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Japan in the Greyzone: Strategy and Self-defence in East Asia

ABSTRACT

The legacy of East Asian geopolitics is deeply rooted in Japan's evolution as a polity and state. The pacifist approach, cemented in Japan's post-Second World War Constitution, defined its existential dilemma in one of the most turbulent regions in the world. Japan's conviction around its military and pacifist ideals has been tested in its surrounding littorals by potential adversaries that bear a Japanese imperialist and colonial history. Current geopolitical conditions have now forced a reinterpretation of these ideals. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution had by all means outlawed warfare other than in the interest of self-defence. Under the former Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, the meaning of self-defence was revisited to accommodate the overwhelming influence of its strongest ally, the United States, and to address the increasing number of

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small-scale hostilities by China and North Korea which collectively were inducing a greyzone environment. The scale and nature of military assets and spending in the interest of self-defence has spawned a decade-long debate on when does defensive nature actually turn offensive in real terms.

Keywords: Japan, China, East Asia, nuclear weapons, North Korea, Greyzone Environment.

Since 2020 and the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the global order has seen a sharp rise in hostility in different regional pockets of the world. The fallback upon hard-power politics clubbed with economic instability, public health insecurity, the receding global leadership of the United States, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has pushed the world order back into the turmoil associated with the Cold War. The defining aspects of the world order over the past six years or so are seen in declining faith in multilateralism, rising doubts about existing security guarantees, non-abidance with the rule of law, and states internally imposing nationalist policies that exhibit isolationist and alienating trends. It would be easy to allude these problems in some way to the Trump presidency (2016–2020), however the seeds of doubt, disillusionment, and revision within the contemporary world order defined by the United States and Western powers after the Second World War are now germinating. The continuing decline of the United States as a world leader and its ability/capacity to undertake multiple initiatives worldwide has been brought into question, both materially and ideologically. The U.S. downslide is indicated in the twenty-year questionable operation in Afghanistan with no clear end goal, the failure to enforce red lines in Syria, Ukraine, and Crimea, or to address the burgeoning human rights situation in Hong Kong or Yemen,



festering internal political strife and division within their own borders, and the mercurial nature of the post-Obama foreign policy.

Furthermore, the prevalence of the “Thucydides Trap” rhetoric between China and the United States has captured the imagination of scholars and policymakers. The “Thucydides Trap” popularized by the scholar Graham Allison in 2012 describes China’s (revisionist power) position vis-à-vis the United States (status quoist power) position as similar to the Athenian-Spartan competition where statist calculations and the bilateral scenario between the two inevitably led to war.¹ Such an equation does seem plausible in a vacuum and in the theoretical space, in practice however there are various significant variables on which this approach is negligent.

One of the principal variables among them is Japan. Being a neighboring state with frosty relations with China, Japan’s position is supremely unique also because of its close (formerly custodian-like) relationship with the United States. The island state finds itself embroiled within regional competitions on two levels; it is a direct participant in territorial disputes and balance of power competition against China, and an ancillary (and critical) player within the global competition between the United States and China. Keeping these two realities in mind, the evolution of Japan’s hard power capabilities needs to be carefully observed within domestic and international contexts.

Japan’s colonization of Taiwan, China, and Korea in the pre-Second World War period plays a distinct role in the regional geopolitics of the twenty-first century. While unpackaging Japan’s current military development, it is vital to revisit its evolution as a regional stakeholder since the Second World War and the ensuing

¹ Graham Allison, “Thucydides’s Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific,” *Financial Times*, August 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/5d695b5a-ead3-11e1-984b-00144feab49a>.

dilemmas it has faced. For example, while the generational roots linked to Taiwan and Japan since 1895 have created an environment of *bonhomie*, an underlying factor of geopolitical necessity also needs to be factored into the relationship between the two island polities.² The “first island chain” hypothesis suggests a domino effect in terms of the spread of Chinese influence across the Indo-Pacific.³ While the credibility and accurate estimate of its impact varies, it is understood that Taiwan is the supposed first domino in this scenario. Japan’s outermost islands are only 500 kilometers away from Taiwan and place Sino-Taiwanese dynamics well within its areas of concern. The latest developments in East Asia indicate power and intent by the Chinese, especially noting its aggressive displays of power in specific incidents. These put together are rightly ringing alarm bells in Washington and Tokyo. Keeping this in mind, this article addresses Japan’s military role in East Asia, on three lines:

- Japanese Military Expenditures in the Last Decade
- Greyzone Environment
- Self Defence and Deterrence

Revitalizing the Japanese Military

A recurring pattern in modern Japanese political history is its longstanding capability to adapt to conditions prevalent in the international system. Since the Meiji restoration in 1868, Japan’s realist and pragmatic approach to regional and global developments has

² E. Patricia Tsurumi, “Education and Assimilation in Taiwan under Japanese Rule, 1895–1945,” *Modern Asian Studies* 13, no. 4 (February 15, 1979): 617–41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312185>.

³ Koichi Sato, “The Senkaku Islands Dispute: Four Reasons of the Chinese Offensive—A Japanese View,” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 8, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 50–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2019.1626567/>



repeatedly allowed it to maintain its more extensive, long-term interests. Such a goal has, however, often come at great cost in the short term. In the post-Second World War period, the disarmament and invocation of self-binding principles in situ seemed like a subversive approach to comply with the U.S. occupation. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution reads, “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.” While security guarantees by the United States allowed Japan to focus on its “economic miracles,” it became a great source of chagrin for a particular sect of the Japanese polity that was against such a high degree of dependence on an extra-territorial power.⁴ In sharp contrast, former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida and his successors who opposed this sect during the Cold War envisioned the future of Japan’s military within the context of U.S. military supremacy, Japan’s developmental needs, and the geopolitical competition between its ally and the Soviet Union. In a private interaction with his aide, Yoshida once said in 1956 “The day [for rearmament] will come naturally when our livelihood recovers. It may sound devious (*zurui*), but let the Americans handle [our security] until then. It is indeed our Heaven-bestowed good fortune that the Constitution bans arms. If the Americans complain, the Constitution gives us a perfect justification. The politicians who want to amend it are fools.”⁵ To characterize these self-binding principles within the

⁴ Kenneth B. Pyle, “Japan’s Return to Great Power Politics: Abe’s Restoration,” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2 (2018): 69–90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2018.0026>.

⁵ Trevor Harrison, *21st Century Japan: A New Sun Rising* (London: Black Rose, 2008).

Japanese Constitution and philosophy, Kenneth Pyle calls the measures (since the 1970s) “the nine nos:”

no overseas deployment of the Japan Self Defence Forces (JSDF), no participation in collective self-defence, no power-projection capability, no possession of nuclear arms, no arms exports, no sharing of defence-related technology, no spending more than 1% of GNP (national income) for defence, no military use of space, and no foreign aid for military purposes.⁶

Over thirty years since the end of the Cold War, the constitutional question of self-defence is just as rampant in Japan but with newer nuances and different considerations. Yoshida’s bargain for American security guarantees in favor of focusing on developmental needs is not as convincing as it once was. In 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe again envisioned Japan’s interests in the context of post 9/11 global military and counter-terrorism developments, regional hostility from China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the erosion of the United States’ long-standing influence in Asia. It is important to note that this transition in thinking and re-evaluation of national priorities should be considered a seamless or balanced transformation. In the post-Cold War moment, Japan’s domestic policy infrastructure suffered through a vacillating phase that saw a nation disillusioned over U.S. support and its foreign developmental policies.⁷ While that phase eventually smoothed out, creeping doubts over Japan’s security have persisted, which PM Abe

⁶ Pyle, “Japan’s Return to Great Power Politics: Abe’s Restoration.”

⁷ Mike M Mochizuki, “Japan After the Cold War,” *SAIS Review (1989-2003)* 10, no. 2 (February 15, 1990): 121–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45345421>.



dealt with decisively in 2012, kicking off a ten-year uninterrupted rise in Japan's defence costs, which recently included an (estimated) unprecedented crossing of the 1 percent of GNP barrier in 2022.

Under the new interpretation of Article 9, Japan would be permitted to undertake collective self-defence operations, including sending troops and personnel as part of UN peacekeeping missions. The 2015 amendment to the Japanese Constitution, which occurred under the Abe reforms, cited the heightened geopolitical tensions in East Asia as a cause for revising the interpretation of Article 9. The governing party was successful in passing the amendment in the Diet, but faced strong resistance from the public that protested the changes that permitted internationally coordinated operations for peace and security under the premise of collective self-defence with close allies (presumably the United States), and revised the authority to use weapons pre-emptively.

Japan's Rising Defence Expenditure

(Unit: \$100 million)

Item	1960	1966	2015	2022 (estimated)
Defence Costs (A)	444.4	946.4	4,56,740	4,92,604.6
National Income (B)	33,158.5	69,110.9	4,93,76,900	4,77,82,588
National Budget (C)	4,903.3	11,984	82,61,703	93,11,338.6
A/B %	1.34%	1.37%	0.93%	0.97% (>1% expected)
A/C %	9.07%	7.90%	5.52%	5.3%

Data collated from Japanese Defence Ministry.

https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_budget/index.html.

A comparison between the 1960s and this past decade bears similar geopolitical uncertainty vis-à-vis China under differing circumstances. In the 1960s, Tokyo was concerned about the situation

in the PRC due to the ongoing Cultural Revolution and was investing heavily in building up the JSDF as a nominal force for Japanese territorial security.⁸ The uncertainty emanating from the Maoist regime in Beijing at that time was of grave concern to policymakers in Japan, and even though the 1 percent threshold was crossed, the principal form of defence was through U.S. presence within its territories. In 2022 as we again are potentially seeing the 1 percent threshold being transgressed, some of these nuances are synonymous in principle, such as the continued presence of U.S. forces on Japanese islands and uncertainty over Chinese intent. The steady, continuous rise in defence expenditure for the last ten years is no longer about setting up a defence force but instead fortifying it and bringing its capacity in line with the new interpretation of self-defence in Japanese constitutional law.

Japan's concerns vis-à-vis China and the DPRK have been long-standing and bear a colonial legacy too. However, the increased dependence on the United States since the Second World War is a factor that prime minister Abe had repeatedly warned about during his tenure. The comparative outlook of Yoshida and Abe epitomize the evolution of security and strategy approaches in the East Asian island state, and capture the direction where its military thinking is headed. The steady increase in military expenditure is symptomatic of this rationale. The equation of the security guarantees the United States provides in a part of the world where its influence is eroding can turn into a liability as other players continue to make indigenous, technological progress. Shinichi Kitaoka, foreign policy advisor to Abe, wrote in 2017,

⁸ James H. Buck, "The Japanese Self-Defense Forces," *Asian Survey* 7, no. 9 (1967): 597–613, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2642617>.



Japan should build up not only a missile defence system, but also counter strike capabilities in response to North Korea's military threat . . . What will the United States really do when North Korea finally develops the ability to target Los Angeles with either precision-guided intercontinental ballistic missiles or submarine-launched ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads? I doubt that Washington would order an offensive against the North while knowing that a large number of citizens in the second-largest US city would be inevitably killed. Put simply, Japan has virtually no say about the extent and range of any offensive the United States may launch in this region. Is it appropriate for a country to leave its fate up to a foreign country to such an extent?⁹

Abe's understanding of collective self-defence is not the only conceptual revision of Article 9 of the Constitution. The capability and capacity to undertake such self-defence has also developed in the last ten years, and in the future more significant cause for procurement and capability building will also rise, if geopolitical tensions continue to track with such hostility.

Greyzone Environment

Greyzones are an emerging international relations concept located at the intersection between statecraft and open warfare, and one that has acquired great relevancy in East Asia. Greyzones encompass hybrid threats, political warfare, malign influence, irregular warfare, modern deterrence, and cyber-technology. For example, China is displaying

⁹ Shinichi Kitaoka, "Japan Should Acquire Counter strike Ability," *Japan News*, October 3, 2017, <http://qoshe.com/the-japan-news/shinichi-kitaoka/insights-into-the-world-japan-should-acquire-cou/1621876>.

adroitness in developing greyzones in East Asia as it does not undertake large scale antagonist operations or open belligerence, but rather indulges in low-level provocations such as reclamation of reefs, construction of de facto military bases in strategically contentious areas that feed into the overarching security dilemma, and adopt aggressive military postures such as chronic territorial water incursions.¹⁰ All of these acts can technically fall under violations of Article 2.4 of the UN Charter. Still, in state practice, the claim of breach of sovereignty and consequent self-defence needs to be proportional and limited. Seeing that these events are relatively low-scale and low-yield, any form of belligerent response in self-defence should be measured as it most likely can be taken out of proportion, thus further giving cause for Chinese retributive action and fueling the spiral matrix.

Greyzone situations harbor the threat of ambiguous security concerns transforming into severe conditions without forewarning. The lasting impact of greyzone behavior from actors such as China serves as an indicator of its long-term belligerent intent in Taiwan and in areas near Japanese littorals. The Japanese, in their annual defence review for 2021, have defined a greyzone, for example, as “a country that confronts another over territory, sovereignty or maritime or economic interests using some forceful organisation to demonstrate its presence in the relevant disputed region in a bid to alter the status quo or force other countries to accept its assertions.”¹¹ It is particularly difficult to address greyzone situations, as the author envisions, because they

¹⁰ Nobumasa Akiyama, “Arms Control Dialogue is Japan’s Interest: An Agenda for a New Nuclear Posture Review,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4, no. 2 (2021): 202–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2021.2017137>.

¹¹ Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan,” Tokyo, 2021. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_budget/index.html.



manifest in a dichotomized manner: as an individual act or a greyzone incident that may have a long-term cumulative impact on the greyzone environment. In response to individual acts, the scale and manner are usually of low intensity and are often exhibitivite in nature, i.e. military jets conducting fly overs in disputed territories or naval vessels encroaching in disputed waters. Even ballistic projectiles flying over national territory can be indicative of such behavior, but the scale and intensity of such acts can be debated. In the instance of jets and ships, the transgressed upon state faces the burden of finding a response that abides by the principle of proportionality in self-defence and would not further feed into the spiral matrix and escalate the situation.

Greyzone incidents have previously manifested in other spaces in Asia as well, recently between India and Pakistan. The clash of the two states' air forces due to incursion into the sovereign territories epitomizes the high stakes "threading the needle" scenario the two countries face.¹² Greyzone environments are the cumulative impact of such incidents on national policymakers and public perception, which needs to be factored into the balance of power realities of the region. For example, various considerations in the spiral matrix between India and Pakistan serve as a threshold; the conventional capability asymmetry, tactical nuclear instruments, and first use policies create a larger equation within which this greyzone environment exists. Unlike the former Soviet Union, China does not solely depend on its military output, but also utilizes its economic, political, and diplomatic prowess to supplement the greyzone environment.

¹² Maria Abi-Habib, "After India Loses Dogfight to Pakistan, Questions Arise About Its 'Vintage' Military," *New York Times*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/world/asia/india-military-united-states-china.html>.

Similarly in East Asia, China's rapidly growing conventional capabilities and minimum nuclear deterrence are placed against the JSDF and U.S. forces (with its nuclear guarantees) in the region. While this equation has been long-standing, there have been massive changes that induced security concerns in Tokyo in the last decade. Receding U.S. influence and vacillating commitments in East Asia have raised eyebrows among Japanese policymakers that, in parallel, looked at creating stronger multilateral links with extra-regional players like Britain, Australia, and India. Furthermore, the greyzone environment has thickened the security dilemma between China and Japan, which subsequently continues to influence Japan's position on supporting the 'No-First Use' policy in Biden's Nuclear Policy Review.

Japan's fundamental military predicament is China's continued and increased willingness to demonstrate unilateral assertions despite the existing balance of power dynamics and deterrence mechanisms in place through U.S. proxies. The Chinese continue to create a greyzone environment that symbolizes their willingness to challenge the regional status quo by multiple small-scale incidents of coercion and generate a larger *fait accompli*. Additionally, China has maintained heightened opacity around its conventional and unconventional capabilities, which have further fueled the security dilemma among regional players. It has not disclosed information about specific weaponry, procurement goals, organizations, locations, records of military exercises and operations, as well as a comprehensive breakdown of its defence expenditure.¹³ It is unclear how much of this, in comparison, is extraordinary to general state behavior, although the element of voluntary military transparency definitely serves as a confidence-building measure and indicates a *bona fide* relationship

¹³ Ministry of Defense, "Defense of Japan."



between the parties. Needless to say, as this opacity is part of the greyzone environment shrouding East Asia, clarity around some of these factors will serve as a substantial confidence-building measure. However, there is no clear incentive for the Chinese to do so at this point in time as they continue to push to achieve their 2035 modernization goal. On the contrary, there have been noted instances of Chinese officials lying or not acknowledging military operations in disputed regions in the Sea of Japan.¹⁴ China has published white papers bi-annually since the 1980s, but apart from a select few, none of them delves into the above-mentioned specifics and only skims over general military policies. While addressing Chinese intent, its conventional and unconventional postures are often only confirmed during an initiated incident, which normally leads to speculation. There is a need to carefully judge the circumstances because, unlike the Americans or the Japanese, with the Chinese there is relatively no free and open public discourse around their military capabilities that confirm these speculations. So when defence analysts call for ‘strategic stability,’ which alludes to engaging in further vectors of militarization and weaponization, it feeds into the emerging controlled arms race in the region with no verifiable purpose or end.

Japan, within this scenario, needs to be careful where it balances the national will of a newly interpreted self-defence doctrine, owing to China’s ambiguous posture. As seen previously, China reacts strongly to its neighboring countries importing arms even if they only have defensive use.¹⁵ If Japan were to increase imports of dual-use or

¹⁴ Anthony Kuhn, “After Being Silent For Decades, Japan Now Speaks Up About Taiwan—And Angers China,” *NPR*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/26/1020866539/japans-position-on-defending-taiwan-has-taken-a-remarkable-shift?t=1644947586442>.

offensive weaponry for the purpose of self-defence to manage the greyzone environment, it would further deepen the security dilemma between the two neighboring East Asian states. The critical driving factor moving forward will be Japan's dependence on the international arms market and China's indigenous production capabilities. Mutual vulnerability and cognizance of mutual interests will be the defining elements in Japanese self-defence and deterrence.

To Defend and To Deter

Japan's SDF has relentlessly developed and evolved based on immediate circumstances and littoral needs. Consider its maritime SDF: despite being in one of the most competitive regions in the world with close littorals and disputed territories, the island state originally developed its forces to deal with crimes such as fish poaching, smuggling, and illegal immigration, and even disease.¹⁶ All of these are non-traditional maritime security issues that in maritime security affairs are separate from the traditional statist matters. It is important to note here that many of the developing naval powers in Asia in the 1950s were either reconfiguring colonial naval assets and bases or developing indigenous capabilities for traditional security purposes. Imperial Japan itself boasted of one of the most formidable naval forces in East Asia. The pacifism in Japan since the Second World War has periodically been revised on the basis of specific circumstances and developments. Japan's military evolution has been driven by internal stability, public

¹⁵ Daniel Hurst, "China Warns Australia and Japan over 'confrontational' New Defence Pact," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2020.

¹⁶ Sado Akihiro, "The Self-Defense Forces and Postwar Politics in Japan," *Contemporary Japan* 32, no. 2 (2020): 262–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18692729.2019.1630591>.



approval, and constitutional values, rather than any statist competition.

What the question boils down to is this: how is the current regional dynamic affecting Japanese internal stability, its foreign relations, and its public perception? The greater question of self-defence in Japan has grown increasingly complex in recent years, which has emboldened Japan under a revised, post 9/11, U.S.-influenced approach to “pre-emptive” and collective self-defence. The Japanese Constitution, as stated, restricts the use of offensive weapons, which was articulated in the backdrop of the Second World War and the consequent U.S. occupation. However, the Japanese interpretation of what constitutes “offensive” has evolved in the context of what constitutes “defence” in contemporary warfare. The Japanese interpretation has been influenced by the sophistication of missile technology, cyber-warfare, unarmed/remote combat capabilities, greyzone incidents, and tightening geopolitical competition vis-à-vis China and the DPRK.¹⁷ The principle of anticipatory self-defence in international affairs dates back to the Caroline incident in U.S./Canadian waters in 1837 which has been turned into the Caroline doctrine/test.¹⁸ It has been found to be compatible with the UN Charter and has been implemented in international military tribunals. The test essentially looks to understand the reasoning behind a pre-emptive attack in the name of self-defence and examines the factual accuracy about the supposed inevitable use of force by an opposing entity.

Here it is essential to differentiate between (1) anticipatory, pre-emptive self-defence, and (2) preventive self-defence. Andrew

¹⁷ Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan.”

¹⁸ Howard Jones, “The Caroline Affair,” *The Historian* 38, no. 3 (February 15, 1976): 485–502, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24444235>.

Clapham articulates this distinction quite succinctly in his book *War*, “For one to claim that I punched you in self-defence, I must be responding to an ongoing attack or the immediate, verifiable threat of one” [anticipatory, pre-emptive self-defence]. “I cannot thump you on the grounds that I am pretty certain you might hit me tomorrow” [preventive self-defence].¹⁹ Anticipatory, pre-emptive self-defence can have legal grounding as per the Caroline test. Preventive self-defence is simply abusive and not permitted. However, in practice, the distinction has been vastly blurred due to the factor of time. The probability of an attack can turn into a certainty within seconds due to modern instruments which has opened grounds for legal and political debate in Japan for the procurement of offensive weapons, which would traditionally be seen as preventive in nature but could be utilized for anticipatory purposes.

In 2017, Itsunori Onodera, a former defence minister of Japan, had urged for the purchase of pre-emptive military capabilities, including cruise missiles that could destroy enemy missile capabilities before they were launched.²⁰ In 2022, Defence Minister, Nobuo Kishi stated that Japan needed to have the option of “sending fighter jets in the opponent’s airspace to carry out the attacks.”²¹ In scenarios like

¹⁹ Andrew Clapham, “Outlawing War,” in *War*, ed. Paul Craig (Geneva: Oxford University Press, 2021).

²⁰ Tomohiro Osaki, “New Defense Chief Onodera Suggests Japan Should Consider Acquiring Ability to Strike North Korean Missile Bases,” *Japan Times*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/08/07/national/politics-diplomacy/new-defense-chief-onodera-suggests-japan-consider-acquiring-ability-strike-north-korean-missile-bases/>.

²¹ Yusuke Takeuchi, “Japan Won’t Rule Out Airstrikes on Enemy Bases: Defense Minister,” *Nikkei Asia*, February 17, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-won-t-rule-out-airstrikes-on-enemy-bases-defense-minister>.



these, the adoption of such capabilities must be cognizant of applicable international law, which is the Japanese constitutional law, and the preventive powers of such instruments that are being procured for pre-emptive purposes. The intent and facts behind a pre-emptive (or preventative) attack would be a cardinal deciding factor in the characterization of self-defence in the contemporary era of Asian geopolitics.

Consider the scenario of the remote Japanese islands in the Sea of Japan. The Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are uninhabited islands whose ownership is disputed by Japan and China. Both countries have claimed the islands, and Japan has characterized them as critical to its national security and has devised plans for their protection.²² Under the current U.S.-Japan alliance, the western power has affirmed its commitment to defend Japanese sovereignty collectively. Since the Obama administration, the United States has extended the protection to include these islands as well.²³ As recently as 2021, U.S. and Japanese defence ministers have confirmed that the islands fall within the scope of their bilateral security treaty.²⁴ In the event of foreign occupation of these islands, Japan considers the retaking of the islands as self-defence. The nuance applicable here is that strategically ‘retaking’ can be defensive, but functionally and operationally can turn offensive if the response is construed as disproportional by the opposing entity or

²² Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan.”

²³ Ankit Panda, “Obama: Senkakus Covered Under US-Japan Security Treaty,” *The Diplomat*, April 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/obama-senkakus-covered-under-us-japan-security-treaty/>.

²⁴ Lara Jakes, Rich Motoka, and John Ismay, “Visiting Japan, Top U.S. Envoys Set Combative Tone for China Talks,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/world/asia/us-japan-china-talks.html>.

the instruments used cause additional harm than required for the military objective of retaking the islands.²⁵

Another critical factor is the public perception of the SDF in Japan which enjoy great popularity and support from Japan's population. Since the 2011 tsunami, the SDF has received massive public approval; as of 2018, close to 90 percent of Japanese residents supported the SDF.²⁶ However, it is crucial to keep in mind that this is indicative of rising military fervor in the Japanese polity. The SDF has gained support because of its vital role in disaster relief and not as a fighting force, per se. In fact, the SDF has never been battle-tested after the Second World War, and has not been privy to real-life interstate conflict situations. The post-war intergenerational pacifist values are deeply ingrained within the Japanese approach to national politics and opinions on foreign policy. Even when Abe pushed for the reinterpretation of Article 9, he faced significant resistance, and if the government is to again push for further changes, similar resistance will emerge.²⁷ Therefore, U.S. strategic involvement is invaluable to manage Japanese public perceptions, to fortify its defensive capabilities, and create high thresholds of deterrence.

The official paper on Japan's security by the Ministry of Defence clarifies that the country's ultimate security guarantor are both its international dependence for sustenance and its self-defence

²⁵ Jaren Keith Price, "The Rebirth of Japan's Amphibious Forces," *Strategic Studies Institute* 3, no. 1 (2017): 41-44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11943.7>.

²⁶ Akihiro, "The Self-Defense Forces and Postwar Politics in Japan."

²⁷ Janak Rogers, "The Debate over Japanese Pacifism and Article 9," *ABC*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/japanese-pacifism-and-article-9/6695058>.



capabilities. The will and capacity to resist and prevent foreign invasion are explicitly mentioned in the document while highlighting the importance of an appropriate defence capability to respond to complex, multi-layered security issues. The Japanese paper further envisages bolstering national defence measures by developing “seamless” defence measures within U.S.-Japan security arrangements.²⁸

China’s control over Taiwan poses a significant geopolitical concern to Japan and its allies, especially the United States. The strategic advantage Taiwan could afford to China in case of takeover or invasion will allow the Chinese Navy to extend its maritime influence incrementally over the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region. In U.S. and Japanese thinking, such a scenario threatens to destabilize the balance of power in the region, pose immediate potential sovereignty threats to Japan and U.S. forces, and bolster Chinese coercive influence. Japanese senior officials have gone on record to state that China’s current behavior very closely rhymes with the pre-Second World War Imperial Japanese statist approach to international relations.²⁹ Having convinced themselves of the decline of U.S. global hegemony, it is presumed within Chinese scholarly and policymaking circles that in due course China will replace the United States as the status quo-ist power and the stark difference between China’s ‘organized polity’ against U.S. ‘messy democracy’ will be a defining factor.³⁰ These rhymes with Japan’s past have a lesson on the overconfidence of emerging states.

²⁸ Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan.”

²⁹ Sheila A Smith, “How Japan is Upgrading its Military,” 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-japan-upgrading-its-military>.

³⁰ Ibid.

Furthermore, Japan's concern regarding such confidence is the immediate material impact in case of an eruption of conflict between China and the United States. The human and infrastructural cost associated with a limited or total war scenario between belligerent entities in the region is far too high for all sides and stakeholders. Here lies Japan's incentive to not completely isolate China from regional politics and to ensure continued diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution on matters regarding Taiwan, arms control, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Diplomatic engagement and soft power have worked very efficiently for Japan in recent times, however the growing greyzone environment by the Chinese has given cause for the Japanese to revise their hard power capabilities.

The definitional metric in studying deterrence in the China-U.S.-Japan-North and South Korea pentilateral equation is the prevalence of two (almost three) nuclear weapons states. Furthermore, Japan being the epicentre of the only noted usage of nuclear weapons as an act of war also raises a more profound moral question in the national and U.S.-Japan bilateral conversation. During the incumbency of former U.S. President Obama, the United States conducted a nuclear policy review (NPR) where it considered adopting a no-first use (NFU) policy.³¹ While the United States has maintained that it will only deploy nuclear weapons in extraordinary circumstances that pose direct, abominable threats to its sovereignty and/or of its allies, it has intentionally not characterized the threshold of these threats as being conventional or unconventional, which allows it undertake a nuclear response to a non-nuclear attack. This raises grave concerns regarding an indiscriminate response as preventive self-defence, which by no

³¹ Akiyama, "Arms Control Dialogue Is Japan's Interest: An Agenda for a New Nuclear Posture Review."



metric will be proportional. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Defence wants to retain ambiguity and continue to feed the security dilemma with potential global adversaries.³² This allows it to maintain strategic supremacy and capability on various points of potential military conflicts. However, in peacetime, this gravely affects the increasing influx of weaponry in East Asia and is a principal driving factor in the emerging arms race in the region. During his tenure as vice-president Biden had indicated considering a NFU policy or sole purpose posture.³³ A NFU is where a nuclear state avows not to use its nuclear capabilities unless it faces a direct nuclear attack first. This requires the NFU state to develop second-strike capabilities, a complex command structure, and heterogenous delivery mechanisms that involve land, maritime, or air strike capabilities. In its current configuration, the U.S. nuclear infrastructure can fulfil such requirements. But is it in the interest of Japan for the United States to adopt a NFU posture?

Japan's concerns about nuclear weapons in its vicinity are historically and strategically well placed. But the strategic necessity and historical lessons are not complementary to one another in its policymaking. Japan had successfully lobbied the Obama administration against adopting a NFU policy, as well as the Trump administration to maintain that posture and consider including low-yield tactical nuclear options in its arsenal.³⁴ It is lobbying the Biden administration on

³² Department of Defense, "Dangers of a Nuclear No First Use Policy" (Washington DC, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Apr/01/2002108002/-1/-1/1/DANGERS-OF-A-NO-FIRST-USE-POLICY.PDF>.

³³ Duyeon Kim, "Biden Can Find Middle Ground in Heated Nuclear Debate," *Foreign Policy*, February 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/15/nuclear-weapons-review-biden/>.

similar lines for the nuclear policy review (NPR) which started in January 2022.

It is understood that if the United States were to adopt a NFU policy framework, Japan's nuclear proxy deterrent would be turned passive and diluted. Chinese missile effectiveness and thickening greyzone environment are already pushing the Japan-U.S. bilateral alliance to invest heavily in missile defence systems, early warning capabilities, and counter strike capabilities.³⁵ However, the hypersonic glide vehicles China has developed indigenously can escape early warning surveillance which has upset the defence-offense balance among the parties on conventional lines.³⁶ Not only has this incentivized Japan to invest in "hange kiryoku" (counter-strike capabilities),³⁷ which can be implemented for preventive and pre-emptive purposes but also to maintain its position against a possible U.S. NFU policy. Furthermore, the unrestrained nuclear program of the DPRK and the hostile position the peninsular state has held for decades against Japan has underscored its commitment to ensuring an active U.S. nuclear deterrent in the region, in policy and principle.

³⁴ Gregory Kulacki, "The Nuclear Deterrence Strategy of the US-Japan Alliance is Failing but Can Be Fixed," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4, no. 2 (2021): 222–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2021.1994744>.

³⁵ Kingston Reif, "U.S. and Allied Ballistic Missile Defenses in the Asia-Pacific Region," 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/us-allied-ballistic-missile-defenses-asia-pacific-region>.

³⁶ Kulacki, "The Nuclear Deterrence Strategy of the US-Japan Alliance Is Failing but Can Be Fixed."

³⁷ Ken Moriyasu, "U.S., Japan to Develop Counter-Hypersonic Capabilities: 2-plus-2," *Nikkei Asia*, January 7, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/U.S.-Japan-to-develop-counter-hypersonic-capabilities-2-plus-2>.



U.S. developers of war games that simulate probable scenarios involving collective self-defence and allied military operations have devised the Blue Theory of Victory.³⁸ The color blue in these war games represents the United States and its allies. Within this theory, the threat of nuclear first use, or at the bare minimum the ambiguity around it creates high barriers for antagonizing states entering into conventional conflict scenarios. To counter this, the Chinese have built numerous dummy silos to create counter-ambiguity regarding strike locations and retain second-strike capabilities in the event of a nuclear strike against them.³⁹ The Chinese leadership has maintained its NFU policy, believing that if they can retain second-strike capabilities in all possible scenarios, it will have in principle reduced U.S. nuclear weapons to “paper tigers.” Equating U.S. nuclear weapons to paper tigers is representative of Chinese strategic thinking regarding the nuclear question.⁴⁰ A dangerous shortcoming of the Blue Theory of Victory is negligence of its counter party’s thought and philosophy. The legacy of the Chinese leadership with nuclear threats date back to the Korean War and the Taiwan Straits Crisis. These experiences have profoundly impacted Chinese nuclear thinking. The Chinese Communist Party Chairman, Mao Zedong, responding to the Hiroshima–Nagasaki bombings, had stated that nuclear weapons are means of mass slaughter; however, more importantly, they were

³⁸ Brad Roberts, “On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue,” 2020, <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR-LivermorePaper7.pdf>.

³⁹ Joby Warrick, “China Is Building More than 100 New Missile Silos in Its Western Desert, Analysts Say,” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-nuclear-missile-silos/2021/06/30/ofa8debc-d9c2-11eb-bb9e-70fda8c37057_story.html.

⁴⁰ Kulacki, “The Nuclear Deterrence Strategy of the US–Japan Alliance is Failing but Can Be Fixed.”

“paper tigers.”⁴¹ The United States uses them more to strike fear and conduct psychological warfare than physical harm, the Chinese believed. This is not to imply the Chinese never worry about U.S. nuclear retaliation. During the Korean War, Beijing was deeply concerned about such a possibility, noting that it had a psychological effect on its forces deployed on the conflict-ridden border.⁴² Extensive deliberation on the matter led to the conclusion that the Americans could not undertake such a retaliation due to a variety of factors, including international condemnation. U.S. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower were documented as having considered using the nuclear option in the Korean War and Taiwan Strait Crisis.⁴³ Still, ultimately it did not wholly deter Chinese participation in the war.

NFU is an essential factor for the United States and China in East Asia. Reflecting upon the U.S.–Soviet nuclear competition during the Cold War, a compelling reason for arms reduction and détente was the element of mutual vulnerability. The element of vulnerability corrected the arms race trajectory by indicating that a vertical rise in the numbers of weapons between the two powers would not guarantee absolute protection against a second-strike possibility in any given scenario. No matter the order in which strikes were conducted, the inevitable vulnerability allowed the thawing of nuclear relations between the Americans and the Soviets. The ballistic missile arms

⁴¹ Ralph L. Powell, “Great Powers and Atomic Bombs Are ‘Paper Tigers,’” *The China Quarterly*, no. 23 (February 16, 1965): 55–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/651723>.

⁴² Kulacki, “The Nuclear Deterrence Strategy of the US–Japan Alliance Is Failing but Can Be Fixed.”

⁴³ Charlie Savage, “Risk of Nuclear War Over Taiwan in 1958 Said to Be Greater Than Publicly Known,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/22/us/politics/nuclear-war-risk-1958-us-china.html>.



control dialogue that has continued to date is rooted here. This element of mutual vulnerability is vital to reassure all parties of no gains to be made by not adopting a NFU (if not in policy, at least in principle).

Acknowledging this element would go a long way in much-needed arms control and de-escalation, Japan believes that such a position could come at the detriment of its national interest, especially given the greyzone environment if proper guarantees are not placed. A critical examination of the issue indicates that no matter the scale of U.S.-Japan nuclear deterrence, the Chinese have continued to undertake small-scale greyzone incidents to which a nuclear response is by no means an option. The dilemma around the Chinese nuclear first strikes in East Asia also seems improbable given that it will profoundly impact its national interests around its littorals as well. In such a scenario, the gains being in favor of China are highly implausible, and the existence of a very unique, extraordinary scenario will be necessary for Beijing to break its NFU. On the other hand, Japan's concerns around the DPRK's nuclear program is that of a matter of time and technological progress. In the hypothetical scenario that the DPRK successfully achieves intercontinental ballistic capability to carry nuclear payloads to the U.S. mainland and target cities such as Los Angeles, the risk threshold for the United States to be involved in the nuclear equation in the region will become exaggerated. In such a scenario, the dependence of the United States on an effective nuclear deterrent, no matter its policy, will be questionable. Therefore, strategically it remains highly unclear what an active U.S. nuclear deterrent without a NFU policy positively achieves in the region's interest and stability. A caveat here is that the DPRK has repeatedly confirmed it does not trust any negative security assurances (NSA) from the U.S. side regarding its nuclear posture (essentially, the United States promised to place a NFU policy in the

U.S.-DPRK bilateral). Negative security assurances occur when a state willingly assures an adversarial state of adopting a posture that may be strategically detrimental, but it is in the diplomatic interest of building an environment of mutual trust. During the six-party talks during the incumbency of President George W. Bush, the United States offered such an NSA to the DPRK, which was turned down.⁴⁴ Even during Obama's tenure, the DPRK reiterated its position around not accepting the premise of any U.S. promised NFU.⁴⁵

Conclusion

In the East Asian geopolitical configuration, Japan is placed at a delicate crossroads of facing immediate, direct, material, conventional, and unconventional threats from multiple parties—but also as a diplomatic facilitator. The actual value and gains of Japan's 'remilitarization' lie in the diplomatic advantages (or disadvantages) it affords itself vis-à-vis China, the DPRK, and its other allies like the United States, India, Australia, and Britain. Japanese concerns about wavering U.S. commitment and will to resolutely protect and serve as a security guarantor are not unfounded. Furthermore, Japan will need to position itself astutely within the U.S.-China competition that may develop further over Taiwan or elsewhere. As stated earlier, Japan's stake within that competition is two-fold: as a direct regional stakeholder, and as a military facilitator for the United States, for whom it hosts primary military assets in the region.

⁴⁴ Victor D Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (Washington, D.C.: Ecco, 2013).

⁴⁵ Michael O'Hanlon, "The Nuclear No First Use Dilemma and North Korea," *Brookings*, August 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/08/24/the-nuclear-no-first-use-dilemma-and-north-korea/>.



Finally, the question must be posed whether Japan should negotiate to pull nuclear weapons out of the equation? Advocating for a scenario free of nuclear competition, at least between the United States and China, is not unachievable. Japan is in a prime place to sharpen the call for slowing the emerging arms race, by keeping its tragic history in mind, and by acting upon the gains accruing from its regional diplomacy that capitalizes on its status as an economic powerhouse and its soft-power outreaches which locate it in a unique position to undertake efforts to place limits on arms escalation in the region. It is the mutual interest of all states to stymie the flow of arms in East Asia which inadvertently fuels the security dilemma among the regional players. Japan's diplomacy can prove to be fruitful in these endeavors. This question, however, will only be relevant if Japan configures exactly how a U.S. first-use policy benefits its middle to long term security interests vis-à-vis China. In contrast, Japan must also consider the benefits of a NFU between the United States and China to contain any possible fallout or spike in hostilities. In the present author's opinion, the latter is evidently more representative of security dilemma sensibility and plays to the strengths of Japan's statist position in the international order.

On a concluding note, Japan's 2022 Defence Review offers insights into its statist psychology. The review introduces the U.S. and Chinese position in the global order, respectively. But the intended manner in which the document characterizes these two countries is fascinating. In the case of the United States, the paper straightaway aims at situating the U.S. politico-military posture without giving any consideration to other variables or domains in U.S. domestic realities or foreign relations. It does not mention or address U.S. domestic instability depiction, rise in racism, and human rights violations. On

the other hand, while introducing China, the document describes the human rights situation, socio-economic realities, authoritarianism, etc., before addressing China's military posture. This author believes that such skewed narratives provide a graphic visualization of how states represent geopolitical equations in their interest, and egocentrically perceive reality to justify their choices. This does not suggest that the author condones the gross violations prevalent in China, but rather to reflect on the framing of the geopolitical equation from Japan's point of view, and on the selective importance that Japan gives to certain factors, realities, and drivers that are desirable to substantiate Japan's own position. And to ignore similar factors, realities, and drivers in national documents, if they dilute justification of one's stance, is to confirm bias and selective reasoning on a national level.

Note on the Author

Ryan Mitra is currently pursuing a Masters in International Affairs at The Graduate Institute Geneva. While specializing in global security, his areas of interest are Asian geopolitics, Maritime Affairs, Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, and Migration. He has previously interned with the United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs while also actively writing on matters pertaining to Indo-Pacific maritime security and strategy, refugee and humanitarian affairs, and post-colonial statehood history and theory. Some of his recent publications are "India's Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2020 and beyond," in the *Liberal Studies Journal* (February 2, 2022); "The Fight Against the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Context of Human Rights, International Cooperation, and Solidarity," published by the UN OHCHR (January 4, 2022); and



“Sardar Udham Singh, the Oscars, and Colonial Amnesia,” published in *The Diplomat* (November 8, 2021).