

Defending Japan: National Security Agenda 2022



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The year 2022 will be a decisive year as defence policy elites in Tokyo are shoring up deterrence with review of Japan's National Security Strategy (NSS), in addition to key defence documents including the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and Medium Term Defense Program (MTDP). From rebooting the Diet debate on constitutional reforms to deepening the conversation on enemy-base strike capability to doubling defence budget—how Japan rewires its national security doctrine is the space to watch for in the coming months.

Defence ministry as well as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) Research Commission on Security and National Defence Division panel, led by former defence minister Itsunori Onodera are debating realistic options in pursuing Japan's national security goals as the strategic environment has changed drastically since the first NSS was conceived in 2013. The current NSS predates intense US–China strategic competition and the Covid-19 pandemic. As Beijing advances naval and air power, further sophisticates its missile capability and nuclear force, and Pyongyang demonstrates no tangible progress on denuclearisation, Tokyo has no room for strategic ambivalence and miscalculations. The bold choice of an armoured samurai warrior on the cover page of Japan's 2021 Defence White Paper demonstrates a refreshing confidence amongst the next generation defence planners. The shift in the optics—from the Fuji and plum flowers to an armoured samurai—carries the categorical message of Japan's *changing nature as a security actor and its resolve to push the envelope of positive pacifism in determining the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific*.

In the year ahead, Japan's political class, defence planners as well as the strategic community will have to navigate difficult choices amid post-Covid economic risks, demographic dilemma, constitutional limitations and alliance politics while addressing key security challenges on the high-table. These include reviewing the effectiveness of the US–Japan spear and shield strategy, alliance management, especially weaving an effective joint operational plan for a Taiwan contingency, and addressing the strike gap in US–Japan alliance and China, and providing more teeth to the Coast Guard Act amid intensifying Chinese grey zone tactics. The policy options regarding missile defence and the discussion on enemy-base strike capabilities, and what type of strike capabilities to pursue, will be at the centre stage. The strategic discussion on whether to accept US intermediate range missiles on Japanese territory, and weighing the pros and cons of having nuclear-powered submarines, a conversation that gained traction following AUKUS, are also preoccupying the mind space of

defence planners. Additionally, framing robust economic security legislations to advance Japan's autonomy and indispensability is also amongst the top agendas.

The policy deliberations on ramping up the defence budget to 2 per cent of the GDP vis-à-vis Japan's unsustainable public debt challenge will further evolve. Ruling LDP's Research Commission on National Security has previously argued the case elevating the budget to around 2 per cent of GDP, a target embraced by NATO. The recent LDP election manifesto also referred to the NATO defence spending goals. Defence Minister Kishi Nobuo has argued in favour of stepping up defence budget with the aim of bolstering "capabilities at a radically different pace" at a time when China's defence budget, despite issues of transparency, remains more than four times higher. As Japan sits on the front line, the self-imposed policy of 1 per cent cap on defence spending which can be traced back to early 1970s is outdated. In late December 2021, the Cabinet approved a defence budget of US\$ 47 billion for fiscal 2022, continuing the northward trends in the last decade. While regional powers often critically analyse the discussion on increasing defence budget through the lens of Japan's return to militarism, the debate itself is an old one. The US has long urged Japan for equitable burden sharing. For instance, in the late 1980s, former defence secretary Frank Carlucci in his report to the Congress advocated that Japan must significantly bolster its self-defence capability. There was resolution calling on Japan to spend around 3 per cent of its Gross National Product (GNP) annually on defence.

As President Xi Jinping pursues a third term as general secretary of the party, Taiwan remains his core project and reunification is central to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". The military balance is shifting in the western Pacific and it is important to avoid miscalculations. The debate between strategic ambiguity versus strategic clarity vis-à-vis Taiwan has gained momentum in the defence policy conversation not just in Washington, but also in Tokyo. Is it time to impart strategic clarity on Taiwan without provoking conflict from China on the one hand and not emboldening Taiwan to formally declare independence on the other? While some argue that strategic ambiguity approach has lost steam, there is a school of thought which suggests that keeping the position on cross-strait contingency ambiguous serves Japan better to avoid entanglement.

The pivotal issue of stabilising the situation surrounding Taiwan, which is intrinsically linked to Japan's security, is not just framed in the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) and the 2021 Defence White Paper, leading political figures including Abe Shinzo, Kishi Nobuo, Nakayama Yasuhide, Aso Taro and Takaichi Sanae are also shaping the conversation that a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency given its proximity to Okinawa. Furthermore, the argument about protecting Taiwan as a fellow democracy has also gained traction. Meanwhile, the ruling LDP has intensified its discussion on formulating a Japanese version of the Taiwan Relations Act. It has further consolidated its relationship with Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), especially on the economic security vertical. Former Prime Minister Abe is positioned centre stage in the Taiwan discussion. In his recent call "Rise up Taiwan" at the US-Japan-Taiwan Trilateral Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue, he advocated deeper defence technology cooperation across domains.

Although a conventional war on Taiwan is an unrealistic option and PLA's power projection is essentially a pressure tactic, there is a strong view in Japan that invasion of the Senkaku Islands situated in the South China Sea and controlled by Taipei, is a possibility. Some consider it as President Xi Jinping's "easy target" to test waters on American response. Thus, US–Japan alliance must work towards defence of Taiwan by formulating joint operational plans beyond the Senkaku Islands, focussing on a possible Taiwan contingency, bolster missile defence capabilities and deploy medium-range missiles on the first island chain, deepen joint training and exercises, and strengthen intelligence sharing via the US. The revised NSS, NDPG, the US–Japan Defence Guidelines, and advanced interoperability will be indicative of the progress. Moreover, Tokyo may also consider enabling a legal framework on similar lines with Washington for providing arms to Taipei despite their commitment to the one-China principle. While a sense of crisis concerning Taiwan is dominating the mind space of defence elites amid internationalisation of the Taiwan issue, the key question is, will Japan outline a legal framework to add more depth to its Taiwan policy?

Meanwhile, the renewed debate on enemy-base strike capability after the cancellation of Aegis Ashore reflects that there is support for balancing offence and defence capabilities. Following the conversation in Japan indicate that while some argue for "limited" strike capability aimed at preserving the regional military balance, others articulate that striking the enemy with the objective of securing Japan is a defensive strategy—'offensive defence' or 'active defence'. In July 2020, LDP advocated that Japan should have "the ability to head off missiles in enemy territory". Meanwhile former defence and foreign minister Kono Taro advocates that the discussions should be anchored on deterrence, focussing on the ability to strike enemy-bases to take out launch sites, conduct ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) operations, building air superiority, and gauging the effectiveness of strikes. It is important to note that Tokyo already decided on hypersonic cruise missiles and hypervelocity guiding projectiles.

The discourse on strike capability is hardly new and the roots can be traced to Prime Minister Hatoyama's administration in 1956, laying the foundation of strike debate. But garnering wider public support on the subject within the frame of the pacifist constitution proved challenging. This is reflective of the larger trend where defence and security policy debates often slide into constitutional and legal question, complicating Japan's options. While Tokyo is expected to craft a defensive narrative on strike capability, how the region reacts will considerably determine the future course of East Asian security.

In the coming months, the region will keenly observe how Tokyo's exclusively defence oriented post-war security posture evolves. In rejecting a Sino-centric regional order, the priority will be to reorient Tokyo's defence posture in close coordination with Washington, and further synergising strategies for seamless operational coordination given the fast-changing dynamics of warfare and new domains of power projection such as space, cyber and electromagnetic spectrum. NSS 2013 accorded priority to South Korea but Japan–South Korea relations suffered considerably in recent years drawing from the baggage of history.

However, policy elites must ensure that bilateral fault lines should not adversely impact the strategic goals of the US–Japan–South Korea coordination in handling the threats coming from Pyongyang. The revised NSS will position US–Japan alliance at the core, and further align Tokyo’s security interests with the Quad powers—Australia and India, members of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and strategic partners in Europe, including France, the UK and Germany in pursuit of keeping the strategic space of Indo-Pacific “free” and “open”. Japan as an ardent advocate of rules-based order will step up and is expected to proactively mobilise resources to deliver global public goods in the post-Covid era. Japan is manifesting refreshing confidence drawing from its resolve to push the envelope of positive pacifism in determining the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

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