



***UNDERSTANDING JAPAN'S DEFENSE
DEBATE***

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

Brad Glosserman (brad@pacforum.org) is deputy director of and visiting professor at the Center for Rule-Making Strategies at Tama University as well as senior adviser (nonresident) at Pacific Forum. He is the author of "Peak Japan: The End of Great Ambitions" (Georgetown University Press, 2019).

For more from this author, visit his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).

Japan is engaged in an intensifying national debate about defense policy. The government is drafting for release later this year three key documents—the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Program Guidelines, and the Mid-Term Defense Program—obliging politicians and the public to ponder the military budget and policies, such as offensive strike capabilities, that portend profound shifts in Japan's approach to defense. This discussion covers lots of ground and many of the issues demand a deep dive to understanding their complexity. Let me offer some guides to help navigate this moment in Japanese policy and strategy.

First, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo shifted the framework within which this debate is taking place. Abe—with the help of the People's Republic of China—moved the center of gravity of defense and security policy to the right such that there is a new governing paradigm in Tokyo. The Yoshida doctrine, which subordinated "hard" security concerns to economic development and guided Japanese thinking for over half a century, is over. Abe's harder line, triggered by greater distrust of China and the desire for a higher-profile for Tokyo in regional security, now prevails. However, as will be discussed below,

that does not mean that his ambitions have been realized; there remain considerable headwinds.

Second, Russia's invasion of Ukraine pushed many doubters toward a more realist approach to security policy. Moscow has reminded skeptics, and especially the Japanese public, that borders are not sacrosanct, that forcible revision of the territorial status quo is a reality and that old-fashioned kinetic, destructive war between states remains a very real option in the 21st century. In an [Asahi Shinbun poll](#) taken shortly after the war began, 80% of respondents said that there were more anxious than before about a possible war between Japan and a neighboring country. The military threat emanating from China, felt by a rising number of Japanese—68.9% of Japanese according to the 2021 [Genron NPO survey](#)—makes that prospect palpable.

Third, recognition of that threat has not transformed public thinking about national defense. There remains little appetite for power projection. Emphasis remains on defense of the homeland and physical protection of national interests narrowly defined. The power of longstanding views is evident in various polls. Only about [one-third](#) (34.1%) of respondents favor increasing defense spending to 2% of GDP, despite the menace just noted. The Cabinet Office's annual [survey](#) of views of diplomacy shows little desire for changes in Japanese policy to embrace more security activism; for virtually all questions on this topic, the majority prefers to maintain engagement at existing levels. Japanese remain split when asked about support for acquiring strike capabilities—according to a [Yomiuri Shimbun](#) poll, 46% favor and 46% oppose. Komei's continuing opposition to ending the "exclusively defense oriented policy" is another headwind.

Fourth, there is widespread belief that the China challenge—given its size, appetite for expansion, and the military modernization program that enables that expansion—cannot be met by Japan alone. Tokyo must find and work with partners to deter and if necessary defend against Chinese aggression and predation. To win the trust of those allies and partners, Japan must quiet doubts about the inclination to "free"

or “cheap-ride.” Japan must show that it is willing to defend itself if it expects others to aid in that defense.

Fifth, Japan continues to believe in multilateral, multidimensional security mechanisms. There may have been questions a few years ago about Japanese self-help efforts and the meaning of its “hedge”—some anticipated greater independence as Tokyo expanded and improved defense capabilities—but today there should be no doubt that working with allies and partners is the pre-eminent objective.

Defense policy makers must also emphasize the “multidimensional” aspect. Japan has long championed comprehensive security and economic considerations, both at home and abroad, have invariably assumed great weight in that policy. Those inclinations have not diminished even as hard security concerns grow larger. The need to coordinate among disparate partners, with different views of the region, the threats and the best ways to address them, has also encouraged that expansive approach to security and the creation of a spectrum of working groups to address issues like climate, technology, and public health in those cooperative efforts.

Sixth, while Tokyo is strengthening ties with a wider range of countries, the United States remains its partner of choice. A memo released by the National Security Secretariat summarizing meetings with experts [reportedly](#) concludes that “Japan’s best choice will be to hug tight to Washington.” Priority will continue to be put on projects and programs with its ally and managing that relationship will remain one of the prime minister’s priorities. Across the government, coordination with Washington guides decision making. Creation of the Economic “2+2” forum is an expression of that imperative.

At the same time, however, Japanese well understand US politics: Tokyo knows well the countervailing currents in Washington and recognizes that the Biden administration views of allies and engagement generally are not universal. It is often said that even if Donald Trump doesn’t return to the White House, Trumpism might. This drives Japan to dispel the image of the free rider (see four above) and to thicken the weave of relations with partners, as a “hedge” and

to make it harder for the US to contemplate withdrawal.

Seventh, be skeptical of numbers as Japan debates defense budgets. Tokyo is well aware of the talismanic nature of the call to spend 2% of GDP on defense. Standing next to President Biden during his visit to Tokyo last May, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [said](#) that his Cabinet would “substantially” increase defense spending within the next five years to a level equivalent to that NATO target. Defense spending has been inching up in recent years and the 1% limit that is often cited is a guideline, not a barrier, and is regularly breached.

In recent days, there have been reports that the Japanese government is embracing a more expansive model of defense budgeting. The [Nikkei](#), for example, noted that the Kishida administration is considering “a broader budget framework that includes funding for scientific research as well as space and cyber programs to respond to evolving security challenges.” This new approach would also add Coast Guard spending (currently in the budget for the Land and Transport Ministry), costs of infrastructure development for military facilities, pensions for former SDF members, and peacekeeping operations (now in the Foreign Ministry budget). According to one estimate, inclusion of those expenditures in the FY2021 defense budget would have bumped the total to 6.9 trillion yen (\$40.9 billion), or 1.24% of GDP.

Eighth, keep an eye on how monies are spent. Several years ago, a failure to actually spend the money negated defense budget increases. Much of the debate in Japan has focused on big-ticket items that scratch the great-power itch: next-generation fighters or Aegis Ashore systems, to name but two. More attention should be given to mundane, but essential items such as ammunition, hardening of facilities, logistics and the like. Given Japan’s demographic woes, unmanned vehicles for air and sea should be a priority; they aren’t sexy but they maximize bang for buck. Noah Sneider of *The Economist* argues that planners are beginning to make this shift.

Finally, the debate over constitutional revision is a red herring. There is little indication that the constitution

has effectively prevented Japan from acquiring or expanding defense capabilities. At key moments, Japanese courts have shown considerable deference to the government on issues of national security; it is difficult to see the Supreme Court blocking the government from adopting a policy that it has deemed vital to the nation's security. (That is no uniquely Japanese phenomenon: Most courts defer to the executive on such matters.)

Hanging over all this is Prime Minister Kishida's readiness to spend political capital on the defense budget debate. With his Cabinet's [popularity](#) tumbling, that is more important than ever. Much will likely depend on what China does and how that impacts public sentiment.

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