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Japan's Security Policy

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Introduction

A number of turning points—indeed, watershed moments—can be identified in Japan's security policy, presenting an evolutionary process that falls into decades: the 1950s and 60s as the post-World War II period when the San Francisco Peace Treaty was concluded and Japan's exclusively defense-oriented posture was established within the Japan-US security framework; the 1970s and 80s, when the Nixon Doctrine prompted adjustment of the division of roles within that framework as well as expansion of Japan's defense arrangements; the 1990s, when Japan focused on cooperation with the post-Cold War international community and stepped up its engagement in regional security; the 2000s, which brought involvement in the war on terror and other aspects of global security; and the period from the 2010s onward when Japan returned its gaze to regional security in response to China's military rise.

The two dimensions shaping that historical evolution have been, first, how to procure power, and particularly military power (Japan's defense capability, the military power of the United States as Japan's ally, and cooperation with the international community) and, second, in what space to exercise that power (defense of Japanese territory, the area around Japan, the wider region, and the global domain). The above evolutionary process could consequently be regarded as Japan moving on from

the early postwar years when it had extremely limited defense capabilities and depended primarily on the military power of the United States within the Japan-US security framework to gradually acquire its own capabilities and continue to expand the spatial dimension.

Throughout the entire postwar period, however, Japan has been unable to exchange its military role as a US ally for an autonomous security policy. The role that Japan can play in response to the military threats it faces, and the possible outbreak of conflict has been limited to some territorial defense grounded firmly in the assumption of the United States stepping in should the conflict escalate. Japan's lack of autonomy also manifests in the way that it has proclaimed an exclusively defense-oriented policy while in practice avoiding developing the required defense capability—in other words, the quantitative capability to counter a threat, instead long maintaining a basic defense capability, comprising the minimum necessary defense capability so as not to form a power vacuum that becomes a source of instability in the surrounding region.

Modern Japanese security policy could be characterized as a departure from this underlying structure. Here I recap the role of Japan's security policy from the perspective of deterrence and the expansion of escalation management capacity.

The evolution of deterrence and escalation management in Japan's security policy

(1) Establishment of a basic national defense policy and an exclusively defense-oriented posture

Tracing how the concept of deterrence has developed in Japan's security policy requires examining the evolution of Japan's security environment and how potential conflict has been shut down. The Basic Policy on National Defense, approved by a Cabinet decision in 1957 under the Nobusuke Kishi administration, noted that "the objective of national defense was to prevent direct and indirect aggression, but once invaded, to repel such aggression." At the same time, it also explicitly required "dealing with external aggression based on the security arrangements with the US until the United Nations will be able to fulfill its function in stopping such aggression effectively in the future," while the role that Japan could play was "building up effective defense capabilities by steps within the limit necessary for self-defense in accordance with national strength and situation."

It was the United States that served the central deterrence function in the establishment of Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and Japan's postwar defense capability, with Japan's role

restricted to a few limited functions. While maintaining this basic division of labor between itself and the United States, Japan has gradually expanded the role that its defense capability can play. Specifically, the aim has been to develop Japan's independent capacity to counter "an invasion by conventional forces at a level below local warfare." The exclusively defense-oriented posture established in that context lays out a "passive defense strategy" under the conditions that "defensive force is used only in the event of an attack, that the extent of the use of defensive force is kept to the minimum necessary for self-defense, and that the defense capabilities to be possessed and maintained by Japan are limited to the minimum necessary for self-defense."

(2) The "Basic Defense Force Concept" and Japan-US security cooperation

One inflection point in Japan's defense concept responded to the transformation of the Asian strategic environment, including the changing US-Soviet relationship during the late 1960s détente, the American withdrawal from the Vietnam War and the Nixon Doctrine's demand that US allies share the defense burden, and the shift in the international architecture wrought by Sino-American rapprochement. The November 1969 Sato-Nixon Joint Communiqué called for Japan to play a greater role in Asian peace and security and affirmed that the

security of South Korea and Taiwan was closely linked to Japan's security. Where Japan's security policy was formerly a regional concept centered on territorial defense, greater involvement in the surrounding region emerged as a policy issue.

Serving as the points of connection for the new policy direction were the 1976 National Defense Program Guidelines and the 1978 Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation. In the process of creating these guidelines, the Japanese government clarified that it would take the Basic Policy on National Defense as its basic approach—an approach guided by the line of thought that, rather than directly countering military threats to its territory, Japan would instead possess only the minimum necessary basic defense capability as an independent nation so as not to create a power vacuum that might become a source of instability in the surrounding region. The plan was to leave room for sufficient expansion in Japan's defense capabilities to respond to "a limited, small-scale invasion" but, should conflict escalate beyond that point, to bring the Japan-US security framework into play.

(3) Regional security engagement and globalization

Japan's defense policy and the basic relationship between Japan and the United States within their alliance began

to change in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War and the concomitant process of redefining alliance policy. When Japan expanded its defense capabilities during the Cold War, its ability to engage in peacetime surveillance and reconnaissance in relation to Soviet military strength in the Soviet Far East and the anti-submarine capacity represented by Japan's defense of the Soya, Tsugaru, and Tsushima Straits were both consistent with the United States' Asia strategy. In other words, the roles of Japan's exclusively defense-oriented posture and the Japan-US alliance had a certain alignment and complementarity.

Post-Cold War, however, the attenuation of the Soviet threat saw strategic concerns shift to small to medium-scale regional conflicts and the transfer of weapons of mass destruction. As tension grew in Japan's security environment, particularly in relation to North Korea's nuclear program (the first nuclear crisis) and the Taiwan Strait crisis (the 1996 missile crisis), the central issue in the alliance's realignment became how to position the Japan-US alliance for regional stability. The morphing of the threat into not a territorial defense issue but rather the extra-territorial issue of regional instability forced both the alliance and Japan's own defense policy to take on a much greater regional focus. The April 1996 Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security and the subsequent 1999 Act on Measures to Ensure the Peace and Security of Japan in Perilous Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan consequently

positioned the Japan-US security framework as the cornerstone of regional deterrence and response while also requiring Japan to shoulder more of the burden of regional security, augmenting the legal basis and capacity for Japan's provision of regional logistical support for US forces.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States and the subsequent US-led global war on terror expanded the geographic scope of Japanese security into the global arena. The 2001 Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law and the 2003 Act on Special Measures concerning Humanitarian Relief and Reconstruction Work and Security Assistance in Iraq saw the JSDF replenishing fuel for multinational forces in the Indian Ocean and engaging in humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in Iraq, among other activities. The 2004 National Defense Program Guidelines noted that interdependence among nations and globalization made the growing international terrorist threat and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction pressing issues for the international community. In other words, the expansion of the security policy space was driven by the recognition of the direct connection between Japan's security and the global arena.

Tracing the trajectory of Japan's postwar security policy, we can see that the expansion of JSDF capabilities and the changing division of labor in Japan-US defense cooperation were

accompanied by an enlargement of the space addressed by Japan's security policy. This development prompted the widespread perception that the postwar legal constraints on Japan's security policy had been overcome and that a linear expansion of the policy space would ensue, with Japan set to become an "ordinary country."

The military rise of China and growing concern over North Korea's nuclear missile development, however, necessitated yet another change in direction. In the 2010s, Japan reduced JSDF involvement in global missions and peace-keeping operations (PKO) to focus instead on military issues with direct relevance to Japan. Having undergone a spatial expansion from the territorial to the regional and then the global, the reach of Japan's security policy returned to regional security and territorial defense.

Japanese security policy issues since the 2010s

(1) Three strategic fronts: China, North Korea, and Russia

Japan's current security environment is characterized by the need to simultaneously address military challenges on three fronts: China's emerging military capabilities, North Korea's ongoing nuclear missile development, and Russian forces' moves in the Russian Far East.

The problem is that China, North Korea, and Russia all have different characteristics in terms of their military power, making it difficult to apply one policy to them all. If Japan were to build its defense capabilities separately for each risk scenario, it would impose a heavy burden on the order of battle for the JSDF and the necessary defense capability. And if military partnership were to deepen between China and Russia, China and North Korea, and Russia and North Korea, their added capacity to coordinate operations and employ diversionary tactics would make the JSDF strategic planning burden even greater.

China: US-China antagonism and Japan's inferiority to China

Until the early 2000s, Japan assumed an East Asian strategic environment in which the United States enjoyed overwhelming dominance over China and Japan had the autonomous capability to secure air and maritime superiority over China. It was possible to maintain the Japan-US alliance and to shape Japan's defense policy on the assumption that the United States and Japan could remain superior to China in their respective relations with the latter.

Since the 2010s, however, China's "Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)" capabilities in relation to the United States have expanded to the extent that a strategic environment must be assumed in which the supremacy of US forward-deployed forces is no longer unconditional. Even though the US military outperforms the

Chinese military in terms of conventional forces and operational capabilities, it has become difficult for the United States to maintain strategic superiority in the Western Pacific; the estimated cost of military intervention in contingencies in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea has risen significantly.

In Japan-China relations, not only is it very hard for Japan to deter China on its own, but it is also becoming even harder to maintain Japan's autonomous capability in terms of crisis escalation management. The 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines envisaged a harsh situation "when maintaining maritime and air superiority becomes untenable." The situation is undoubtedly becoming even graver.

North Korea: Deployment of nuclear missile capacity

Second, North Korea's nuclear missile development poses a serious and imminent threat to Japan's security. Defense of Japan 2022 notes that "considering that North Korea has already conducted six nuclear tests, it is conceivable that North Korea has made considerable progress in its nuclear weapons program," and that "North Korea is considered to have already miniaturized nuclear weapons to fit ballistic missile warheads" and possess the capability to launch an attack on Japan with a ballistic missile fitted with a nuclear warhead." Assuming a North Korean ballistic missile attack as a nuclear attack, it calls for more effective deterrence and the

development of ballistic missile defense. Japan will need to maintain a system of extended deterrence using nuclear and conventional forces under the Japan-US alliance while also developing its missile defense.

The various types of missiles used by North Korea to transport nuclear weapons too are becoming increasingly long-range, with more diverse launch modes. They have the improved operational accuracy and capability required for saturation attacks; secrecy and immediacy; and an upgraded surprise attack capability. Since March 2021, North Korea has been conducting test launches of a low-altitude irregular trajectory missile allegedly employing technology employed in Russia's Iskander. This missile diversification enabling North Korea to neutralize the missile defenses of target countries is having the effect of making the latter's defense efforts more costly.

Russia: Strategy spoiler

Third, there has been a dramatic change in Japan's perception of Russia. The 2013 National Security Strategy noted that it was critical for Japan "to advance cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security and energy, thereby enhancing bilateral relations as a whole." Efforts have subsequently been made to build confidence, including establishing the Japan-Russia Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultation (the "2+2" Ministerial Meeting) and bolstering defense exchange (e.g. Japan-Russia

joint search and rescue training) and visits between defense ministers. Even with Russia straining relations with the United States and Europe through its 2014 invasion of Crimea and its intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015, Japan continued to work tenaciously to maintain a stable relationship with Russia. Undoubtedly, the Japanese government had the political will to resolve the Northern Territories issue by concluding a Japan-Russia Peace Treaty.

Japan's quest for stable relations with Russia included another strategic element—the notion that stabilizing relations with Russia was vital in dealing with China, Japan's overriding security challenge. Amidst increasing competition and hostility in US-China and Japan-China relations, greater alignment between Russia and China would exacerbate the deterioration of Japan's security environment. While it would be difficult to alienate Russia and China, the Japan-Russia relationship might help disperse Russia's strategic interests in Asia. Positioning Japan-Russia economic relations and Japan-Russia peace treaty negotiations in this way would allow Japan to pursue strategic interests beyond the resolution of the Northern Territories issue.

Japan was forced to fundamentally alter this strategic positioning of Japan-Russia relations, however, due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Post-invasion, the Japanese government strongly condemned Russia

and, together with Western countries, implemented comprehensive economic sanctions against it. In March 2022, Russia lashed back at Japan for its “anti-Russian behavior,” announcing the suspension of the peace treaty negotiations and Russia’s withdrawal from the dialogue on joint economic activities in the four northern islands. Since then, there has been no sign of improvement in the bilateral relationship.

These changes in Japan-Russia relations mean that Russia can develop its policy toward Japan in the Far East without considering its economic relationship with Japan or bilateral peace treaty negotiations. Given the growing difficulty of severing Russian and Chinese interests, further China-Russia military alignment seems likely. In fact, the Russian and Chinese militaries have been deepening joint action in the maritime and air spaces around Japan. In 2019, Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers and Chinese H-6 bombers were already making joint flights from the Sea of Japan to the East China Sea as part of the “China-Russia joint aerial strategic patrol.” Another joint flight was conducted in May 2022 after the Ukraine invasion. “Vostok 2022” in September 2022 saw the Chinese and Russian navies conduct a large-scale joint exercise in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan.

The progress in China-Russia military relations is closely tied to the two countries’ shared strategic interests. Russia and China appear to aim to counter US

military power in the Western Pacific and disrupt the Japan-US alliance. The indication that Russia might deploy military forces and align with China in the event of a Taiwan contingency will also complicate operational planning by Japan and the United States. Russia’s buildup of its Far Eastern forces (including missile deployment) and expansion of military activities will have a significant impact on the JSDF’s posture, operational planning priorities, and reform direction. For example, if the JSDF is forced to allocate more resources to Japan’s northern defenses, the situation could effectively delay the southwestern shift by the JSDF designed to address China’s movements in that direction. Japan’s national security strategy must address Russia as a cost imposer and spoiler.

(2) Creation of three national security documents and Japan’s deterrence and response capabilities

In December 2022, the Japanese government adopted three national security documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program. The adoption of these documents represents the greatest watershed in Japan’s postwar history, including the sweeping enhancement of Japan’s defense capabilities in the next five years, boosting of defense spending to 2% of Japan’s GDP, and the introduction of long-range “counterstrike capabilities.”

The security environment posited in the three documents is one in which the international community is facing its “greatest postwar trial,” with Japan too “finding itself in the midst of the most severe and complex security environment since the end of WWII.” The NSS begins by noting that “globalization and interdependence alone cannot serve as a guarantor for peace and development across the globe,” a harsh attack on the expectations born out of a liberalist worldview. Observing the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Ukraine’s failure to deter the invasion, it also focuses on capability-based strategic design whereby a country builds its capabilities with an eye to the capabilities of others.

In terms of the regional situation, China is deemed the “greatest strategic challenge,” North Korea as “an even more grave and imminent threat to Japan’s national security than ever before,” and Russia as a “strong security concern.” The characteristics of these threats, moreover, are noted as multi-dimensional, including not only conventional warfare and nuclear weapons, but also hybrid conflict that combines the space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic domains, as well as information warfare in the cognitive domain.

The three documents as a denial strategy

There are a number of points in relation to the kind of deterrence and escalation management system that Japan could conceivably roll out over the decade

from 2022. The first concerns the major feature of the strategy introduced by the three documents. While they have not been given the formal title of a security and defense strategy, synthesizing the thinking that runs through the strategy, the aim is clearly to build the capability to make it clear to potential invaders that it would not be worth the cost they would incur if they invaded Japan using military means. On the other hand, it is not explicitly stated that Japan will develop defense capabilities to realize a balance of power by equipping the JSDF to the same scale as China in terms of conventional forces (aircraft, ships, submarines, and missiles, etc.). China’s national defense spending is already around five times as much as Japan’s (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Military Expenditure Database, 2021), with China vastly surpassing Japan in terms of its quantities of 4th and 5th-generation fighter jets, new destroyers and frigates, and new submarines. Even if Japan were to boost its defense spending substantially, the enormous difficulty of pursuing a quantitative balance strategy is apparent.

Underpinning the strategy in the three documents is assessing the capabilities of countries of concern and acquiring the capability to deny such countries the ability to conduct operations if they seek to change the status quo by force. The aim is to acquire denial capabilities that use the capacity to continue fighting (operating in a swift as well as persistent manner to crush the opponent’s will

to invade) as well as stand-off defense capabilities (disrupting and defeating invading forces from a distance, thereby deterring an invasion of Japan itself), and, should deterrence fail, to ensure an asymmetric advantage while gaining superiority across domains. Collectively, these can be labeled a Japanese-style denial strategy.

The meaning of standoff defense and counterstrike capability

The second point is the positioning of “advanced standoff missiles” and “counterstrike capability” which will be pursued as part of the NSS. An important element of the above Japanese-style denial strategy is the broad acquisition of means that will increase the cost of a military invasion of Japan. In that context, the strategy emphasizes the time and space elements of “defense capabilities that will enable Japan to disrupt and defeat invasion much earlier and at places further afield” as a target by 2032. “Much earlier” indicates the capability to disrupt conflicts, blitzkrieg operations, and surprise attacks early, while “at places further afield” means maintaining the ability to attack from a distance rather than close to Japanese territory or Japanese maritime or air space. One could interpret this as Japan seeking to give greater “strategic depth” to JSDF capabilities, including boosting Japan’s denial capability.

A few options remain, however, in terms of that long-range strike capability. First is the expansion of Japan’s existing

standoff defense. The December 2022 Cabinet decision defined standoff defense as “capabilities to deal with ships and landing forces attempting to invade Japan, including remote islands from the outside of their threat envelopes.” In the sense of deploying JSDF attack assets outside threat envelopes to attack enemies from out of range amidst the growth in China’s capacity to attack through conventional warfare, this approach lies along the same trajectory as short-range defense.

The second approach would aim to acquire long-range, wide-area strike capabilities, including maritime (the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan) and land (the Chinese mainland and North Korea) areas. This would mean acquiring a broad range of attack options, such as attacks on Chinese naval vessels far across the East China Sea or on military targets on the Chinese mainland. The 2032 target of “disrupting and defeating invasion much earlier and at places further afield” could be correctly regarded as reflecting this second approach.

This approach raises the question of whether Japan would primarily target attacks on its own territory or whether it would include strike capabilities to address a Taiwan contingency. Would Japan’s long-range, wide-area strike capabilities be primarily anti-ship, targeting offshore naval vessels, or are fixed terrestrial targets in China or North Korea’s missile defense capacity envisaged? It is still unclear what scenario

Japan's strike capabilities are expected to address.

The three documents provide an interpretation of the politically contested concept of "counterstrike capabilities." They describe counterstrike capabilities as "key to deterring invasion against Japan," going on to explain that "in cases where an armed attack against Japan has occurred, and as part of that attack ballistic missiles and other means have been used, counterstrike capabilities enable Japan to mount effective counterstrikes against the opponent's territory." It is not clear why the three documents specify the occurrence of an armed attack, and an attack in which ballistic missiles and other means are used, but during the prior policy coordination process, the concern was raised that counterstrike capabilities could be perceived as preemptive strike capabilities, so this may well have been an effort to contain the whole counterstrike issue within the interpretation of Japan's defense as exclusively defense-oriented.

At the same time, though, the government notes that counterstrike capabilities "squarely apply to measures for self-defense taken under the Three New Conditions for Use of Force, presented in the 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security." It should be noted that because these conditions enable Japan to exercise the right to self-defense in cases "when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs"

(limited exercise of the right to collective self-defense), the government evidently assumes that Japan's counterstrike capabilities can also be used in cases where Japan itself is not necessarily directly under attack (for example, a crisis in the Taiwan Strait).

The third approach is the interpretation of filling the gap between China's intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) and the United States' military capacity missile gap. Because the United States was not able to possess IRBMs under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty concluded during the Cold War, it has been left at a significant disadvantage in terms of US-China conflict escalation management (In February 2019, the US notified Russia of withdrawing from the treaty and resumed intermediate-range missile development). The idea would be to fill that gap with Japan's long-range strike capability.

Given China's massive ballistic and cruise missile arsenal, however, Japan would struggle to close that gap with the same number of missiles. The standoff defense capability envisaged in the NSS, too, aims for precision-guided strikes on military targets using (upgraded) Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles (SSMs) in ground-launched, ship-launched, and aircraft-launched versions, Hyper Velocity Gliding Projectiles for island defense, hypersonic missiles, and Tomahawks, etc. This is a strike capability of a very different nature from the firepower of China's DF-21 and other

IRBMs. As the current strategy does not suggest Japan possessing ballistic missiles with greater firepower, there is apparently no intention at this stage of addressing the missile gap.

Conclusion

This article traces the historical trajectory of Japan's security policy from the perspective of deterrence and escalation management. It considers the transformation sought in the three national security documents announced in December 2022. The Japanese government stresses that the changes "fall within the purview of Japan's Constitution and international law [and] ... do not change Japan's exclusively defense-oriented policy." In that sense, the three documents stand as an extension of Japan's postwar defense policy.

The expansion of Japan's "denial" capabilities through long-range strike capabilities (standoff defense capability) sought in the three documents, however, adds depth to Japan's strategy, giving the JSDF more leeway to execute its own escalation management. In a strategic environment in which the US military does not necessarily enjoy a clear advantage over China in terms of conventional forces, Japan's new policy will enable it to support US intra-theater operations through joint operations with the JSDF, as well as to expand its own response capabilities.

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