

Trends in International Politics 2024

Japan's Expanding Diplomatic and Military Horizons

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Erik Isaksson

Erik Isaksson MA is an Ernst Mach Fellow at the oiip, conducting a project on narratives of neutrality in Austria and pacifism in Japan. His main research interests are the role of narratives, discourses, identity, status, and knowledge regimes in international politics, with a particular focus on Japan and East Asia. He is also a researcher and PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin, working on narratives of “universal values” in contemporary Japanese foreign policy, and an Associate Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. He received his MA in Asian Languages and Cultures (focus on Japan) from Stockholm University in 2016 and worked at the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) 2017-2020.

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Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik – oiip,

Austrian Institute for International Affairs

A-1090 Vienna, Währinger Straße 3/12, www.oiip.ac.at, info@oiip.ac.at

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Japan's security posture: drivers and motivations

In 2023, Japan was on a steady trajectory toward a greater military and diplomatic footprint on the world stage, having just announced a new National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and a Defense Buildup Program in December 2022. These were part of a long-term effort to bolster Japan's military capabilities and international profile, motivated by a ruling party that has sought these goals since its founding in 1955. Particularly since the start of the war in Ukraine these domestic motivations have gained in relevance by virtue of deteriorating international security. In 2024, we are likely to see Japan further develop its military capabilities, military exports, and assistance, partly driven by hard security concerns, and partly by these domestic motivations. These motivations can in turn be understood as an effort to boost Japan's international status.

Among other measures, the December 2022 security documents set forth a goal of allocating 2 percent of GDP on defense spending by 2027 and another of acquiring so-called “counter strike

capabilities” on overseas military bases. That level of defense spending and those capabilities had been long in the making. Now, according to Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, they were motivated particularly by “Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine”, but also by the “military buildup” and “nuclear missile developments” in Japan's neighborhood (Prime Minister's Office of Japan 2022). The prime minister's yearly policy speech to the National Diet in January 2023 further underscored Japan's wary outlook on international security. In the speech, Kishida called the full-scale invasion of Ukraine the third “turning point” in the history of modern Japan, after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and the end of World War II. In his words, the invasion was a “challenge to the rules-based international peace order”, and Japan was, as G7 chair in the first half of 2023, “ready to lead the world” (Prime Minister's Office of Japan 2023). Domestically, the prime minister is not known as a hawk. He is the erstwhile leader¹ of the Kochikai faction, a grouping that represents the traditionally “dovish” mainstream of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party

¹ It is custom in the LDP's factions that their leaders exit the faction and give up faction leadership when they are appointed prime minister, so as to avoid conflicts of interest

(Konno 2023). However, their stature as de facto faction leaders remain; in newspaper articles the prime minister's old faction will be invariably referred to as the “Kishida faction”, or “Abe faction”.

(LDP), the party that has been in power almost continuously since 1955. In spite of this purported dovishness, however, he is largely continuing a security policy reform effort initiated by the LDP most

ardent nationalists and more likely hawks in the Seiwakai faction, previously headed by the late prime minister Abe Shinzo.² This underlines how

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Japan's geopolitical predicament is an important factor in understanding the country's position. Concern about this can be gleaned not only from official statements like those from Kishida's speeches, but also by listening to what security policy experts in Japan say. These emphasize the significance of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the precedent it might set, and the restructuring of international relations it

might forebode (Closed seminar on Kishida government security policy 2022; Osawa 2023). Moreover, as regular watchers of Japanese security policy would know, China's rise and

aggressive behavior has become an increasing concern in the past 15-20 years. Former deputy head of Japan's National Security Secretariat and close prime ministerial advisor to Abe Shinzo, Kanehara Nobukatsu, expresses what is arguably the

consensus in Japanese security circles by calling China the "eye of the storm (typhoon)" in the shifting international balance and calling for robust Japan-US alliance cooperation to face it (Kanehara 2021, pp. 177-178).

While external threats certainly play a role, Japan's expanding national security posture also has important roots in ideational and domestic factors, which might help us understand where Japan is headed in 2024. The Japanese government has a long history of measuring itself and its progress against other states in the international system. In the modern era, usually said to start

² Recent milestones in security policy reform are, for example, the state secrets law of 2013 and the instituting of a National Security Council in the same year, the reinterpretation of the

constitution to allow for collective self defense in 2014/2015 and associated laws, and the decision to remove the self-imposed cap on defense spending at 1 % of GDP in 2017, and the subsequent steadily rising military budgets.

around 1868, the “West” generally came to replace China as the main point of reference for policymakers and intellectuals (Tanaka 1994; Gustafsson 2022). The famous *Datsu-A Ron* (Leaving Asia) editorial in the newspaper *Jiji Shimpō* in 1885 constructing Asia as “backwards” and the West as “progress” is perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of this shift. This strive for upward mobility with an eye toward the “West” as yardstick and competition lived on during Japan’s imperialistic war in the Asia-Pacific and through the post-war economic boom. In this way, status concerns and concerns about where Japan belongs have had sway in Japanese foreign policy circles.

Community through military efforts, status through military buildup

Since the appointment of conservative Abe Shinzo as prime minister in 2006, the Japanese government has been steadily beefing up its military capabilities, expanding its military expenditure to GDP ratio throughout his tenure (2006-2007 and 2012-2020). It has also attempted to rally states around defense of the rules-based international order, often emphasizing how the order stands for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. In both of these areas the Japanese government has employed narratives that remind us

of the ideational status drivers introduced above, emphasizing the need for Japan to “lead”, and that Japan is in a community with states that emphasize the importance of the “rules-based order” and those that are called “likeminded” (*doushikoku*) - primarily U.S. allies and partners. One example of this type of narrative is then-foreign minister Kono Taro’s introduction to the 2018 Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bluebook: “the international order built on fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law is under threat. [...] [T]o preserve the existing international order [...] Japan needs to take on even greater responsibility and an even greater role than before” (Kono 2018). Another is prime minister Kishida’s speech in December 2022 announcing Japan’s three new security documents. In the speech, he emphasized how NATO countries aimed for “a defense spending commensurate to economic strength” and that Japan would “speed up its efforts in line with our cooperation with these allies and likeminded countries” (Kishida 2022).

As part of the community building with U.S. allies and partners, 2023 saw the launch of Japan’s new “Official Security Assistance” program, styled as an expansion of Official Development Assistance but for the benefit of the militaries of “likeminded countries”. In the program’s first year, Bangladesh, Fiji, Malaysia and the Philippines benefited, with Indonesia and Vietnam to be added in 2024, along with a doubled budget for the program (Matsuyama 2023). In the past couple of years, there has been a shift in Japanese government narratives toward emphasizing “rules-based order” over “democracy”, seemingly based on the consideration that “democracy” narratives in diplomacy scares off less democratic states that Japan wants in its fold against China (Tsuruoka 2022). Some of these are likely in the Southeast Asian group benefiting from OSA, hinting at further Japanese engagement with that region.

Since the Russian invasion and through October 31, 2023, Japan has provided a total of EUR 6.81 billion to the country. In this regard it is only outmatched by the EU, the U.S., Germany, the UK and Norway, and outpacing other relatively large givers like the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and Denmark.

Falling in the same category of policy that functions to carve out Japan’s place in the Western (security) community is Japan’s aid to Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion and through October 31, 2023, Japan has provided a total of EUR 6.81 billion to the country. In this regard it is only outmatched by the EU, the U.S., Germany, the UK and Norway, and outpacing other relatively large givers like the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and Denmark. Given the size of the Japanese economy, in terms of share of GDP it is “only” the 22nd largest donor - still ahead of European countries like France, Belgium, Spain and Italy (Antezza, Bushnell and Dyussimbinov et al 2023). In December 2023, Kishida pledged another USD 4.5 billion in aid to Ukraine (Yamaguchi 2023), and the government also announced a modification to its defense equipment export rules, whereby export of lethal weaponry will be allowed. Such export to Ukraine is still prohibited, given the country’s involvement in conflict, but given the long trend of easing export restrictions,³

³ Abe removed the general prohibition on weapons exports in 2014 and replaced it with principles governing their export. Before that,

prime minister Noda Yoshihiko had in 2012 relaxed the same prohibition, and in 2004 prime minister Koizumi Jun’ichiro made an exception

that will likely be made possible either in 2024 or the near future, too (Nagasaki 2023). In early January 2024, foreign minister Kamikawa Yoko visited Kyiv as the third Japanese cabinet member since the war started, underlining Japan's continued support. The foreign minister also announced Japan's impending donation of USD 37 million to a NATO trust fund for drone detection systems in Ukraine (Matsuyama 2024).

As Eric Heginbotham, Samuel Leiter and Richard Samuels argue (2023), upgrading Japan's military capability has itself been a long-standing top priority for actors across politics, the bureaucracy, and American so-called Japan handlers - diplomats particularly involved in managing the U.S.-Japan Alliance. In their words, "responses to changing international circumstances reflect long standing political and bureaucratic desires as much as objectively framed requirements" (ibid., p. 49). Japan's 2022 security documents are furthermore partly motivated by "desires of dominant political actors". The reforms proposed - identifying counter strike capabilities as

a "key" to strengthening Japan's defense (National Security Council, p. 17) - come at the expense of other, from a military perspective overdue but less spectacular measures, such as improving the resilience of Air Self-Defense Forces bases through hardened aircraft shelters (Heginbotham et al., pp. 54-56).

The argument of Heginbotham et al does not relate to status but rather to long-standing "policy preferences". The two are not mutually exclusive, however, and the argument that conservative Japanese policymakers are status conscious and connect Japan's "pacifism" with lower status has been made elsewhere (e.g. Ha and Hagström 2022). The "policy preferences" ought to come from somewhere, and the fact that they have been there since the re-imagining of the Japanese state after World War II suggests that they are something more than a response to any one particular security threat. These long standing preferences, which in this way can be conceptualized as born out of status concerns, feed into narratives - domestic and international - of a worsening international security situation in recent years.⁴ This mounting

for the development of a joint U.S.-Japan missile defense system.

⁴ Using "narrative" here does not mean that the worsening security situation is not real. It is simply an acknowledgement that no "situation" exists independently of how we interpret and

conceive of it, and these conceptions are very real, with real implications. This conceiving of and making sense of the world is often done through narratives - chronological storytelling structure and an evaluation with lessons on

notion that international security is worsening, coupled with these preferences will, if anything, not hinder further militarization in 2024 and beyond.⁵

Musical chairs in domestic politics

A wild card in 2024 is the political stability of the Kishida government. Several of the LDP's factions and particularly the late Abe's conservative faction, the Seiwakai, is embroiled in a scandal where ministers and high officials have systematically failed to disclose financial contributions. As an immediate response, Kishida decided to purge all Seiwakai members in high office in the government and party in order to contain the fallout. In early January, the prime minister called the first meeting of the newly instituted Panel for Political Reform within the party, stating that the “the LDP itself needs to change” (Jimin 2024). Kishida's predecessor as prime minister, the faction-less Suga Yoshihide, is using the opportunity to

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argue for the abolition of factions in the LDP (Channeru Seiron 2024). In mid-January, the prime minister announced his intent to abolish his own faction. At the time of writing, the decision has prompted the Seiwakai faction and former LDP Secretary General and party bigshot Nikai Toshihiro's Shisuikai faction to announce their dissolutions as well. These three factions are those that are embroiled in the scandal so far.

While this may seem like a big shift,

factions have existed since the party's beginnings and are arguably engrained in its organizational culture. Mass dissolution has even happened before at a political low point for the LDP in 1994 (Hodo Station 2024), after

which the factions rebounded. The prime minister likely sees the move as an opportunity to salvage his poor approval ratings, as almost half of the Japanese public wants the abolition of LDP factions (NHK 2024). The political reform panel contains 10 Seiwakai members, nine of whom are themselves

steps to be taken (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, p. 390).

⁵ Here, I use a broad and military affairs-focused definition of militarization, as “the gathering of

arms, the raising of armies, and the seeking of military bases and allies” (Naidu 1985, p. 2).

suspected of being embroiled in the funds scandal. The conservative daily Sankei Shimbun's political commentator suspects Kishida believes that he needs young Seiwakai members' support going forward and is therefore trying to keep them integrated rather than shutting them out (Channeru Seiron 2024).

While three factions have announced their dissolution, three remain undecided, making the outcome of Kishida's gambit still unclear (Kawaguchi 2024). One of the three is led by LDP kingmaker and ex-PM Aso Taro, who has been an intraparty supporter of Kishida but is reportedly now upset about where things are going (Asahi 2024). Even if all current factions were dissolved, that could of course simply herald the birth of new factions. These could be formed around the prime minister on the one hand, and those who are currently in a "group of the factionless", such as Suga and former faction boss and perennial party outsider Ishiba Shigeru on the other; where Aso sets his foot down is likely to matter much. Elections for the Lower House do not need to be held until late 2025, but in fall 2024, Kishida's first term as LDP president is up. What happens in and around the party until that point and, crucially, what that does to Kishida's approval ratings, is likely to

decide whether he will face a challenger or not.

Conclusion

In sum, radical change in Japan's security outlook is unlikely in 2024. The dominant conservative preference for the spectacular in security reforms and of community building with the "likeminded" is likely to continue. In part this is because the big changes were already announced at the end of 2022; focus now is on how to deliver the changes, particularly regarding funding. The imperative to align with the "likeminded countries" in the West as a leading defender of the rules-based order feeds into acquiring spectacular military capability, to the extent that status within that likeminded Western community is defined by having such hard security capabilities.

When Japanese security policy make the international news, reports often declare the country's pacifist tradition as once and for all ended - over and over again. What such commentary misses is, as this piece has tried to argue, that the militarizing trend is rather a long-term one. This is underpinned by long standing political goals to that effect, a fundamental driver of which is the aim for international status, and community building with those countries whose

recognition is seen as desirable. This is not to say that there is no “Japanese pacifism” or that the Japanese government never acted in line with a more “pacifist” inclination. It rather means that the country’s pacifism exists as one narrative among several of what Japan is or should be, and that is not the narrative that dominates today’s political class in Japan.

Be it through defense exports, OSA, or deepening alignment with U.S. allies and partners, Japan’s 2024 trajectory is

relatively staked out. As the country’s tragic start to the year shows, however – a large earthquake off the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture and the collision on Haneda Airport between a Coast Guard plane and a Japan Airlines passenger aircraft – the unexpected and potentially trajectory-changing does not always involve the actions of other states, complicating any predictions of the future.

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