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**Japan's New National Security Strategy:
Background and Challenges**

Hideshi Tokuchi

European University Institute
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Keywords

Europe in the World

1. Introduction

On 16 December 2022 the government of Japan released its new National Security Strategy (NSS),¹ National Defence Strategy (NDS)² and Defence Build-up Programme (DBP).³ In Japan these are seen as one set of documents and they are usually called the 'three national security documents.' The NSS is a revised version of the 2013 strategy document, the NDS is a revised version of the national defence policy established in 2018 called the National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG) and the DBP is the medium-term defence programme to achieve the aims established in the NDS. The government had been working on these three documents since the start of the current Kishida Cabinet in October 2021.

The documents contain some bold unprecedented decisions, including a number of new capabilities and a sharp increase in the defence budget. In the new NSS the government declares "While maintaining the fundamental principles of Japanese national security, ... the strategic guidance and policies in the strategy will dramatically transform Japan's national security policy since the end of WWII in terms of its execution." It is unusual for the government to admit a dramatic transformation when it changes its national security and defence policy. Previously, it tended to emphasise the continuity in the policy in order to minimise the impression of a drastic shift and avoid a political backlash, but now the Japanese public is more security-minded than before due to tension in the region, particularly between China and Taiwan and on the Korean Peninsula, and also because of the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on East Asia.

However, the shift in the national security policy has caused a heated debate in Japan, mainly over the startling increase in the defence budget and the new military capabilities such as 'counter-strike capabilities,' which are defined as "capabilities, which, in the case of missile attacks by an opponent, enable Japan to mount effective counter-strikes against the opponent to prevent further attacks." While funding and such offensive military capabilities deserve attention, Japan's efforts to strengthen its national security are not limited to them. This paper discusses the background to the revision of the NSS and some of its characteristics.

2. The regional security environment around Japan and threat perceptions in Japan

The government of Japan started to review its 2013 NSS before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but already the regional security environment had become increasingly tense. The Russian invasion of Ukraine fuelled this tension and the Japanese became far more security-minded than before

Geographically, Japan is located in a unique security environment. It is surrounded by three authoritarian military powers: Russia, China and North Korea. North Korea is not expected to abandon its nuclear capability. It is obvious that it does not abide by the commitment for denuclearization any longer. It voted against UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is even reported to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine by delivering arms supplies to the Russian Wagner Group.⁴ Despite sanctions and UN resolutions, it keeps launching ballistic missiles, including ICBMs. China is colluding with Russia. China and Russia threaten Japan by jointly manoeuvring in its vicinity. China's military build-up is very rapid. The China Coast Guard (CCG) is also strengthening its capabilities. CCG is not a genuine law-enforcement organisation. It has military missions, too. Its ships are becoming bigger and more lethal. They intimidate the Southeast

1 Cabinet decision (Provisional Translation), "National Security Strategy," December 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzen-hoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

2 Cabinet decision (Provisional Translation, 28 December 2022), "National Defence Strategy," 22 December 2022, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf.

3 Cabinet decision (Provisional Translation, 17 January 2023), "Defence Build-up Programme," 16 December 2022, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program_en.pdf.

4 Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Washington says North Korea is delivering arms to the Wagner Group for Russia's use in Ukraine," *New York Times*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/22/world/europe/north-korea-wagner-group-russia-ukraine.html>.

Asians in the South China Sea and regularly intrude into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. The three countries are trying to alter the status quo by force and coercion and are damaging the rules-based liberal international order.

In addition, because of the geographical proximity of Taiwan to Japan and also because of strong bilateral ties between them, Japanese concerns about the possibility of China invading Taiwan are growing. In a Japanese opinion poll conducted a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 77% of the respondents were concerned that the invasion might affect the situation involving Taiwan.⁵ In another poll conducted at almost the same time, 79% of the Japanese believed that Japan's own national security was threatened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁶ And according to a poll conducted by the Japanese Foreign Ministry, 88% of the Japanese thought that East Asian security had become more threatened.⁷ This is the backdrop against which the new strategy documents were shaped.

The threat perceptions indicated in the new NSS are very different to those in its predecessor. Shifts in the balance of power were recognised in both the 2013 and 2022 NSSs, but the 2013 NSS perceived North Korea as a greater threat than China. The order was reversed in the 2022 NSS. The 2013 edition did not even have a Russia section in its threat perception pages.

The shift in the perception of China is clear. In 2013 China was just "an issue of concern" but in 2022 it was regarded as "unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge." The shift in the perception of Russia is also clear. Russia was regarded as a security partner in 2013, but now Russia is a strong security concern as it has shaken the very foundations of the international order by invading Ukraine. There is also a noticeable shift in the perception of the threat of North Korea. The new NSS states that "North Korea's military activities pose an even more grave and imminent threat to Japan's national security than ever." This shift was caused in particular by North Korea's frequent missile launches in 2022 and the improvement in its missile capabilities. It is no longer just a regional threat but now it is a global threat as it is almost ICBM-capable.

Japan is also threatened by global challenges such as climate change and pandemics. International cooperation is indispensable to tackle these non-traditional challenges, but due to a lack of strong leadership in global governance structure and also due to the intensified rivalry among the great powers, international cooperation is becoming difficult. Success in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia has shown the importance of unity among the international community, but it is hard to extend the positive effect of this effort to other fields and areas today.

The new NSS attaches importance to climate change: "Climate change is a security issue that affects the very existence of humankind. Extreme weather events due to climate change significantly impact Japan's national security in various ways, including more frequent and severe natural disasters [and] increased responses to disasters." Based on this recognition, it considers "climate change measures" to be one of the strategic approaches to achieve Japan's national security objectives. Japan is prone to natural disasters, which is why climate change issues are emphasised in the new NSS.

There is debate over whether climate change should be dealt with as a matter of security, but in fact it affects both international security and Japan's national security. At least, responding and adapting to climate change is to be dealt with as an important security issue.⁸ However, it is not easy to muster efforts by major powers to address climate change. Competition will grow in acquiring and processing minerals and resources used in key renewable energy technologies. China is in a strong

5 Nikkei, "Public opinion poll conducted on 26-27 March 2022," 28 March 2022.

6 TV Asahi, "Public opinion poll conducted on 19-20 March 2022," <https://www.tv-asahi.co.jp/hst/poll/202203/>.

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Public opinion poll conducted on 17-22 March," <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100333982.pdf>.

8 Hideshi Tokuchi, "The Japan-U.S. Alliance Cooperation on Addressing Climate Security," Ocean Policy Research Institute, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Climate Security, Tokai Education Research Institute, 2022, pp. 155-166.

position to compete. It currently controls more than half the global processing capacity for many of these minerals, including polysilicon for solar panels and cobalt, lithium, manganese and graphite for electric vehicle batteries. It is able to process these minerals at reduced cost.⁹ They will easily be weaponised.

As the new NSS states, we are in an era in which confrontation and cooperation are intricately intertwined in international relations. International cooperation is a must, but it is easier said than done. It is in these circumstances that Japan's security strategy was shaped.

3. The characteristics of the new NSS

A. What is a strategy?

A strategy consists of the following three elements. First, you assess where you are; second, you decide the destination where you should be headed; and third, you plan how to get there. The destination set in the NSS remains almost the same as before: national sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, safety of nationals, prosperity, a free and open international order, and so on. These generic national interests remain worth pursuing in any international environment. However, we are in a different world today. Japan has more means than before, for example, reinterpreting its constitution regarding the use of force to admit the right to collective self-defence. By honing its tools and combining them in a better way, Japan may cultivate a new way to the same destination. Japan's path to the goal is very different to that in the past. This is the main point in the revision of the 2013 NSS.

B. Evolution rather than revolution

There are a number of remarkable changes in the new NSS, but they are not necessarily revolutionary changes. They represent policy evolution.

Japan's defence budget is increasing dramatically, but it would be wrong to say that the famous ceiling of 1% of GDP for defence spending was abolished by the 2022 NSS. It had been abolished in 1987 because an economic index should not be a yardstick for defence requirements.

The new NSS takes a whole-government approach, but this is not new. The 2013 NSS also took a whole-government approach to achieving national security objectives. Even the counter-strike capability is not necessarily new because it is basically a new application of previous capabilities.

Japan's national security policy after the end of the Cold War had three pillars: its own defence efforts; Japan-US alliance cooperation; and international security cooperation. These three pillars remain at the core of Japanese national security and defence policy. Each pillar has just become bigger and more robust.

The larger defence budget makes the first pillar more robust. As military pressure on Japan has been increasing in recent years, Japan has to urgently strengthen its military capability. This is why military effort is prioritised in the new NSS. However, threats to Japan are not only military but are very complex today. For example, in the face of a variety of economic threats, efforts to promote supply chain resilience, to counter weaponisation of natural resources, energy sources and food, to protect critical infrastructure from foreign interference and to protect sensitive technologies and data must be accelerated. These areas are newly categorised as economic security policies in the new NSS, but they are not completely new.

⁹ National Intelligence Council, National Intelligence Estimate - *Climate Change and International Responses Increasing Challenges to US National Security Through 2040*, October 21, 2021, pp. 5-6.

C. A whole-government approach

In order to address such diverse threats, the new NSS specifies five capabilities, i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological and intelligence capabilities, as the main elements in “comprehensive national power” and it commits to harnessing this power in an integral way.

This whole-government approach is consonant with the approach of the US national security strategy, i.e. integrated deterrence. This is the most important part of the national security strategy. Merely focusing on the military aspect of security is not well-balanced. A much broader perspective is indispensable.

The whole-government approach in the 2013 NSS was not extensive enough. The concrete strategic approaches it took were centred on diplomatic and defence policies and were not wide enough to encompass all the relevant policy issues and relevant ministries and organisations. The new NSS has broadened the scope of its strategic approach, making it more inclusive.

D. The defence budget

Although the new NSS takes a whole-government approach, it prioritises military effort. The 2013 NSS did not say anything specific about the defence budget. The amount of this budget for five fiscal years was determined in the Medium-Term Defence Programme in 2013 and again in 2018, but now, in order to show its strong resolve to enhance its defence capability, Japan has decided to drastically increase the amount of the defence budget. The basic principle underlying the defence budget is set out in the NSS: “In FY 2027, ... Japan will take the necessary measures to make the level of its budget, for both fundamental reinforcement of defence capabilities and complementary initiatives, reach 2% of current GDP, by building on the content of necessary defence capabilities, and by taking into account indexes of international comparison, with a view to coordination with its ally, like-minded countries and others.”

Four notes should be added to this. First, the total amount of the defence budget to reinforce defence capabilities in the next five years, i.e. from FY 2023 to FY 2027, is determined by the DBP, according to which the amount is about 43 trillion yen, which is around 330 billion US dollars. In the FY 2023 budget, the defence budget increased by 27.4% whereas the social security budget only increased by 1.7%, the education and science promotion budget increased by 0.5% and the economic cooperation budget only increased by 0.2%.¹⁰ The priority of defence is obvious.

Second, Japan’s annual defence budget was almost always less than 1% of GDP in past decades, but it was only until fiscal 1986 that a cabinet decision to cap annual defence expenditure below 1% of GDP existed. It does not make sense to determine the level of defence expenditure using an economic index, because a country’s GDP has nothing to do with the level of military threat to the country. This is why the ceiling was abolished. There was no such thing as a de facto ceiling of 1% of GDP.

Third, however, the proportion of GDP makes some sense as an index for international burden sharing. At the Wales summit in 2014 in response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and the turmoil in the Middle East, NATO leaders agreed to continue to commit to the guideline of 2% of GDP on defence spending.¹¹ With the NATO members’ commitment in mind, the phrase “taking into account indexes of international comparison” was inserted in the above-quoted language of the NSS.

¹⁰ Ministry of Finance, “Reiwa 5-nendo yosan-no point [Points of FY 2023 budget],” p. 5, https://www.mof.go.jp/policy/budget/budger_workflow/budget/fy2023/seifuan2023/01.pdf.

¹¹ NATO, “Funding NATO,” 12 January 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm.

Finally, the above-quoted paragraph in the NSS is not about the defence budget in a narrow sense. It includes not only the budget for the Ministry of Defence but also some other budgets similar to the NATO definition of 'defence budget.' This is why the phrase "complementary initiatives" is included next to "the fundamental reinforcement of defence capabilities." This could be regarded as another sign of a whole-government approach to the national security-related budget.

The real substance is more important than the percentage of GDP. In the FY 2023 defence budget, expenditure on maintenance and repairs is 80% more than in FY 2022. The munitions budget is 3.3 times as much as in FY 2022, as is the facilities budget. Resilience and sustainability are prioritised in order to make the defence forces more operational. R&D expenditure in FY 2023 is 3.1 times as much as in FY 2022. This is focused on stand-off and missile defence capability.¹² This is a remarkable investment for the future.

E. Counter-strike capability

One of the highlights in the new NSS is the introduction of counter-strike capability. This new capability is necessary because of drastic advances in missile-related technologies in countries in the vicinity of Japan in recent years. As is explained in the new NSS, if Japan continues to rely solely on ballistic missile defences, it will be increasingly difficult to fully address missile threats. This is why Japan needs offensive capabilities to supplement its missile-defence shield.

Whether the exclusively defence-oriented policy, which Japan has maintained for decades, permits it to acquire such offensive capabilities has long been debated in Japanese politics. The Japanese government has repeatedly said that this is a matter of interpretation of the Constitution. If there is no other means to defend against guided missile attacks, it is legally within the purview of self-defence and permissible to hit the bases that guided missiles are fired from. The new NSS explains that the decision to acquire counter-strike capabilities does not go against the government's long-held exclusively defence-oriented policy.

Most of the Japanese public support this decision. According to an opinion poll conducted soon after the release of the new NSS, 60% of the respondents were in favour of the decision and 31% were against.¹³ North Korea's frequent missile launches, in particular last year, are considered to have influenced Japanese attitudes.

The counter-strike capability does not mean deterrent by punishment or denial of US extended deterrence. The basic principle of division of labour between Japan and the US in cooperation in the alliance continues to be valid and Japan will not drift from its alliance with the US. Instead, it is an important opportunity to strengthen the alliance, as the leaders of both countries have instructed their ministers to reinforce cooperation on the development and effective employment of Japan's counter-strike capability.¹⁴

¹² Ministry of Defence, "Defence Programme and Budget of Japan," December 2022, pp. 7-8, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/yosan/yosan_gaiyo/2023/yosan_20221223.pdf.

¹³ Nikkei, "Opinion poll conducted on 23-25 December," December 26, 2022.

¹⁴ "Joint Statement of the United States and Japan," 13 January 2023.

4. Challenges for the future

Implementation of the three national security documents has started. Looking toward the future, there are a number of challenges in conducting the policy. First, Japan has to make its alliance relationship with the US more robust. One of the lessons of the Ukraine war is that it is impossible for any country to achieve its national security all by itself. The importance of the Japan-US alliance for Japan's national security and regional stability cannot be overstated.

As an integral part of cooperation in the alliance, Japan hosts more than 50,000 US troops on its soil. The US aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan and its battle group are homeported in Japan. Operations of the US forces stationed in Japan are covering not only Japan but also a wide area in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan has been providing one of the most dependable stationing environments for US forces in the world, not only financially but also by means of its industrial capability.

As Japan expands its military role and enhances its capabilities, a new wider framework of cooperation will have to be established with the US.

Second, in order to achieve a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), international security cooperation with like-minded countries, such as Australia, India, the ASEAN countries, South Korea and NATO members, is more important than ever.

The line between alliance cooperation and other partnerships is becoming blurred. This is because the US-centred hub and spokes system of alliances in the Asia-Pacific region is transforming into a web-like multilateral network, and also because a number of new mini-lateral frameworks such as AUKUS and the Quad are emerging and being intertwined with the alliance network.

Both the effort to strengthen the alliance and the effort to strengthen ties with like-minded countries are relevant in Indo-Pacific regional security. Regarding the alliance, the new NSS states "In particular, for the US commitment to the region to be maintained and strengthened, deepened cooperation between Japan and the US at a concrete level in the Indo-Pacific region is of vital importance." Regarding like-minded countries, it states, "As a nation in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan will further promote efforts to realise a FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) by deepening cooperation with like-minded countries with the Japan-US alliance as a cornerstone and through efforts such as the Japan-US-Australia-India (Quad) partnership. To this end, Japan will strive to make the vision of a FOIP more universal around the world..." The NDS states "In order to counter unilateral changes to the status quo by force ... and to ensure Japan's security, it is extremely important to reinforce collaboration with not only our ally but also as many countries as possible. From this perspective, Japan will promote efforts to contribute to realising the vision of a FOIP."

It is increasingly important for Japan to enhance its partnerships with countries which share this vision and to work together to address both traditional and non-traditional challenges in order to strengthen the rules-based liberal international order in the Indo-Pacific. For this purpose, the Government of Japan should define its FOIP vision more clearly in security terms. In this context, Prime Minister Kishida's policy speech in India in March 2023 entitled 'The Future of the Indo-Pacific – Japan's New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific' is important as it defined the FOIP vision better. It is to "enhance the connectivity of the Indo-Pacific region, help the region grow into a place that values freedom and the rule of law, and is free from force and coercion, and make it prosperous."¹⁵ The new plan sets out four pillars of cooperation: principles for peace and rules for prosperity; addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way; multi-layered connectivity; and extending efforts for security and safe use of the sea to the air.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kishida Fumio, "The Future of the Indo-Pacific – Japan's New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific" – "Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner," March 20, 2023, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-10.

The priority in coordination is clearly coordination with the US, Australia, the Republic of Korea, Canada, Europe and India.¹⁷ There are three important regions where enhanced connectivity is particularly important: Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands.¹⁸ Unlike the briefing materials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the past several years, “efforts for security,” particularly efforts for maritime security include military cooperation.¹⁹ Maritime security in the South China Sea will be a focal point as the South China Sea is the artery of the global economy and it connects the largest and the third largest oceans in the world.

This article concludes by pointing out that there is some uncertainty about implementing the three national security documents. The documents contain a number of bold decisions. The Japanese public seem to have a positive view of the documents so far, but it will take a considerable amount of time and resources to implement them. Consistent, continual and unrelenting efforts are necessary.

The tax increase will be unpopular. Deployment of the new capabilities may cause strong opposition among local communities. It is not certain if other relevant ministries and organisations such as the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MLIT) will continue to cooperate to help Japanese and American forces be deployed and operate smoothly and effectively.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised Japanese public concern about Japan's national security, but it is an open question whether the public awareness of the Japanese and their willingness to do more is sustainable for long. It will be challenging for the Japanese government to maintain the current momentum by winning more robust public support.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

Authors

Hideshi Tokuchi

Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS)

h.tokuchi.2023@gmail.com