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& U.S.-JAPAN FOUNDATION



U.S.-Japan Alliance: Strengthening Defense and Security in the Indo-Pacific



PROJECT SUMMARY
REPORT 2025

Project Summary

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Concept Note

The U.S.-Japan alliance assumes significant importance owing to China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Moreover, China-Russia collaboration and North Korea's advancing missile program alarm the security of the Indo-Pacific Region. The growing alliance between the United States and Japan, along with the increasing network of security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, serves to address a wide range of security challenges. These challenges include maritime security, nuclear proliferation, natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and territorial disputes. China is frequently identified as the primary instigator in these disputes, employing grey zone tactics.

This project aims to comprehensively analyze the multi-faceted aspects of strengthening defense and security cooperation between the United States and Japan. It also intends to cultivate a comprehensive understanding through observational assessment and analytical research, thereby advocating a perspective that safeguards sovereignty and territorial integrity of free states while advancing a rule-based international order in the Indo-Pacific.

The project explores three research areas as follows:

First research area comprehensively reviews the evolution of the U.S.-Japan alliance to the “core” of the Indo-Pacific network of security diplomacy with attention to the level of strategic coordination.

Second research area at a more tactical level focuses on joint responses by the United States and Japan (or lack thereof) to the grey zone tactics of China.

Third research area is on defense planning and focuses on-The Future of U.S.-Japan Alliance
Pivots on Defense Planning.

Evolution of the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Growing Strategic Coordination and Hurdles Ahead

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Overview

The U.S.-Japan Alliance has endured over seventy years of transformation in the international security environment. The alliance has evolved to cope with the changes that are internal to the domestic and bilateral contexts of the two countries, as well as the fundamental shift from the bipolar confrontation of the Cold War period against the Soviet Union to an uncertain future of the post-Cold War period. The current external challenges to the alliance include the rise of China, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, cybercrimes, and grey-zone challenges, often in their hybrid manifestation. The necessary upgrading of the alliance to meet these challenges is being attempted in a new political environment where Japan's stable conservative leadership has dissipated, and an offshore balancing strategy tempts the Trump administration in the United States.

Threats in the Region

China foremostly poses a challenge to the U.S.-Japan Alliance in multiple ways. Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) modernization and expansion has lent credibility to China's threats to use force in maritime territorial disputes in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea. China's steady enhancement of its land-based intermediate-range missile force has raised the vulnerability of the U.S. bases throughout the Western Pacific,¹ where forward deployment of the U.S. forces not only yielded tactical advantages but also strategic assurance about the U.S. commitment to defend Japan.² The growing Chinese capability is most felt by Taiwan, raising serious discussions about possible implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance.³ North Korea has focused on building its nuclear and missile arsenals, also putting U.S. forward-deployed forces under increasing threats. Russia is currently preoccupied with the war against Ukraine, yet its alignment with China and North Korea through the show of joint military actions⁴ is alarming to the U.S.-Japan alliance. China's grey-zone challenges through its coast guard's provocations in the East and South China Seas threaten both territorial integrity of the concerned states including Japan, as well as the rule of law in the maritime domain, including the freedom of navigation.⁵ Moreover, association between terror groups and anti-U.S. states like Iran and their growing ties with China and Russia⁶ threatens Japan's energy supplies and trade

¹ Matthew Cox, Pentagon Reviewing Base Defense as Experts Warn of Pacific Threats. Air and Space Forces Magazine, June 15, 2025. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/pentagon-reviewing-base-defense-as-experts-warn-of-pacific-threats/>

² Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, et al. U.S. Overseas Military Posture Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits. Research Summary, Rand, Apr 29, 2013. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9708.html

³ Alliance Options for Responding to a Taiwan Crisis. Sasakawa Peace Foundation, February 10, 2022. <https://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Event-Taiwan-Roundtable.pdf>

⁴ Sung Min Cho. The China–Russia–North Korea Nexus: Implications for Regional Security and the War in Ukraine, Roundtable Summary Report. Asia Society, August 13, 2025. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/china-russia-north-korea-nexus-implications-regional-security-and-war-ukraine>

⁵ Outlook of the Current Situation in the East China Sea and South China Sea Areas. Research Institute for Peace and Security. February 28, 2025. <https://www.rips.or.jp/en/newsletter/monthlycolumn/outlook-of-the-current-situation-in-the-east-china-sea-and-south-china-sea-areas/>

⁶ Christopher S. Chivvis and Jack Keating. Cooperation Between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and

through the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea, as well as U.S. diplomacy and economic interests in the broad Middle East.

Japan has come out of its Cold War dependence on the United States and passed several legislations to enable overseas dispatch of the Self Defense Forces and their joint operations with the United States and others. The steady transformation of the alliance towards more mutuality since the passage of the Peacekeeping Operations Law in 1992⁷ has seen Japanese SDFs acting in places like Cambodia, East Timor, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, Iraq, and South Sudan. While the United States has mostly “nudged” Japan to undertake more common defense responsibility, the incremental changes in Japan were due to the strong domestic pacifism, which has to date prevented the ruling Liberal Democratic Party from amending Article 9 (peace clause) of the constitution. Japan’s approach to legislate permanent legal changes for closer cooperation with the United States in the most proximate and critical regions followed the testing of the domestic political ground for overseas dispatches in sunset legislation and legally unilateral articulations.⁸ Security legislation under late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe conditioned the closer cooperation with the United States upon grave existential threats to either party, thereby avoiding entrapment into minor conflicts the United States may engage in a region not critical for Japan’s security.⁹ Even for what appears to be a grave threat to the United States, such as nuclear-armed missiles heading towards the U.S. territory, Abe’s attempt to explicitly

Potential Future Threats to America. October 8, 2024. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/cooperation-between-china-iran-north-korea-and-russia-current-and-potential-future-threats-to-america?lang=en>

⁷ Cabinet Affairs Office (Japan). No title. No date.

https://www.cao.go.jp/pko/pko_j/info/other/pdf/leaflet_e2019/02_03.pdf.

⁸ Yoichiro Sato. (2008). Three Norms of Collective Defense and Japan’s Overseas Troop Dispatches. In: Sato, Y., Hirata, K. (eds) Norms, Interests, and Power in Japanese Foreign Policy. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230615809_5

⁹ Ministry of Defense (Japan). Development of Legislation for Peace and Security and the SDF Activities since Legislation’s Enforcement. In: Defense of Japan 2019.

https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2019/pdf/DOJ2019_2-5-1.pdf

permit interceptions by the SDF under several hypothetical cases of collective defense met domestic opposition and was dropped. Japan may aid U.S. forces in Japan's vicinity or in areas where Japan's survival is demonstrably threatened, but President Biden's effort to have Prime Minister Fumio Kishida commit to joint operations in a Taiwan contingency was carefully dodged by Kishida.¹⁰ The current domestic political context of weak central leadership under Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba will most likely confine discussion of closer defense cooperation into the working-level within the current interpretation of the constitution about legally permissible collective defense.

Challenges for the U.S.-Japan Alliance & Recommendations

Given the current political mismatch between the leaderships of the two countries, management of the U.S.-Japan alliance should be left to the creativity of the working-level defense bureaucracies. Japan has been able to undertake a greater amount of security diplomacy in Asia on behalf of the alliance. Japan has been active in assisting coast guard capacity building in the South China Sea littoral states,¹¹ and maritime assistance has further been extended to the Philippines military in the form of coastal radar installations.¹² Most recently, Japan offered economic assistance to the disputed border region between Thailand and Cambodia.¹³ Japan has also demonstrated its growing willingness to take part in the security operations in the South

¹⁰ William Choong, Will Japan intervene in a Taiwan contingency? It depends. Japan Times, December 17, 2023. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/12/17/japan/japan-taiwan-contingency/>

¹¹ Yoichiro Sato. Southeast Asian Receptiveness to Japanese Maritime Security Cooperation. Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, September 2007. <https://www.apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/PDFs/Maritime%20security%20cooperation%20Japan-SE%20Asia%20Sato.pdf>

¹² Tomohisa Takei. Provision of Radars to the Philippines Can Create a 3,000-Nautical-Mile Air Surveillance Zone. Sasakawa Peace Foundation. September 18, 2024. https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/tomohisa_takei_01.html

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan). Emergency Grant for the Cambodia-Thailand Border Areas. August 15, 2025. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_01545.html#:~:text=As%20part%20of%20such%20efforts,th,e%20Cambodia%E2%80%93Thailand%20border%20areas.

Pacific, as seen during the volcano eruption in Tonga in 2022.¹⁴ Japan's regular participation in the U.S.-led "Pacific Partnership" naval diplomacy program¹⁵ in the Pacific deters the growing influence of China in Pacific island states. U.S.-Japan cooperation in peacetime in less critical subregions away from Japan's immediate Northeast Asian neighborhood, through which the burden of maintaining regional security is gradually shifted from the United States to Japan, is consistent with the Trump administration's offshore balancing leaning, yet does not disturb Japan's domestic politics with the question about the limits to collective defense participation.

Healthy management of the bilateral alliance also requires a better appreciation of the value of this alliance by the Americans. The gap between the seasoned defense bureaucrats on one hand and President Trump and his political appointees on the other is deep, and silencing of the former by the latter due to the President's management style, are breeding dissatisfaction within the Japanese leadership.¹⁶ The narrative by President Trump that the U.S. troops are stationed in Japan for a sole purpose of defending Japan must be challenged with a more balanced perspective, which identifies the geostrategic benefits to the United States of having forward deployment bases at the far western end of the Pacific Ocean.¹⁷ As the range of possible missile attacks by China extends,¹⁸ and as the U.S. ability to strike from afar improves,¹⁹

¹⁴ Ministry of Defense (Japan). JS OSUMI related to international disaster relief activities in the Kingdom of Tonga arrived in Japan. March 2022. <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/sf/english/news/2022/03/0307-03.html>

¹⁵ Patricia O'Brien. U.S.-Japan Cooperation in the Pacific: 75 Years After the End of the Pacific War. Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, August 6, 2020. <https://spfusa.org/publications/u-s-japan-cooperation-in-the-pacific75-years-after-the-end-of-the-pacific-war/>

¹⁶ Sheila A. Smith. The Ishiba-Trump Era. Council on Foreign Relations. February 10, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/ishiba-trump-era>

¹⁷ Adam Liff. Japan: America's indispensable ally. Brookings Institution. September 16, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/japan-americas-indispensable-ally/>

¹⁸ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, Mackenzie Knight-Boyle. Chinese nuclear weapons, 2025. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. March 12, 2025. <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2025-03/chinese-nuclear-weapons->

2025/#:~:text=China%20continues%20the%20long%2Dterm,for%20road%2Dmobile%20missile%20launchers.

¹⁹ Joshua Thibert. Striking from Afar: The Strategic Edge of Standoff Warfare. Global Security Review. No date. <https://globalsecurityreview.com/striking-from-afar-the-strategic-edge-of-standoff-warfare/>

vulnerability of the forward deployed U.S. troops is being addressed by reducing permanent basing in the Western Pacific and substituting it with access rights to a greater number of facilities,²⁰ as seen in the agreements with the Philippines²¹ and in the preparation of the list of civilian ports and airfields in Japan,²² which could be opened to the U.S. forces in a regional contingency. Naval personnel are effective spokespersons to speak of the collective benefits of the bilateral alliance. In Yokosuka and Sasebo, interactions between naval personnel and civilians to jointly study regional diplomatic and security affairs contribute to stable hosting arrangements. On the other hand, the absence of Japanese troops on U.S. soil handicaps Japan in public diplomacy, with the exception of Hawaii, where the annual RIMPAC exercise offers a great opportunity for local engagement to the JMSDF crews. Enlarging officer exchanges with the US Navy to the extent Japanese naval personnel are more visible on U.S. vessels operating through the Atlantic ports might be one idea to enhance public diplomacy in the United States.

The greatest challenge the alliance faces today is its inability to articulate collective responses to a contingency over Taiwan explicitly. The current shortage of political will in Japan to meet this challenge eye-to-eye must not stop the thinking and planning at the working level. Track 1.5 and Track 2 security dialogues (with the Chatham House rule) need to be prepared and ready to offer policy options in various possible scenarios, which likely involve non-traditional and grey-zone tactics in combination with the employment of traditional military threats.

²⁰ Lynn E. Davis, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Melanie W. Sisson, Stephen M. Worman, Michael J. McNerney. U.S. Overseas Military Presence: What Are the Strategic Choices? Rand. 2012.
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND_MG1211.pdf

²¹ Shawn D. Harding. There and Back and There Again: U.S. Military Bases in the Philippines. U.S. Naval Institute. May 2024 Proceedings Vol. 150/5/1,455. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/may/there-and-back-and-there-again-us-military-bases-philippines>

²² U.S. Department of Defense. Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee ("2+2"), July 28, 2024. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3852169/joint-statement-of-the-security-consultative-committee-22/>

Representatives from Taiwan (if not government officials, at least civilian scholars or experienced journalists) should actively be invited to these dialogues.

In conclusion, the bilateral U.S.-Japan alliance has evolved to embrace a greater degree of collective defense, in which Japan shoulders more burden of maintaining regional security. A full mutuality, which President Trump implies as a fair arrangement, is not the goal of the bilateral alliance, however. A gradual shifting of the responsibility for regional peace onto Japan has been and will be the direction of the evolution. A series of legislation leading to Prime Minister Abe's National Security Legislation²³ has prepared the soil for Japan's active roles, but the country's "self-defense" doctrine continues to limit the scope of collective defense. Managing expectations is critical if Japan's nascent embracing of collective defense and security, first in no-war situations such as HADR, is to open a path for closer defense cooperation in a hybrid situation. Public diplomacy in the United States is also critical in this effort, as President Trump's exploitation of public ignorance is hurting the very foundation of the bilateral alliance.

²³ Ministry of Defense (Japan). Development of Legislation for Peace and Security and the SDF Activities since Legislation's Enforcement. In: Defense of Japan 2019. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2019/pdf/DOJ2019_2-5-1.pdf

U.S.–Japan Joint Response to China’s Gray-Zone Tactics in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Overview

The term "gray-zone tactics" is typically associated with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Indo-Pacific. In its 2022 report, RAND’s Project Air Force defined it as “coercive Chinese government geopolitical, economic, military, and cyber and information operations (cyber/IO) activities beyond regular diplomatic and economic activities and below the use of kinetic military force.”²⁴ This research paper examines U.S.-Japan joint responses to China’s gray-zone tactics in the Indo-Pacific region. It analyzes the role of the two other QUAD actors (Australia and India). Finally, it explains how the U.S. and Japan's commitment to trilateral Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) with the Republic of Korea (ROK) acts as an effective deterrent to the PRC's gray-zone tactics, particularly in the East China Sea (ECS), and also extends across the Indo-Pacific.

The PRC has seen great success in using gray-zone tactics against any number of nations, the U.S. and Japan being chief among them. Responding to these activities is vital to maintaining the Rule-Based

²⁴ “A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China’s Gray-Zone Tactics,” RAND, accessed July 1, 2025, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RBA500/RBA594-1/RAND_RBA594-1.pdf.

International Order and Freedom of Navigation for all countries that rely on the Indo-Pacific's vast air and sea lines of communication. Failure to acknowledge and respond in a timely manner can have dire consequences. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, China has constructed 20 outposts in the Paracel Islands and 7 outposts in the Spratly Islands. It has also maintained a regular maritime presence at Scarborough Shoal. However, it has not constructed any outposts there.²⁵ Furthermore, China's militarization of



Figure 1. <https://www.statista.com/chart/33551/number-of-built-outpost-on-islands-rocks-and-reefs-in-the-south-china-sea/>

Woody Island, part of the Paracel grouping, includes fighter jets, cruise missiles and radar stations.²⁶ While this particular gray-zone activity may be more alarming for Vietnam and the Philippines, who have competing claims to those same South China Sea features, it is also worrisome for Japan and the U.S. for obvious reasons. Increased PRC control of any disputed features, seabed, or airspace within China's self-proclaimed Nine-dash line sets a dangerous precedent for all nations that rely on the free flow of vital trade throughout the region.

The U.S. and Japan have been relatively successful in exposing the PRC's gray-zone behavior and coordinating effective responses. These range from simple diplomatic protests to complex, multi-lateral military exercises. The former are formal, public declarations that the PRC's behavior violates international laws and norms. The latter are indispensable to increasing military interoperability between partner nations and deterring gray-zone activities or at least keeping them from escalating into kinetic confrontations. The U.S. and Japan conduct such exercises together regularly, and others include Australia, India, and the

²⁵ "Holding the Line: China's Expanding Patrols around Scarborough Shoal," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, accessed July 1, 2025, <https://amti.csis.org/holding-the-line-chinas-expanding-patrols-around-scarborough-shoal/>.

²⁶ "Global Conflict Tracker, Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Center for Preventative Action, Updated September 17, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

ROK.²⁷ Strong, determined cooperation between these nations gives the PRC pause when considering how to pursue its national agenda. Though its abandonment of gray-zone tactics is highly unlikely, perhaps it will make transparent, diplomatic efforts more attractive and ultimately successful.

Risks / Threats (In the Region)

The most prominent threats in the Indo-Pacific region are the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the PRC. While the DPRK tends to be more direct and belligerent in its military pursuits, the PRC takes a more subtle and defensible approach. This “gray-zone” methodology is deliberate and relentless. In the ECS, the PRC has attempted to enforce its unrecognized claim over Japan's Senkaku Islands by setting back-to-back records in 2023 and 2024 for the number of days its ships have loitered inside Japan's internationally recognized contiguous zone (within 12-24 nautical miles from the islands' coastal features). In each of those years, People's Liberation Army Navy and Chinese Coast Guard vessels were present in these waters 352 and 355 days out of 365, respectively.²⁸ This intrusive behavior is obviously concerning for Japan, which has administered the islands continuously since 1895. But it is also



Figure 2. <https://japan-forward.com/economics-not-history-are-driving-chinas-senkaku-islands-claims/>

concerning for the U.S., given the PRC's track record for assuming control of claimed features and later occupying and improving them, as they did in the South China Sea. Confronting and countering the PRC's “gray-zone” activities is not without risk, as effective responses elicit an escalating war of words and the potential for kinetic conflict.

²⁷ In the case of the ROK, trilateral exercises with the U.S. and Japan focus on BMD in order to deter both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the PRC.

²⁸ “China Sets Record for Activity Near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2024,” The Diplomat, accessed July 1, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/china-sets-record-for-activity-near-senkaku-diaoyu-islands-in-2024/>.

Challenges for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

Alliance challenges in the face of PRC gray-zone tactics are many. First, there is an issue of response fatigue. For the U.S., response fatigue is not an option, though it does come at an incredible cost. For several years, the U.S. has identified the PRC as its pacing, geopolitical challenge. Ever since then U.S. President Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" in 2011, the U.S. has sought to divert resources and focus to the Indo-Pacific and the PRC's growing hegemonic tendencies.²⁹ This diversion has always faced challenges, early on from the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and more recently from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a resurgent Violent Extremist Organization threat, U.S. immigration issues on its Southwest border, and the conflict between Israel and Iran (and its proxies, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, etc.). Additional challenges have surfaced within the alliances themselves, as the current U.S. Presidential Administration has sought to tackle trade disparities with allies and partners across the globe and re-look burden sharing in defense agreements and other international commitments. Unfortunately, these moves have put a strain on current alliances and threaten to empower Beijing in the endless struggle for Indo-Pacific dominance.

Recommendations

Continued public condemnation and frequent multi-lateral exercises are effective responses to PRC gray-zone tactics; however, they only address the symptoms of the problem and not the fundamental root cause(s). The PRC tends to portray every issue and dispute in the Indo-Pacific as an existential and non-negotiable matter. As most of these issues involve questions of jurisdiction and sovereignty, the PRC is quick to announce (very forcefully and loudly) that it will not budge on such matters. In a 2018 meeting with then U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Xi Jinping reminded the U.S. that the Chinese people

²⁹ "The US Pivot to Asia Reborn: Old Grand Strategies, New Challenges," The Diplomat, accessed July 3, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/the-us-pivot-to-asia-reborn-old-grand-strategies-new-challenges/>.

“cannot lose even one inch of the territory left behind by our ancestors.”³⁰ This non-negotiable position cannot be ameliorated through diplomatic protests and exercises; it requires a definitive action on the part of the disputant. In the case of the Senkaku Islands, many commentators, including this author, believe Japan and the U.S. should resume use of the islands as bombing ranges, for which they were used from 1948 to 1977.³¹ Resuming use of the islands as military training grounds would re-assert Japan’s physical control of the islands and re-establish the U.S. as an authorized user of the ranges under the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement. Certainly, the PRC would object, and a confrontation could ensue, but legal precedence and international public opinion would favor Japan. Act or react, take the initiative or have it taken from you; unpleasant as it may be, the choice should be clear.

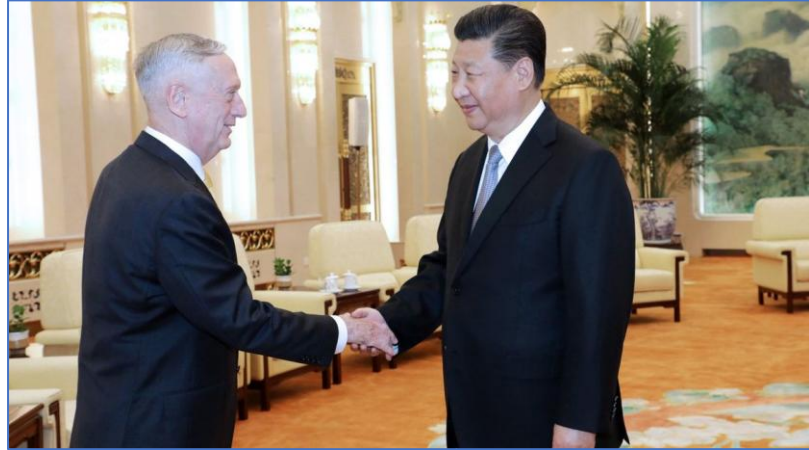


Figure 3. <https://www.thestatesman.com/world/china-will-not-concede-an-inch-of-land-president-xi-jinping-tells-mattis-1502654629.html>

Further Work

As long as the PRC continues to embrace the use of gray-zone tactics, other nations with Indo-Pacific interests will be required to respond. Failure to do so cedes the initiative to China. New strategies must be developed to neutralize the effects of such tactics and change the PRC’s calculus regarding their usefulness. Whether the U.S. and Japan have the wherewithal to develop and employ a new strategy remains to be seen. Although it appears the U.S.-Japan initiative to move forward on operationalizing its Joint Force

³⁰ “China won’t give up ‘one inch’ of territory says President Xi to Mattis,” The BBC, accessed July 7, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-44638817>.

³¹ “A restart of Senkaku firing ranges is long overdue,” The Japan Times, accessed July 1, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2024/12/10/japan/senkaku-firing-range/>.

Headquarters is still intact, recent tariff and burden-sharing proposals threaten to derail or at least delay its implementation.³² Likewise, U.S.-Australia cooperation under AUKUS appears to be on shaky ground. What had been once heralded as a future pillar of Indo-Pacific security now faces a skeptical U.S. Administration looking for ways to hike the costs for partners across the region.³³ Finally, the QUAD's recent announcement to diversify critical mineral supply chains could present an effective counter to China's attempts to corner the market and gain leverage over the U.S. and other Indo-Pacific competitors³⁴; however, India's commitment may wane as it seeks to balance its core interests under the BRICS umbrella.

³² "Defense Secretary Announces U.S. Forces Japan's Upgrade to Joint Force Command," U.S. Department of Defense, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4139213/defense-secretary-announces-us-forces-japans-upgrade-to-joint-force-command/>.

³³ "Clock ticks towards Pentagon AUKUS review deadline," The Interpreter, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/clock-ticks-towards-pentagon-aukus-review-deadline>.

³⁴ "Quad countries agree to diversify critical mineral supplies amid China concerns," The Guardian, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/02/quad-countries-agree-to-diversify-critical-mineral-supplies-amid-china-concerns>.

The Future of U.S.-Japan Alliance Pivots on Defense Planning

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Overview

The Indo-Pacific continues to become increasingly uncertain with China, North Korea, and Russia changing the status quo, consequently heightening the risks of armed conflict. While there are certainly concerns over the risks of planned attacks and invasions by China, North Korea, and Russia, equally concerning is the increasing number of gray-zone situations that could uncontrollably escalate into hot conflicts.³⁵ Moreover, there are concerns over the continued or renewed political and military coordination and cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia, and the implications it would have on the Indo-Pacific security environment. In sum, the proximity of the flashpoints combined with the growing relations among China, North Korea, and Russia indicate not only the growing complexities but also the risks of simultaneous conflicts in the Indo-Pacific.³⁶

To overcome the abovementioned problems, the former Kishida Fumio administration issued the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense

³⁵ See: Japan Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan 2025,” (Tokyo, Japan2025).

³⁶ See: Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, “choshentoto taiwankaikyodeno “fukugouteki yuuji”no risuku (Risks for a “Composite Contingency” on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait),” *Gekkan Toa* (January 2025).; Markus V. Garlauskas, “The United States and its Allies Must Be Ready to Deter a Two-front War and Nuclear Attacks in East Asia,” *Atlantic Council Report* (2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/>.

Buildup Program (DBP) in December 2022 which have noted seven key areas to enhance the readiness of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF), including: “stand-off defense capabilities”, “integrated air and missile defense capabilities”, “unmanned defense capabilities”, “cross-domain operation capabilities”, “command and control and intelligence-related functions”, “mobile deployment capabilities and civil protection”, and “sustainability and resiliency.”³⁷ Such developments significantly supplement the efforts of the past two decades that focused on greater readiness to function under war conditions particularly in the southwestern regions of the archipelago.

The strategic and defense doctrines and plans are certainly significant in sharpening and strengthening Japan’s strategy and the readiness of the JSDF, as well as the Japan-United States (U.S.) alliance. Yet there remains to be many questions over how the doctrines and plans are implemented, as well as addressing the other gaps in the JSDF and the alliance’s strategies and readiness. Such concerns stem from Japan’s resource constraints to fund the defense plans, but also the logistical and personnel shortages that have been the Achilles’s heel in the JSDF’s warfighting readiness.

While Japan’s defense planning and readiness – if pursued as planned – would undoubtedly benefit Japan and the alliance with the U.S., there are questions over whether they are sufficient in dealing with the growing threats in the defense of remote islands, air and missile defense, naval defense, and hybrid warfare. The state of political and strategic relations between Japan and the U.S. will also be critical, where gaps in visions and priorities would inevitably

³⁷ Government of Japan, “National Security Strategy of Japan,” (Tokyo: Japan 16 December 2022).; Japan Ministry of Defense, “National Defense Strategy,” (Tokyo: Japan 16 December 2022).; Japan Ministry of Defense, “Defense Buildup Program,” (Tokyo: Japan 16 December 2022).

cause disruptions in Japan's strategies and defense plans that would consequently undermine the alliance's readiness.

Against this backdrop, the Japan-U.S. alliance must work to enhance mutual security assurance and credibility through various coordination and dialogue mechanisms and ensure that their respective defense plans remain consistent in the context of strengthening the alliance. At the operational level, Tokyo and Washington must also continue to enhance interoperability and efficient coordination of assets to enhance readiness against the threats and possible scenarios. Moreover, Japan and the U.S. will also need to further strengthen cooperation and coordination with other U.S. allies and likeminded states to effectively deal with the diverse threats in the region, although such tasks could be challenging given the fluid nature of domestic politics, as well as gaps in capacity and priorities.

Risks and Threats in the Region

Japan's security risks have heightened significantly over the past three decades as a result of emboldened threats posed by states in the region pursuing anti-status quo strategies, but also the vulnerabilities in its security posture.

Regarding threats, China continues to enhance the readiness of its People's Liberation Army (PLA) and paramilitary forces while also intensifying their activities in the first-island chain.³⁸ North Korea is also modernizing capabilities of the Korean People's Army (KPA) as well as systemizing a new nuclear doctrine that have lowered the bar for preemptive and

³⁸ See: U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024," (Washington, D.C.2024).

preventative strikes.³⁹ Russia, while continuing their invasion of Ukraine, have also enhanced their presence in areas north of Japan including the disputed northern territories.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the three states have been working to improve their relations, evidenced by Russia's bilateral summits with China and North Korea, the growingly intimate military relations between Moscow and Pyongyang, and China's continued interests to directly and indirectly support North Korea. Problems are compounded by Japan's vulnerabilities. Aside from the fact that Japan is withing close range of China, North Korea, and Russia, Japan's suffers from a number of self-imposed vulnerabilities that undermine its readiness to deal with the threats. The most serious is the legal restrictions derived from the pacifist constitution, undermining JSDF's ability to respond to situations in the early phases of conflict. Moreover, there are myriad readiness shortages, notably with the low reserve of ammunition and supplies, as well as personnel.



³⁹ See: Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, *Defense Planning and Readiness of North Korea: Armed to Rule* (Oxfordshire, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

⁴⁰ Yu Koizumi, "Russian Military Modernization in the Northern Territories and Its Implications for Japanese Foreign Policy," *Sasakawa Peace Foundation International Information Network Analysis* (31 May 2021), https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/koizumi_01.html.

Challenges for the Japan-U.S. Alliance

Since the 2010s, Japan and the U.S. has taken significant steps to enhance the alliance's readiness for coordinated and combined operations. Over the past decade or so, notable improvements are seen in interoperability with the restructuring of commands, establishment of Japan's key commands near U.S. bases in Japan, and increase in military-to-military dialogues, combined exercises and training, exchange of liaison personnel, etc.

Still, the aforementioned threats are outpacing the readiness developments of the Japan-U.S. alliance, creating a number of challenges that must be addressed. While Japan is taking credible steps in its defense planning and readiness, there are nonetheless questions in both Tokyo and Washington over whether they are sufficient in dealing with the threats.⁴¹ Much boils down to how Japan implements and operationalizes the items outlined in the NSS, NDS, and DBP. Yet the problem is that the pace of China and North Korea's military modernization and activities are likely to outpace Tokyo's efforts, particularly in defense of remote islands, air and missile defense, cyber warfare, naval operations, and hybrid warfare.

Japan also has its own questions toward the current Trump administration's strategic visions vis-a-vis the Indo-Pacific region and demands against the allied partners – especially concerning the vagueness over the U.S.'s strategy and role, stronger demands against allied partners concerning budget increases and alliance roles, and in the worst case, abandonment.⁴² The combination of Japan's uncertainties toward the U.S. and Washington's demanding and transactional attitudes

⁴¹ Jeffrey W. Hornung and Mike M. Mochizuki, "Japan: Still an Exceptional U.S. Ally," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2016).

⁴² Yu Koizumi and Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, *2030no sensou [War in 2030]* (Tokyo, Japan: Nikkei BP, 2025).

toward regional partners consequently undermine the alliance's cohesion and readiness – even when the two are convergent on dealing with the threats in the region.⁴³ While the problems may not seem critical at this point, any gaps between Japan and the U.S. (or any other U.S. allies) will only create opportunities for China, North Korea, and Russia to exploit, consequently changing the status quo.

Recommendations

Given the challenges faced, Japan and the U.S. will need to take further steps to deal with the current and future risks in the Indo-Pacific. First, Japan and the U.S. must ensure that their respective strategies are on the same page and facing the same direction. While the alliance was strong under the Abe-Trump and Kishida-Biden administrations, there are questions on the fate of the alliance under the second Trump administration. Under this light, it is critical for Tokyo and Washington to provide assurance and credibility through dialogues and exchanges to ensure that the two countries' defense plans are set for enhancing the alliance's strategies, readiness, and extended deterrence. Japan and the U.S. do have the Security Consultative Committee and also Extended Deterrence Dialogue, and there have been discussions over the possibility of a Nuclear Consultative Group similar to the one between the U.S. and South Korea.

Second, Japan and the U.S. will need to further improve interoperability to facilitate greater coordination between one another's forces. Already, Japan and the U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) are adjusting their joint command structures to enable greater coordination of the two forces. That said, the adjustments will need to be applied to the various tactical units to facilitate

⁴³ See: Demetri Sevastopulo, "US Demands to Know What Allies Would Do in Event of War over Taiwan," *Financial Times* (13 July 2025), <https://www.ft.com/content/41e272e4-5b25-47ee-807c-2b57c1316fe4>.

smoother combined and coordinated readiness. Regarding capabilities, while Japan relies on the U.S. force's strike and amphibious assault assets, the JSDF has much to provide for the alliance in denial operations in the air and maritime domains. Going forward, Japan and the U.S. should connect their respective assets to complement or compensate for one another's strengths and weaknesses to create an allied "kill web."



JSDF's Joint Operations Concept (Source: Ministry of Defense, Japan)

Third, Japan and the U.S. must continue to work on enhance the security coordination and cooperation network with regional partners. Given the diverse, and multi-faceted threats faced in the Indo-Pacific theatre, it is imperative for Japan and the U.S. to enhance coordination and cooperation with other U.S. allies and like-minded states – particularly the Republic of Korea, Australia, the Philippines, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as select Southeast and South Asian states, Pacific Island states, and where possible, Taiwan. Achieving this, however, would depend not only on political efforts to converge strategic visions and priorities, but could also be swayed by fluid domestic politics.

Areas for Further Discussion

As outlined thus far, although Japan and the U.S. have taken significant steps in sharpening the alliance's strategies and readiness, much more needs to be done to deal with the diversifying and intensifying threats and risks in the region. Naturally, discussions on political and strategic relations, as well as how Japan and the U.S. should work to clarify and converge their visions and priorities are needed. While many experts are already working on this topic, they are ever-more critical in both the short- and long-term given the questions over one another's administrations, as well as the state of domestic politics.

On top of the political and strategic discussions, more efforts are needed on the operational-level issues in the JSDF and the Japan-U.S. alliance. One area that warrants greater attention is how the JSDF's efforts to enhance joint readiness contributes to the defense of Japan and the alliance. In particular, much attention is needed on Japan's amphibious capabilities that would be critical in defending the southwest island chain. While Tokyo has undertaken incremental but steady strengthened their amphibious operations readiness in recent years, the demands for further improvements are seen both from the Japanese and alliance perspectives given the growing threats posed by China.

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