



JAPAN'S NEW STRATEGIC POLICY: THREE OVERLOOKED TAKEAWAYS

BY THOMAS WILKINS

Thomas Wilkins (thomas.wilkins@sydney.edu.au) is an Adjunct Senior Fellow (non-resident), Pacific Forum, Senior Fellow, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and Associate Professor, University of Sydney.

Japan has signaled its intent to strengthen its national security and defense posture significantly in an increasingly volatile Indo-Pacific. When he [met President Joe Biden in January 2023](#), Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, referring to Japan's new National Security Strategy, declared he would “fundamentally reinforce our defense capabilities.” This includes raising the Japanese defense budget to approximately 2% of GDP by 2027. This will gratify many in Washington who share a determination to strengthen the alliance militarily and bolster combined deterrence postures.

Kishida's remarks came a month after the release of the new [National Security Strategy](#), accompanied by the [National Defense Strategy](#) (renaming the prior National Defense Program Guidelines) and [Defense Build-Up Program](#) (formerly Medium-Term Defense Program).

Together these documents together present a grim picture of the security situation Tokyo and its US ally face. The NSS states that “Japan's security environment is as severe and complex as it has ever been since the end of World War II.” Russian aggression in Ukraine, Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas and across the Taiwan Strait, and North Korea's nuclear missile ambitions top the list of dangers. The NSS identifies them as countries that seek to “revise the existing international order.” In the context of strategic competition, the NSS states the boundaries between peace and war

have become blurred through “gray zone” activities, malicious operations in the cyber and information spaces, the use of economic statecraft, and a vigorous technological arms race.

The NSS (along with NDS and DBP) represents a highly coordinated response on Japan's part. They have been dubbed “[historic](#),” a “[paradigm shift](#),” and a “[revolution](#)” by some analysts, while some have offered more [skeptical appraisals](#) on their actual implementation. Heretofore debates have primarily centered on defense budget increases and acquisition of counter-strike capabilities.

But there are three other key leitmotifs of the documents that have not attracted as much comment.

First, the NSS unabashedly foregrounds “universal values” as a “national interest” and “fundamental principle” of its strategy. While many observers have questioned the sustainability of the former prime minister (and current vice president of the Liberal Democratic Party) Aso Taro's “[values-oriented diplomacy](#)” since his time as party leader, it appears to be back with a vengeance. The NSS speaks of “upholding universal values such as freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights, and the rule of law.” It excoriates states that do not share such values and points to their malignant actions to undermine a “free, open, and stable international order.” Japan's commitment to project its Free and Open Indo-Pacific “vision” thus frames the almost Manichean contest between liberal democracies and authoritarian states as “a historical inflection point.” Japan now states it “will maintain and protect universal values.” For a country that long eschewed taking ideological leadership and intrusive democracy promotion, this emphatic statement is quite a departure.

Second, Japan's new security strategy emphasises its “holistic” approach. This is evident in its “integrated” approach to strategy—where it will lever all aspects of its “comprehensive national power” (a term originally invented by the Chinese) to achieve its strategic objectives. It will employ diplomacy, defense capabilities, economic strengths, technological prowess, and intelligence assets in

service of an integrated strategic approach. It seeks to create a “comprehensive defense architecture” by increasing coordination across organizational sectors such as the Japan Coast Guard and Maritime Self Defense Force, for example. The documents are replete with references to “cross-governmental” and “whole-of government” coordination, and “cross-community collaboration” (in advanced technology and R&D), indicating desire to break down institutional “silos” that could impede a joined-up approach to the implementation of strategy.

This “integration” includes the military domain, where Japan continues to build a “Multi-Domain Defense Force” by marrying the “traditional” land-sea-air domains with the space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains. Integration also extends to allies and partners, with greater efforts to harmonize US and Japanese forces, since “No country can protect its security alone.” This includes bilateral integration with the United States through the [Alliance Coordination Mechanism](#) and [Flexible Deterrent Options](#). The former focuses on information sharing, improving common situational awareness and coordinating responses from peacetime to conflict contingencies. The latter is designed to coordinate combined responses to deterring Chinese coercive activities within the maritime domain through military signalling and escalation control. Greater interoperability with close strategic partners, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, through [Reciprocal Access Agreements](#), which provide legal and logistical frameworks necessary to facilitate overseas training and military operations in one another’s countries, are a means toward improving inter-military coordination and force interoperability. This will result in a “multi-layered network” knitting together Japan’s regional ally and “like-minded” partners (e.g. Australia, India), in conjunction with “[minilateral](#)” mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Trilateral Strategic Dialogue. Japan is thus transcending its role as a single bilateral “spoke” of the US-led “[hub-and-spoke](#)” alliance system to become a subsidiary “hub” itself.

Japan is now acting to become accountable for its own national defense, eventually assuming responsibility for dealing with any invasion more independently (by

2027). This does not portend a move to complete national defense “autonomy” and a decoupling from the US alliance, but rather a determination to progressively assume of the primary burden for self-defense of its national territory. Though it will rely on its US ally for some time, this will be a major step, prospectively freeing up US forces based in Japan for other activities. The DBP also indicates that “Such a defense capability must come with high readiness and response capability.” To achieve this, the increased defense budget will need to be allocated accordingly to acquire counter-strike capabilities that can deter or defeat an enemy invasion, supported by a robust defense industrial base (a “virtually integral part of defense capability”), and a hardening of its defense facilities, with ample stocks of fuel and munitions. As well as providing for the defense of Japanese territory, this makes a greater contribution to the alliance considering the diminishing resources (and increasing obsolescence) of the US’ force posture.

Third, combined with greater responsibility for its own national defense is the emphasis on streamlining the “responsiveness” of its defense architecture. This is part to the overarching recognition that “a strategy that integrates its national responses at a higher level” is required. The [2016 Peace and Security Legislation](#) set the groundwork for this by freeing Japan of some of the former constraints upon its activities and permitting more collaboration with allies and partners. If deterrence fails, responsiveness of government and defense apparatus will be at a premium. To improve reaction times, decision-making procedures will become more “seamless,” contingency plans drawn up, and the mobility and readiness of rapid reaction forces improved (“mobile deployment capabilities,” per the NDS). This builds upon the earlier establishment of a National Security Council (in 2013) and centralization of decision-making in the Prime Minister’s Office, initiated under Abe Shinzo. This extends to inter-service crisis response coordination between the Self Defense Forces, police, and Japan Coast Guard, for example.

Japan’s new strategic approach is perhaps best seen as an apotheosis of the determined efforts put in motion during the [premiership of the late PM Abe](#), and a validation of these. This trajectory has been pursued

by his successor Kishida, first in his “[vision for peace](#)” address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2022. Unified by a clear statement of national objectives, including universal values and a commitment to uphold a rules-based order, Japan is investing heavily in marshalling the requisite resources to back this (“pragmatic realism”), drawn from the whole spectrum of the comprehensive national power it possesses. This is a recognition that strategic competition occurs across all domains, and it has become a national security imperative for Japan to improve its ability to deter and defend against attacks on its national territory, whilst assuming a greater burden within the US-Japan alliance. The ambitions of the national security documents, by their own admission are “unprecedented in terms of size and content.” Nevertheless, they signal Japan’s “steadfast resolve” to achieve them.

Time will tell if they are successfully implemented, or if they can be realized within the urgent timeframe available before a potential conflict breaks out.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.