

# JAPAN'S HISTORIC MOMENT: GLOBAL CHALLENGES NECESSITATE POLICY EVOLUTION

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*As Japan's power and importance in the regional and international domain continues to grow, this issue brief provides an analysis of the domestic and international threats that are challenging and shaping Japan's historic moments. The issue brief asserts that while the assassination of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe showed that Japan is not immune to domestic threats, it is incorrect to connect it to threats to democracy or rule of law. However, challenges such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's belligerent actions, the growing U.S.-Japan camaraderie, status quo changes in the Taiwan Strait as well as economic challenges such as Japan's own new form of capitalism highlight that Japan's national security and defense policy remains filled with symbolism. Arguing that the need for Japan to stop being constrained by an outdated constitution has arrived, the author sets the tone for Japan's 'historic' moment in the form of evolution of its policies vis-à-vis present day challenges.*

The assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō on July 8, 2022, was shocking in many ways. First, the careless way he was protected, or rather, not protected, by the police was not in accordance with what one could expect of a professional security detail. Second, although there is always a risk of high-profile politicians being targeted by potential assassins, the domestic threat level against Abe was relatively low. He was not liked by everyone, but he was never much of a target of hatred and abuse

on social media. Those on the extreme right, who historically have been the ones behind assassinations of politicians in Japan, were probably not dissatisfied with Abe's policy agenda. On the contrary, his goal of amending the constitution and putting an end to the post-war period, with all its demands for continuous apologies from neighboring countries, together with his ambition to have Japan accepted as a "normal country", was in line with Abe's profile as an outspoken nationalist.

True, the murderer belonged to a category of radicals that are always hard to detect. His motive was personal, accusing the former Prime Minister of being guilty of making his mother donate the family fortune to a religious organization to which Abe was said to have belonged. But professional security guards are, or should be, trained in identifying potential threats and stop the potential assassin before he or she goes to action. This was obviously not the case in this tragic incident.

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### **Domestic Threats**

Japan is no doubt a peaceful country, but it has experienced several assassinations and assassination attempts of high-profile people before. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were at least three attempts to kill the Emperor. Prime Minister Hara Takashi was stabbed to death in 1921. Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi was shot in 1930, and died the year after. Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was killed in 1932. After World War II, in 1960, the socialist party leader Asanuma Inejiro was stabbed to death during a speech, and the same year Abe's maternal grandfather, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, was stabbed six times, but managed to survive.

On March 20, 1995, the religious sect Aum Shinrikyô was behind the infamous sarin gas attack on Tokyo's subway system during the early morning rush hour. Thirteen people died and thousands were injured. The attack occurred simultaneously

on several subway lines bound for stations close to the government quarters and the intention was to kill as many as possible. For years the sect had managed to build chemical and weapon factories without being discovered by the police. Ten days after the attack, the chief of the National Police Agency, was shot and seriously injured outside his home in Tokyo.

The size of the Japanese police force is large, with more or less the same number of police officers per capita as the United States, but the number of firearm related deaths per year is close to zero. One of the main reasons for this is the strict gun laws. This may have contributed to the relatively lax performance of the Japanese police. The high level of security in society has perhaps lowered the vigilance of the police officers and made their presence one of show, rather than one of attentiveness.

### **International Threats**

As for Japan's national security and defense policy, it has also to a large degree been filled with symbolism. Article 9 of the constitution, forced upon Japan by the victorious allied forces, outright forbids Japan of having military forces. Post-war developments later made it necessary for both Japan and the international community to adapt to reality and Japan has now one of the strongest forces in the world. Its bilateral alliance with the United States has also developed into a two-way relationship, one which expects Japan not to be passive if a larger regional conflict were to occur. However, as reality has taken precedence over symbolism, amendment of the constitution has become a step towards recognizing Japan as a normal country, something which former Prime Minister Abe often underlined. Just like the allied powers wanted after the end of World War II, Japan has, during the nearly eight decades that have followed, developed into a solid democracy, an advocate of the rule of law and a responsible member of the world community. According to the UN charter, Japan, like other countries, has the right to defend itself. So, why

should it be forbidden to have military forces, even if the ban today is just symbolic?

One argument could of course be that if constitutional restrictions were to be lifted, the risk of Japan again developing into a hungry and aggressive imperialist power would be too large. This is what China, North Korea and sometimes also South Korea argue, but for imperialism to develop you first need an ideology saying that the Empire in question needs more territory. No serious Japanese politician or ideologist argues this way, although Japan has territorial disputes with its neighbors. Also, the Japanese government has never expressed a will or nurtured a plan to capture the “Northern territories” from Russia or the Takeshima/Dokdo islets from South Korea by force.

China, on the other hand, has not refrained from continuously sending coastguard vessels and armed fishing boats into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. China has also been very aggressive in its claims for territory in the South and East China Seas. Its statements are often belligerent in character.

### *Russian Invasion of Ukraine*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not only put an end to the existing European security order, it has also torn apart any prospect for a smooth relationship between Russia and Japan. It has effectively crushed the hopes for a mutually agreed settlement of the territorial issue. Putin’s war does not belong to the 21<sup>st</sup> century: it is an attempt to conquer territory in a manner that in many aspects resembles the European wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is an old-style war of aggression and certainly not something that you would expect of a member of the United Nations, let alone one which has a permanent seat on the Security Council and is supposed to behave in a responsible manner.

The Japanese government has imposed an unprecedented level of economic sanctions against Russia following the invasion. These include

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freezing the assets of Russia’s Central Bank and have been a stark contrast to Japan’s subdued reaction to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Japan has also moved to ban or restrict imports of Russian machinery, lumber, and vodka, and the Japanese government has expelled nine Russian diplomats in response to the revelations about crimes against humanity in Bucha. In response, Moscow announced that it was officially withdrawing from negotiations for a bilateral peace treaty.

Prime Minister Kishida has been a sharp critic of Russia’s behavior and stressed that it disrupts the very foundation of the international order. The level of this criticism is not only rare, it also signals Japan’s willingness to take action in tandem with other Western nations. If earlier Japan did not want to disrupt the possibility of success in its bilateral negotiations with Russia over the Northern Territories, it now seems to put emphasis on an approach that will not leave room for doubts about Japan’s commitment to maintaining a stable framework of agreed international principles. Of course, Japan does not want to see anything similar happening in its own backyard. Russia’s illegal war against Ukraine has also influenced Japanese public opinion, which has made it easier for the Japanese government to take tougher measures. A poll taken



in April showed that 73.7 percent of the Japanese people supported tough economic sanctions against Russia.<sup>1</sup>

The tougher Japanese stand does not really risk any potential progress in the bilateral negotiations, since Russia under Putin has already shown its unwillingness to cede any territory back to Japan. In Singapore on November 14, 2018, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and President Putin cited the “mutual trust” that had been built up over the previous two years under Abe’s “new approach” to bilateral relations, and the two agreed to accelerate peace treaty talks “on the basis of the 1956 Declaration”. However, shortly after, Putin poured cold water on any expectation, saying that ownership over the islands was not on the table and that all of them would remain Russian territory.<sup>2</sup>

### *Japan-China*

China’s increasing activities in the Pacific Ocean and its recent attempt to bolster its influence over Pacific island nations is not only a concern for the US but also for Japan. In 2019, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched their diplomatic ties to China from Taiwan, and earlier this year China and the Solomon Islands signed a security pact that,

it seems, would allow the deployment of Chinese police, military and other armed personnel, as well as docking Chinese military ships on the islands. Pacific island countries like Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu have also looked favorably on participating in Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative. For Japan, this is a threat to its ambition to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific. China has already built artificial islands with military infrastructure in the South China Sea.

However, it is not a simple process for China to extend its influence over the Pacific island nations, since some of the islands are very much aware of what is going on, and have expressed fears of being dragged into a new cold war. Even if developments do not go that far, it is very important for Japan to work through cooperation structures such as the Quad to make sure that emphasis on human rights and the rule of law is maintained, and that the concept of open societies is not sacrificed on the altar of Chinese enticements. Recently, the Quad leaders agreed to extend more than USD 50 billion in infrastructure aid and investment in the Indo-Pacific over the next five years, and Japan has already hosted the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting every three years since 1997, an initiative which has now grown in importance.<sup>3</sup>

No doubt, Japan’s economic interests will be at stake if U.S.-China relations should deteriorate further. The economic and trade interdependence between Japan and China is important and it is not an easy thing for Japan to turn its back on China. Japan’s foreign direct investment in China has grown substantially over the last 20 years and Japanese corporations rely heavily on unrestrained access to the Chinese market. Japan has also kept a low profile when it comes to human rights abuses in China, but ever since the imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, Tokyo has become increasingly outspoken. And when a Japanese diplomat in February this year was held for several hours without being allowed to call the Japanese Embassy, trust in China took a further blow.<sup>4</sup>

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Recently, in a meeting held on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum in Singapore, Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo (and Abe Shinzō's brother) told his Chinese counterpart, Wei Fenghe, that he viewed joint Sino-Russian military exercises around Japan, including the deployment of long-range strategic bombers, as a threatening demonstration against Japan.

### *Japan-USA*

Recent developments on the world stage have no doubt bolstered the importance of the U.S.-Japan bilateral cooperation. Gone are the days when the imbalance in Japan's favor of the bilateral trade led to extreme tensions between the two countries in the 1980s. Accusations in both directions of incompetence, arrogance and unfairness have now been replaced by assurances of close cooperation. Japan is dependent on U.S. strategic protection and the U.S. has become dependent on Japan increasing its capabilities in the military field. Washington will defend Japan against an attack from China, including probably the Senkaku islands, but Japan also needs to abandon its hesitation to use its Self-Defense Forces in joint operations with American forces. This was actually realized in 2015, when new laws integrating the reinterpretation of Article 9 made it possible for U.S. and Japanese forces to

operate together in the region went into effect. Japanese forces are now allowed to protect U.S. forces if they are attacked while protecting Japanese interests in the region.

Japan has indeed already begun to increase its military capabilities and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party has now adopted a policy platform which contains a commitment to invest up to 2 percent of GDP in defense. The Self-Defense Forces has increased its maritime presence in Okinawa's main island and its ground forces on islands closest to the East China Sea. Integration of command is something that will also be important for crisis response.<sup>5</sup>

### *Japan-Taiwan*

China's increasingly belligerent behavior against Taiwan has recently led Tokyo to issue statements of support for its southern neighbor. This has angered Beijing, but a military confrontation between Beijing and Taipei would hardly occur without Japan being directly threatened, thereby forcing the Japanese government to hint at supporting Taiwan militarily against an invasion. Whether this can be translated into real action, or if it is mainly rhetoric, is a relevant question, but what perhaps is more important is that it signals a policy change. It has become more important to keep Taiwan integrated and safe within the sphere of democracies than to keep China from taking punitive actions against Japanese business interests.

If Japan's National Security Strategy of 2013 and the 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines and Medium Term Defense Program were to be updated, something the Kishida administration has indicated it wants to do, it would be difficult to do it without even further stressing the importance of Taiwanese security to Japan's national interests.<sup>6</sup>

Former Prime Minister Abe published a syndicated article on April 20, comparing the situation in Ukraine with that surrounding Taiwan. An obvious similarity, he claimed, was the gap in military power between Taiwan and China, just like that between

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Ukraine and Russia, was growing by the year. Neither Ukraine nor Taiwan has formal military allies and both are forced to meet threats or attacks alone. The United States has its Taiwan Relations Act from 1979, requiring it to provide Taiwan with military equipment and supplies if the island nation would be attacked, but the US policy of “strategic ambiguity” has made it unclear if it would actually assist in defending Taiwan, Abe said.<sup>7</sup> President Biden stated in a press conference in Tokyo on May 23 that he actually would use military force to defend Taiwan if it were ever attacked by China, but both the White House and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III later denied that the traditional policy had changed, saying that the One China Policy was still intact, as was the Taiwan Relations Act.<sup>8</sup>

### **Japan’s ‘New Form of Capitalism’**

Former Prime Minister Abe was a proponent of “Abenomics”, which aimed at revitalizing the Japanese economy by a mix of deregulations and stimulations. In a speech to the City of London in early May this year, Prime Minister Kishida can be said to have built on Abe’s ideas when he presented a “new form of capitalism” that Japan ought to develop. He said that Japan prides itself on being the world’s foremost promoter of free trade in

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recent years and therefore expects to also take on a leading role. One problem, he said, was economic externalities, such as widening inequality, climate change and issues deriving from urbanization. A second pressing challenge was that posed by authoritarian states. Capitalism has changed its shape before and experienced at least two major transformations, according to Kishida: One was going from laissez-faire to the welfare state, the second shift from the welfare state to neoliberalism. But while the earlier changes were characterized by the pendulum swinging between “market or state” and “public or private”, the new form of capitalism will, according to Kishida, have the public and private sectors working together.<sup>9</sup>

While his characterization of the transformative process might be correct, this “new form of capitalism” is already a reality in most of the European states, particularly in northern Europe. What is significant, however, is that his vision underlines Japan’s dependence on a free and open economic and political climate, thereby signaling Japan’s willingness to cooperate with like-minded countries as a first priority and then deal with authoritarian regimes from that position of strength.

## Japan's Global Vision

At the Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore in June this year, Prime Minister Kishida presented his view of what is of priority for Japan: a rules-based international order, enhanced national defense capabilities, regional security cooperation, a world without nuclear weapons, reforming the UN Security Council and international economic security. He also announced a security assistance plan for Indo-Pacific countries, a package which would include patrol boats and transport infrastructure, and investments in training and education of necessary human resources. Kishida said that Japan will continue to share technical knowledge and experience in its cooperation with some 20 countries in the region.<sup>10</sup>

Prime Minister Kishida also said that Japan would fundamentally reinforce its defense capabilities within the next five years and that Japan now has adopted a new type of realism in its coming diplomacy. Kishida also promised to provide at least USD 2 billion over the next three years in “maritime aid” to Indo-Pacific countries. He said Japan would utilize cooperation of the Quad and frameworks of international organizations for that purpose.<sup>11</sup>

The limit of 1 percent of GDP has long been an issue of great debate in Japan, but the situation is different now, after the outbreak of the Ukraine war, and raising defense spending to 2 percent will be less of a contentious issue. The reason is not an ongoing militarization of Japan, but simply that unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in violation of international law are continuing by other countries and that Japan has to adapt to that situation.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

The assassination of former Prime Minister Abe was certainly a historic moment, but it did not shake the foundations of Japan's democracy. It was based on personal grudge and was not aimed at challenging the rule of law as a system. However, it did show that Japan is not immune towards threats of this

kind, no matter how stable and peaceful the society is. It underlined, in spite of its tragic content, that Japan is a normal and open country with normal problems.

On the international arena, things are slightly different. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, combined with China's belligerency, not to speak of the constant North Korean bursts of threats against South Korea, the United States and Japan, are signs that things have changed, and to a significant degree. Neither Japan nor the rest of the free world can afford to have Japan being constrained by an outdated constitution. Japan needs to be transformed into a “normal country” not just in social and economic terms, but also in terms of international law.

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## Endnotes

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