

IMPLICATIONS OF THE US ELECTION FOR JAPAN'S ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

by
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Elections are the bedrock of democracy, providing citizens with a vital mechanism to hold their leaders accountable. Beyond addressing domestic issues, the electoral process also plays a crucial role in shaping foreign policy decisions. A potential shift from a Democratic to a Republican leader in the U.S. elections could have significant repercussions in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Having said that, this blog discusses how the U.S. election might influence Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific.

Shared Values and Interests

As the world's largest economy and a prominent leader in humanitarian and military endeavors, the U.S. elections exert a substantial influence on international relations, particularly in critical regions such as the Indo-Pacific. There is a primary reason for this, namely Biden's and Trump's divergent political perspectives on the respective region. Clearly, the Biden administration has shown robust support for the Indo-Pacific, particularly through the reinforcement of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ([Quad](#)).

This initiative, originally launched by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo [Abe](#) in cooperation with allies like Australia and India, was further advanced with the support of the U.S. This became even more evident when Biden assumed office, stressing the importance of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific. Biden's commitment was unmistakable when he convened the first [Quad](#) summit, where leaders deliberated on regional security, climate change, and other vital issues.

Following the summit, a [joint](#) statement was released reaffirming their shared values and commitment to upholding an open, rules-based order. Although

the outcomes in areas like COVID-19 and semiconductors were modest, the summit effectively laid the groundwork for advancing three strategic objectives: Countering China, aligning India, and revitalizing alliances. However, the journey to strengthening the Indo-Pacific presence did not conclude there. Under President Biden and Japan's Prime Minister Kishida, the U.S.-Japan alliance has bolstered efforts to address [challenges](#) in the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, the Biden administration prioritized its alliance with Japan, making it a crucial partner of its Indo-Pacific strategy. This emphasis stems from shared strategic interests particularly regarding North Korea and China, which are viewed as a threat to security—a concern highlighted during the summit.

The administration's strategy emphasizes the pivotal role of the alliance in ensuring regional stability and confronting emerging threats, which have become more critical in the wake of the upcoming U.S. election. With President Biden recently deciding not to run for re-election, he has endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris as his successor. While we can think that she will follow in his footsteps, her [record](#) shows otherwise as she has criticized China for "stealing intellectual property and other products". She also opposed then-President Trump's [tariffs](#) on China, yet the Biden administration largely upheld those tariffs. Despite her rigorous approach towards China, Harris' endorsement signals continuity in the U.S.-Japan relationship. While this means her leadership is expected to maintain the cooperative approach typical of the Biden foreign policy, there are concerns about her capacity to effectively execute this strategy amidst geopolitical shifts. Such a move necessitate a more robust U.S. presence, a stance Trump has been hesitant to adopt without shared responsibility from other allies.

Security Challenges and Concerns

Japan has long stood as the U.S.' most reliable ally in countering China's strategic and national security threats in the Indo-Pacific region. This robust cooperation was thoroughly articulated during the [Japan-US Security Consultative Committee](#) (2+2)

meeting in 2023, where both nations addressed the growing threat posed by China in the East China Sea. The meeting underscored the importance of maintaining a strong partnership, particularly as the alliance faces a range of security challenges, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing strategic military cooperation between China and Russia. To address joint threats more effectively, Japan updated its defense guidelines to enhance measures against regional risks, particularly from China. This includes the revised [“Three Principles on the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology”](#) and their implementation guidelines, based on the new “National Security Strategy” from December 2022.

These changes encompasses expansion of Japan's role in missions while deepening cooperation with the U.S. and other allies. The new defense strategy includes a pledge over the next five years, starting in 2023, with the goal of increasing annual defense spending to [2 percent](#) of GDP by 2027. President Biden welcomed the decision, noting that it brings Japan in line with other nations in countering security threats. Although this strategic alignment boosts international cooperation and enhances collective security, Japan faces a significant challenge to its foreign policy with the upcoming U.S. elections.

Japan has traditionally had good relations with both President Biden and former President Trump. However, this year, concerns are heightened due to their markedly different approaches: Biden's cooperative stance contrasts with Trump's more unilateral methods. This issue became apparent during Trump's presidency when he [asked](#) Japan to increase its contributions for U.S. troop deployments, even threatening to withdraw forces if his demands were not met.

With approximately [40,000](#) U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine personnel stationed at 78 U.S. Armed Forces facilities in Japan, there is a risk that Trump might renew his threat to withdraw the troops if he returns to office. As this scenario raises questions about the continued effectiveness of the alliance in addressing emerging challenges and

maintaining mutual interests, it deepens worries about its future. While Trump successfully established a strong relationship with former Prime Minister Abe, it is uncertain whether he would achieve the same rapport with the current Prime Minister, Kishida. Abe's effectiveness in working closely with Trump was demonstrated by his considerable efforts to build trust, notably becoming the [first](#) foreign leader to meet with Trump in person and concluding the visit with a round of golf. Whereas, in the economic realm, Japan proposed a [U.S.-Japan](#) dialogue chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and Vice President Mike Pence held in Washington D.C. These efforts aimed to correct any misconceptions Trump had about Japan and to clearly distinguish between economic and security policies, ensuring that these issues were addressed separately and effectively.

While this may imply that Trump's re-election might not result in significant disruptions, his increased demands for other countries to share the burden are now more prominent in his political agenda than ever before. This might indicate that his focus on equitable burden-sharing has become more pronounced compared to his previous presidency, potentially resulting in abrupt and unpredictable decisions. This has unsettled many Japanese policymakers, who are using the term [Moshi Tora](#), meaning “if Trump,” to reflect their growing unease.

Japan's Presence and Commitment

In alignment with their alliance commitment, Japan has joined with the U.S. on imposing [chipmaking](#) restrictions on China. While this has posed challenges for Japanese companies such as Nikon and Tokyo Electron, it has also reinforced U.S.-Japan relations by strengthening their commitment to cutting-edge technologies like AI and cloud infrastructure. This was solidified with Microsoft's decision to invest [\\$2.9 billion](#) in Japanese AI, including U.S. universities and companies such as Nvidia, Amazon, and Arm. While concerns span political, diplomatic, and economic spheres, it is crucial to emphasize that the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance will depend not only on the actions of the new U.S. President but also on Japan's approach to regional threats. Although Japan has

effectively revised its national security strategy and bolstered the SDF, it is essential to position itself strongly to tackle threats in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, revising Article 9 could strengthen the U.S.- Japan alliance, enabling more decisive actions.

Although Abe attempted to revise Article 9, he was unable to do so due to insufficient support. This led us to assume that both current and future administrations are likely to encounter the same challenge. It is therefore crucial for policymakers and citizens alike to recognize Japan's significant role in international affairs from the outset. While Kishida is commended for his strong stance and leadership in Japan's foreign policy, having become the second Prime Minister, after Abe, to address the U.S. Congress, he will inevitably face challenges in elevating Japan's international presence regardless of the outcome of the U.S. elections. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the elections, one thing remains clear: The U.S.-Japan alliance is both important and far-reaching. This was further confirmed on Sunday, July 28, 2024, when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa held their first ministerial-level "[2+2](#)" security talks in Tokyo. The meeting reaffirmed their alliance and underscored the importance of a free Indo-Pacific, following President Biden's withdrawal from the electoral campaign.

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