumatized by its inability to contribute in any meaningful sense to the Gulf War beyond massive financial assistance. The Act on Cooperation with United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Other Operations (the International Peace Cooperation Act) was enacted in June 1992, and September saw Japan's first postwar dispatch of its Self-Defense Forces (SDF), sent by the Miyazawa administration to join United Nations peacekeeping operations in Cambodia. While this was a small first step in terms of the international contribution of an advanced democracy, the international response was divided. In Europe and the United States, Japan's move was lambasted as too little, too late, a view shared by Japanese policymakers. Japan's Asian neighbors, however, viewed the move suspiciously as the beginning of Japanese militarization, which was also the argument of the Japanese left.

Accordingly, my argument on Japan's middle-power diplomacy aimed at moving beyond this fractured image of diplomacy by taking the middle way. Ultimately, such diplomacy would rest on the revision of Article 9. However,

the basic concept behind this constitutional amendment is a vision of middle-power diplomacy grounded in internationalism. The experience of the early 1990s confronted Japan with the reality that Article 9 was obstructing Japan's international contribution, including SDF international peace-keeping activities.

The above experiences and lessons should be recalled when considering Japan's involvement in international politics post-invasion. When it comes to the diplomacy of the current Kishida administration, it was highly significant that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida opened his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (Asia Security Summit) on June 10, 2022 with a reference to "Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, who went before me as ... the leader of the Kouchikai, the policy group I belong to." Kishida said that "Squarely addressing the reality that Japan was called upon to play a greater international role in the security arena, Miyazawa, after an extensive debate in Japan, managed to get the International Peace Cooperation Act passed, and he deployed Japan's SDF to Cambodia based on this Act."

Kishida then laid out the five pillars of the "Kishida Vision for Peace," namely, maintaining and strengthening the rules-based free and open international order, enhancing security, promoting realistic efforts to bring about a "world without nuclear

weapons," strengthening the functions of the United Nations (UN), including UN Security Council reform, and strengthening international cooperation in new policy areas such as economic security. Self-help receives some emphasis in the context of strengthening security, but all the other policies are grounded in international cooperation. That outright internationalism also emerges clearly in the Kishida administration's diplomacy in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The world post-invasion and Japan's response

Russia claims that what is effectively the military invasion of an independent sovereign state is a special military operation for the protection of Ukrainians of Russian descent living in eastern Ukraine and for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. Beneath, however, one senses the unilateralism of a great power along with President Putin's obsession with restoration of the Russian Empire.

(1) The rules-based free and open international order

The invasion is, firstly, an outright challenge to the rules-based free and open international order supported by the advanced democracies, who have banded together to provide Ukraine

with weapons and other military assistance, as well as emergency financial support, and to impose economic sanctions on Russia. The issues faced by the United States and the other advanced democracies are, however, just too great. In particular, given that China too is making moves (discussed below), the United States will really struggle to handle the dual fronts of Europe and Asia. The military withdrawal from Afghanistan ordered by the Biden administration in May 2021 was doubtless prompted partly by the desire to divert resources into the administration's China strategy. Now, resistance to Russia on the European front has added to the burden.

Japan's diplomacy is built around its position as an advanced democracy. The Kishida administration is actively involved in the G7 Summit talks among the leaders of the major powers, as well as in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). It is also pressing resolutely ahead with monetary, trade, and visa sanctions on Russia and support for Ukraine. Russia, naturally, has hardened its line on Japan and the future of Japan-Russia relations is highly uncertain.

(2) Europe's security order

Secondly, the invasion has completely redrawn the map of Europe's security order, exposing a new antagonism between Russia and Europe/NATO.

While Western euphoria over its Cold War "victory" has long been described as an illusion, Russia's actions have shattered that illusion entirely. Putin's efforts to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO at all costs appear to be fueled by his refusal to accept the defeat of the Soviet empire in the Cold War.

In May 2022, Finland and Sweden, which maintained military neutrality for many years during the Cold War, took the step of applying for NATO membership, and in April 2023, Finland became NATO's 31st member. This was nothing less than an "own goal" scored by Russia (Michito Tsuruoka), but at the same time, expansion has also burdened NATO with new and difficult challenges.

Still constrained by Article 9, Japan cannot pursue full military cooperation with the NATO countries. The Japan-NATO Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) signed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at a North Atlantic Council meeting in May 2014 represented an important development in cooperation between Japan and NATO. The IPCP comprises quintessential middle-power cooperation, including cyber-defense, humanitarian aid and disaster relief, anti-terrorism measures, disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation.

The June 2022 NATO summit held in Madrid following the Russian invasion was attended by Prime Minister Kishida as the first Japanese leader to do so.

Specifically, he participated in a special NATO partner session with other Asia-Pacific leaders from Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea. NATO called the four countries the Asia-Pacific Partners, or AP4. The session was an acknowledgement of the importance of cooperative ties between the Asia-Pacific and Europe amidst the growing synchronicity of moves by Russia and China, as discussed below.

(3) A malfunctioning UN Security Council

Thirdly, the United Nations Security Council has become dysfunctional, removing any certainty over the role of the United Nations in international security. The postwar international order began with the establishment of the United Nations by the Allied nations in the wake of their triumph over the Axis nations of Japan and Germany. The initial UN vision collapsed immediately due to the outbreak of the Cold War, but the functions of the organization recovered in the 1990s once the Cold War ended. The United Nations and international law just managed to function despite numerous issues during the US-led Gulf, Afghan, and Iraq Wars. This time, however, Russia as a permanent member of the Security Council has emerged as a destroyer of the international order. And, as explored below, a certain bond has formed between Russia and China.

Back in the postwar period, Japan and Germany transformed themselves into the honor students of the international community, contributing to the construction of a free and open world order, and today they are standing up as advanced democracies against the challenge presented by Russia and China. From a macro perspective, the UN order has flipped completely upside down.

In that sense, while the UN reforms in which the Japanese government has been involved for many years are entirely legitimate, realistically, their prospects are not necessarily that bright. Regardless, however, following the Ukraine invasion, the power of international law and the UN's role in crystallizing world public opinion are key. The developing nations which make up the bulk of UN membership are not on an equal footing with the advanced democracies in terms of their relationships with Russia and China. Neither are India, Indonesia, and those other nations which have observed the principles of nonalignment and neutrality for so long. Rather than trying to bring these nations belonging to the political world's third force—the “global south”—on to the same footing, it will be important to continue steadily with engagement policies from the perspective of middle-power diplomacy.

China and the Asian order

(1) China-Russia ties

Turning next to Asia, China's self-assertiveness is clearly underpinned by nostalgia for Imperial China or Sinocentrism. In recent years, China has been emphasizing its so-called century of humiliation following the Opium Wars as a means of rallying Chinese nationalism. As it steadily builds national power, it has also ceased disguising its conviction that Asia is naturally China-centric. Globally, China has made clear that it will not hesitate to challenge the values and mechanisms of the postwar Western-centric world order.

The imperialist dreams driving both Russia and China today have also formed a psychological bond between the two, while in that psychological dimension, the greatest rival and obstacle for both is obviously the United States. Another commonality is the way in which this mindset has given the Russian and Chinese people a certain tolerance for political dictatorship.

At the same time, however, while Russia is primarily focused on Europe, China's eyes are firmly on Asia. They are not necessarily providing each other with full support in their respective regions, nor are their US strategies completely shared. In particular, China will be closely watching the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on its own dream of "liberating" Taiwan.

(2) The Taiwan issue

Since the Joint Communiqué of the Government of Japan and the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was announced on September 29, 1972, Japan has maintained that it fully understands and respects China's claim that Taiwan is an inalienable territory of the PRC. Since US-China diplomatic relations were normalized in January 1979, the United States too has acknowledged China's position that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. Both Japan and the United States have, however, never explicitly stated that they share China's position, maintaining a politically ambiguous position on the issue of Taiwan's attribution. The US Congress also adopted domestic legislation entitled the Taiwan Relations Act in April 1979 in apparent opposition to China's assertion that Taiwan is a Chinese internal affair, noting that it would not rule out the possibility of the United States coming to the defense of Taiwan.

Since the 1970s, China has been claiming sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands, which are effectively controlled by Japan. This claim is based on the very typically Chinese assertion that the islands have been part of Taiwan since ancient times. For Japan, therefore, a situation arising in Taiwan is highly likely to translate into a Senkaku Islands situation. In that case, it would become an issue of self-defense for Japan, simultaneously triggering

Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty, which requires a joint US-Japan response in the event of an attack on territories under the administration of Japan. The basic security postures of Japan and the United States consequently mean that China has to be very careful about exercising military force against Taiwan.

Now, Russia has invaded Ukraine. If China were to stage a military invasion of Taiwan, it would mirror the Ukraine invasion and would be greeted by many democracies as an imperial attack on democracy. In that sense, Russia's invasion has probably adversely affected China's Taiwan "military liberation" strategy. This situation has made the role of diplomacy as important, or even more important, than a military response. Next, therefore, I examine the substance of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept which has become the face of Japanese diplomacy.

FOIP and the Quad

Indo-Pacific diplomacy centered on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India was originally an Abe initiative and has been maintained by the Kishida administration as a pillar of Japanese diplomacy. Already at the time of the Abe administration, however, the thrust of the initiative had shifted from pushback against China to a vision of regionalist diplomacy.

The origin of the Indo-Pacific concept in

Japanese diplomacy was a speech given by Abe to the Indian Parliament in August 2007 during his first administration, in which he described the coupling of the Pacific and Indian Oceans as "broader Asia" and made his first formal call for a Quad framework whereby cooperation between Japan and India would bring the United States and Australia into that broader Asia. Stepping down from his position after a year for health reasons, when Abe returned in December 2012, he presented the Quad internationally as "Asia's democratic security diamond," which is what locked in the international perception that the Indo-Pacific diplomacy advocated by Abe was an aggressive effort to curtail Chinese ambitions.

Abe subsequently reacted sensitively to the November 2014 announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative by Chinese President Xi Jinping: in his August 2016 keynote speech at the 6th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) held in Nairobi, Kenya, Abe called for the "union of two free and open oceans and two continents" (namely, Asia and Africa).

Senior diplomatic officials from Quad members have been meeting regularly on the sidelines of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings since 2017, and since 2018, announcements of the results of their consultations have included the expression "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region" and the principle of support for ASEAN

centrality—both intended to communicate that the Quad is not necessarily intended to exclude China.

While this practice reflects the working-level sensibilities of the diplomatic authorities, the change in Abe's China diplomacy as of 2018 was also important. In October 2018, Abe and Xi Jinping held summit talks in Beijing. When Xi Jinping came to Japan in June 2019 for the Osaka G20 summit, he met again with Abe, who formally invited the Chinese president to visit Japan as a state guest the following spring (a visit that was not realized due to the outbreak of COVID-19).

Next to join the Quad calendar were a foreign ministers' meeting as of September 2019 and a summit meeting as of March 2021. A string of joint declarations has extolled the rule of law, a rules-based international order, and freedom of navigation and overflight as the principles of Quad cooperation, with an obvious undertone of concern in relation to China. At the same time, the Quad has never come out openly against China, and specific areas of cooperation stretch from global issues such as the pandemic and climate change to cooperation cognizant of competition with China primarily in the economic sphere, as well as non-traditional security cooperation.

As FOIP and the Quad are widely regarded as a China containment strategy, the Quad framework too may well be perceived as the Japan-US

alliance with the addition of Australia and India. In reality, a look at the substance of Quad consultations and results reveals typical middle-power cooperation, suggesting that the framework could be more accurately understood as Japan-Australia-India cooperation with the addition of the United States. The concept of an expanded Quad is consequently likely to continue down that trajectory to embrace South Korea and European nations.

Conclusion

July 8, 2022 saw the tragic assassination of Shinzo Abe. As Japan's longest-serving prime minister not just postwar but in all of modern Japanese history from the Meiji era onward, Abe leaves a complex and weighty legacy in terms of Japan's economy, politics, and diplomacy.

Particularly important are the three national security documents approved by the Kishida Cabinet on December 16, 2022: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program. Leaving a detailed analysis of these documents to other articles, here I will note only that they represent a paradigm shift in the security mindset of the Japanese government. The traces of Abe's slogan of "escaping from the postwar regime" which could be glimpsed in the earlier version of the NSS approved by the Abe Cabinet on December 17, 2013 emerge with far greater clarity in the revised version.

First, it has been regarded as a major characteristic and indeed strength of Japanese diplomacy under the postwar regime that Japan abstains from direct involvement not only in the military sphere but also in the power-balance game amongst the great powers, virtually “stepping down from the stage of power politics” (Masataka Kosaka). The revised NSS, however, directly engages with areas such as military deterrence, the balance of power, and geopolitics. Second, where defense capability had a very limited role and position in Japan’s national strategy under the postwar regime, the NSS now grants it central importance. Further, where the former strategy explicitly rejected the idea of required defense capability, the new NSS calls on Japan to develop defense capabilities with attention to entities with powerful military capabilities, setting the actual goal of doubling defense spending to 2% of Japan’s GDP.

Given the recent moves by Russia and China discussed above, this paradigm shift might seem a logical evolution, but the legal constraints arising from Article 9 have not been entirely removed and the NSS too explicitly states that there will be no change to Japan’s basic policy of maintaining an exclusively national defense-oriented policy. In other words, the conditions prescribing Japan’s national power and security policy lag behind the new security paradigm of the NSS. As a result, the NSS fills the gap with a consistent trajectory of Japan-US military integration. Being unable to

abandon the Japan-US alliance is the fate of Japan’s middle-power diplomacy.

However, by pursuing such a trajectory, Japan only continues to limit its strategic options. This is where Japan needs to recognize the importance of diplomacy, and the NSS also notes the priority of diplomacy over defense capabilities. However, that reference to diplomacy too seems overly fixated on the idea of a geopolitical and geoeconomic struggle with China.

Japan’s middle-power diplomacy needs to adopt the flexible two-pronged approach of consolidating Japan’s position on the stage of power politics based on the Japan-US alliance while also seeking out Japan’s strengths and autonomy in middle-power cooperation. Many Asian countries are increasingly uneasy about the growth of Chinese power but at the same time recognize that geography compels coexistence, and Japan is really no exception. The greater the concern over China, the more important it will become to develop a network of cooperative relations among countries in the Asian region.

Deeper involvement in European security in response to the novel situation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will effectively expand the horizon of Japan’s middle-power diplomacy. From the same middle-power perspective, the importance of strengthening relations among the AP4 nations—Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea—invited to

the NATO summit in June 2022, should also stand out. The same applies to the expanded Quad discussed above. And standing squarely in the way of such agendas is the key diplomatic issue of repairing Japan-South Korea relations.

Reference material

"Asia's Future" Research Group (2023), "Asia's Future at a Crossroads: A Japanese Strategy for Peace and Sustainable Prosperity," <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/d/3083/files/2023/07/Asias-Future-at-a-Crossroads-English.pdf>

Yoshihide Soeya (2022), "Middle Power Cooperation 2.0 in the Indo-Pacific Era," in Chien-Wen Kou, Chiung-Chiu Huang, and Brian Job, eds., *The*

Strategic Options of Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific, London: Routledge

Yoshihide Soeya (2021), "Japan's Diplomacy toward China under the Abe Shinzo Administration," in James Brown, Guibourg Delamotte, and Robert Dujarric, eds., *The Abe Legacy: How Japan Has Been Shaped by Abe Shinzo*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books

Yoshihide Soeya (2018), "The Rise of China in Asia: Japan at the Nexus," in Asle Toje, ed., *Will China's Rise be Peaceful? Security, Stability, and Legitimacy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Yoshihide SOEYA



Yoshihide Soeya is Professor Emeritus of Keio University, from which he retired in March 2020 after serving as Professor of political science at the Faculty of Law for 32 years. He received Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1987, majoring in world politics. Previously, he served the "Korea-Japan Joint Research Project for the New Era" (MOFA), the "Council on Security and Defense Capabilities in the New Era" (Prime Minister's Office), the "Advisory Group on Ministerial Evaluations" (MOFA), the "Central Council on Defense Facilities" (Agency/Ministry of Defense), and the "Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century" (Prime Minister's Office). His areas of interest are politics and security in East Asia, and Japanese diplomacy and its external relations.

His recent publications in English include "Middle Power Cooperation 2.0 in the Indo-Pacific Era," in Chien-Wen Kou, et al., eds., *The Strategic Options of Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2022), "Japan's Diplomacy toward China under the Abe Shinzo Administration," in James Brown, et al., eds., *The Abe Legacy* (MD: Lexington Books, 2021); and "The Rise of China in Asia: Japan at the Nexus," in Asle Toje, ed., *Will China's Rise be Peaceful?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).