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Editors' Note

Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer 2025): Japan—Its Relations and Environs

Welcome to the Summer 2025 issue of the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. We are proud to present a thematic issue focused on Japan's strategic posture and its role in shaping regional and global security.

Guest edited by Dr. Satoru Nagao of the Hudson Institute, this edition brings together a distinguished group of international scholars to examine Japan's responses to a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. From Europe to the Middle East to the contested waters of the South China Sea, Japan's foreign and defense policies are increasingly central to the Indo-Pacific's future.

We begin with Dr. Nanae Baldauff, who explores Japan's deepening defense cooperation with NATO. Her study traces the historical roots and strategic implications of this partnership, emphasizing Japan's growing role in transatlantic security.

Drs. Rotem Kowner and Yoram Evron turn to the Middle East, examining Japan's diplomatic balancing act following the October 7 Hamas-led attack on Israel. Their analysis situates Japan's response within its broader global strategy and energy security concerns.

In a compelling piece on middle-power diplomacy, Dr. Richard Javad Heydarian assesses Japan's role in the South China Sea disputes. He underscores Japan's efforts to support Southeast Asian partners, counterbalance China, and reinforce a multipolar regional order.

Dr. Fumiko Sasaki offers a conceptual shift, arguing that China's artificial islands in the South China Sea are not merely military outposts but intelligence platforms. Drawing on lessons from the war in Ukraine and China's doctrine of intelligentized warfare, she proposes a space-based strategy—one in which Japan plays a vital role—to restore information dominance in the region.

In the Views section, Drs. Kamakshi Wason and Satoru Nagao examine Japan's policy toward the India–China border and the Indian Ocean. Their article highlights Japan's strategic alignment with India and its efforts to secure vital sea lanes through diplomacy, defense cooperation, and infrastructure development.

Together, these contributions offer a comprehensive and forward-looking portrait of Japan's strategic outlook.

—The Editors

Japan, the War in Ukraine, and Japan–Europe Relations

A G7-NATO Alignment Perspective

DR. NANAE BALDAUFF

Abstract

Japan has emerged as the Indo-Pacific’s most resolute supporter of Ukraine, committing more than USD 9 billion in aid and assuming a central role in the global response to Russian aggression. This article examines Japan’s strategic motivations through a “what–why–how” framework, situating its Ukraine policy within the broader context of deepening Japan–Europe security alignment—particularly through the G7 and NATO. Far from a gesture of distant solidarity, Tokyo’s stance reflects a deliberate recalibration: projecting normative leadership, hedging against US unpredictability, and signaling deterrence across both Eurasian and Indo-Pacific theaters. The war in Ukraine has become a crucible for transregional cooperation, transforming Japan from a peripheral player to a pivotal actor in the defense of international order. As US leadership wavers under the second Trump administration, Japan–Europe ties are set to deepen further, driven by shared threats, converging interests, and the imperative to uphold sovereignty against revisionist powers on both ends of the Eurasian continent.

Japan has emerged as Asia’s most resolute backer of Ukraine in its struggle against Russia’s brutal and unprovoked aggression. This support is not incidental. It reflects Tokyo’s deliberate effort to reposition itself as a frontline defender of the post–Cold War order—a posture it has pursued through deepening ties with European partners in both security and defense domains. With USD 9 billion in total assistance, Japan now ranks as the fifth-largest international donor to Ukraine, behind only the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France.¹ More striking still, among the 51 states participating in the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, Japan stands alone as the only country outside the Euro-Atlantic area to sign the Ukraine Compact—an agreement formalized in July 2024 and notable for its symbolism and strategic intent.

Japan’s support is not merely financial. It is political, diplomatic, and increasingly strategic. Through the Group of Seven (G7) and its intensifying partnership with

¹ Christoph Trebesch et al., “The Ukraine Support Tracker: Which Countries Help Ukraine and How?” Kiel Working Paper, no. 2218 (2024): 1–75.

NATO, Japan has cast its lot with the liberal democratic powers of the West. This alignment raises critical questions: What motivates Japan to shoulder burdens in a war thousands of miles from its shores? Why does Tokyo's support matter in the evolving global order? And in what ways have Japan–Europe relations enabled or amplified Japan's role in Ukraine's defense?

To answer these questions, this article employs a “what–why–how” framework, analyzing Japan's objectives, rationale, and operational approach through the lens of its engagement with Europe—particularly via G7 diplomacy and institutional coordination with NATO.²

Scholars have approached Japan's support for Ukraine from several angles. One school emphasizes the tension between continuity and change in Japanese foreign policy. For decades, Tokyo hewed closely to constitutional pacifism while quietly expanding its global diplomatic footprint. The invasion of Ukraine by a permanent member of the UN Security Council—brazenly violating the UN Charter—has forced a reckoning. Japan does not frame the war as a clash between democracy and authoritarianism, as Washington often does. Instead, Japanese leaders have cast it as a fundamental assault on international norms—namely, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition against the use of force to alter borders.³

Other analysts highlight Tokyo's evolving posture toward Moscow. For much of the post–Cold War period, Japan pursued a policy of cautious engagement with Russia, motivated by a desire to resolve the Northern Territories dispute and to prevent Russia from falling deeper into China's strategic orbit.⁴ The war in Ukraine upended that calculus. Since 2022, Japan has pivoted decisively, designating Russia

² Paul O'Shea and Sebastian Maslow, “Rethinking Change in Japan's Security Policy: Punctuated Equilibrium Theory and Japan's Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Policy Studies* 45, nos. 3–4 (2024): 653–76, <https://doi.org/>; Yuko Nakano, “Japan's Leadership Role on Ukraine,” *CSIS*, 22 February 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>; Yuichi Hosoya, “Dōyōsuru liberaru kokusai chitsujo [Liberal International Order in Turmoil],” *Gaiko* 72 (March–April 2022): 6–11; and Michito Tsuruoka, “Why the War in Ukraine Is Not about Democracy versus Authoritarianism,” *RUSI*, 27 June 2022, <https://rusi.org/>.

³ Atsuko Higashino, “In Defense of Japanese Aid to Ukraine,” *Nippon*, 11 October 2024, <https://www.nippon.com/>; and Michito Tsuruoka, “Naze Ukuraina shien ga hitsuyō nanoka” [Why Support for Ukraine Is Necessary], *Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.spf.org/>.

⁴ Yoko Hirose, “Japan–Russia Relations: Toward a Peace Treaty and Beyond,” in *Japan's Global Diplomacy*, ed. Yuki Tatsumi (Washington: Stimson Center, 2015); James D. J. Brown, “Japan's Security Cooperation with Russia: Neutralizing the Threat of a China–Russia United Front,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2018): 861–82, <https://doi.org/>; James D. J. Brown, “Abe's Russia Policy: All Cultivation and No Fruit,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 1 (2019): 148–55, <https://www.jstor.org/>; Matteo Dian and Anna Kireeva, “Wedge Strategies in Russia–Japan Relations,” *Pacific Review* 35, no. 5 (2022): 853–83, <https://doi.org/>.

as a “strong security concern” and joining Western sanctions and diplomatic rebukes—actions unthinkable a decade ago.⁵

A third, narrower perspective centers on bilateral Japan–Ukraine ties. While there is a modest body of literature tracing Japan’s political, economic, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, this analysis tends to treat the relationship in isolation. It overlooks the broader geopolitical significance of Japan’s Ukraine policy—particularly its implications for Japan’s security alignment with Europe and its emerging role as a normative power capable of shaping global responses to territorial aggression.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did more than redraw the strategic map of Europe—it coincided with, and catalyzed, Japan’s intensifying pursuit of security and defense partnerships with Europe.⁶ Long before Russian armor crossed into Donbas, Tokyo had already begun recalibrating its foreign policy, seeking new alignments with the European Union, NATO, and key European states.⁷ The aim was clear: to diversify its strategic dependencies and forge a shared transregional understanding of the global nature of the challenge posed by China.

While the COVID-19 pandemic had already chipped away at European illusions about Beijing, it was Russia’s war—tacitly endorsed and economically sustained by China—that hardened European resolve. For Japanese strategists, this confluence of events reinforced the imperative to knit together like-minded democracies across continents. The Ukraine war became the crucible in which Japan–Europe defense cooperation matured from aspirational to operational.

Yet, much of the existing literature remains confined to Japan’s early material support for Ukraine—its sanctions, aid packages, and refugee resettlement efforts. These accounts miss the deeper transformation: Japan’s support for Ukraine is not an isolated gesture of solidarity but a logical extension of its broader strategic pivot westward. It marks a deliberate integration of Japan into Europe’s evolving security architecture, not merely as a partner, but increasingly as a stakeholder.

⁵ *The National Security Strategy 2013* (Tokyo: Japan Cabinet Office, 2013); and *The National Security Strategy 2022* (Tokyo: Japan Cabinet Office, 2022).

⁶ Sheila Smith, “Ukraine Response Deepens Japan–Europe Strategic Ties,” *CFR* (blog), 29 April 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/>; and Céline Pajon and Eva Pejsova, “Rapprochement in Times of Crisis: War in Ukraine and the EU–Japan Partnership,” CSDS Policy Brief 9/2022, 11 May 2022, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy, <https://csds.vub.be/>.

⁷ Michito Tsuruoka, “Japan–Europe Relations: Towards a Full Political and Security Partnership,” in *Japan’s Global Diplomacy*, ed. Yuki Tatsumi (Washington: Stimson Center, 2015); Nanae Baldauff, “Japan and Europe: Indivisibility of Security” in *Japan’s Defense Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: Deterrence, Strategic Partnership, and Stable Order Building* (Cham: Springer, 2024), <https://doi.org/>.

One common analytical misstep is the tendency to treat Japan's engagement with the G7 and NATO as separate or loosely related tracks. This compartmentalization obscures the profound and, in many respects, unprecedented convergence between the two institutions. The G7, dominated by European powers—France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, with the EU as an observer—overlaps almost entirely with NATO membership, which includes the United States and Canada. Japan's involvement with both should not be seen as parallel diplomacy, but rather as a unified axis of engagement, leveraging its position in the G7 to interface with NATO's strategic ecosystem.

This article seeks to fill the analytical gap by reframing Japan's Ukraine policy within the broader context of its deepening alignment with Europe. It argues that Japan's support for Ukraine is not just a response to Russian aggression but a strategic recalibration with implications far beyond Eastern Europe. It is a signal—to allies and adversaries alike—that Japan intends to shape, not merely observe, the future contours of global order.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section offers a concise historical overview of Japan–Ukraine political relations to establish a baseline. The third section identifies key strategic parallels between the Ukraine war and Japan's own regional security concerns, thereby clarifying Tokyo's motivations. The fourth section explores why Japan's support for Ukraine matters—not only for the defense of Europe but for the stability of international norms writ large. The fifth section analyzes the operational mechanisms of Japan's coordination with Europe, focusing on its multilateral work through the G7 and NATO. The article concludes by assessing the continued utility of the “what–why–how” framework and draws forward-looking implications for Japan–Europe relations in the context of a second Trump administration.

Japan–Ukraine Bilateral Relationship

Japan recognized Ukraine's independence swiftly, establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. From the late 1990s onward, Tokyo extended technical and financial aid to Kyiv as part of its broader assistance to post-Soviet states.⁸ The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake provided an unexpected catalyst for closer bilateral ties. Japan turned to Ukraine's Chernobyl disaster experience for insight into nuclear

⁸ Kamila Szczepanska, Olga Barbasiewicz, and Viktoriya Voytsekhovska, “Responding to the Crisis: Japan's Changing Foreign Policy and ODA to Ukraine (2014–2023),” *Pacific Review*, July 2024, 1–31, <https://doi.org/>.

disaster management.⁹ This cooperation evolved into joint technical monitoring of both the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear sites, using Japanese satellites launched aboard Ukrainian rockets.¹⁰ Yet despite these practical collaborations, the political relationship lacked institutional depth. It was not until 2015 that a sitting Japanese prime minister—Shinzō Abe—set foot in Ukraine.

This diplomatic reticence was not accidental. Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea coincided with Japan’s own high-stakes effort to normalize relations with Moscow. Tokyo’s strategic calculus at the time centered on two objectives: to resolve the decades-long Northern Territories dispute and to prevent a diplomatically isolated Russia from pivoting further into China’s geopolitical orbit.¹¹ In this balancing act, Ukraine became collateral. Japan issued only a tepid response to the annexation, stating it did not recognize Crimea as part of Russia, suspending visa liberalization talks, and halting negotiations on new agreements.¹² There were no sanctions of consequence. The preference was clear—preserve the diplomatic window with Moscow, even at the cost of principle.

Nonetheless, Japan did draw a red line. It maintained that Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, had violated international law by undermining the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of a fellow UN member. Tokyo’s official stance condemned Russia’s attempt to unilaterally alter the status quo by force—a transgression Japan would not tolerate, whether in Eastern Europe or the Indo-Pacific.

Prime Minister Abe’s 2015 visit to Kyiv marked a turning point. While the gesture was largely symbolic, it laid the groundwork for emerging defense cooperation, including a cyber consultation in 2016 and a defense memorandum and exchange in 2018.¹³ These initiatives remained modest—until Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. In the opening days of the war, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida condemned the Russian assault, stating that it “shakes the foundation of

⁹ “The Second Meeting of the Japan-Ukraine Joint Committee for the cooperation to advance aftermath response to accidents at nuclear power stations” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 18 July 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

¹⁰ “Ukraine, Japan to Monitor Chernobyl and Fukushima from Space,” *Phys.org*, 26 August 2013, <https://phys.org/>.

¹¹ Brown, “Japan’s Security Cooperation with Russia”; and Baldauff, *Japan’s Defense Engagement in the Indo-Pacific*.

¹² Giulio Pugliese, “Japan Responds to Russia’s War: Strong Solidarity with Ukraine with an Eye on China,” IAI Commentaries 22, 11 March 2022, <https://www.iai.it/>; and “Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan on the Measures against Russia over the Crimea Referendum” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 18 March 2014), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

¹³ *2019 Defense of Japan* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 2019), 372, <https://www.mod.go.jp/>.

the international order that never tolerates unilateral change of the status quo by force.”¹⁴

Kishida’s timing was strategic. With Japan poised to assume the G7 presidency in 2023, he recognized an opportunity to showcase Japan’s leadership beyond Asia. Tokyo began translating rhetoric into policy. In March 2023, Japan and Ukraine elevated their diplomatic ties to a “Special Global Partnership.” A year later, Japan became the first nation outside the Euro-Atlantic area to sign a bilateral agreement committing to Ukraine’s defense—a diplomatic milestone that repositioned Tokyo as a pivotal actor in the global response to Russian aggression.¹⁵

What Is the Purpose of Japan’s Support for Ukraine?

At the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida issued a stark warning: “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow.” This was not a rhetorical flourish. It was a calculated statement of strategic doctrine. For Tokyo, the Russian war against Ukraine is not a distant European crisis—it is a rehearsal for the Indo-Pacific. Japan discerns three ominous parallels: the normalization of nuclear blackmail, the erosion of territorial integrity, and the imperative of defense self-reliance.

First, nuclear coercion.

Russia has wielded its nuclear arsenal not as a deterrent but as a shield behind which it wages conventional war with impunity. Moscow has paid no meaningful price for its nuclear saber-rattling.¹⁶ For Japan, this sets a dangerous precedent. Tokyo sits in a neighborhood ringed by three nuclear powers—Russia, China, and North Korea—all of which have grown bolder in recent years. Pyongyang, undeterred by international condemnation, amended its constitution in September 2023 to declare its intention to “develop nuclear weapons to a higher level.”¹⁷ Beijing, meanwhile, is expanding its strategic forces at breakneck speed, with an estimated

¹⁴ “Japan Condemns Russian Attack on Ukraine as Shaking Int’l Order,” *Kyodo News*, 24 February 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/>.

¹⁵ Accord on Support for Ukraine and Cooperation between the Government of Japan and Ukraine, signed 13 June 2024.

¹⁶ Heather Williams, “Why Russia Keeps Rattling the Nuclear Saber,” *CSIS*, 20 May 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

¹⁷ *The Defense of Japan 2024* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense of Japan, , 2024), 203, <https://www.mod.go.jp/>.

600 operational warheads as of mid-2024.¹⁸ And Russia remains the world’s second-largest nuclear power after the United States.¹⁹

Japan relies on the American nuclear umbrella. But extended deterrence is only as credible as the will behind it. The failure of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum—which offered Ukraine security assurances in exchange for denuclearization—has cast a long shadow. Kyiv gave up its nuclear weapons. In return, it received promises. Those promises proved worthless. The lesson is not lost on Tokyo. With doubts now growing about Washington’s commitment to allies under the second Trump administration, Japan must hedge against strategic abandonment.²⁰

Second, territorial integrity.

The United Nations Charter enshrines the principle of sovereign equality and prohibits the use of force to alter borders. Yet international law, in the absence of power, is just parchment. Japan understands this acutely. It remains embroiled in unresolved territorial disputes, most notably with Russia over the Northern Territories—seized by Soviet forces in the waning days of World War II. Eighty years later, no peace treaty exists.

Japan sees Ukraine’s predicament mirrored in Taiwan’s. While Ukraine is universally recognized as a sovereign state, Taiwan occupies a legal and diplomatic gray zone. Only a handful of nations recognize its statehood. China, in defiance of historical fact, claims Taiwan as its own.²¹ Yet Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs is unambiguous:

“Taiwan has never been part of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This is an objective fact and an internationally recognized status quo . . . Taiwan’s sovereignty belongs to the Taiwanese people, and only Taiwanese themselves can decide Taiwan’s future. . . . Taiwan will neither provoke nor bow to pressure from China. The government will continue to staunchly defend Taiwan’s territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and national security.”²²

¹⁸ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 2024), 101.

¹⁹ “Chapter Four: Russia and Eurasia,” in *The Military Balance*, 125, no. 1 (2025): 152–205, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁰ Joseph Rodgers, “The Credibility Challenge: US Extended Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific,” *Open Nuclear Network*, 22 January 2025, <https://platform.opennuclear.org/>.

²¹ Shinichi Kitaoka, “Learn Multiple Lessons from Ukraine Ordeal,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2022): 4–10, <https://doi.org/>.

²² “Statements and Responses: MOFA Rebuts China’s False Claims Concerning Taiwan’s Sovereignty” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan), 26 April 2022), <https://en.mofa.gov.tw/>.

Beijing, however, does not rule out force.²³ Should war erupt over Taiwan, estimates suggest USD 2.6 trillion could vanish from the global economy—an order of magnitude more devastating than the economic fallout of Ukraine.²⁴

The message from Tokyo is clear: territorial conquest, nuclear coercion, and gray-zone warfare must not be allowed to succeed—whether in Europe or in Asia. A failure to respond decisively in one theater invites catastrophe in the other.

Third, defense self-reliance.

The third and most sobering parallel Japan draws from the Ukraine conflict is the imperative of defense self-reliance. In a world absent of a global enforcer—a world governed by power rather than principle—realists have long argued that survival depends on the capacity to defend oneself.²⁵ Japan, tethered to a longstanding alliance with the United States, now finds itself recalibrating that assumption. The American umbrella remains open, but its fabric has begun to fray.

Tokyo's recognition of this strategic reality is not new, but it has grown sharper and more urgent. Japan's first National Security Strategy, adopted in 2013, articulated a three-pronged vision: to bolster indigenous defense capabilities, reinforce the US–Japan alliance, and expand partnerships with other like-minded democracies. The 2022 revision deepened this approach, explicitly embracing a doctrine of proactive deterrence. The new posture includes doubling defense spending, acquiring counterstrike capabilities, and strengthening military-industrial cooperation with states across Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

The war in Ukraine has become a case study in modern defense resilience. Ukrainian forces, far outgunned and outnumbered, have withstood the assault of a major nuclear power by relying on grit, improvisation, and external support. That lesson is not lost on Japanese strategists. If Ukraine—without formal alliance guarantees—can impose costs on Moscow, then Japan must ensure it can do the same to any regional aggressor. The principle is not mere imitation; it is adaptation. Tokyo understands that, in the event of a Taiwan contingency or a crisis in the East China Sea, the first hours will determine whether deterrence holds or collapses. Preparedness cannot be subcontracted.

²³ “China Won't Renounce Use of Force over Taiwan; Xi Visits Frontline Island,” *Reuters*, 16 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

²⁴ “\$2.6tn Could Evaporate from Global Economy in Taiwan Emergency,” *Nikkei Asia*, 22 August 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>; and “China Attack on Taiwan Would Hit Global Trade More than Ukraine War, Says Taiwan,” *Reuters*, 14 June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

²⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 615–28.

Japanese public opinion has shifted in tandem with this new strategic clarity. Two years into the war, polling revealed sustained public support for Ukraine, including the resettlement of Ukrainian refugees.²⁶ This reflects not only empathy, but a broader recognition that Japan’s national security is bound to the global defense of sovereignty and law.

In September 2024, Shigeru Ishiba assumed the premiership in a moment of mounting geopolitical uncertainty. At the third anniversary of the Ukraine war, Ishiba addressed a virtual G7 summit—one notably clouded by American disengagement. The new US president had shown little interest in sustaining Ukraine’s fight. Nonetheless, Ishiba delivered a message with unmistakable resolve: the international community must not absorb the wrong lessons from Ukraine—that nuclear intimidation works, or that borders can be redrawn by force without consequence.²⁷ The wrong lessons are that countries can get away with nuclear bullying and invading another country’s territory.

Japan’s support for Ukraine is thus not a distant act of charity—it is a proximate act of self-preservation. It is aimed squarely at China. The message is calibrated and strategic: any attempt by Beijing to replicate Moscow’s adventurism in the Indo-Pacific will provoke a coordinated response. The stakes extend well beyond the defense of Ukraine. They include the fate of Taiwan, the credibility of US alliances, and Japan’s own survival as a sovereign nation in a rapidly hardening global order.

Why Does Japan’s Support for Ukraine Matter?

Japan’s support for Ukraine matters not only because of what it represents, but because of what it prevents. It reinforces two pillars of the current international order: the indivisibility of security between Europe and Asia, and the sanctity of territorial integrity under international law. Both are under direct assault.

²⁶ For example, “Seifu no ukuraina shien hyōka 63%” [63% Approves Government’s Support for Ukraine], *Nikkei Shimbun*, 26 February 2024, <https://www.nikkei.com/>; “Ukuraina hinan min ni taisuru ishiki chōsa” [Opinion Survey on Refugees from Ukraine], *Nippon Foundation*, 28 March 2024; “Ukraina shinkō ninen: shien keizoku subeki nanawari ‘shien zukare’ no naka ‘nishigawa icchi no shien’ hitsuyō 34% FNN yoron chōsa” [FNN Public Survey Ukraine Invasion 2 Years On: Amid Support Fatigue 70% Endorsed Continuation of Support; 34% Supported the Western Unity to Support Necessary], *Fuji News Network*, 26 February 2024, <https://www.fnn.jp/>.

²⁷ “Press conference by Prime Minister Ishiba regarding the G7 Leaders’ Video Conference and the International Summit on the Support of Ukraine” (press release, Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 24 February 2025), <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/>.

Japan has long asserted that the war in Ukraine is not a regional dispute but a global inflection point.²⁸ This is not a diplomatic abstraction. It is a strategic conviction grounded in geography, history, and power politics. For years, Tokyo attempted to coax Moscow out of Beijing's orbit—an effort now thoroughly overtaken by events. Russia and China have deepened their military, economic, and diplomatic partnership, with Beijing playing the role of economic enabler, shielding Moscow from the full weight of Western sanctions. Chinese state-owned enterprises continue to supply Russia with components vital to its war machine, while providing financial and trade lifelines through yuan-based settlements and gray-market logistics.

Beijing's support is transactional but strategic. Its goal is to ensure the survival—and ideally the success—of a fellow authoritarian regime hostile to the West and sympathetic to Chinese ambitions. The longer Russia bleeds NATO and fractures transatlantic unity, the greater the strategic space for China to act in the Indo-Pacific.²⁹

This alignment is not merely rhetorical. China and Russia have expanded joint naval exercises and long-range bomber patrols—often in Japan's maritime backyard.³⁰ These operations are not confidence-building measures. They are rehearsals, intended to demonstrate that both states can operate in tandem against shared adversaries. North Korea, too, has entered this axis of autocracy. In 2022, it was one of just six states to vote against a UN resolution demanding Russia halt its aggression.³¹ Since then, Pyongyang has reportedly dispatched labor, materiel, and troops to support Moscow's war effort.³² The Russia–North Korea strategic partnership now functions as a visible bridge between European and Asian theaters.

For Tokyo, these developments obliterate any lingering notion of strategic compartmentalization. The Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic are no longer discrete arenas. They are two fronts in a single, systemic struggle. That is why Japan's support for Ukraine must be viewed not as an act of altruism, but as a strategic imperative. If non-European states like China and North Korea are backing Russia, then non-European democracies—including Japan—must do the same for Ukraine. Otherwise, deterrence will collapse, first in Europe, then in Asia.

²⁸ “Japan-Netherlands Summit Meeting” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 24 March 2014), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>; and “G7 Foreign Minister Meeting” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 19 February 2022), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²⁹ Michal Bogusz and Witold Rodkiewicz, “Three Years of War in Ukraine: The Chinese–Russian Alliance Passes the Test,” *Centre for Eastern Studies* (Poland), 20 February 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/>.

³⁰ “Development of Russian Armed Forces in the vicinity of Japan” (press release, Ministry of Defense of Japan, September 2024), <https://www.mod.go.jp/>.

³¹ UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/6, adopted with the approval of 141 member states.

³² Edward Howell, “North Korea and Russia's Dangerous Partnership: The Threat to Global Security from the Kim-Putin Axis and How to Respond,” *Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

The second reason Japan’s support matters lies in its defense of first principles. If Russia’s invasion succeeds—if borders can be redrawn by force and treaties shredded with impunity—then the international order becomes a carcass for revisionist powers to pick apart. The principle of territorial integrity, as enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, is not self-enforcing. It requires collective will, consistent action, and credible penalties.

That is precisely what the G7, with Japan assuming a pivotal leadership role in 2023, set out to achieve. Sanctions remain among the most potent instruments available to democracies short of armed conflict. When wielded with coordination and resolve, they can impose real costs—not only on a belligerent’s military-industrial base, but on its long-term capacity to wage geopolitical revisionism. The G7’s response to Russian aggression has been both comprehensive and strategic, targeting the architecture that enables the Kremlin’s war effort.

The measures include:³³

1. Establishing an *Enforcement Coordination Mechanism* to detect, prevent, and punish sanctions evasion and circumvention;
2. Cutting off Russia’s access to advanced materials, technologies, and dual-use industrial equipment sourced from within G7 jurisdictions;
3. Imposing export bans and enforcing a price cap on seaborne Russian-origin crude oil and refined petroleum products, designed to squeeze revenue without triggering global supply shocks;
4. Severing one of Moscow’s less-publicized but lucrative revenue streams by restricting the export of Russian diamonds;
5. Targeting Russian financial institutions that serve as conduits for sanctions evasion, money laundering, or proxy financing; and
6. Pursuing and penalizing individuals implicated in war crimes, human rights violations, and systemic abuses in occupied territories.

These actions, while not decisive alone, form part of a long-term strategy to degrade Russia’s capacity to sustain its war and to raise the cost of aggression globally. But Japan’s contributions extend beyond coercive tools. Tokyo has also led on the economic reconstruction front. In early 2024, it hosted the Japan–Ukraine Conference for the Promotion of Economic Growth and Reconstruction, an effort

³³ “G7 Leaders’ Statement” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 24 February 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

to galvanize public-private partnerships across sectors. Germany followed suit, and Italy is set to host a third such event in 2025.³⁴

Japan's reconstruction initiative signals its commitment not only to Ukraine's survival, but to its postwar revival. This is strategic statecraft—ensuring that Ukraine emerges not as a broken ward of the West, but as a functioning, sovereign democracy embedded in the global economy. Tokyo understands that the restoration of Ukraine is part of the broader fight to uphold a rules-based order that prevents conflict in Asia before it begins.

How Japan–Europe Cooperation Supported Japan's Efforts in Ukraine?

Japan has supported Ukraine through both bilateral and multilateral means. But its most consequential contributions have emerged through its strategic coordination with Europe—principally via the G7 and NATO. While other platforms such as the Ukraine Defense Contact Group and the Ukraine Compact serve Ukraine-specific functions, the G7 and NATO have been instrumental in elevating Japan's global diplomatic profile and embedding its actions within a larger coalition of democratic powers. Japan's 20-year engagement in Afghanistan stands as precedent; its role in Ukraine reaffirms the trajectory from a reluctant power to a committed actor in global security.³⁵

Despite being the only non-European and non-NATO member of the G7, Japan did not hesitate when war returned to the European continent. It acted swiftly and in solidarity—aligning its policy, messaging, and aid commitments with the Euro-Atlantic bloc through the G7 and NATO frameworks. This was not symbolic diplomacy. It was strategic alignment.

The G7, once primarily an economic coordination body, has evolved into a forum where security and strategic issues are addressed with increasing regularity and candor. For Japan, its G7 membership is not a token of prestige—it is a platform to shape policy at the highest levels. While the G20 may serve as the global economic forum of record,³⁶ the G7 remains the exclusive club where democratic powers speak freely and act decisively. In this arena, Japan's voice carries growing weight.

³⁴ "G7 Transport Ministerial Meeting, The Future of Mobility: Ensuring Global Connectivity in an Uncertain World," *G7 Italia 2024*, 13 April 2024, <https://www.g7italy.it/>.

³⁵ Michito Tsuruoka, "Nihon gaiko ni totteno Afghanistan wa nandatta noka [What Did Afghanistan Mean for Japan's Diplomacy?]," *Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, 27 August 2021, <https://www.spf.org/>.

³⁶ Yuichi Hosoya, "Japan and the Challenge of G7 Leadership: Toward an Inclusive, Rules-Based World Order," *Nippon.com*, 17 May 2023, <https://www.nippon.com/>.

Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented convergence between the G7 and NATO. During the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, NATO’s secretary general joined G7 virtual sessions to coordinate evacuations.³⁷ This alignment only deepened following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. On 24 March 2022, NATO hosted an extraordinary summit in Brussels. That same day, it convened the G7 heads of state—with NATO leadership participating in both forums.³⁸ Just months later, the G7 summit immediately followed NATO’s, symbolizing the tight strategic synchronization now defining these two bodies.

There are two structural advantages to this G7–NATO alignment. First, the G7’s informal and less-scripted nature allows for frank exchanges—a flexibility not always present in NATO’s protocol-bound sessions. Second, while NATO is necessarily focused on military defense, the G7 spans broader domains—economic resilience, energy and food security, sanctions coordination, and financial stabilization.³⁹ As the war in Ukraine expanded beyond the battlefield to become a test of global endurance, the G7 proved essential in confronting these socioeconomic dimensions.

It was against this backdrop that Japan assumed the G7 presidency in 2023. On the margins of the NATO Summit in Vilnius that July, Japan played a leading role in drafting and finalizing the *Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine*. That declaration established three principal commitments:⁴⁰

1. Delivering sustained assistance to Ukraine across security, defense industrial, intelligence, financial, and technical domains;
2. Escalating costs on Russia through sanctions, export controls, asset freezes, and legal accountability for war crimes; and
3. Supporting Ukraine’s internal reform agenda—including anticorruption measures, judicial modernization, and defense-sector restructuring.

The declaration became the basis for bilateral security agreements between Ukraine and each G7 state. In turn, those agreements formed the legal and political scaffolding for the Ukraine Compact, signed in July 2024 on the sidelines of the NATO

³⁷ “NATO Secretary General Participates in G7 Meeting on Afghanistan,” *NATO News*, 24 August 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_186194.htm.

³⁸ “NATO Secretary General Participates in G7 Leaders Meeting,” *NATO News*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.nato.int/>.

³⁹ Christopher S. Chivvis, “Why It’s Crucial That the G7 and NATO Summits Are Back-to-Back,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 22 June 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

⁴⁰ “Attendance at the ceremony to issue the Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 July 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Summit in Washington.⁴¹ These mechanisms—born from the hard lessons of the failed 1994 Budapest Memorandum—are not formal NATO commitments, nor are they legally binding treaties. But they constitute an incremental and deliberate process toward establishing long-term security guarantees for Ukraine.⁴²

In parallel with its G7 leadership, Japan has also deepened its engagement with NATO—particularly through the NATO-IP4 format, also referred to as the Asia-Pacific Four (AP4). This grouping—comprising Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea—represents NATO’s closest Indo-Pacific partners. Each has an individually tailored cooperation program with the alliance, and NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly recognizes the indivisibility of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security.

On 29 June 2022 in Madrid, Japan assumed a leading role at the inaugural Leaders’ Meeting of the AP4 convened just prior to the NATO Summit. The agenda was unambiguous: to assess the war in Ukraine not as a distant European conflict, but as a harbinger of systemic instability reverberating across the Indo-Pacific. For Japan, this was not an exercise in diplomatic pageantry. It was strategic positioning—Tokyo asserting itself as the Indo-Pacific’s voice within the Euro-Atlantic security dialogue.

All four AP4 states participate in NATO’s Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine, but it was at Madrid where they spoke with unusual clarity. The leaders reached consensus: responsibility for the war rests squarely with Russia.⁴³ That political convergence marked the formalization of what has since become a regularized framework for strategic engagement. Since 2022, the AP4 have convened at every relevant echelon: summits, foreign ministerials, defense chiefs, and most recently, ministerial-level defense coordination.⁴⁴ This is no longer an ad hoc gathering; it is an emergent architecture of Indo-Pacific alignment with NATO.

⁴¹ Twenty-eight countries/entities have signed the bilateral security agreement with Ukraine as of January 2025.

⁴² Hanna Shelest, “From Budapest Memorandum to Ukraine Compact: A Conundrum of Guarantees,” *RUSI*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/>; and Nanae Baldauff and Yee Kuang Heng, “Evaluating Japan’s Defense Cooperation Agreements and Their Transformative Potential: Upgrading Strategic Partnerships with Australia and the UK,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 24, no. 2 (May 2024): 183–215, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴³ “NATO Asia-Pacific partners (AP4) Leaders’ Meeting” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 29 June 2022), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

⁴⁴ “Secretary General Welcomes Indo-Pacific Partner Countries to NATO HQ,” *NATO News*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.nato.int/>; “Session 7. Plenary with the Chiefs of Defence of the Indo-Pacific Region,” *NATO News*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.nato.int/>; and “Meeting between Defense Minister Nakatani and NATO Secretary General” (press release, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 17 October 2024).

The tangible output of these engagements is already visible. The AP4, under NATO coordination, have launched four flagship projects in support of Ukraine: military healthcare support, cyber defense, counterdisinformation operations, and the application of artificial intelligence to defense resilience.⁴⁵ These are not peripheral initiatives—they strike at the heart of modern warfare and the instruments of hybrid aggression.

Although Ukraine is but one dimension of the NATO–AP4 framework, Japan’s leadership has been decisive. It was the first among the four to sign a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine and the first non–Euro-Atlantic country to join the Ukraine Compact. These are not symbolic gestures; they are unmistakable markers of Japan’s strategic intent: to transition from observer to architect in the shaping of a rules-based order—one that extends from the Baltic to the South China Sea.

Conclusion

This article employed a “what–why–how” framework to interrogate Japan’s motivations, logic, and operational approach in its support for Ukraine—viewed through the prism of Japan–Europe relations. As a diagnostic tool, the framework offers considerable clarity. It explains why a nation situated in the western Pacific has committed itself so unequivocally to a European theater of war. Yet the framework, by design, privileges the unit level of analysis. It places Japan at the center, without fully accounting for the systemic pressures imposed by great-power rivalry, alliance decay, and the erosion of deterrence. The risk is analytical overreach: overstating what Japan alone can do to shape outcomes in Ukraine.

Still, that critique must be weighed against reality. Few states today possess the combination of strategic foresight, institutional credibility, and diplomatic agility necessary to bridge the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic theaters. Japan is one of them. That its leaders have chosen not to sit idly by—despite geography, pacifist traditions, and constitutional constraints—speaks volumes.

A second analytical gap stems from the relative underemphasis on the United States, the fulcrum of the postwar order and now its most volatile variable. With the inauguration of the second Trump administration in January 2025, American policy shifted from strategic commitment to conditional disengagement. Washington has pivoted from arming Ukraine to brokering a peace deal likely to favor

⁴⁵ “NATO takes stock of cooperation with Japan and the Republic of Korea,” *NATO News*, 14 January 2025, <https://www.nato.int/>.

Moscow. This reversal has jolted the foundations of the transatlantic alliance. Yet even as the United States steps back, Japan has stepped forward.⁴⁶

When US intelligence support to Ukraine was suspended, Tokyo quietly filled part of the void, leveraging its commercial satellite firm iQPS to provide geospatial intelligence. In concert with Finland's ICEYE, and the radar capabilities of Germany and Italy, Japan helped restore what the US National Reconnaissance Office once supplied.⁴⁷ This act was not merely technical; it was political. It signaled to both allies and adversaries that Japan intends to remain operationally relevant—even without Washington's hand on the tiller.

Amid these disruptions, four truths endure. First, Russia's war aims remain unchanged: the subjugation of Ukraine and the reassertion of imperial control.⁴⁸ Should Moscow succeed, Beijing will conclude that it, too, can achieve its objectives—Taiwan, the South China Sea—at an acceptable cost. Second, this war is not a morality play between democracy and authoritarianism.⁴⁹ It is the blunt contest between an aggressor and a sovereign state defending its survival. The stakes are legal, territorial, and existential. Third, states must take responsibility for their own defense. In an age where alliance commitments come with strings, self-reliance is no longer aspirational—it is imperative. Fourth, and most decisively, Japan–Europe security relations are not just deepening; they are hardening into something strategically durable.

In April 2025, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte's visit to Tokyo marked a new phase. Japan joined NATO's Security Assistance and Training mission for Ukraine—beyond the aid already flowing. His tours of the Yokosuka Naval Base and Mitsubishi Electric's Kamakura Works were more than optics; they were the visible contours of a growing NATO–Japan defense-industrial nexus.⁵⁰

Though this article has centered on Japan's engagement with NATO and the G7, the broader trajectory is unmistakable. Japan has forged a Security and Defense Partnership with the European Union and is building strategic ties with a constellation of European states—Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, and Sweden among them. Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not merely alter European security; it catalyzed a transregional realignment. And as America's reliability wavers, Tokyo has

⁴⁶ “Macron Urges Allies to Work on Ukraine,” *Le Monde*, 11 March 2025, <https://www.lemonde.fr/>.

⁴⁷ Pierre Gastineau, “Tokyo steps in to provide intelligence support for Ukraine,” *Intelligence Online*, 21 April 2025, <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/>.

⁴⁸ Jack Watling and Nick Reyholds, “Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine through 2024,” *RUSI*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/>.

⁴⁹ Stuart Coles et al., “Seven ways Russia's war on Ukraine has changed the world,” *Chatham House*, 1 June 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

⁵⁰ Mark Rutte and Shigeru Ishiba, “Joint Press Statement” (press release, NATO, 9 April 2025), <https://www.nato.int/>.

emerged not as a substitute for Washington, but as a strategic amplifier—binding Europe and Asia through shared threat perception, operational cooperation, and a common resolve to prevent the return of conquest as a tool of statecraft.

Japan is no longer merely reacting to the tectonics of great-power competition. It is positioning itself as a geopolitical fulcrum—one that understands that the defense of Kyiv and the fate of Taiwan are not distant problems, but twin fronts in the same global struggle. 🌐

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Between Scylla and Charybdis

Japan's Response to the October 7 Hamas Attack and Its Aftermath

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Abstract

This article examines Japan's response to the 7 October 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israel and the ensuing conflict. By analyzing Japan's historical engagement with the Middle East and its evolving relationships with Israel and Palestine, the article argues that Japan faces competing priorities in its Middle East diplomacy. These include aligning with the US, maintaining positive Arab relations to ensure a stable oil supply, and potentially enhancing its global stature through mediation efforts. This article provides the first comprehensive analysis of Japan's challenges in navigating the Israel–Hamas war, situating these within the broader framework of its Middle East and global policies. It explores Japan's approach to global conflicts beyond its immediate security environment, shedding light on the intricate interplay of economic, diplomatic, and strategic factors shaping Japan's foreign policy decisions in this volatile region.

Japan's relations with the Middle East rest neither on historical affinity nor formal alliances. They are, at their core, a function of economic necessity—above all, Tokyo's reliance on Middle Eastern oil. For decades, this dependency, along with US geopolitical imperatives, shaped Japan's cautious diplomacy in the region, including its delicate balancing act between Israel and the Arab world.¹ In the 1970s, Washington actively pressed Tokyo to maintain ties with Jerusalem, underscoring Israel's status as a key US ally in the region.² Yet, in the three decades preceding the Israel–Hamas war of October 2023, this calculus shifted. A confluence of factors—the ascent of Israel as a technological and military powerhouse, the fragmentation of Arab unity, and the growing specter of Iranian aggression—has recast Japan's regional outlook. No longer can Arab states wield the oil weapon as they did in 1973. No longer is engagement with Israel a diplomatic liability.

Instead, Japan has sought to capitalize on Israel's cutting-edge technological and defense sectors while recalibrating its approach to a Middle East in flux.

¹ Satoru Nakamura and Steven Wright, eds., *Japan and the Middle East: Foreign Policies and Interdependence* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), vii–ix.

² Jacob Abadi, *Israel's Quest for Recognition and Acceptance in Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 106.

Simultaneously, Japan's global aspirations and its strategic competition with China have injected new urgency into its Middle Eastern engagements. With Beijing expanding its economic and political footprint in the region, Tokyo can ill afford passivity. Japan's strategy now blends independent initiatives with Indo-Pacific partnerships, positioning it as a more assertive—if still cautious—player in Middle Eastern affairs. The upshot: While Tokyo remains tethered to US security guarantees and dependent on Middle Eastern hydrocarbons, its fears of economic retaliation for ties with Israel have markedly diminished.

Then came 7 October 2023. Hamas's massacre and the ensuing war have thrown Japan's Middle East diplomacy into sharp relief. Forced to navigate between US strategic priorities and its own economic stakes in the Arab world, Japan faces a defining moment. Will it seize the opportunity to assert a diplomatic role commensurate with its global stature? Or will it revert to its traditional posture—risk-averse, deferential, and ultimately marginal in the region's grand chessboard? More fundamentally, will Tokyo's response be guided by strategic calculus or swayed by the tides of domestic public opinion? This article dissects Japan's handling of these dilemmas, shedding light on its evolving approach to conflicts beyond its immediate security sphere.

Japan's Approach to the Middle East

Since the mid-twentieth century, Japan's engagement with the Middle East has evolved through three distinct phases. For the first four decades—most notably through the oil crises of the 1970s and 1980s—securing stable access to Persian Gulf energy resources dominated Tokyo's regional priorities. By the early 1990s, as the Cold War's end redefined global geopolitics, Japan's alignment with US regional policies became increasingly central. Washington's demands for greater burden-sharing in the Middle East compelled Tokyo to recalibrate its approach, albeit within the strict confines of its pacifist constitution. Since the early 2000s, Japan has cautiously expanded its footprint beyond economic interests, seeking to bolster its global political standing while navigating the region's shifting power dynamics.³ The post-9/11 era saw Japan intensify security cooperation with the United States, including in the Middle East. Under Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō (in office from 2001 to 2006), Tokyo dispatched the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to Iraq, marking a rare deployment to a conflict zone. However, these missions remained heavily circumscribed—focused on logistics, reconstruction, and humanitarian aid rather than

³ Yukiko Miyagi, *Japan's Middle East Security Policy: Theory and Cases* (London: Routledge, 2008), 35.

direct combat. Even as Japan nominally contributed to US-led stabilization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, its broader strategic focus remained closer to home. China's growing assertiveness and the growing North Korean missile threat compelled Tokyo to redirect resources to regional security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

To be sure, the Middle East remains economically vital to Japan—primarily as an energy supplier, and to a lesser extent as a market for Japanese manufactured products (notably automobiles) and infrastructure projects. However, the region is not viewed as a strategic investment destination or a principal trade partner. Crude oil from the region still accounts for over 90 percent of Japan's imports, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates being the primary suppliers. Together with liquefied natural gas (LNG), it constitutes about half the country's overall hydrocarbon imports, but broader economic engagement has remained limited.⁴ Japan's exports to the Middle East, which peaked at USD 31.9 billion (4.5 percent of total exports) in 2012, declined to USD 20.5 billion (2.6 percent) by 2021.⁵ Likewise, Japan's outward direct investment (ODI) in the region has remained marginal—less than 1.5 percent of its total ODI from 1996 to 2022. Even at its high point in 2017 (USD 2.1 billion), Japanese ODI in the Middle East was modest, and by 2022, net flows had plummeted to a mere USD 225 million.⁶

Yet, Japan's diplomatic engagement with the Middle East has grown, partly in response to US expectations. Washington has long pressed Tokyo to assume a more active role in supporting American partners and stabilizing the region, occasionally while forcing Japan to adjust its constitutional constraints on military force.⁷ This pressure has intensified amid Japan's deepening security ties with the United States, particularly as Tokyo seeks to counterbalance China's global ambitions. In December 2022, after decades of strategic restraint, Japan announced plans to double its defense

⁴ "International Overview," *U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)*, data released 31 January 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/>.

⁵ "Japan Exports, Imports and Trade Balance By Country 2022," *World Integrated Trade Solution*, 2024, <https://wits.worldbank.org/>.

⁶ Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), "Japanese Trade and Investment Statistics," JETRO website, 2024, <https://www.jetro.go.jp/>.

⁷ Christopher K. Lamont, "Japan in the Middle East: A Complex Web of Partnerships and Shifting Priorities," in *East-West Asia Relations in the 21st Century: From Bilateral to Interregional Relationships*, ed. Rotem Kowner, Yoram Evron, and P.R. Kumaraswamy (London: Routledge, 2024), 120–30; and Yoram Evron, "China–Japan Interaction in the Middle East: A Battleground of Japan's Remilitarization," *Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2017): 188–204.

budget within five years—a decisive break from its postwar military posture.⁸ However, Japan’s willingness to align with US Middle East policy has its limits. Nowhere is this more evident than in its dealings with Iran. Despite sustained American pressure, Tokyo has maintained an independent course, investing in Iran’s energy sector and preserving diplomatic channels with Tehran. This delicate balancing act underscores Japan’s broader foreign policy challenge: reconciling its strategic dependence on the United States with its need for economic and geopolitical flexibility in an increasingly multipolar world.⁹

Beyond economic imperatives, Japan’s growing engagement in the Middle East reflects two overarching strategic goals: bolstering its stature in global politics and countering China’s expanding influence in the region. Since 2013, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (in office from 2006 to 2007, from 2012 to 2020), pursued an ambitious diplomatic outreach to Middle Eastern and North African states, seeking to reduce Japan’s reliance on US policy—a marked departure from the approach of his predecessor, Koizumi Junichirō, whose foreign policy closely aligned with Washington’s post-9/11 military campaigns. When President Donald Trump signaled a shift toward retrenchment in US security commitments, Abe capitalized on Japan’s longstanding ties with Tehran to mediate between the United States and Iran, reinforcing Tokyo’s diplomatic credibility in the region.¹⁰ His successors—Suga Yoshihide (in office from 2020 to 2021), Kishida Fumio (in office from 2021 to 2024), and more recently Ishiba Shigeru (in office since 2024)—have sustained this trajectory, advancing Japan’s economic and security interests while maintaining its delicate regional balancing act. This strategy aligns with Tokyo’s broader objective of preserving regional stability and reinforcing a rules-based international order—particularly as US–China tensions continue to shape global power dynamics.

Diplomatic and Economic Instruments

Lacking hard power projection capabilities in the Middle East, Japan has relied on a sophisticated mix of diplomatic, economic, and technological instruments to advance its interests. Development aid, humanitarian assistance, and high-level

⁸ For an outline of Japan’s revised national defense strategy, see *National Defense Strategy* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 16 December 2022), <https://www.mod.go.jp/>. See also “US, Japan Military-to-Military Relationship Reaches ‘New Heights,’” *DOD News*, 11 April 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/>; and Takuya Matsuda, “Japan’s Emerging Security Strategy,” *Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 85–102.

⁹ Mitsugu Saito, “US-Japan Relations and the Persian Gulf,” *Middle East Institute*, 25 April 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/>.

¹⁰ Lamont, “Japan in the Middle East,” 121.

diplomatic engagement have reinforced Japan's presence in the region. High-profile visits by Abe and his successors have solidified key partnerships, particularly with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Flagship initiatives such as the Saudi-Japan Vision 2030 and the UAE's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative underscore Tokyo's efforts to support Gulf states' economic diversification and technological advancement. Japan has also sought to counter Beijing's growing regional footprint, primarily through economic and infrastructure diplomacy. The India-Japan Asia-Africa Growth Corridor represents a direct challenge to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), positioning Tokyo as an alternative economic partner in a region increasingly courted by Beijing. At the multilateral level, Japan has pursued engagement through the Japan-Arab Political Dialogue and trilateral cooperation with Israel and the UAE, reinforcing its diplomatic versatility. Since 2012, Tokyo has also provided USD 3.1 billion in humanitarian aid, further cementing its regional goodwill.¹¹

In addition, Japan has skillfully maintained diplomatic equilibrium among rival regional players—preserving ties with both Israel and Iran, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Israel and the Palestinian Authority.¹² This calibrated approach mirrors the balancing strategies of China and India, both of which have engaged competing Middle Eastern actors without provoking entanglement. However, Japan's political and strategic involvement remains more constrained than that of its Asian peers. Over the past two decades, China has entrenched itself in the region through large-scale infrastructure investments, the creation of multilateral frameworks, and joint military exercises. India, leveraging its historical commercial, cultural, and religious ties to the Persian Gulf, has deepened its defense partnerships with Israel, strengthened trade links with Gulf states, and expanded its diplomatic footprint through regional forums.¹³

Strategic Shifts and Persistent Caution

Japan's Middle East policy has evolved considerably in the post-Cold War era, expanding beyond economic pragmatism to incorporate broader political and strategic considerations. To a large extent, the Middle East has become an extension

¹¹ Lamont, "Japan in the Middle East," 121; and Rotem Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations: A Recent Promise That Has Yet to Materialize," in *Israel-Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Yoram Evron and Rotem Kowner (London: Routledge, 2023), 105–28.

¹² Lamont, "Japan in the Middle East," 121; and Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations," 105–28.

¹³ On Japan's, China's, and India's engagement with the Middle East, see Rotem Kowner, Yoram Evron, and P.R. Kumaraswamy, eds., *East-West Asia Relations in the 21st Century: From Bilateral to Interregional Relationships* (London: Routledge, 2024), 120–30.

of Japan's strategic competition with China—largely as a spillover of US–China tensions in the Indo-Pacific, where Tokyo remains firmly aligned with Washington. Consequently, Japan's traditionally limited and transactional relationship with the region has given way to a more proactive, multidimensional approach, shaped by the intricate interplay of domestic priorities, regional imperatives, and global power shifts. Even so, Tokyo's engagement in the region remains measured and its enduring caution remains a defining feature of its Middle East strategy. While it has broadened its regional engagement, Tokyo remains steadfast in avoiding deep entanglement in the region's political and security quagmires. Its approach—greater yet restrained involvement—continues to be dictated by a fundamental imperative: safeguarding national interests without inviting strategic overextension.

Japan and the Israel–Palestine Conflict

Japan's earliest substantive engagement with the Palestinian issue stemmed from the 1973 Arab oil embargo. Confronted with the dual pressures of securing vital energy supplies and maintaining ties with Israel under US expectations, Tokyo prioritized economic pragmatism. In a clear signal to Arab oil producers, Japan issued a pro-Palestinian statement, indicating that it “may have to reconsider its policy towards Israel.”¹⁴ This move underscored Tokyo's fundamental approach to the Middle East—balancing diplomatic flexibility with economic imperatives. Throughout the subsequent decade, Japan incrementally acknowledged the Palestinian cause, carefully calibrating its stance to accommodate Arab sensitivities while keeping its distance from deeper engagement with Jerusalem. By the late 1980s, however, the weakening of the unified Arab front against Israel provided Tokyo with greater diplomatic maneuverability. This shift, coupled with Israel's growing integration into the global economy, laid the groundwork for a cautious improvement in Japan–Israel relations.

Post–Cold War Adjustments and Strategic Realignments

A more pronounced recalibration occurred in the 1990s, driven by the geopolitical transformations following the Cold War's end. Japan, long accused of being a passive player in international security affairs, came under mounting US pressure to align with Washington's strategic initiatives in the Middle East. This pressure intensified after Tokyo's widely criticized financial-only contribution to the 1991 Gulf War coalition. Seeking to demonstrate diplomatic engagement beyond economic

¹⁴ Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), *Chūtō funsō kankei shiryōshū* [Collections of Sources on the Middle East Conflict and Relations] (Tokyo: Gaimushō, 1975).

interests, Japan actively participated in international efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, notably the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo Accords. During this period, Tokyo took steps to enhance its relationship with Israel, reflecting both an evolving regional landscape and a pragmatic reassessment of its diplomatic approach. However, its policy remained dictated by the delicate balancing act between energy security and alliance commitments. Japan continued to tread cautiously, mindful of its economic reliance on Arab oil exporters and wary of jeopardizing its broader Middle Eastern ties.

However, this momentum proved short-lived. By the 2000s, as the peace process faltered and the utopian “end of history” outlook of the 1990s gave way to a more fractured and volatile international order, Japan’s engagement with Israel stagnated.¹⁵ While economic ties continued to grow incrementally, Tokyo remained hesitant to embrace a more overt strategic partnership, constrained by its traditional diplomatic caution and enduring reliance on Arab energy exports. A renewed shift in Japan’s Middle East policy emerged with the return of Prime Minister Abe in 2012, marking a recalibrated approach to both Israel and the Palestinian issue. Seeking to enhance Japan’s international profile, Abe—who had already identified the Palestinian question as a diplomatic priority during his first term (2006–2007)—viewed engagement in the peace process as an opportunity to underscore Japan’s commitment to stability, development, and humanitarian initiatives.

Building on his predecessor Prime Minister Koizumi’s 2006 launch of the Corridor for Peace and Prosperity initiative, Abe committed an initial USD 100 million investment to a joint agricultural-industrial complex spanning both sides of the Jordan River, primarily in the Jericho area within Palestinian Authority territory. The Jericho Agricultural Industrial Park became a flagship project, symbolizing Tokyo’s emphasis on economic development as a pathway to regional stability. By May 2022, around a dozen factories were operational in the park, and Japan’s total aid to the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian welfare initiatives had exceeded USD 2.3 billion.¹⁶ This made Japan the largest donor to the Palestinians among Asian nations—an often-overlooked fact due to China’s higher-profile diplomatic engagement in Palestinian affairs.

¹⁵ Matthew Brummer and Eitan Oren, “Beyond Power, Before Interdependence: Complex Synergy and Japan–Israel Relations,” in *Japan and the Middle East: Foreign Policies and Interdependence*, ed. Satoru Nakamura and Steven Wright (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 165–67.

¹⁶ Abe Toshiya, “History of JICA’s Development Assistance to Palestine—Jericho Agro-Industrial Park,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2024): 144–64; and Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), “Japan-Palestine Relations (Basic Data),” MOFA website, 4 September 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Strengthening Japan–Israel Relations

By the early 2020s, after years of sustained involvement in regional development and peacebuilding, Japan faced fewer domestic constraints in expanding its ties with Israel. This period saw notable advances in bilateral relations. High-level diplomatic exchanges accelerated, and amid ongoing negotiations for a free trade agreement, Japanese ODI in Israel surged. Between the first and second decades of the twenty-first century, Japanese ODI in Israel grew more than sevenfold, rising from USD 1.5 billion to USD 11.3 billion.¹⁷ Japan, traditionally cautious about engaging with Israel's defense sector, also began relaxing its stance—particularly in nonlethal domains such as cybersecurity. As a result, collaboration between Japanese and Israeli companies and government agencies expanded in strategic sectors, including artificial intelligence, medical technology, and autonomous systems.

Despite these advancements, Japan's historical alignment with the Arab world continues to shape its diplomatic posture. Institutional preferences for the Palestinian cause remain deeply ingrained within Japan's media, academia, government agencies, and political establishment. While the Israel–Palestine conflict occupies a relatively minor role in Japan's public discourse and ranks low among its foreign policy priorities, any explicit show of support for Israel—particularly during military confrontations with Palestinian factions—has consistently faced significant domestic resistance.¹⁸ The 7 October 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israel and the subsequent war have put Japan's balancing act to the test once again. While economic and strategic considerations have driven a closer relationship with Israel, Japan remains cautious in its diplomatic rhetoric, wary of disrupting its historically stable ties with Arab partners. This enduring tension underscores the fundamental challenge in Japan's Middle East diplomacy—advancing economic and security interests with Israel while maintaining regional credibility among Arab states.

Japan's Response to the October 7 Hamas-Led Attack and the Ensuing Conflict

The Hamas-led attack on Israel and the subsequent multifront war provide a revealing lens through which to assess Japan's evolving approach to Middle Eastern conflicts in the early twenty-first century. The assault, unprecedented in scale and brutality, saw Hamas militants infiltrate Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, killing 1,139 Israelis and foreign nationals—including 766 civilians—and abducting 253 others. Nearly 200,000 Israeli civilians were evacuated from conflict zones, including

¹⁷ Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations," 116–17.

¹⁸ Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations," 119–20.

areas near the Lebanese border. Israel's response was swift and overwhelming: after regaining control of its territory, it launched a relentless counteroffensive, beginning with aerial bombardments and culminating in a large-scale ground invasion of Gaza on 27 October. By the time a prisoner exchange and armistice were reached on 15 January 2025, more than 45,000 Palestinians had been killed in Gaza, roughly two-thirds of whom were civilians. Meanwhile, Israel found itself engaged on six additional fronts, battling Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq, Iran itself, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants in the West Bank.

Against this backdrop, Japan's response—like that of other leading Asian powers—was marked by a blend of heightened engagement and careful diplomacy.¹⁹ The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) reacted swiftly, issuing a statement on the very day of the attack. “Japan strongly condemns,” it declared, “the launch of a number of rockets as well as infiltration into Israeli territories from the Gaza Strip by Hamas and other Palestinian militants.”²⁰ However, the statement conspicuously avoided referring to the assault as a terrorist attack and made no mention of the hostages. The following day, Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yōko issued a more detailed response, explicitly condemning the kidnappings and addressing the situation with greater specificity.²¹

On 9 October, Japan chose not to endorse a joint statement issued by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, which unequivocally condemned Hamas and reaffirmed support for Israel. Instead, Tokyo sought to carve out a diplomatic role by engaging regional actors, including key Arab states and, eventually, Iran.²² Notably, it was not until 12 October—following diplomatic pressure from Israel and a meeting with its ambassador in Tokyo, Gilad Cohen—that Foreign Minister Kamikawa initiated direct contact with her Israeli counterpart.²³ To maintain diplomatic balance, the next day she reached out to the Palestinian

¹⁹ For a comprehensive survey of the response to the Israel-Hamas War in major Asian countries, see Yoram Evron, Rotem Kowner, and Oshrit Birvadker, “East-West Asia Relations and the Power Transition Dynamics: Insights from the Israel-Hamas War,” *Asia Policy* (in press).

²⁰ “Attack on Israel by the Palestinian Militants Including Hamas” (press release, MOFA, 7 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²¹ “The Clashes Between Israel and the Palestinian Militants” (press release, MOFA, 8 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²² See, e.g., “Japan-Jordan Foreign Ministers’ Telephone Talk” (press release, MOFA, 9 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²³ “Japan-Israel Foreign Minister’s Telephone Talk” (press release, MOFA, 12 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Authority's foreign minister, reiterating Japan's condemnation of the Hamas attack while signaling Tokyo's commitment to de-escalation efforts.²⁴

Japan's response to the war reflects its broader strategic posture in the Middle East—cautiously proactive yet constrained by a longstanding commitment to neutrality. While Japan has deepened economic and security ties with Israel in recent years, it remains keenly aware of its energy dependence on Arab states and its historical positioning as a mediator rather than a partisan actor. The October 7 conflict reinforced this delicate balancing act, underscoring Japan's preference for diplomatic engagement over direct involvement in the region's shifting geopolitical currents. Within ten days of the 7 October attack, Japan shifted toward a more traditionally neutral stance, exhibiting a measured tilt toward the Palestinian side. Expressing concern over the deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Tokyo announced an initial emergency aid package of USD 10 million.²⁵ On 18 October, it condemned Israel's airstrikes in Gaza, extending "heartfelt sympathy to the victims" on both sides and dispatching a special envoy to the region.²⁶ That same day, Prime Minister Kishida led a second round of diplomatic engagements with counterparts in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Jordan—but conspicuously not with Israel.

On 20 October, Foreign Minister Kamikawa arrived in Egypt for the Cairo Summit for Peace, holding high-level discussions, including with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. At the summit, she unequivocally condemned Hamas's attacks while outlining Japan's diplomatic priorities: securing the immediate release of hostages, ensuring adherence to international law, and facilitating de-escalation.²⁷ Notably, Kamikawa refrained from visiting Israel during this trip. On 22 October 22, Japan again distanced itself from Western allies by abstaining from a G7 statement that reaffirmed Israel's "right to self-defense against terrorism." Tokyo's calibrated neutrality was evident again on 27 October, when the United Nations General Assembly voted on a Jordanian resolution calling for a humanitarian truce in Gaza. Before the main vote, Canada introduced an amendment that explicitly condemned Hamas for the October 7 attack. Japan voted in favor of this amendment, aligning with 87 other member states in acknowledging Hamas's culpability. However, when the amendment failed to pass and the General

²⁴ "Japan-Palestine Foreign Ministers' Telephone Talk" (press release, MOFA, 13 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²⁵ "Japan-France Foreign Ministers' Telephone Talk" (press release, MOFA, 17 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²⁶ "Dispatch of Ambassador UEMURA Tsukasa, Special Envoy for the Middle East Peace to the Middle East Region" (press release, MOFA, 17 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²⁷ "Attendance of Foreign Minister Kamikawa at the Cairo Summit for Peace" (press release, MOFA, 21 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Assembly moved to vote on the unamended Jordanian resolution, Japan abstained, positioning itself alongside most European Union nations and diverging from the United States, which voted against the resolution.²⁸

On 2 November, Kamikawa embarked on her second Middle East tour, engaging directly with countries involved in the conflict. In Israel, she met with her counterpart but declined to visit communities affected by the Hamas assault, despite Israeli requests. She then met with Palestinian officials before traveling to Amman, Jordan, where she visited the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) headquarters. There, she reaffirmed Japan's commitment to humanitarian aid and its balanced diplomatic posture. Over the following year, Japan maintained steadfast support for UNRWA's activities, going so far as to voice "grave concern" in October 2024 over Israeli legislation aimed at restricting the agency's operations.²⁹

Exactly one month after the attack, Kamikawa participated in a G7 foreign ministers' meeting in New York, emphasizing Japan's twin priorities: securing the release of hostages and addressing Gaza's humanitarian crisis. During the meeting, she announced an additional USD 65 million in humanitarian assistance to Gaza.³⁰ This commitment was later expanded in February and August 2024, bringing Japan's total Gaza-related aid to USD 230 million—approximately half of what the European Union provided during the same period.³¹ Since 1993, Japan's financial support for Palestinian causes has surpassed USD 2.6 billion, underscoring its sustained regional engagement.³²

Throughout the conflict, Japanese officials engaged in frequent dialogue with Middle Eastern counterparts, including Israeli leaders. Notable interactions included a meeting in Dubai between Kishida and Israeli President Isaac Herzog and a phone call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in early December. During these discussions, Kishida voiced deep concern over mounting civilian casualties, reiterated Japan's insistence on adherence to international law, and reaffirmed Tokyo's longstanding commitment to a two-state solution as the basis for lasting

²⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution ES-10/21, "Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations," A/RES/ES-10/21, 1 adopted 27 October 2023, <https://www.un.org/>.

²⁹ "Legislation on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Adopted in the Israeli Parliament (Knesset)" (press release, MOFA, 29 October 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁰ "G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting" (press release, MOFA, 7 November 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³¹ European Commission, "EU Announces New €120 Million Humanitarian Aid Package for Gaza," 16 January 2025, <https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/>.

³² "Japan's Assistance to the Palestinians" (press release, MOFA, January 2025), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

peace.³³ In parallel, Japan pursued broader regional stability efforts. In Geneva, Kamikawa met with her Iranian counterpart to discuss escalating tensions. She also condemned the Houthis' seizure of a vessel operated by a Japanese company, characterizing the act as "unacceptable" and urging Iran to exert its influence over regional proxies to promote restraint. These engagements reflect Japan's delicate balancing act—prioritizing humanitarian concerns and diplomatic mediation while preserving key relationships on both sides of the conflict.³⁴

By early 2024, Japan had repeatedly voiced concerns over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza and Israel's prolonged military operations.³⁵ This approach gained traction as Washington itself became increasingly critical of Israel's handling of the conflict, allowing Tokyo to align more closely with its principal ally without drastically altering its traditional neutrality. However, in April, as discussions progressed over Japan's potential involvement in the AUKUS alliance—a strategic security partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—Tokyo's stance on Israel became noticeably firmer. On 14 April, Iran launched an unprecedented missile and drone barrage at Israel, prompting US and UK military intervention to support Israeli defenses. In a departure from its previous caution, Japan strongly condemned Iran's escalation, aligning its position with the broader G7 consensus.³⁶ This marked a rare instance of Tokyo taking a more assertive stance on Middle Eastern security, highlighting the strategic undercurrents shaping its foreign policy.

As the intensity of the war subsided toward the summer of 2024, Japan's active involvement in the region waned, reverting to more symbolic diplomatic gestures. In July, Tokyo publicly expressed concern over Israel's expanding military activities in the West Bank, signaling continued diplomatic scrutiny. In a notable move, Japan joined the United States and European Union in imposing sanctions, freezing the assets of four Israeli settlers accused of violent acts against Palestinians. This decision reinforced Japan's adherence to international norms while preserving its carefully managed diplomatic balance in an increasingly polarized geopolitical

³³ "Japan-Israel Summit Telephone Talk" (press release, MOFA, 6 December 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁴ "Japan-Iran Foreign Ministers' Meeting" (press release, MOFA, 13 December 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁵ See, e.g., "Remarks Made by Israeli Ministers on the Resettlement of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and Settlements in the Gaza Strip" (press release, MOFA, 5 January 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁶ "Attacks by Iran Against Israel" (press release, MOFA, 14 April 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

landscape.³⁷ While the Japanese government maintained a largely measured and neutral stance, the domestic media adopted a far more critical posture toward Israel. Initial coverage of the October 7 attack included expressions of sympathy for Israel, but this tone shifted rapidly, reverting to the media's longstanding pro-Palestinian perspective.³⁸ As the war dragged on, Japanese media outlets intensified their criticism, with some commentators openly accusing Israel of committing genocide.³⁹

Despite Japan's historical distance from Middle Eastern conflicts, public engagement with the Israel– Hamas war was strikingly high. A large-scale poll conducted by *Asahi Shimbun* in autumn 2024 found that two-thirds of respondents had discussed the war, making it one of the most widely followed global crises in Japan. Notably, 62 percent of respondents identified the Israel– Hamas conflict as a major topic of conversation— ranking second only to the Russia– Ukraine war and surpassing interest in any previous Middle Eastern conflict, including discussions on Japan's wartime history in the Asia-Pacific.⁴⁰ Yet, this heightened awareness did not translate into mass protests. Unlike in Europe and the United States, Japan saw no large-scale demonstrations in response to the Gaza war. The most visible gatherings included two protests organized by Israeli expatriates and local supporters calling for the release of hostages held by Hamas. Meanwhile, smaller pro-Palestinian pickets and vigils took place across the country, with activists warning of potential genocide in Gaza and demanding increased humanitarian aid.

Public and media sentiment appeared to influence both corporate decisions and government actions. A notable example came in February 2024, when Japan's Itochu Corporation announced that its aviation division would terminate its emerging partnership with Israeli defense firm Elbit Systems. The decision followed the January 26 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which ordered Israel to take measures to prevent acts of genocide. Citing Japan's recognition of the ICJ ruling as a key factor, Itochu's move underscored the growing intersection of legal rulings, public opinion, and business strategy in Japan's approach to the Middle East. Taken together, Japan's response to the Israel– Hamas war in 2024 reflected

³⁷ "Announcement by the Government of Israel Regarding Settlements" (press release, MOFA, 3 July 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>; and "Asset Freeze for Israeli Settlers Involved in Violent Acts" (press release, MOFA, 23 July 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁸ Dylan O'Brien, "Shifting Sands of History Are Influencing Japanese Media Coverage of the Hamas-Israel War." *Number 1 Shimbun* (December 2023); and Nagao Satoru, "Nihon no Isuraeru hōdō ni taisuru 10 no gimon" [Ten Questions About Japan's Coverage of Israel], *Japanese Forum on International Relations (JFIR)*, 26 November 2024, <https://www.ifir.or.jp/>.

³⁹ "Isuraeru no 'genosaido' [Israel's 'Genocide']," *Shūkan Kiyōbi*, 5 April 2024, 18–22.

⁴⁰ "Be Between: sensō no hanashi o shiteimasuka?" [Be Between: Are You Talking About the War?], *Asahi Shimbun*, 9 November 2024.

the country's enduring diplomatic caution, balancing alliance commitments with Washington, economic and energy interests in the Arab world, and a domestic landscape increasingly shaped by media narratives and public sentiment.⁴¹

Japan's response to the war in Gaza followed a familiar script—only this time, with sharper inflection. From the outset, Tokyo sought to mitigate the crisis while steering clear of entanglement, adhering to its long-established posture on the Palestinian question. The government, maintaining the trajectory set by Abe and upheld by his successors, demonstrated strategic restraint. Yet this was not passivity; it was calibration. By subtly distancing itself from Israel—however temporarily—and crafting a posture distinct from Washington's, Tokyo deftly insulated its regional interests from unnecessary turbulence.⁴² This calculated diplomacy stood in stark contrast to Beijing's. While both Japan and China sidestepped deep involvement, issuing pro-Palestinian statements while preserving ties with Israel, Beijing's approach was far more aggressive. The war provided a convenient platform for China to undermine US regional influence and amplify its leadership credentials in the Global South. But opportunism has its limits. Confronted with the liabilities of overreach, China tempered its rhetoric, though its core position remained unchanged. Japan, by contrast, executed a steadier, more disciplined balancing act—reinforcing its US alliance while pursuing regional objectives designed, in part, to counter Beijing's encroachment.

At home, Japanese media struck a markedly different chord, aligning with the Palestinian cause and lambasting Israel's military actions. This schism between government policy and media sentiment is nothing new. Since the Gulf War, Tokyo has approached the Middle East with a cool pragmatism, weighing geopolitical imperatives against economic priorities. The media, however, has charted a more ideological course, often amplifying public sentiment at the expense of strategic calculus. This divergence, while hardly unique to Japan, presented an additional challenge for policymakers navigating the crisis. By contrast, Beijing's state-controlled press served as a blunt instrument of policy—hammering home unwavering support for the Palestinians to mask the limited substance behind China's rhetoric.⁴³

⁴¹ "Japan's Itochu to End Cooperation with Israel's Elbit Amid Gaza War," *Reuters*, 5 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁴² Mercy A. Kuo, "Israel-Japan Relations and the Middle East: Insights from Rotem Kowner," *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁴³ Evron, Kowner, and Birvadker, "East-West Asia Relations."

Conclusion

The Israel– Hamas war has once again exposed Japan’s enduring diplomatic quandary in the Middle East—how to reconcile its strategic alliance with Washington, its economic reliance on the region’s energy resources, and the competition with China over regional influence, without entanglement in its conflicts. Since the 1950s, Tokyo has mastered the art of geopolitical tightrope walking, navigating between its diplomatic and strategic commitments and its dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Its response to the war that erupted on 7 October 2023, was no exception, exemplifying the caution, pragmatism, and adaptability that define its regional policy. Compared to other Asian powers—most notably China—Japan’s approach revealed key insights into its evolving strategic calculus.

First, Japan adhered to its longstanding principle of neutrality, condemning violence on both sides while emphasizing humanitarian concerns and the sanctity of international institutions. Its initial denunciation of Hamas’s attack was swiftly followed by calls for de-escalation and humanitarian aid for Gaza, reinforcing its well-established preference for diplomatic engagement over ideological posturing. Tokyo moved quickly to commit substantial humanitarian assistance, leveraging its soft-power influence. High-level engagement—including participation in the Cairo Peace Summit and sustained diplomatic outreach to both Israeli and Palestinian officials—further underscored its methodical, measured approach. Yet, while Japan demonstrated solidarity with the United States by condemning terrorism, it carefully avoided full alignment with Washington’s pro-Israel posture in global forums. Tokyo’s abstention from UN resolutions that promoted a humanitarian truce without condemning Hamas reflected a deliberate assertion of its independent diplomatic stance. Domestically, a familiar dynamic played out: the Japanese media adopted a highly critical view of Israel’s military actions, and sporadic pro-Palestinian demonstrations signaled a degree of public discontent. This divergence between government policy and public sentiment exerted subtle but tangible pressure, reflected in corporate decisions such as Itochu Corporation’s withdrawal from a defense partnership with an Israeli firm.

However, Japan’s calculus was not dictated by domestic sentiment alone. As in previous conflicts, Washington’s expectations weighed heavily on Tokyo’s decision-making. While Japan seeks deeper integration into Western security frameworks like AUKUS and remains committed to countering China’s regional ambitions, it has carefully calibrated its Middle East policy to safeguard its broader geopolitical and economic interests. The war tested Japan’s ability to navigate these complexities, and it responded with characteristic discipline—preserving relations with both Israel and Arab states while maintaining its humanitarian credibility.

By executing a restrained yet engaged diplomatic strategy, Japan reaffirmed its role as an advocate for peace in the region, without compromising its extensive regional interests, humanitarian principles, or public support from both sides of the conflict. ✪

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Middle-Power Diplomacy in the Age of Great-Power Competition

Japan, the Philippines and the South China Sea Disputes

RICHARD JAVAD HEYDARIAN

Abstract

This article examines the emergence of Japan and the Philippines as a pivotal middle-power dyad in the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. Against the backdrop of China's maritime assertiveness and growing uncertainty in US foreign policy, Tokyo and Manila have deepened bilateral cooperation across defense, economic, and strategic domains. From Japan's unprecedented military modernization and infrastructure investments to the Philippines' recalibrated external defense strategy, both countries are aligning to shape a more resilient and rules-based regional order. Initiatives such as the Japan–Philippines–US trilateral framework, the Luzon Economic Corridor, and Reciprocal Access Agreements demonstrate how this partnership has transcended symbolism to become a cornerstone of regional deterrence. The article assesses structural constraints, political volatility, and strategic incentives driving this cooperation while exploring its implications for broader middle-power diplomacy. Ultimately, the Japan–Philippines partnership signals a strategic shift—one where capable middle powers actively hedge against great-power uncertainty to preserve regional stability.

The South China Sea disputes are neither novel nor reducible to a single catalyst. China's sweeping claims in these contested waters trace back to the chaotic aftermath of its imperial collapse in the early twentieth century, when embattled nationalist elites resorted to cartographic mythmaking and symbolic territorial assertions to reforge national identity from the ruins of dynastic decay. The so-called nine-dash line, widely associated with the People's Republic of China, in fact mirrors earlier claims made by the Kuomintang regime—an ideological continuity that extends to Taipei's present-day maps, if not its policy or posture.

Vietnamese and Philippine assertions over the region's maritime features predate even this nationalist fervor, rooted instead in centuries of historical engagement—commercial, strategic, and colonial. Both states began entrenching their presence

in the Spratly Islands by the mid-twentieth century, long before the term “freedom of navigation” entered the geopolitical lexicon.¹

Yet China’s ascension as a global power has altered the character—and the stakes—of the dispute. Over the past decade, Beijing has fused dredging with doctrine, transforming reefs into fortified forward operating bases that extend its reach and bend maritime realities to its will. In response, the United States has bolstered its presence in the theater, conducting regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), expanding defense cooperation with regional allies, and spearheading joint patrols with likeminded maritime democracies. The result is unmistakable: the South China Sea has become a crucible of twenty-first-century great-power rivalry.²

What remains underappreciated, however, is the critical role played by middle powers—states that, while lacking the full-spectrum capabilities of superpowers, possess both the will and the weight to shape the strategic environment. Chief among them is Japan. With the world’s fourth-largest economy and one of Asia’s most capable maritime forces, Tokyo has emerged as a central architect of Indo-Pacific security. It counters China’s assertiveness, complements the United States’ regional strategy, and empowers frontline states across Southeast Asia to defend their exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and safeguard territorial integrity.

No Southeast Asian partner has proven more strategically pivotal to Tokyo than the Philippines.³ Over the past decade, Manila has embraced closer defense ties with Japan, particularly in response to China’s maritime coercion. Armed with Japanese-built coast guard vessels, the Philippines has taken a leading role in documenting and publicizing Beijing’s violations of international law under what has come to be known as the Transparency Initiative. The 2023 Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between Tokyo and Manila institutionalized this partnership, enabling joint exercises, defense technology transfers, and operational coordination.

More consequential still is the launch of the Japan-Philippines-U.S. (JAPHUS) trilateral framework. Positioned at the nexus of the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait flashpoints, this alignment signals a maturing minilateralism aimed at

¹ Bill Hayton, “China’s false memory syndrome,” *Prospect*, 10 July 2014, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/>; and Bill Hayton *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

² Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China and the New Struggle for Global Mastery* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³ Richard Javad Heydarian, “Twenty-First-Century Governance: The Rise of Middle Powers and the Future of Global Cooperation,” *Trends Research & Advisory*, 18 October 2021, <https://trendresearch.org/>.

detering Chinese adventurism and reinforcing the maritime rules-based order.⁴ While the United States remains the cornerstone of regional deterrence, it is Japan—deliberate, dependable, and increasingly assertive—that is anchoring a multipolar counterweight to China’s hegemonic ambitions. In Manila, Tokyo has found both a willing partner and a strategic linchpin. Together, they represent the vanguard of middle-power diplomacy in an era defined by hardening geopolitical fault lines.

Beyond the Superpowers

The meteoric rise of China has understandably dominated strategic discourse from Washington to Canberra. In terms of velocity and scale, Beijing’s economic ascent is without precedent. In 1990, China’s nominal gross domestic product stood at a mere 6 percent of that of the United States. Less than thirty years later, it had surged to nearly two-thirds. Nowhere has this transformation been more dramatic than in East Asia, where China eclipsed Japan’s century-long economic primacy. Between 1990 and 2014, Beijing’s share of East Asia’s GDP vaulted from 8 percent to over 50 percent—an economic displacement with direct geopolitical consequences.⁵

Over the past decade, China has entrenched itself as the world’s foremost trading nation and primary manufacturer.⁶ At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it stood alone among major economies in posting growth, buoyed by its monopoly over critical medical supply chains and production infrastructure.⁷ Its industrial policy—most notably the “Made in China 2025” initiative—has borne strategic fruit. China now dominates the frontier of emerging technologies, from 5G telecommunications and electric vehicle platforms to artificial intelligence and advanced materials. A comprehensive assessment by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute concluded that China leads in 37 of 44 critical technologies spanning defense, space, robotics, energy, biotechnology, quantum computing, and more.⁸

Economic power, however, does not remain sequestered in the commercial domain; it invariably seeks strategic expression. Despite inefficiencies and debt-trap criticisms, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has produced over 2,600 projects

⁴ Richard Javad Heydarian, “Japan’s new golden age in Southeast Asia,” *The Interpreter*, 14 November 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

⁵ David Kang, “A Looming Arms Race in East Asia?,” *National Interest*, 14 May 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

⁶ Stella Yifan Xie and Grace Li, “For Xi Jinping, ‘Made in China 2025’ has been worth every penny,” *Nikkei Asia*, 20 December 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

⁷ Keith Bradsher, “With Covid-19 Under Control, China’s Economy Surges Ahead,” *New York Times*, 8 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

⁸ “Critical Technology Tracker,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2025, <https://www.aspi.org.au/>.

across 64 countries and three continents. While many of these projects remain unfinished or under scrutiny, Beijing hails the BRI as “the project of the century.”⁹ It has since launched a battery of additional initiatives—including the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and the Global Security Initiative (GSI)—designed to reframe the architecture of global governance and cast China as the new steward of international order, especially in the Global South, where it enjoys outsized political traction among local elites.¹⁰

But China’s ambitions extend beyond trade routes and summits. Its rise is not merely economic—it is martial.¹¹ Beijing is executing a rapid and deliberate military build-up, designed not only to defend its interests but to assert them with force if necessary.

In *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, historian Paul Kennedy noted a predictable delay between a nation’s economic ascent and its military expansion. China defies this trajectory. Rather than lag behind its economic rise, the People’s Republic has marched in lockstep, converting its newfound wealth into strategic hardware at breathtaking speed.¹² Its modernization effort is two-pronged: enhancing asymmetric anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) systems, while simultaneously building a formidable conventional force. The results are stark. Beijing is now fielding fifth-generation aircraft carriers, advanced stealth fighters, and nuclear-powered submarines—all emblematic of its resolve to contest the regional order, if not rewrite it.¹³

Measured in purchasing power parity, China’s defense budget ranks just behind the United States—far surpassing every other country. This is no mere vanity project. It is a calculated response to Beijing’s expanding global footprint and the vulnerabilities that come with it. In Xi Jinping’s view, economic interests must be shielded, trade routes must be defended, and access to critical maritime corridors must be secured by force, if necessary.¹⁴

Yet China’s growing capabilities are not emerging in a vacuum. They coincide with rising nationalistic fervor and an assertive geopolitical agenda. Under Xi’s

⁹ Peter Cai, “Understanding China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Lowy Institute*, 22 March 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

¹⁰ Lunting Wu, “China’s Transition From the Belt and Road to the Global Development Initiative,” *The Diplomat*, 11 July 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

¹¹ Erik Green, Meia Nouwens, and Veerle Nouwens, *The Global Security Initiative: China’s International Policing Activities* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, October 2024), <https://www.iiss.org/>.

¹² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xxiii.

¹³ “The dragon’s new teeth,” *The Economist*, 7 April 2012, <https://www.economist.com/>.

¹⁴ “Nominal spending figures understate China’s military might,” *The Economist*, 1 May 2021, <https://www.economist.com/>.

ideological banner of “national rejuvenation,” the Chinese Communist Party has framed its expansive maritime claims as sacred and non-negotiable. The South China Sea and East China Sea are no longer just contested waters—they are, in Beijing’s words, “blue national soil.”¹⁵ The phrase reveals a mind-set not of negotiation, but of entitlement.

Even more alarming is the regime’s posture toward Taiwan. A vibrant democracy and the world’s leading producer of high-grade semiconductors, the island represents not only a political defiance of Beijing’s one-party system but a strategic prize in the high-tech race that defines the twenty-first century. Beijing’s increasingly muscular rhetoric and force projection toward Taiwan signal a willingness to unify the island not through persuasion, but through coercion or conquest.

As China closes the capability gap with the United States, the Indo-Pacific slides toward a new bipolarity.¹⁶ Whether one calls it a New Cold War or a systemic rivalry, the underlying reality is the same: two superpowers locked in structural competition, each testing the other’s resolve, each prepared—at least rhetorically—for confrontation. In this environment, the danger is not calculated aggression but catastrophic miscalculation.¹⁷

History rarely rewards complacency. And the Indo-Pacific is no place for illusions. The region is no longer a theater of balance—it is a crucible of collision.¹⁸

Strategists in Washington and beyond have long wrestled with a single question: how to manage the rise of China. Nearly a decade ago, Zbigniew Brzezinski—former U.S. national security adviser and one of the last Cold War-era grand strategists—proposed a concept as audacious as it was controversial: a “Group of Two.” This G2 framework envisioned an institutionalized U.S.-China partnership, designed not merely to stabilize bilateral ties, but to co-manage the global order.

In theory, such a condominium could temper confrontation through dialogue. In practice, it risked gutting the autonomy of America’s allies and partners, especially the middle and frontline states anchoring the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ The price of great-power

¹⁵ James R. Holmes, “The Commons: Beijing’s ‘Blue National Soil,’” *The Diplomat*, 3 January 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

¹⁶ James Holmes, “Which Germany Should Modern China Emulate?,” *National Interest*, 5 July 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

¹⁷ See Michael Mandelbaum, “The New Containment,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

¹⁸ See David Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); and Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011): 41–78, <https://www.mitpressjournals.org/>.

¹⁹ Peter Martin, “Kissinger Warns Biden of U.S.-China Catastrophe on Scale of WWI,” *Bloomberg*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

accommodation, under this model, would be paid by those most exposed to Chinese coercion—and least able to resist it alone.

Enter the middle powers. Chief among them, Japan.

These states are neither middling in influence nor monolithic in character. They span continents, cultures, and capabilities.²⁰ But they share a core distinction: the strategic autonomy to shape their environments without the full-spectrum dominance of superpowers. Middle powers act not as spectators to history, but as shapers of it.

Unlike small states, which must often hedge or bandwagon, middle powers blend material strength with diplomatic agility. What sets them apart is not size, but intent—and the means to translate intent into action. Their hallmark is multilateralism: a preference for institutions over imposition, compromise over coercion, and international norms over nationalist grievance.²¹

As Gareth Evans—former Australian foreign minister and a leading voice on diplomatic strategy—once observed, middle powers derive their influence not merely from material capability but from the respect they command on the global stage. Their authority flows from perception as much as performance: a reputation for economic and political significance, and more normatively, for responsible international behavior. These are not states that coerce. They persuade. They do not dictate terms; they build coalitions to shape them.²²

Middle-power diplomacy, in its purest form, is the art of responsible influence. It is practiced by states that lack the coercive leverage to impose preferences unilaterally, yet possess the vision—and credibility—to act as stewards of international order. They engage because they must. Their security and prosperity are directly tied to the functionality of a system they cannot dominate but can help preserve.²³

Political scientist John Ravenhill distilled the core attributes of middle-power influence into five essential traits: capacity to defend core interests and project limited power; concentration on targeted diplomatic and normative agendas; creativity in maximizing strategic leverage; coalition-building during crises; and credibility as

²⁰ See Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 19; and Allan Patience, “Middle Powers in International Relations,” *E-international Relations* (blog), 8 May 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/>.

²¹ Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers*, 19.

²² Gareth Evans, “Middle Power Diplomacy,” Inaugural Edgardo Boeninger Memorial Lecture, 29 June 2011, <http://www.gevans.org/>.

²³ John Ravenhill, “Cycles of middle power activism: Constraint and choice in Australian and Canadian foreign policies,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 52, no. 3 (1998): 309–27, <https://doi.org/>.

champions of a rules-based order. These are not the attributes of bystanders. They are the tools of states that understand both their limitations and their leverage.²⁴

Middle powers are, in essence, strategically significant democracies that have rejected the nihilism of power politics without succumbing to the naïveté of idealism.²⁵ They have foresworn nuclear revisionism, but not relevance. And in an age when great powers collide and small states scramble for shelter, it is the middle powers—steady, serious, and strategically sober—that may well hold the balance.

The Japan Factor

Japan's return to strategic relevance has been neither sudden nor accidental. It is the product of decades-long introspection, catalyzed by the collapse of its economic miracle in the waning years of the twentieth century. The so-called "Lost Decades" ended Japan's trajectory as an ascendant global power and plunged the nation into a period of prolonged stagnation—economic, demographic, and strategic. What followed was not resignation but recalibration. A quiet strategic awakening began to stir in Tokyo.

That transformation found early expression under the reform-minded Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006). Charismatic and unorthodox, Koizumi spearheaded the overhaul of Japan's sclerotic postal system and, more consequentially, authorized the deployment of Japanese Self-Defense Forces to Iraq—a postwar first.²⁶ Though these moves cost him political capital at home, they redefined the boundaries of Japanese foreign policy and inspired a generation of successors to think beyond the constraints of pacifist inertia.

Chief among them was Shinzo Abe, the most consequential Japanese statesman of the postwar era. When Abe returned to power in 2012, he did not simply govern—he set out to reforge Japan's strategic identity. In his manifesto, *Towards a Beautiful Country*, Abe invoked the legacy of his grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, who sought a more reciprocal US–Japan alliance and a foreign policy befitting a sovereign nation. Abe adopted that ambition as his own, marrying it to a new geopolitical reality: the rise of China.²⁷

²⁴ Ravenhill, "Cycles of middle power activism."

²⁵ See "Middle Power Initiative website," Basel Peace Office, 2025, <https://www.baselpeaceoffice.org/>.

²⁶ "Koizumi Wins Postal Reform Battle in Japan," Voice of America, 31 October 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/>; and Leszek Buszynski, "Japan's Security Policy in the Koizumi Era," *Security Challenges* 2, no. 3 (2006): 93–107, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

²⁷ Shinzo Abe, "Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan," *Bungei Shunju*, 2006.

Beijing's growing assertiveness, particularly in the maritime domain, presented Japan with both a threat and an opportunity.²⁸ As China expanded its influence across the Indo-Pacific, Abe seized the moment to reposition Japan as a pivotal middle power—a reliable partner to the United States and a pillar of regional stability.²⁹ But this assertiveness did not emerge in a vacuum. It was forged in the crucible of national trauma. Among advanced economies, no country experienced the “China shock” more viscerally than Japan, which watched its long-held industrial supremacy erode as its former wartime adversary ascended to economic dominance.³⁰

During his first, brief tenure as prime minister in the mid-2000s, Abe recognized that a stable Asia could no longer rest on US hegemony alone. America was mired in the Middle East, while China was exploiting the openness of the liberal international order to amass strategic capital. The answer, Abe believed, was coalition—an architecture of likeminded powers that could buttress regional order even in Washington's absence.

Accordingly, he moved with conviction. He deepened strategic ties with India, identifying the world's largest democracy as both a geopolitical counterweight to China and a natural partner. Meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Abe framed their nations as the “largest and most developed democracies of Asia,” bound by mutual prosperity and shared interests. The two leaders called for institutionalized cooperation, opening the door to a trilateral dialogue with other regional democracies.³¹

Shortly thereafter, Abe extended the same vision to Australia's Prime Minister John Howard, proposing a new strategic coalition—an alignment of democracies that would eventually coalesce into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: the Quad.³²

In a landmark 2007 address before India's Parliament, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe laid bare his geopolitical vision. He spoke of a “broader Asia,” forged at the “confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans,” and called upon the

²⁸ Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan* (London: Hurst, 2020).

²⁹ For a more “liberal institutionalist” take on Japanese foreign policy, see Dennis Yasutomo, *The New Multilateralism In Japanese Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995); for a more “realist” take on Japanese foreign policy see, Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008) and Kenneth B. Pyle, “The sea change in Japanese foreign policy,” *National Bureau of Asian Research*, 2014, www.nbr.org/; and for a more constructivist take, see Peter Katzenstein, *Japanese Security in Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³⁰ Pankaj Mishra, “A Nation's State: Japan's Tormented Relationship with its Modernity,” *The Caravan*, 1 October 2013, <https://caravanmagazine.in/>.

³¹ “Joint Statement Towards India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership” (press release, Ministry of External Affairs of India, 15 December 2006), <https://www.mea.gov.in/>.

³² Tanvi Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad’,” *War on the Rocks*, 16 November 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

region's great democracies to deepen ties across all levels of society. His message was clear: geography had gifted Asia with strategic interdependence; it was time for its democracies to turn that interdependence into alignment.³³

But the moment proved premature. New Delhi, wary of provoking Beijing, demurred. Australia's Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister Kevin Rudd likewise balked, unwilling to alienate China—then Canberra's largest trading partner.³⁴ Abe's first attempt to build a democratic coalition was shelved, an ambitious doctrine outpaced by regional caution.

He would not have to wait long for a second chance. Abe's resounding electoral victory in 2012 returned him to power with a sweeping mandate, a repudiation of the Beijing-friendly Democratic Party of Japan and a green light to reshape the nation's strategic posture.³⁵ He vowed to “build a new country” and to “take the lead in handing over a proud and hopeful Japan to younger generations.”³⁶ But his aim was larger still—a decisive break from the “postwar regime” that had constrained Japan's foreign policy since 1945. He would bring Japan back—back into the center of Indo-Pacific geopolitics.³⁷

Armed with a parliamentary majority, Abe moved swiftly. He revised the U.S.–Japan Defense Guidelines in 2015 to bolster interoperability and strategic flexibility for the Self-Defense Forces. He consolidated national security bodies into a more coherent architecture and, most critically, reinterpreted Article 9 of Japan's constitution, permitting collective self-defense.³⁸ This was not a revolution; it was an evolution—deliberate, disciplined, and long overdue.

Abe then doubled down on his earlier strategic blueprint. He resurrected the Quad, not as a speculative forum but as a “Democratic Security Diamond”—a coalition of likeminded powers poised to counterbalance China's hegemonic ambitions.³⁹ In his time, the world was ready. The Trump administration in Washington and the Modi government in New Delhi embraced the vision with vigor. Even

³³ Shinzo Abe, “Confluence of the Two Seas” (speech, Indian Parliament, 22 August 2007), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁴ Abe, “Confluence of the Two Seas.”

³⁵ Robert Pekkanen, “The 2012 Japanese Election Paradox: How the LDP Lost Voters and Won the Election,” *National Bureau of Asian Research*, 18 December 2012, <https://www.nbr.org/>.

³⁶ Justin McCurry, “Shinzo Abe Set to be Japan's Longest-Serving PM After Winning Party Vote,” *The Guardian*, 20 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

³⁷ See Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, “The Constitution of Japan,” 3 May 1947, <http://bitly.ws/>; and Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

³⁸ Justin McCurry, “Japan moves towards amending https pacifist constitution,” *The Guardian*, 14 May 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

³⁹ Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad.’”

Australia, once hesitant, now recognized the perils of strategic complacency in the face of China's increasingly coercive posture.

The result was a revitalized and institutionalized Quadrilateral Security Dialogue under the aegis of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" doctrine—a blueprint aimed squarely at constraining Beijing's revisionism, particularly in the South China Sea.⁴⁰

To anchor that vision in reality, Abe turned to diplomacy. Between 2013 and 2015, he visited forty-two nations, most of them in the developing world, wielding charm, capital, and credibility. Nowhere was this charm offensive more consequential than in Southeast Asia. His first foreign trip upon returning to office was to the region—not Europe, not the United States, but the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) capitals that would become linchpins in Japan's strategy.

In 2013, Abe brokered a series of landmark agreements to enhance defense cooperation and economic investment with ASEAN.⁴¹ Gone was the reticent Japan of old. In its place stood a middle power unafraid to lead, projecting stability, prosperity, and strategic resolve across the Indo-Pacific.

The Philippines' historic legal challenge to China's claims in the South China Sea—filed by the Benigno Aquino administration following a tense naval standoff at Scarborough Shoal—was more than an act of defiance. It was a strategic pivot, and one that found a natural partner in Japan. With Manila seeking support for a rules-based order, Tokyo answered the call. President Aquino made repeated visits to Tokyo, where he found in Prime Minister Abe a leader ready to push beyond Japan's traditional restraint. In an unprecedented address to the Japanese Diet, Aquino urged Japan to take on a more assertive regional role, not as a hegemon, but as a defender of international law.⁴²

Japan responded—not with fanfare, but with resolve.

Even under the controversial presidency of Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), whose foreign policy openly courted Beijing and whose domestic war on drugs drew international condemnation, Tokyo remained engaged. Abe was the first major foreign leader to visit Manila during Duterte's tenure, signaling Japan's refusal to cede regional diplomacy to China—or to moral posturing that left strategic vacuums.

Unlike many Western governments, Japan refrained from publicly castigating Duterte. Instead, Abe deployed a subtler, more strategic diplomacy—quietly

⁴⁰ Jeff Smith, "Unpacking the Free and Open Indo-Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, 14 March 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

⁴¹ Kuni Miyake, "Suga in Vietnam: Talking about China without naming it," *Japan Times*, 20 October 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>.

⁴² "Speech of His Excellency Benigno S. Aquino III President of the Philippines Before the joint session of the National Diet of Japan" (speech, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 3 June 2015), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

encouraging Manila to adopt a public health approach to drug enforcement while maintaining a measured distance from Beijing's economic promises, many of which remained just that: promises. In contrast, Tokyo backed its words with deeds, channeling billions into infrastructure development and capacity building across the archipelago.⁴³

Behind the scenes, Abe also played the role of mediator, helping to ease tensions between Manila and Washington at a time when bilateral relations were at their lowest point in decades. His quiet statesmanship culminated in a cordial summit between President Duterte and US President Donald Trump in Manila in 2017.

Throughout this period, Japan remained a stalwart defender of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, which struck down Beijing's sweeping nine-dash line claims under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). At times, Tokyo appeared more invested in the ruling's enforcement than Manila itself. While Duterte downplayed the ruling to preserve ties with China, Japan, alongside Australia and the United States, repeatedly emphasized its binding nature.

Within the Group of Seven (G7), Japan emerged as the principal advocate for embedding the 2016 arbitral ruling into the institutional lexicon of the world's leading democracies. During its 2023 chairmanship, Tokyo led the drafting of a joint communiqué that left no ambiguity: "[t]here is no legal basis for China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea, and we oppose China's militarization activities in the region."⁴⁴ It was a diplomatic watershed—the first time the G7 spoke with collective authority on the legal dimensions of Beijing's maritime overreach.

Undeterred by Beijing's predictable objections, Japan doubled down the following year. Tokyo issued an unequivocal statement reaffirming that the "Tribunal's award is final and legally binding on the parties to the dispute, the Philippines and China, under the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)." It further condemned Beijing's refusal to accept the ruling as an affront to the peaceful settlement of disputes and a violation of international legal norms. Japan's position was not couched in the language of ambiguity. It was a call to defend order against arbitrariness—and law against lawlessness.⁴⁵

⁴³ Richard Javad Heydarian, "The Golden Era of Japan-Philippine Relations Has Arrived," *National Interest*, 17 July 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

⁴⁴ Michael Punongbayan, "G7 declares support for South China Sea arbitral ruling," *Philippine Star*, 21 May 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/>.

⁴⁵ See Yoko Kamikawa, "Eight years since the issuance of the Arbitral Tribunal's award as to the disputes between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China regarding the South China Sea" (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 July 2024,) <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Japan's motivations were not abstract. They were strategic. As a frontline state in its own maritime dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, Tokyo understood that the erosion of UNCLOS in the South China Sea would reverberate across the region. The South China Sea is not just a legal battlefield or diplomatic theater; it is a commercial lifeline. Japan depends on its sea lines of communication (SLOC) for energy imports and trade. Chinese dominance in these waters would not simply challenge international law—it would place a knife to the throat of Japan's economic security.

For Tokyo, the stakes are existential. Its repeated invocation of UNCLOS is not diplomatic theater; it is doctrine. It reflects a strategic worldview in which rules-based order is not an ideal to be admired, but a structure to be defended. In this calculus, the arbitral ruling is not just a legal precedent—it is the cornerstone of Japan's regional security strategy and a litmus test for whether the Indo-Pacific will remain free, open, and governed by law—or succumb to the logic of might makes right.⁴⁶

Buoyed by the diplomatic backing of Japan and other likeminded powers, the Philippines' national security establishment mounted a quiet but determined resistance to President Rodrigo Duterte's most destabilizing impulses. Among these was his recurring flirtation with a Joint Development Agreement (JDA) with China—an arrangement that would have effectively legitimized Beijing's maritime claims and violated the Philippines' 2016 arbitral victory under UNCLOS.

Veteran diplomats and defense officials held the line. They blocked any substantive defense deals with China and successfully dissuaded Duterte from severing long-standing military ties with the United States, even as Washington's criticism of his human rights record escalated. In the shadows of presidential bluster, institutional resilience prevailed.

Upon assuming office in 2022, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. moved swiftly to restore strategic clarity. In one of his earliest diplomatic gestures, he met with envoys from Japan, the United States, South Korea, and India, reaffirming Manila's commitment to the arbitral ruling and to defending the country's sovereign rights in the South China Sea. It was an unmistakable signal: the Philippines would return to a principled foreign policy anchored in international law and democratic alignment.⁴⁷

Japan, in turn, continued the work Abe had begun. His successors deepened bilateral cooperation with the Philippines, visiting Manila in successive years and

⁴⁶ Based on extensive discussions between the author and senior Japanese policy makers in both Tokyo and Manila between 2015 to 2025.

⁴⁷ See Joshua Kurlantzick, "Marcos Jr. Moves the Philippines Dramatically Closer to the United States," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 January 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

advancing the agenda of strategic alignment. The result was nothing short of a renaissance in Japan–Philippines relations—a new golden era of comprehensive strategic partnership.

On the economic front, Japan committed billions to high-profile infrastructure projects in the Philippines, chief among them the Manila subway system—symbolic of Tokyo’s sustained commitment to nation-building, not just diplomacy. Regionally, Japan offered a hard alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Under Abe’s leadership, Tokyo pledged USD 367 billion in infrastructure investments across Southeast Asia, a figure that eclipsed China’s USD 255 billion and redefined the balance of influence in the region.⁴⁸

On the global stage, Abe’s Japan did not merely react—it led. Tokyo pursued ambitious economic diplomacy, finalizing the world’s largest bilateral trade agreement with the European Union and salvaging the remains of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Under Japanese leadership, it was reborn as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a testament to Tokyo’s capacity to steer multilateralism in the absence of US initiative.

Japan also joined forces with Western allies to launch a series of counter-infrastructure platforms: a USD 4.5 billion high-tech infrastructure initiative with the United States, the Blue Dot Network with the United States and Australia, and the broader Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative alongside G7 partners. Each effort underscored Japan’s strategic objective: to provide credible, transparent alternatives to China’s economic statecraft.

Crucially, Japan’s global activism was matched by a bold new defense diplomacy.⁴⁹ It provided maritime security assistance to frontline Southeast Asian nations to help them monitor and defend their exclusive economic zones amid Chinese incursions. While Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia all benefited, the Philippines stood at the center of this strategic outreach.

Manila received multirole coast guard vessels, surveillance systems, and—perhaps most significantly—Tokyo’s trust. In 2018, the Philippines hosted the first-ever postwar deployment of Japanese armored vehicles during the Balikatan exercises. Four years later, Japan dispatched fighter jets for joint drills—another historic first.

⁴⁸ Michelle Jamrisko, “China No Match for Japan in Southeast Asian Infrastructure Race,” *Bloomberg*, 23 June 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

⁴⁹ Richard Javad Heydarian, “Stealth Superpower: The Fall and Re-Rise of Japan in the Indo-Pacific,” *Trends Research & Advisory*, 24 August 2023, <https://trendsresearch.org/>.

These were not symbolic gestures; they were strategic milestones, marking Japan's transition from economic donor to full-spectrum partner in regional security.⁵⁰

Japan has embarked on the most ambitious defense transformation in its post-war history. Under the shadow of rising threats from China and North Korea, Tokyo has not only shattered longstanding budgetary taboos but also considered acquiring its first fully operational aircraft carrier—once an unthinkable prospect in pacifist Japan. This evolution is not a rupture but the logical culmination of a trajectory set in motion by Shinzo Abe, and now carried forward with conviction by his successors.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, Abe's protégé, institutionalized this legacy. Under his administration, Japan launched the Official Security Assistance (OSA) initiative—an unprecedented program aimed at funding critical infrastructure, cyber defense, and capacity building in frontline states. The Philippines quickly emerged as the primary beneficiary.⁵¹

At the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, Kishida formally introduced a new era of “realism diplomacy.” The message was unmistakable: Japan would no longer rely on moral suasion alone. It would project power, forge partnerships, and build deterrence. He pledged to double defense spending to 2 percent of GDP, pursued the development of advanced offensive capabilities to counter evolving missile threats, and joined Britain and Italy in a trilateral effort to produce next-generation fighter aircraft.⁵²

Kishida's commitment to the Philippines was more than rhetorical. In 2023, he delivered a historic address before a joint session of the Philippine Congress, pledging a comprehensive strategic partnership encompassing maritime security, infrastructure, and regional stability. He visited the Philippine Coast Guard and affirmed Japan's continued support for fleet expansion—equipping the force with larger, more capable Japanese-built vessels to patrol contested waters with greater reach and resilience.

That same year, Kishida joined President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. at the White House, where they—alongside US President Joe Biden—launched the trilateral Japan–Philippines–US (JAPHUS) security framework. At its core was the Luzon Economic Corridor: a trilateral initiative aimed at securing strategic supply chains,

⁵⁰ Richard Javad Heydarian, “Japanese warplanes in Philippines for first time since WW2, *Asia Times*, 8 December 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/>.

⁵¹ This assessment is based on conversations with senior Japanese officials from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Office of the Prime Minister, as well as with former senior officials and veteran journalists in Tokyo.

⁵² Heydarian, “Japan's new golden age in Southeast Asia.”

particularly in semiconductors, energy, and critical minerals—each a linchpin of twenty-first-century deterrence.⁵³

Not long after, Tokyo and Manila formalized a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), unlocking joint military drills, weapons transfers, defense technology exchanges, intelligence-sharing, and cybersecurity coordination. For two nations with military facilities situated near Taiwan, this bilateral alignment is no longer merely beneficial—it is indispensable. In any plausible scenario involving a Chinese campaign against Taiwan, Japanese–Philippine cooperation will form the southeastern flank of regional deterrence.

Given growing uncertainty over the direction of American foreign policy—particularly under a potential second Trump administration—the Japan–Philippines partnership has taken on new urgency. In early 2025, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba made a high-profile visit to Manila to reinforce bilateral ties in critical areas ranging from maritime security to energy and manufacturing resilience.⁵⁴ The timing was deliberate: his visit coincided with the annual Balikatan exercises, where Japanese forces joined their US and Philippine counterparts in one of the most expansive trilateral drills to date.⁵⁵

The Japan–Philippines dyad has become a textbook case of twenty-first-century middle-power diplomacy—melding liberal multilateralism with hard-nosed balance-of-power realism. Yet for all its promise, the path forward remains fraught. Japan faces demographic decline and flatlining growth prospects, which may eventually constrain its ability to sustain elevated defense spending or endure extended kinetic conflict.⁵⁶ Domestic political instability in both countries, fueled by disillusionment with establishment parties, also threatens policy continuity.⁵⁷

The Philippines, while enjoying robust economic growth, remains under-equipped for great-power competition. Its military modernization has been sluggish, skewed for decades toward counterinsurgency rather than external defense. Political volatility further complicates the picture, as the Marcos and Duterte factions vie for

⁵³ Roy C. Mabasa, “Leaders from U.S, Japan and Philippines launch Luzon Economic Corridor at inaugural White House summit,” *Politiko*, 12 April 2024, <https://politiko.com.ph/>.

⁵⁴ Sebastian Strangio, “On Ishiba Visit, Japan and Philippines Pledge Further Security Cooperation,” *The Diplomat*, 30 April 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁵⁵ his assessment is partly based on conversations with members of Prime Minister Ishiba’s cabinet in Manila on 29 April 2025. For more details on the visit see Luisa Cabato, “Japanese PM arrives in Manila for two-day official visit,” *Inquirer.net*, 29 April 2025, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/>.

⁵⁶ See Kenji Kushida, “Japan’s Three D’s (Defense, Disaster Management, and Demographics),” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 1 May 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

⁵⁷ Hiroshi Kimijima, “Poll: Distrust in politics strong among young, neutral voters,” *Asahi*, 30 April 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/>.

control of the nation's strategic direction—particularly over how forcefully to confront Chinese maritime aggression.⁵⁸

Paradoxically, the vulnerabilities facing both Japan and the Philippines have become a catalyst for deeper bilateral cooperation—and a driving force behind broader minilateral engagement with other likeminded middle powers. Strategic necessity has created strategic opportunity.

Japan now sees the Philippines not only as a maritime partner but as a key node for expanding its manufacturing base and geopolitical footprint. With favorable demographics and macroeconomic indicators, Manila presents a long-term platform for industrial diversification and strategic investment. Tokyo, eyeing the Philippines' rapidly growing defense budget, has also positioned itself to become a major player in the country's arms procurement. Over the next decade, the Philippines is projected to spend approximately USD 35 billion to modernize its naval and air forces—part of a long-overdue shift from counterinsurgency to external defense. For decades, a sprawling army consumed the lion's share of military resources, a legacy of internal conflict now being corrected as Manila recalibrates for great-power competition.⁵⁹

India and South Korea have emerged as early suppliers of modern weapons systems, but other middle powers—including Japan, Germany, France, Spain, and Poland—are aggressively pursuing major defense contracts. In this evolving security marketplace, Japan has more than commercial interests at stake. JAPHUS, still embryonic in function, provides a mechanism through which Tokyo—alongside Washington—can build lasting Philippine defense capacity and industrial resilience.

The Luzon Economic Corridor stands at the heart of this strategy. Under its framework, Japanese and Western firms are investing heavily in critical infrastructure, energy production, and advanced manufacturing, with a particular emphasis on semiconductors and critical minerals. The Philippines is positioning itself as a “China-free” supply-chain partner—an increasingly valuable role amid intensifying technological bifurcation and strategic decoupling.

Even a second Trump administration—skeptical of alliances and wary of free trade—would likely embrace sector-specific trade deals with Manila as part of a pragmatic effort to strengthen a frontline network of regional allies. The strategic rationale is clear: to deter any major Chinese kinetic action against Taiwan or along the contested waterways of the South and East China Seas, Washington must rely on partners with credible capabilities and shared interests.

⁵⁸ Francis Mangosing, “Marcos OKs military's P2-trillion wish list for weapons, equipment,” *Cebu Daily News*, 29 January 2024, <https://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/>.

⁵⁹ Joe Saballa, “Philippines OKs \$35B ‘Re-Horizon 3’ Military Modernization Plan,” *Defense Post*, 30 January 2024, <https://thedefensepost.com/>.

Japan and the Philippines, for their part, have drawn the same conclusion. Both governments now acknowledge the necessity of proactive middle-power diplomacy—not merely as an adjunct to American strategy, but as a hedge against long-term uncertainties in U.S. regional posture and resolve. As Philippine Ambassador Jose Romualdez bluntly warned in the wake of what many saw as Washington’s faltering commitment to Ukraine: “[A]t the end of the day, each country now has to be ready to be able to beef up its defense, beef up its economic security.”⁶⁰

Tokyo and Manila have taken that warning to heart. Their focus now is on “Trump-proofing” and “Duterte-proofing” their security relationship—insulating it from both American political volatility and Philippine populist reversals. Japan, like other Western democracies, has a vested interest in the success of the Marcos administration. Consolidating high-stakes defense and economic cooperation today offers the best chance of preserving continuity if a more China-aligned leader emerges after the 2028 elections.

The Duterte presidency demonstrated the enduring strength of institutional guardrails within the Philippine state. Despite six years of strategic ambiguity and rhetorical flirtation with Beijing and Moscow, no substantive defense or economic pacts materialized. The liberal, West-leaning establishment held firm.⁶¹

Today, that same combination of strategic urgency and geopolitical unpredictability has propelled the Japan–Philippines partnership to unprecedented depth. For both nations, a rules-based regional order is not aspirational—it is imperative. It is the legal and strategic scaffolding upon which smaller and medium-sized powers depend.

Yet the Indo-Pacific remains a contested and increasingly combustible theater. Whether this emergent axis of middle powers can constrain the excesses of super-power rivalry—or prevent catastrophic escalation in the event of conflict—remains the defining question of our time.

Conclusion

The Japan–Philippines strategic partnership stands as one of the Indo-Pacific’s most consequential middle-power alignments—born not of convenience, but of necessity. As China presses forward with a revisionist agenda across the East and South China Seas, and as American regional commitments grow increasingly

⁶⁰ Raissa Robles, “Philippine ambassador warns defence treaty with US may not be ironclad,” *South China Morning Post*, 3 March 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

⁶¹ Michael I. Magcamit and Aries A. Arugay, “Explaining populist securitization and Rodrigo Duterte’s anti-establishment Philippine foreign policy,” *International Affairs* 100, no. 5 (September 2024): 1877–97, <https://doi.org/>.

contingent on domestic political winds, Tokyo and Manila have assumed roles that neither sought but now must sustain: architects of regional deterrence and custodians of a fragile rules-based order.

What began as economic assistance and maritime capacity-building has matured into a multifaceted security relationship—backed by formal agreements, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and trilateral frameworks like JAPHUS. This evolution has been driven by clear-eyed assessments in both capitals: the realization that strategic ambiguity, left unchecked, invites coercion; and that sovereignty, in this new era, must be underwritten by both resilience and relationships.

Japan's transformation from pacifist power to proactive security actor has redefined the regional balance, not through hegemonic ambition, but through disciplined statecraft. By expanding Official Security Assistance, co-developing next-generation defense systems, and institutionalizing economic initiatives like the Luzon Economic Corridor, Japan is wielding state power with surgical precision—fortifying allies, shaping regional norms, and confronting gray-zone coercion without firing a shot. This is not rearmament for its own sake; it is geopolitical realism channeled through the logic of middle-power deterrence.

The Philippines, for its part, has shown that democratic vulnerability need not equate to strategic paralysis. The enduring influence of its liberal foreign policy establishment, despite waves of populist disruption, has ensured continuity in its alignment with democratic partners. Under President Marcos Jr., Manila has pursued long-overdue investments in external defense, while positioning itself as a “China-free” partner in semiconductor supply chains, critical minerals, and maritime domain awareness. The fact that Tokyo and Washington view the current administration as a bridgehead for long-term regional stability underscores just how central the Philippines has become to the Indo-Pacific equation.

Still, the road ahead is uncertain. Both nations face structural constraints—demographic stagnation in Japan, political volatility and under-resourced armed forces in the Philippines. And while trilateral and minilateral frameworks have multiplied, the coherence and sustainability of such efforts remain to be tested in a crisis. The looming possibility of a second Trump administration, or of a return to China-friendly leadership in Manila after 2028, only reinforces the need for institutionalized defense, economic, and diplomatic mechanisms that can outlast electoral cycles.

Ultimately, the future of the Indo-Pacific will not be shaped by rhetoric or diplomatic communiqués, but by the willingness of capable middle powers to shoulder responsibility, project credibility, and prepare for contingencies now widely regarded as plausible. Japan and the Philippines have done more than

signal intent—they are building facts on the ground, at sea, and in the policy frameworks that will define the coming decade.

In a region where the rules are under siege and the risks are rising, the Japan–Philippines partnership offers not just a model, but a mandate: that middle powers need not wait for great powers to act, and that order, once imperiled, must be defended not in theory—but in practice. 🌟

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Space, Maritime Security, and Geopolitics in the South China Sea

DR. FUMIKO SASAKI

Abstract

China's militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea has intensified regional tensions and appeared to shift the strategic balance in its favor. This study argues, however, that it is not too late for the United States to restore that balance. By analyzing the primary function of these islands—securing intelligence rather than projecting firepower—the study contends that the United States can neutralize their value without direct military rollback. Drawing insights from the war in Ukraine, particularly the decisive role of space capabilities in enabling information dominance, the analysis underscores the need for persistent surveillance and rapid decision making. The study advances the Heterogeneous Space Architecture as a scalable platform to achieve regional intelligence superiority. It concludes that institutionalizing, coordinating, and localizing this architecture—despite inherent challenges—offers the most viable path for the United States to regain the cognitive high ground in the Indo-Pacific and reassert a favorable balance of power.

The South China Sea (SCS), situated at the heart of the Indo-Pacific and roughly one-third larger than the Mediterranean, plays an outsized role in global maritime commerce and regional food security.¹ This sea, teeming with vital sea lanes and strategic chokepoints, has become the crucible of great power rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beijing, viewing control of the SCS as essential to its economic lifeline and national security, has pursued an increasingly aggressive posture in the region.

As China's economic ascent has matured into geopolitical ambition, the SCS has emerged as a principal theater of confrontation. For Beijing, securing influence

¹ According to the study by the US National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), 20 to 33 percent of the global trade was estimated to be carried through the SCS. Kerem Coşar and Benjamin D. Thomas, "The Geopolitics of International Trade in Southeast Asia" (working paper, NBER, November 2020, <https://www.nber.org/>). See also, "China's put-upon maritime neighbours are pushing back," *The Economist*, 1 February 2023, <https://www.economist.com/>. According to Gregory B. Poling, "50% of the fishing vessels in the world are estimated to operate in the South China Sea. . . [and] Its fisheries officially employ around 3.7 million people and unofficially many more." See Gregory B. Poling, "Illuminating the South China Sea's Dark Fishing Fleets," *CSIS*, 9 January 2019, <https://ocean.csis.org/>.

over the SCS is no longer a peripheral aim—it is a core strategic imperative.² Unsurprisingly, the PRC’s assertive behavior has triggered alarm in Washington. As the US Department of Defense (DOD) declared, China “remains our most consequential strategic competitor for the coming decades.”³ Every mile China gains in the SCS diminishes American influence in a region that serves as the geopolitical hinge of the twenty-first century.⁴

Beijing’s claim to nearly the entire SCS, demarcated by its ambiguous and expansionist “Nine-Dash Line,” directly overlaps with the sovereign rights and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of numerous Southeast Asian nations. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague ruled decisively against China’s claims.⁵ The ruling, however, did not temper Beijing’s ambitions. Instead, China intensified its coercive campaign—harassing regional fishing vessels with its Coast Guard and maritime militia, and disrupting legitimate resource exploration by its neighbors.⁶

The most audacious component of China’s strategy has been the transformation of seven reefs in the Spratly Islands into militarized outposts since 2013.⁷ Among these, Mischief Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Subi Reef—fortified since 2018—stand

² The 2022 report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* by the US Department of Defense is specifically focused on China’s activities in the SCS, particularly compared with the same report published in 2024. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Washington: DOD, 29 November 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/>; and *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Washington: DOD, 18 December 2024), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

³ *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: DOD, 27 October 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁴ Ronald O’Rourke, *U.S.–China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 1 May 2025), <https://www.congress.gov/>.

⁵ The ruling determined that Mischief Reef—one of the primary maritime features militarized by China—is legally part of the Philippines’ EEZ and continental shelf, rendering China’s occupation and use of the reef unlawful under international law. See, Permanent Court of Arbitration, *PCA Case No. 2013–19: In the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration Before an Arbitral Tribunal Constituted Under Annex VII to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea Between the Republic of the Philippines and the People’s Republic of China*, 12 July 2016, *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, <https://web.archive.org/>.

⁶ The US Department of Defense’s 2022 *National Defense Strategy* defines these actions as *gray-zone activities*—coercive tactics that may remain below perceived thresholds for triggering US military response (page 6). This study draws on the works of Andrew Erickson, a professor at the US Naval War College, whose website, andrewerickson.com, serves as a primary resource on China’s naval developments.

⁷ *Geopolitics* in this study is defined as “a set of states’ activities reflecting their geographic conditions to prioritize their preferences over those of others by employing any available measures,” based on Susan Strange’s definition of power. See, Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17. Some argue that large-scale reclamation efforts began in 2013, following the Obama administration’s declaration that the United States would no longer act as the world’s police. See, Aaron Blake and Sean Sullivan, “Team America No Longer Wants to Be the World Police,” *Washington Post*, 13 September 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

as the PRC's forward operating bases, complete with runways, aircraft hangars, munitions storage, radar installations, and a persistent military air presence.⁸ The remaining outposts—Gaven, Johnson, Cuarteron, and Hughes—remain militarized to a lesser degree but represent latent capabilities ready for escalation.

Washington has not ignored this challenge. The White House condemned China's militarization of the islands, warning of consequences and reaffirming its commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Admiral Philip Davidson, then commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, put it bluntly: "China is now capable of controlling the SCS in all scenarios short of war with the United States."⁹

American strategic stakes in the region are profound. Southeast Asia, projected to remain one of the world's fastest-growing regions, represents a critical vector of global economic growth.¹⁰ If Beijing dominates the SCS, regional states may drift into China's orbit—gravitationally pulled by dependency and coerced by force. Disruption of shipping through the SCS would wreak economic havoc: Taiwan's economy could shrink by a third, Singapore's by 22 percent, and the ripple effects would reach American shores.¹¹

Furthermore, the SCS is indispensable to US strategic logistics. Without access to the SCS—particularly the use of bases in the Philippines—American efforts to

⁸ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) hosted and operated by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has perhaps the most extensive and detailed interactive tracking website. See "Occupation and Island Building." AMTI (Retrieved April 20, 2023)

⁹ Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Advance Policy Questions for Admiral Philip S. Davidson, USN, Expected Nominee for Commander, U.S. Pacific Command*, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., 17 April 2018, 18, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>. In 2015, a comprehensive report by the RAND Corporation examining the military balance in the South China Sea concluded that the United States held an overall advantage over China. Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2015), <https://www.rand.org/>. However, reflecting a significant shift in the perceived trajectory of regional power, a 2018 news report quoted Greg Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, offering a more pessimistic outlook. Poling warned, "If current trends continue, the U.S. Navy will continue to sail through the South China Sea, but those presence operations or freedom of navigation operations will be largely hollow as the waters will effectively be a Chinese lake." "US to China: 'Consequences' for Militarization of South China Sea," *Voice of America*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

¹⁰ James Fox, "ASEAN Economic Outlook 2023," *ASEAN Briefing*, 3 January 2023, <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/>.

¹¹ Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, "Competition without catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist With China," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 August 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>. The US National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) analyzed bilateral trade among 51 economies, collectively representing 92 percent of global GDP. According to their findings, Ireland is the only economy projected to remain unaffected by a broader trade downturn. While the study's estimations are based on significant simplifications, the data still offers valuable insight into the potential impact of such disruptions. See, Coşar and Thomas, "The Geopolitics of International Trade in Southeast Asia."

deter or defend against Chinese aggression toward Taiwan would face severe constraints.¹² In short, to cede the SCS to Beijing is to forfeit the Indo-Pacific.

The Question

If the United States must prevent China from dominating the SCS to avoid ceding primacy in Asia—and ultimately the global order—then the pivotal question becomes: What should Washington do about the militarized islands? More precisely, has the window closed on restoring the pre-2013 power equilibrium that existed before Beijing began its island-building blitz?

This study contends with that question and outlines countermeasures to rebalance the regional security architecture. At the core is the hard reality that neither rules nor shared values offer any path forward. The 2016 verdict by the PCA changed nothing on the ground.¹³ The so-called “rules-based international order,” a phrase championed by the Biden administration, is dismissed by Beijing as a self-serving construct of Western hegemony.¹⁴ There is no normative consensus, no moral suasion, no diplomatic lever that will compel China’s retreat from its artificial bastions in the sea.

What remains is power—defined, as Susan Strange once put it, as “the ability to affect outcomes in which its preferences take precedence over the preferences of others.”¹⁵ In the SCS, power is the last and only viable tool. And the US–China competition is, at its essence, a contest over who wields more of it.

Most experts, however, answer the central question with a pessimistic “no.” Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, in their 2020 analysis, dismissed rollback and acceptance, favoring a hybrid strategy of containment and offset.¹⁶ The islands, they argued, represent a *fait accompli*—irreversible facts on the seascape. Likewise, Taylor Fravel and Charles Glaser, both eminent voices in Chinese military and international relations studies, concluded that Washington should aim merely to halt further

¹² Jim Garamone, “Austin Visit to Philippine Base Highlights Benefits of U.S.–Philippine Alliance,” *DOD News*, 1 February 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

¹³ Permanent Court of Arbitration, *PCA Case No 2013-19*.

¹⁴ Liu Guangyuan, “‘Rules-based international order’ is rhetorical tool for US,” *China Daily*, 5 March 2023, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/>.

¹⁵ Strange, *The Retreat of the State*, 17.

¹⁶ Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “Getting Serious About Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (2018): 13–32, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>. The offset approach does not seek to prevent further Chinese encroachments in the SCS but aims to penalize Beijing for destabilizing actions while mitigating their impact through measures that strengthen the overall US position in the region. In contrast, the accommodation strategy accepts Chinese dominance in the SCS, arguing that direct competition with Beijing in its own backyard is too costly and perilous, and instead focuses on ensuring a smooth transition to Chinese regional primacy.

advances. Attempting to force China into demilitarization, they argued, would be futile and disproportionate given the asymmetry in strategic stakes.¹⁷

But these arguments share a common flaw. They rest on a faulty assumption: that the islands serve primarily as launchpads for firepower projection. As such, these analyses presume that power must be countered with more power—missile for missile, base for base. This is a tactical misdiagnosis.¹⁸

Power in the twenty-first century is no longer limited to firepower. It also derives from technology, data, and above all, control over information. The idea that these island outposts are little more than static artillery platforms is an outdated view that ignores China's doctrinal shift toward *intelligentized warfare*.

Power in the twenty-first century is no longer confined to missiles and ships. It now resides in data, networks, and the ability to shape decisions before the first shot is fired.¹⁹ This is the essence of what the People's Liberation Army (PLA) calls *intelligentized warfare* (智能化战争)—a doctrinal leap that envisions future conflict dominated by artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, big data analytics, and operations in the cognitive domain. Rather than simply enhancing firepower, intelligentized warfare seeks to achieve decision dominance through the fusion of human and machine intelligence, the integration of systems across all domains, and the manipulation of perception and will at both tactical and strategic levels. In this construct, the goal is not merely to outgun the enemy—but to outthink, outpace, and outmaneuver them in every sphere, especially the mind.

To assume that the Spratly outposts are static firebases is to miss their deeper function in China's evolving theory of warfare. These platforms serve not just as military fortresses, but as sensors, data hubs, and influence nodes in a region where the most decisive battles may be fought in the electromagnetic spectrum and cyberspace—not with missiles, but with algorithms.

This study proceeds from a different premise. It tests three interrelated hypotheses:

- H1: China's militarization of islands is aimed primarily at achieving information dominance, not firepower superiority.
- H2: The PLA increasingly prioritizes information dominance over traditional kinetic capability.

¹⁷ M. Taylor Fravel and Charles L. Glaser, "How Much Risk Should the United States Run in the South China Sea?" *International Security* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 88–134, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁸ David Brunnstrom and Michael Martina, "Xi denies China turning artificial islands into military bases," *Reuters*, 25 September 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹⁹ James Andrew Lewis, "Technology and Power," *CSIS*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.csis.org/>.

- H3: Space-based capabilities can enable the United States and its allies to regain information dominance and thus strategic balance.

The study begins with a literature review to assess these claims. It then dissects the evolving concept of information dominance and concludes by proposing how the United States can employ spacepower to rebalance the strategic equation in the SCS.

Analysis: Literature Review to Test the Hypotheses

At first glance, China's artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago appear to serve an obvious purpose: the projection of firepower. Concrete runways, hardened shelters, and radar installations suggest that Beijing is extending the reach of the PLA southward into the heart of the SCS. This conventional interpretation dominates much of the strategic discourse.

The DOD, while characteristically cautious in its language, notes that the "PRC's Spratly outposts are capable of supporting military operations, including advanced weapon systems."²⁰ Brands and Cooper go further, asserting that the seven Chinese bases in the Spratlys "greatly extend the reach of both its antiaccess forces and its power-projection capabilities."²¹ Japan's Ministry of Defense, more direct than its American counterpart, has publicly mapped the expanded airpower radius of PLA combat aircraft operating from these fortified outposts.²² These views—rooted in the optics of militarization—assume the islands' primary utility lies in their kinetic capabilities.

Yet this assumption fails to withstand deeper strategic scrutiny. Two critical challenges undermine the firepower-centric interpretation of the islands' purpose.

First, the military contribution of these islands to China's broader power projection is marginal at best. Former US Navy officer and expert on the PLA Navy (PLAN) Michael Dahm argues that missile systems deployed on the islands "pale in comparison to those of multiple PLAN task groups that may deploy to the SCS."²³ In short, the islands are not war-winning assets in a conventional campaign; they are, at best, peripheral launch points. RAND Corporation's Timothy Heath and his colleagues echo this assessment from a different angle. The real threat to US forces and bases, the note, stems not from aircraft operating out of the Sprat-

²⁰ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2022, 112.

²¹ Brands and Cooper, "Getting Serious About Strategy," 4.

²² "China's Activities in the South China Sea" (presentation, Japan Ministry of Defense, April 2025), <https://www.mod.go.jp/>.

²³ J. Michael Dahm, *Offensive and Defensive Strike* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, December 2022), 28, <https://www.jhuapl.edu/>.

lys but from China's massive inventory of long-range precision-strike weapons—particularly ballistic missiles capable of targeting US installations from the second island chain to northern Australia.²⁴

Second, the islands are extremely vulnerable in the event of open conflict. Fravel and Glaser, among others, concede that these outposts would likely be destroyed in the early phases of a war with the United States.²⁵ While Brands and Cooper note that the islands would “complicate the American operations,”²⁶ and Gregory Poling warns that their neutralization would be “prohibitively costly” in the opening salvos of war,²⁷ such concerns must be weighed against the reality that even US bases like Guam are exposed to Chinese missile strikes.²⁸

This vulnerability is not lost on Beijing. The PLA's own assessments acknowledge the limitations of fixed forward positions in a precision-strike environment.²⁹ Indeed, some analysts argue that far from being an asset, these islands are a liability—easy targets in the event of war and thus of limited deterrent value.³⁰ If the islands are likely to be leveled in the first days of high-end conflict, one must ask: what strategic function do they truly serve? Certainly not one rooted solely in conventional firepower.

This line of questioning challenges the dominant paradigm and strengthens the case for reevaluating the islands' purpose through the lens of *intelligentized warfare*—where information, not firepower, delivers decisive advantage.

All evidence considered, the most compelling analysis of China's militarized islands comes not from firepower theorists, but from Dahm, a former US Navy intelligence officer and one of the foremost analysts of Chinese maritime capabilities. Dahm's comprehensive *SCS Military Capability Series* (MILCAP)—an exhaustive survey of

²⁴ Timothy R. Heath et al., *Disrupting the Chinese Military in Competition and Low-Intensity Conflict* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2023), <https://www.rand.org/>.

²⁵ Fravel and Glaser, “How Much Risk Should the United States Run.”

²⁶ Brands and Cooper, “Getting Serious About Strategy,” 4.

²⁷ Gregory Poling, “The Conventional Wisdom on China's island Bases is Dangerously wrong,” *War on the Rocks*, 10 January 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

²⁸ The US military recognizes that Guam remains vulnerable to PLA missile threats, posing significant strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific. See, “Guam, where America's next war may begin,” *The Economist*, 8 April 2023, <https://www.economist.com/>.

²⁹ Kristin Huang, “Beijing's South China Sea Military Bases 'Are Vulnerable to Attack and Will Be of Little Use in the War',” *South China Morning Post*, 6 December 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

³⁰ Olli Pekka Suorsa, “The Conventional Wisdom still Stands,” *War on the Rocks*, 6 February 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

the technologies and operational capacity of China's SCS outposts—offers the most detailed assessment to date of their true strategic function.³¹

Dahm's conclusion is unequivocal: “the primary purpose of China's SCS bases is not to generate conventional military power but to facilitate information superiority with substantial command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and counter-C4ISR capabilities.”³² In other words, the islands are not the forward edge of firepower—they are platforms for sensing, monitoring, and dominating the informational battlespace.

He issues a pointed critique of the US military for its persistent reliance on an industrial-age paradigm—one that privileges kinetic power and maneuver over informational asymmetry. Consequently, Washington tends to interpret Beijing's actions through its own firepower-centric lens. In contrast, Dahm reframes the contest: “Imagine entering a dark room. You can neither see nor hear, but your adversary can see and hear everything.”³³ In that analogy, the PLA is not preparing to fight blind—it is preparing to render its adversary blind.

This metaphor echoes an earlier definition by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, who characterized *information dominance* as the condition in which one “knows everything about an adversary while keeping the adversary from knowing much about oneself.”³⁴ The intellectual resonance between these two conceptions reinforces the argument that China's strategic intent is not rooted in brute force, but in cognitive and situational control.

Taken together, these insights strongly support the first hypothesis: H1—China's militarization of islands is aimed primarily at achieving *information dominance*, not firepower superiority.

What gives Dahm's thesis additional credibility is that it does not rest solely on satellite imagery or Western assumptions. It is rooted in China's own doctrinal texts—specifically, the PLA's theory of informationized warfare as outlined in the *Science of Campaigns*.³⁵ Dahm distills the PLA's approach as follows: “Information power is more prominent than the industrial-age warfare elements of firepower or

³¹ J. Michael Dahm, *Introduction to South China Sea Military Capability Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020), <https://www.jhuapl.edu/sites/>.

³² Dahm, *Introduction to South China Sea Military Capability Studies*, 4.

³³ J. Michael Dahm, “Beyond ‘Conventional Wisdom’: Evaluating the PLA's South China Sea Bases in Operational Context,” *War on the Rocks*, 17 March 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

³⁴ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, “Cyberwar is Coming!,” in *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1997), 30, <https://www.rand.org/>.

³⁵ Yu Liming et al., *Science of Campaigns (2006)*, ed. Zhang Yuliang, Yu Shusheng, and Zhou Xiopeng, in *In Their Own Words* series, trans. Project Everest (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

manpower. The PLA's overarching focus on achieving battlespace information superiority as a tactical, operational, and strategic requirement cannot be overstated."³⁶

While Dahm does not offer a precise definition of *information superiority*, his use of the term clearly aligns with what US strategists define as *information dominance*—the condition in which a force controls the information environment so thoroughly that it can detect, understand, and act faster and more accurately than its adversary, while simultaneously denying that same capacity to others. This entails real-time data integration, electromagnetic spectrum control, cognitive influence, and decision superiority.

Air Force analyst B.A. Friedman confirms this alignment, observing that the PLA's doctrine of *informationization* (*xìnxīhuà*)—the integration of digital networks, sensor fusion, and real-time C4ISR systems across all domains—pursues the same strategic outcome as US information dominance: battlefield and cognitive superiority.³⁷ Informationization serves as the means; information dominance is the intended effect.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, information dominance will serve as the working definition of the PLA's intended strategic outcome in the SCS.

Since 2004, the PLA has systematically pursued the transformation of its force through a process it terms informationization. The PLA's white papers articulate this evolution as “informationization with Chinese characteristics,” emphasizing the leading role of information, composite force development, indigenous innovation, and strategic transformation.³⁸ Information, in this construct, is not simply a tool of warfare—it is its fulcrum.

More recently, the PLA has declared data a strategic national resource, placing artificial intelligence (AI) development at the apex of its priorities in cutting-edge science and technology fields.³⁹ This evolution reflects a conceptual shift from in-

³⁶ Dahm, *Introduction to South China Sea Military Capability Studies*, 3–4.

³⁷ B.A. Friedman, “Finding the Right Model: The Joint Force, the People's Liberation Army, and Information Warfare,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (March–April 2023): 1–17, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

³⁸ *China's National Defense in 2008*, trans., Andrew Erickson, (Beijing: PRC Information Office of the State Council, January 2009), 21–22, <http://www.andrewerickson.com/>; and *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2022, 160–62.

³⁹ “十四五”大数据产业发展规划” (“14th Five-Year Plan for Big Data Industry Development”), 工业和信息化部网站 (PRC Ministry of Industry and Information Technology Website), 1 December 2021, <http://www.gov.cn/>; and “中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要” (“Outline of the People's Republic of China: The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035”), 13 March 2021, <http://www.gov.cn/>. See the translation by Etcetera Language Group, Inc., “Outline of the People's Republic of China: The 14th – Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035”, 2021, <https://cset.georgetown.edu/>.

formationization to *intelligentization*, a doctrine in which AI is no longer an enabling system but the central nervous system of future warfighting.⁴⁰ Intelligentization emphasizes autonomous decision making, sensor fusion, predictive analytics, and algorithmic warfare—precisely the kinds of capabilities enhanced by persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms embedded across the SCS.

American defense analysts have taken note. A 2021 report identified intelligence analysis and information warfare as two of the PLA's highest priorities for AI integration.⁴¹ These systems are not merely tactical enhancements; they are structural pillars of a new form of military power that seeks to dominate the battlespace before the first kinetic exchange.

A growing chorus of experts now echoes Michael Dahm's thesis. Oriana Mastro, a leading scholar of Chinese military strategy, argues that the militarization of the islands has "greatly expanded China's maritime awareness and the range of its targeting capabilities."⁴² In a separate interview, she highlights that within the operational domain, radars and sensors are not merely supplementary but serve as the fundamental components of control.⁴³ To dominate airspace and waterways, Mastro explains, one must first dominate the electromagnetic environment—and that is precisely what these artificial outposts are built to achieve.

Chinese military analysts have said as much. Zhou Chenming, a prominent defense commentator in Beijing, described the reef bases as China's most advanced and comprehensive ISR platforms, integrating sensors and surveillance capabilities across a SCS *system-of-systems*. This interpretation has also been echoed in *Naval and Merchant Ships*, one of the Chinese military's official publications.⁴⁴

Taken together, these perspectives offer powerful support for H2: The PLA increasingly prioritizes information dominance over traditional kinetic capability.

Skeptics may still ask: Even if the primary function of the islands is informational, are they not still vulnerable? Would they not be among the first targets in a US–China contingency?

⁴⁰ The conceptual shift in Chinese terminology has evolved from 信息 (information) to 智能 (smart), reflecting a broader transition toward intelligence-driven technologies and systems. See, "China's National Defense in the New Era," *Xinhua*, 24 July 2019, <https://english.www.gov.cn/>.

⁴¹ Ryan Fedasiuk, Jennifer Melot, and Ben Murphy, *Harnessed Lightning: How the Chinese Military Is Adopting Artificial Intelligence* (Washington: Center for Security and Emerging Technology, October 2021), <https://cset.georgetown.edu/>.

⁴² Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Chinese Intentions in the South China Sea," In *The 2020–21 Wilson China Fellowship: Essays on the Rise of China and Its Implications* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center, 29 April 2021), 348, <https://fsi9-prod.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/>.

⁴³ Cited in O'Rourke, *U.S.–China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas*, 107.

⁴⁴ Cited in Minnie Chan, "South China Sea: how a Spratlys radar system could give the PLA an information edge," *South China Morning Post*, 5 December 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

Dahm preempts this objection. “Historical knowledge and baseline intelligence cannot be destroyed after the fact,” he writes. The PLA, he argues, benefits not only from what these systems see in real time but from years of accumulated data—on foreign resupply patterns, inter-outpost communications, regional weather patterns, and oceanic currents.⁴⁵ The architecture of surveillance outlasts its physical nodes.

This concept is well established. As Arquilla and Ronfeldt emphasized in their foundational work on information warfare, sustaining information dominance in both crisis and war requires proactive development and maintenance of capabilities during peacetime. Like sea and air power, information dominance must be continuously cultivated and operationalized to ensure effectiveness in conflict scenarios.⁴⁶ The PLA’s digital footprint—fed by years of persistent ISR and enriched by AI—may well outlive its platforms. As early as 2018, China was publicly promoting the use of AI to enhance its control and extract value from the SCS’s data-rich environment.⁴⁷

This brings us to the final strategic question: Is it too late to neutralize China’s information dominance—possibly already established? To answer this, the next section examines the final hypothesis: H3—Space-based capabilities can enable the United States and its allies to regain information dominance and thus strategic balance.

Space in War: What the War in Ukraine Has Taught⁴⁸

The opening salvos of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 underscored a truth that strategists had long theorized but rarely observed in such clarity: modern war begins in the information domain. On day one, Moscow launched

⁴⁵ J. Michael Dahm, email correspondence with the author, 2 March 2023.

⁴⁶ Arquilla and Ronfeldt, *In Athena’s Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*.

⁴⁷ Karishma Vaswani, “AI Could Even the Odds in the South China Sea,” *Bloomberg*, 20 June 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>. The Pentagon fully acknowledges the significance of information dominance. As David Spirk, former chief data officer at the Department of Defense, stated, “The new state of conflict is a yet-to-be-fully-conceived blend of strategic weapons, tactical operations, and dominance in information warfare.” He further emphasized the integral role of IT professionals, asserting that the DOD’s (information technology professionals “are warfighters” in the article “Rethinking what conflict involves in the age of exponential data,” *Breaking Defense*, <https://breakingdefense.com/>).

⁴⁸ One of the most insightful analyses on the role of space in warfare, particularly lessons from the War in Ukraine, is Haruhiko Kataoka, (In Japanese). He provided a handout of his work, “Satellite Data Use for National Security: Lessons from the War in Ukraine” (In Japanese), 29 September 2022, to the author of this study. Dr. Kataoka, a former Chief of the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force, currently serves as a member of the governmental Space Policy Committee. The author of this study had the opportunity to learn directly from him. See also, “Space Security Issues,” *Weekly Keidanren Times*, No. 3583 (16 March 2023), <https://www.keidanren.or.jp/>.

a cyberattack that disabled tens of thousands of user terminals linked to the ViaSat satellite communications network—used extensively by the Ukrainian military.⁴⁹ The intent was unmistakable: to plunge Ukrainian forces into an informational blackout, effectively rendering them blind and deaf while their adversary maintained full situational awareness—as Dahm mentioned in his earlier cited analogy.

This opening gambit revealed a foundational principle of modern warfare: victory no longer belongs solely to the side with superior firepower or maneuver—it belongs to the side that can *see, decide, and act first*. The war in Ukraine has become a case study in the primacy of destroying the enemy’s information architecture while safeguarding one’s own.

Despite being outgunned, Ukraine has maintained its information systems through a mixture of commercial innovation, allied support, and improvisation. Space-based Internet services provided by Starlink—an American commercial entity—helped replace disrupted terrestrial infrastructure.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, commercial satellite imagery from firms such as Maxar, BlackSky, Planet, Capella Space, Umbra, Iceye, and others, coordinated in part by the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), has enabled Ukrainian situational awareness and strategic messaging.⁵¹ It was through such imagery that the world learned of the atrocities in Bucha and the mass grave outside Mariupol—exposing Russian disinformation and rallying global support for Kyiv.⁵²

HawkEye 360’s synthetic-aperture radar detected Russian GPS jammer positions. Russian command-and-control links have failed repeatedly due to inadequate communications infrastructure.⁵³ A Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report noted that Russia’s lack of dedicated ISR satellites left its forces unable to assess battle damage, rendering them “highly vulnerable to deception.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ AJ Vicens, “UK, EU, US formally blame Russia for Viasat satellite hack before Ukraine invasion,” *CYBERSCOOP*, 10 May 2022, <https://cyberscoop.com/>; and Jonathan Beale, “Space, the unseen frontier in the war in Ukraine,” *BBC News*, 5 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

⁵⁰ Tim Robinson, “Ukraine conflict points to a future of space-enabled war,” *Royal Aeronautical Society*, 14 June 2022, <https://www.aerosociety.com/>. Summarizing the UK Ministry of Defense’s Defense Space Conference held on 10–11 May 2022, Robinson says “despite the full effort of Russian cyberattacks, jamming and kinetic strikes on Ukraine’s telecommunications, the country’s vital communication links (and even everyday ones) have remained operational.”

⁵¹ Theresa Hitchens, “How US intel worked with commercial satellite firms to reveal Ukraine info,” *Breaking Defense*, 7 April 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/>.

⁵² Tara Copp, “Satellite Firms Are Helping Debunk Russian Claims, Intel Chief Says,” *Defense One*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.defenseone.com/>.

⁵³ Courtney Albon, “How commercial space systems are changing the conflict in Ukraine,” *C4ISRNET*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/>.

⁵⁴ Mykhaylo Zaborodskyi et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022,” *RUSI*, 30 November 2022, <https://rusi.org/>.

Russian guided munitions frequently missed their targets, a direct result of degraded information feeds.⁵⁵

The conflict has also vindicated the use of autonomous systems and precision munitions—both reliant on space. GPS-guided HIMARS rockets helped shift the battlefield momentum in Ukraine’s favor.⁵⁶ Precision strikes demand not only guidance but persistent ISR; Ukraine has relied on US GPS, satellite-based communications, and commercial surveillance assets to sustain its kill chain.⁵⁷ Importantly, autonomous weapons depend on big data for targeting—and that data flows primarily from orbit.⁵⁸ Space systems have elevated battlefield decision making through real-time data aggregation, transmission, and targeting.

These dynamics mirror the PLA’s doctrinal conviction: that information power is not merely equal to but more decisive than firepower and maneuver. Russia’s superior conventional arsenal has not delivered victory because Ukraine has outperformed in the information domain. As the NGA’s director of commercial operations noted, “The power of information is winning.”⁵⁹ And it is space that underwrites this power.

Among the most decisive revelations of the Ukraine conflict is the centrality of space in the contest for information dominance. While war has long been waged on land, sea, and in the air, it is increasingly shaped—if not determined—by control over orbital infrastructure. The war reaffirmed that space capabilities are not abstract technological luxuries; they are warfighting essentials. Space assets enable communication; ISR; earth imaging; weather prediction; early warning; and positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT)—the very arteries of modern command and control.⁶⁰

As then-Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall observed, Russia’s invasion highlighted the critical importance of space-based capabilities in modern conflict.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Robinson, “Ukraine conflict points to a future”; and John Ismay, “Russian guided weapons miss the mark, US defense officials say.” *New York Times*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

⁵⁶ James H. Mittleman, in-person interview with delegates from the Japan Institute for Space and Security, attended by the author of this study, Washington, DC, 14 February 2023.

⁵⁷ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “Ukraine shows how space is now central to warfare,” *Financial Times*, 21 November 2022, <https://www.ft.com/>.

⁵⁸ Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), or drones, which are widely employed for reconnaissance in the war, use Starlink to transmit data.

⁵⁹ Hitchens, “How US intel worked with commercial satellite firms.”

⁶⁰ Dean Cheng, an expert on China’s space capabilities, noted in 2017 that “space assets will play a critical role in such areas as ISR, meteorology, communications, PNT, and SSA (space situational awareness)” within the context of Asian security. See, Dean Cheng, “Space Deterrence, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and Asian Security: A U.S. Perspective,” in *The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Deterring Gray Zone Coercion in the Maritime, Cyber, and Space Domains*, ed. Scott W. Harold et al. (Santa Monica: RAND, 2017), 74–90, <https://www.rand.org/>.

⁶¹ Cited in Copp, “Satellite Firms Are Helping Debunk Russian Claims.”

In a contest where decisions must be made at machine speed, the side that sees more, communicates faster, and strikes with greater precision prevails. And that capacity depends overwhelmingly on orbital infrastructure.

From this reality, three critical lessons emerge for US strategy in the SCS.

First, space systems are the backbone of the *information environment*, defined by the DOD as “the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information.”⁶² These systems are not neutral infrastructure; they shape what each actor perceives, when, and how. Dominating this environment is the prerequisite to dominating the battlespace.

Second, spacepower is not merely a function of satellite quantity. Rather, it is shaped by the scale and sophistication of partnerships. Effective space cooperation—domestically between government and private industry, and internationally among allies—serves as a force multiplier.⁶³ As demonstrated in Ukraine, even a nation without a robust indigenous space program can achieve remarkable informational dominance through integrated partnerships. In this sense, space is no longer exclusive—it is distributive.

Third, the quality of a state’s communication and information systems determines who wins the race to decision. Space-based assets compress the kill chain, enhance situational awareness, and enable real-time adaptation—attributes that make the difference in any modern high-end fight. These lessons all affirm the third hypothesis: H3—Space-based capabilities can enable the United States and its allies to regain information dominance and thus strategic balance.

China’s latest developments in the SCS suggest it has reached the same conclusion. In May 2025, the PLA commissioned a maritime space support vessel designed with both defensive and offensive counterspace capabilities. According to Andrew Erickson, this ship “might conceivably test or deploy non-kinetic counterspace capabilities—such as laser dazzling or jamming—to confuse, disrupt, or disable spy or early-warning satellites passing overhead.”⁶⁴ In other words, the PLA is preparing not only to dominate the electromagnetic spectrum—but to hold US space assets at risk.

⁶² *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington: DOD, November 2021), 104, <https://irp.fas.org/>.

⁶³ David T. Burbach, “Early lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war as a space conflict.” *Airpower after Ukraine* (blog), 30 August 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>; Mittleman interview; and Garrett Reim, “Lessons From War in Ukraine From Former USAFD Commander,” *Aviation Week Network*, 6 December 2022, <https://aviationweek.com/>.

⁶⁴ Andrew S. Erickson, “China’s New Liaowang-1 Space Support Ship: Defensive and Offensive Capabilities from Sea to Satellites,” *19FortyFive*, 8 May 2025, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/>.

This move reflects doctrinal continuity. PLA strategists—drawing from wartime lessons in Ukraine—have long emphasized the value of targeting “reconnaissance, communication, navigation, and early warning satellites” to “blind and deafen the enemy.”⁶⁵ In their view, the path to victory lies not in overwhelming force, but in denying adversaries the ability to perceive and respond.

The United States cannot afford to meet this challenge passively. To counter-balance Chinese information dominance in the SCS, Washington must maintain and extend its edge in spacepower. This means hardening satellite systems, expanding commercial-military cooperation, building resilient orbital architectures, and, most of all, ensuring that space remains an enabler of informational—and strategic—superiority.

In a contest increasingly defined by sensors, signals, and systems, it is not the flash of missiles but the clarity of vision that will decide who controls the Indo-Pacific.

Information Dominance to Intelligence Dominance— Conceptual Analysis

If the United States is to catch up with—and ultimately surpass—the PLA in the contest for strategic advantage in the SCS, it must move beyond reflexive calls for information dominance. To craft effective countermeasures, we must first interrogate what that term actually entails—and whether it suffices.

In US military doctrine, *information dominance* is defined as “the operational advantage gained by the ability to collect, control, exploit, and defend information to optimize decision making and maximize warfighting effects.”⁶⁶ This definition is mirrored in both Air Force and Navy guidance and has shaped much of the joint force’s thinking about twenty-first-century warfare.⁶⁷ But does improving the ability to collect and control information truly yield optimized decision making? Is this sufficient to prevail in the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific?

To answer these questions, this analysis introduces two foundational frameworks on decision making: John Boyd’s OODA loop and Thomas Schelling’s theory of strategy.

Boyd’s OODA model—*Observe, Orient, Decide, Act*—is widely adopted across military planning communities, including by the PLA. In this framework, the

⁶⁵ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020* (Washington: DOD, 2020), 65, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁶⁶ *U.S. Navy Information Dominance Roadmap 2013–2028* (Washington: US Navy, 2013). <https://defenseinnovationmarketplace.dtic.mil/>.

⁶⁷ US Air Force Policy Directive 17-1: *Information Dominance Governance and Management*, 12 April 2016, <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

Observe phase gathers data; *Orient* contextualizes that data and renders it meaningful; *Decide* selects among options; and *Act* implements the choice. It is *Orient*, Boyd argues, that plays the pivotal role—it shapes not only how one observes, but how one interprets, decides, and acts. He emphasizes that *Orient* is enriched by cultural understanding, inherited worldview, and domain-specific experience.⁶⁸

This orientation function aligns closely with the DOD's formal definition of *intelligence*—"the result of the collection, processing, integration, evaluation, analysis, and interpretation of available information concerning foreign nations, hostile or potentially hostile forces, or areas of actual or potential operations."⁶⁹ In effect, *Orient* turns raw data into actionable insight.

Boyd insists that to win in war, one must understand the adversary's *Orient* better than the adversary understands one's own.⁷⁰ That is the essence of *getting inside the enemy's OODA loop*—and thus of dominating the decision cycle.

Defense expert Richard Deakin echoes this view, arguing in his seminal work *Battlespace Technologies* that "the only way to defeat an enemy is to really understand how they think, act, and interpret the information around them."⁷¹ Intelligence, then—not merely data—is the decisive factor in warfare.

This insight dovetails with Thomas Schelling's concept of strategy, which he defines as "a set of action plans that constrain adversaries by shaping their expectations about the consequences of their actions."⁷² Strategy, in Schelling's view, is less about destroying enemy capability and more about influencing enemy choices. And that influence depends on knowing the adversary's preferences, thresholds, and logic—once again, on superior intelligence.

In this light, the US objective should not simply be *information dominance*—defined narrowly as technical control over the data environment—but something more robust: intelligence dominance.

⁶⁸ John R. Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*, ed. and comp. Grant T. Hammond (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2018), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>. Boyd created this model for operational decision-making. Yet it is widely applied to more long-term at higher-level decision-making, such as the Cuban missile crisis. See, Jeffrey N. Rule, "A Symbiotic Relationship: The OODA Loop, Intuition, and Strategic Thought" (research paper, US Army War College, March 2013), 10–11, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

⁶⁹ *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington: DOD, November 2021), 107, <https://irp.fas.org/>.

⁷⁰ Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*, 8.

⁷¹ Richard S. Deakin, *Battlespace Technologies: Network-Enabled Information Dominance* (Boston, Artech House, 2010), 16.

⁷² Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 15–16. This study does not define *strategy* in terms of long-term planning, broad scope, or hierarchical levels, but instead adheres strictly to Schelling's interpretation. See also, M.L.R. Smith and John Stone, "Explaining Strategic Theory," *Infinity Journal* 4 (Fall 2011): 27–30, <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/>.

This study defines *intelligence dominance* as a state in which one actor understands the thinking, decision making, and perceptual framework of the adversary better than the adversary understands one's own. It is this asymmetry in understanding that enables superior strategy, more accurate anticipation, and faster decision making. In other words, it is *Orient*, not merely *Observe*, that determines strategic success.

The PLA's doctrinal shift from *informationization* to *intelligentization* reflects this very insight. While *informationization* focuses on collecting and transmitting data, *intelligentization* integrates AI, machine learning, and cognitive domain warfare to anticipate, interpret, and exploit decision-making patterns.⁷³ It is a clear signal that Beijing now prioritizes intelligence over raw information.

However, implementing *intelligence dominance* in practice presents a substantial challenge. Unlike information systems, intelligence capabilities resist easy quantification. There is no universally accepted metric to assess the depth, accuracy, or effectiveness of a state's intelligence dominance. Technological tools change rapidly, data sources proliferate, and analytic paradigms evolve. As a result, superiority in this domain cannot be measured in discrete terms.

Consequently, *intelligence dominance* must be treated not as a static benchmark, but as an enduring imperative. It is not a point to be reached—it is a condition to be continually pursued. The goal is not to “match” the PLA, but to outpace it in understanding, prediction, and perception.

For the remainder of this study, the term *intelligence dominance*—not *information dominance*—will serve as the conceptual goal for US strategy in the SCS. Just as firepower without precision is wasteful, data without meaning is inert. What the United States needs is not simply more sensors, but sharper minds, better analysts, and faster, more anticipatory decision cycles.

Rebalancing Power in the SCS

The preceding analysis yields five interlocking premises that should shape US strategy in the SCS:

1. Artificial islands serve *primarily* to achieve intelligence dominance, not to project conventional firepower.
2. These islands are far more valuable in peacetime, when they enable persistent data collection, than in high-intensity wartime scenarios.
3. Space capabilities—military, civil, and commercial—are essential to achieving intelligence dominance.

⁷³ “China's National Defense in the New Era,” *Xinhua*.

4. Space cooperation, particularly among allies and trusted private-sector partners, can magnify a nation's spacepower exponentially.
5. Intelligence dominance, not raw information control, is what enables faster, more accurate decision making—and thus determines victory.

These premises collectively reframe how the United States should respond to the PLA's expanding informational footprint in the SCS.

The first premise challenges prevailing strategic frameworks. Where Hal Brands and Zack Cooper propose four options—rollback, containment, offset, or acceptance—the United States must now consider a fifth: functional neutralization.⁷⁴ That is, the United States need not physically dismantle China's outposts to render them strategically irrelevant. If the artificial islands are intelligence hubs, then the United States can outmaneuver them not with firepower, but with superior intelligence architecture—space-based, distributed, and alliance-enabled.

The second premise implies that the PLA may already possess a dominant peacetime intelligence position in the SCS due to years of uninterrupted ISR collection. This accumulated dataset may continue to yield operational value even if the outposts are destroyed in a contingency. Therefore, preemption by kinetic means alone is not enough. The informational advantage must be denied before conflict begins.

The final three premises illuminate a pathway forward. By mobilizing and integrating space capabilities across military, civil, and commercial sectors—both domestically and with key allies—the United States can achieve a quantum leap in regional situational awareness and decision speed. This multi-domain integration would overwhelm China's ISR infrastructure and, more importantly, displace its cognitive and strategic advantage.

In sum, the path to restoring strategic equilibrium in the SCS does not lie in the size of fleets or the range of missiles alone. It lies in mastering the invisible terrain of data, perception, and decision making. It lies in outthinking the adversary before outgunning them.

If the United States adapts to this new informational battlespace, it can reclaim initiative and “maintain a regional balance of power favorable to the United States and its allies and partners.”⁷⁵ The stakes are high—but the strategic tools are within reach.

⁷⁴ Brands and Cooper, “Getting Serious About Strategy.”

⁷⁵ O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas*, i.

Toward Intelligence Dominance: A Strategic Scheme for the SCS

How can the United States neutralize the core functions of China's militarized islands and overpower the PLA's emerging intelligence dominance in the SCS—particularly as Beijing prepares for cognitive, data-driven warfare? Drawing on the five premises established in this study, the answer lies in upgrading space capabilities to strengthen peacetime surveillance (*Observe*) and contextual analysis (*Orient*).

As Arquilla argued nearly three decades ago, “information dominance must arise and operate continuously,” especially in peacetime, when the “weather eye” must scan a dynamic array of potential threats.⁷⁶ Echoing this requirement, Deakin emphasizes that actionable information must be “available 24/7 in all weather” to enable rapid decision making inside the adversary's OODA loop. Persistent surveillance is not a luxury—it is the foundation of strategic initiative. As Deakin notes, the objective is to detect “changes to the situational picture as they occur,” ultimately creating a battlespace in which the adversary has “nowhere to hide.”⁷⁷

The PLA has been quietly but methodically constructing just such an environment in the SCS. As Dahm observes, China's artificial islands serve not merely as launch platforms but as advanced ISR nodes, capable of “collecting every detail of the movements of vessels and aircraft, foreign military activity, foreign outpost communications, resupply patterns, weather conditions, and fishing or other commercial activity in the area.”⁷⁸ These observations are not one-off snapshots; they are the raw material for what Dahm terms *Pattern of Life* (PoL) analysis.

PoL analysis is a sophisticated intelligence methodology designed to map the habitual behaviors and movement patterns of entities—military or civilian—over time. It enables the detection of anomalies, anticipates intent, and provides early warning.⁷⁹ Once established, such localized knowledge gives the PLA a persistent *Orient* advantage, even if the physical platforms on the islands are disabled. In other words, China's intelligence dominance is rooted not only in sensors and satellites, but in time—specifically, in continuous collection, cognitive framing, and regional familiarity.

To rebalance the strategic environment, the United States must match and exceed this persistence. Washington cannot afford to treat the SCS as a transient theater of operations. Intelligence dominance demands continuous and locally

⁷⁶ John Arquilla, *Information Strategy and Warfare: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 27.

⁷⁷ Deakin, *Battlespace Technologies*, 216.

⁷⁸ Dahm, *Introduction to South China Sea Military Capability Studies*, 6.

⁷⁹ Patrick T. Biltgen and Stephen Ryan, *Activity-Based Intelligence: Principles and Applications* (Boston: Artech House, 2016).

attuned presence. That means space-based assets with enduring regional coverage, coupled with analytical capabilities that can translate raw data into context, meaning, and anticipatory insight.

The PLA has already built this informational ecosystem in the region. If the United States is serious about restoring the balance of power, it must stop measuring dominance in terms of platforms or tonnage. The measure that matters now is informational presence—persistent, adaptive, and oriented toward understanding.

The next section outlines a strategic blueprint for how the United States can build this enduring presence and recover the cognitive high ground.

Heterogeneous Space Architecture⁸⁰

The United States already possesses a foundational scheme capable of enhancing its *Observe* and *Orient* functions across the Indo-Pacific. That prototype is the Heterogeneous Space Architecture (HSA), developed through the Micro-Satellite Military Utility Project Agreement (HSA-MSMU-PA).⁸¹ Though underappreciated in public discourse, this coalition-based framework offers a scalable path toward regional intelligence dominance—if properly expanded and institutionalized.

The HSA-MSMU-PA was conceived to build a more robust, resilient, and distributed information architecture that enhances warfighter decision making by integrating both commercial and governmental satellite assets from allied nations.⁸² Spearheaded by the United States, the coalition includes eight other nations and is composed of military, civil, and commercial satellites that span the full range of mission areas: missile warning, weather monitoring, ISR, space situational awareness, and communications.⁸³

The architecture underwent two operational tests during the 14-day Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises in 2018 and 2020. These exercises validated the core concept: synchronized constellations of allied satellites, analytical tools, and ground

⁸⁰ This section is based on documents published by the Annual Small Satellite Conferences.

⁸¹ The military application of small satellites is well established, with the United States, China, and Russia already deploying them alongside advancements in small-satellite constellation technologies, given their strategic benefits. See, Mariel Borowitz, “The Military Use of Small Satellites in Orbit,” Briefings de LIFRI, 4 March 2022, <https://www.ifri.org/>. Additionally, the role of small satellites in maritime domain awareness has been extensively analyzed. Saadia M. Pekkanen, Setsuko Aoki, and John Mittleman, “Small Satellites, Big Data: Uncovering the Invisible in Maritime Security,” *International Security* 47, no. 2 (2022): 177–216, <https://keio.elsevierpure.com/>.

⁸² Charlene Jacka et al., “Demonstration of a Hybrid Space Architecture during RIMPAC 2020” (paper, 35th Annual Small Satellite Conference, August 2021), <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/>.

⁸³ David Lingard et al., “Demonstration of a Heterogeneous Satellite Architecture during RIMPAC 2018” (paper, 33rd Annual AIAA/USU Conference on Small Satellites, 2019), <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/>.

stations can execute reconnaissance missions successfully across a shared battlespace.⁸⁴ By leveraging the advanced technological capabilities of private-sector firms, HSA-MSMU-PA demonstrated its potential to enable faster, more accurate decision making across domains.

Given the urgency of countering PLA informational expansionism in the SCS, this platform offers an immediately usable foundation. It has already been tested in the Indo-Pacific, and it was designed with *Observe* and *Orient* functions in mind—functions now central to rebalancing regional intelligence asymmetries.

However, despite its promise, HSA-MSMU-PA remains underdeveloped in three critical areas:

First, while the PLA has methodically and continuously collected multi-domain data over the SCS for years—building a long-term informational advantage—the HSA remains experimental. Its scope has thus far been geographically limited, focused primarily around Hawaii.⁸⁵ In effect, Washington has been rehearsing while Beijing has been operationalizing.

Second, the PLA has adopted a holistic approach to intelligence dominance, fusing ISR with cyber, electronic warfare, and local PoL analytics. In contrast, HSA-MSMU-PA remains narrowly focused on enhancing space-based ISR infrastructure, rather than building an integrated intelligence ecosystem.⁸⁶

Third, the PLA operates in its own backyard. Its familiarity with the SCS's terrain, currents, weather patterns, and indigenous maritime activity gives it an irreplaceable *Orient* advantage. Chinese maritime militia, commercial fishermen, and port authorities all serve as passive contributors to Beijing's localized knowledge base. By contrast, HSA-MSMU-PA has no local actors among its participants—no regional intelligence inputs that mirror the PLA's embedded presence.⁸⁷

To achieve intelligence dominance in the SCS, the United States must transform HSA-MSMU-PA from a *testbed* into a *standing institution*. This study recommends three immediate actions:

⁸⁴ Jacka et al., "Demonstration of a Hybrid Space Architecture," 3. RIMPAC allowed the participants to "directly exploit well scripted events, rich target sets, and access to planning and ground truth information for structured capability testing anchored on real world data."

⁸⁵ The 2018 RIMPAC exercise incorporated 185 satellites, while the 2020 iteration utilized 256 sensors, including earth observation systems, Automatic Identification System (AIS), and Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR). Participating satellites included Planet SkySats, BlackSky, Spire, Maxar, and NovaSAR. Lingard et al., "Demonstration of a Heterogeneous Satellite Architecture," 3; and Jacka et al., "Demonstration of a Hybrid Space Architecture," 3.

⁸⁶ Andy Bowyer, "New Contract Award," *Kleos*, 19 May 2020, <https://kleos.space/>.

⁸⁷ Jacka et al., "Demonstration of a Hybrid Space Architecture."

1. Institutionalize HSA-MSMU-PA as a permanent regional intelligence architecture—not a periodic exercise.
2. Expand its mission set beyond ISR to include secure communications, joint targeting, electronic intelligence, and maritime domain awareness.
3. Embed local knowledge acquisition mechanisms, including collaboration with frontline regional states such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan, whose proximity and cultural fluency can significantly enhance the US coalition's *Orient* capabilities.

Time favors the actor who builds persistently. If the PLA has constructed a cognitive perimeter around the SCS, then HSA-MSMU-PA must evolve into the platform that dismantles it—one insight, one orbit, and one allied partner at a time.

Institutionalization: Despite its successful demonstrations in 2018 and 2020, the HSA-MSMU-PA has not been tested during recent RIMPAC exercises. According to Mittleman, while the concept of Heterogeneous Space Architecture has gained institutional traction, the specific initiative under HSA-MSMU-PA remains mired in research and development, with no road map for operational institutionalization.⁸⁸ This stagnation is no longer tenable.

Geopolitical conditions have changed dramatically since 2020. Chinese coercion in the SCS has escalated, with gray-zone aggression against the Philippines, increased incursions near Taiwan, and rapid advancements in AI and unmanned systems. In this environment, the United States cannot afford to maintain a prototype posture. It must accelerate the transformation of HSA-MSMU-PA into a permanent, operational platform to establish persistent *Observe* and *Orient* capabilities in the region.

The opening of the US Space Forces Indo-Pacific Command Center in Hawaii in November 2022 provides an ideal institutional anchor.⁸⁹ This command node could serve as the operational headquarters for a standing HSA-MSMU-PA—linking allies, commercial providers, and regional partners in a unified intelligence architecture covering the entire Indo-Pacific.

Coordination with HSA-DIU: Parallel to HSA-MSMU-PA, the DOD has initiated another heterogeneous space project through the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU). This effort, known as the Hybrid Space Architecture (HSA-DIU), is designed to deliver “global, ubiquitous, and secure internet connectivity” and enable “a fully networked battlespace” by leveraging cloud-based analytics and multi-orbit

⁸⁸ Mittleman interview.

⁸⁹ Rachel S. Cohen, “Space Force opens first regional command headquarters in Indo-Pacific,” *Air Force Times*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>.

constellations.⁹⁰ The HSA-DIU is a joint venture involving DIU, the Air Force Research Laboratory, the Space Warfighting Analysis Center, and the US Space Force.

HSA-DIU complements what HSA-MSMU-PA lacks—namely, a resilient communications backbone. In May 2025, the DIU expanded its commercial partnerships from 12 to 24 firms to accelerate the delivery of real-time warfighting data.⁹¹ While HSA-MSMU-PA focuses on ISR and analytics, HSA-DIU provides the communications infrastructure to deliver that intelligence at speed and scale.

These architectures must not remain stovepiped. If the DOD synchronizes HSA-MSMU-PA and HSA-DIU—integrating ISR, PoL analytics, and resilient communications—it will forge a comprehensive, multi-domain intelligence platform capable of overcoming the PLA's dominance in the SCS.

Localization: Boyd emphasized that *Orient*—the most decisive stage of the OODA loop—depends on cultural understanding, inherited context, and lived experience in the operational environment.⁹² To detect what is anomalous, one must first understand what is normal. This is especially true in a contested maritime zone like the SCS, where ambiguity is a weapon and “civilian” actors often blur the line between commercial and military operations.

Here, the PLA has the home-field advantage. China has systematically embedded local knowledge into its intelligence infrastructure—through maritime militias, state-affiliated fishermen, and persistent ISR from artificial islands. The United States, by contrast, lacks a similar cultural substrate in the region.

To level the playing field, HSA-MSMU-PA must embed a permanent local team composed of experts from frontline SCS littoral states—including Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and the Philippines.⁹³ These partners bring critical linguistic, cultural, environmental, and navigational expertise necessary to strengthen *Orient* functions and refine PoL analysis. Their integration would provide early warning, anomaly detection, and richer intelligence synthesis.

Additionally, inviting close US regional allies—Japan, South Korea, and India—to support the architecture would broaden strategic depth, provide redundancy, and promote interoperability across the Indo-Pacific intelligence community.

⁹⁰ “Initial Contracts for Hybrid Space Architecture Program,” *Defense Innovation Unit*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.diu.mil/>.

⁹¹ Mikayla Easley, “With pilot planned for 2026, DIU brings additional vendors into ‘hybrid’ space satellite network project,” *DefenseScoop*, 21 May 2025, <https://defensescoop.com/>.

⁹² Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*.

⁹³ Dean Cheng, “The Importance of Maritime Domain Awareness for the Indo-Pacific Quad Countries,” *Heritage Foundation*, 6 March 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

Limitations of the HSA-MSMU-PA Scheme

No strategic architecture is without its constraints. Activating the HSA-MSMU-PA to counter the PLA's growing intelligence dominance in the SCS will encounter both structural and political limitations—some of them fundamental.

First, the inherent characteristics of space-based surveillance impose operational constraints. Spaceborne *Observe* capabilities lack the tactical flexibility and visual immediacy of airborne platforms. They are more expensive to deploy, more difficult to re-task dynamically, and less capable of direct verification.⁹⁴ While space delivers persistent, wide-area coverage, it cannot easily replicate the responsiveness or granularity of aerial ISR.

Second, institutionalizing HSA-MSMU-PA—particularly in coordination with HSA-DIU and through the inclusion of additional partner nations—will demand complex multilateral governance. Shared platforms necessitate shared investments and benefits. Yet participating states vary widely in their resource capacity, security priorities, and risk tolerance. Aligning these diverse preferences into a coherent operational framework will not be frictionless.⁹⁵

Third, efforts to *localize* the architecture will encounter geopolitical hesitation from Southeast Asian states. Many of these nations—despite facing unlawful maritime encroachments by China—are reluctant to openly align with the United States. Their preference for strategic ambiguity over overt alignment could limit their willingness to contribute intelligence or host related infrastructure.⁹⁶

Fourth, integrating commercial space companies into a military-centric intelligence architecture introduces legal, operational, and ethical complications. These firms must be assured that their space assets—including satellites and ground stations—will be protected, indemnified, and not subject to adversarial retaliation. Doing so will require new frameworks for risk-sharing, liability, and public-private coordination in contested environments.⁹⁷

Yet despite these limitations, this study maintains that the HSA-MSMU-PA remains the most viable platform to help the United States counterbalance Chinese intelligence dominance in the SCS. Its technical foundation is sound, its operational concept has been field-tested, and its integration with broader DOD initiatives—

⁹⁴ Martin Streetly, "Space V Airborne ISR – or Mix and Match," *Asian Military Review*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/>.

⁹⁵ Bryan Clark and Dan Patt, "Software engineers could show the Pentagon how to end 'innovation theater,'" *The Hill*, 18 October 2022, <https://thehill.com/>.

⁹⁶ Tara Copp, "Elon Musk's refusal to have Starlink support Ukraine attack in Crimea raises questions for Pentagon," *AP News*, 12 September 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

⁹⁷ Copp, "Elon Musk's refusal to have Starlink support."

especially HSA-DIU—offers a pathway to persistent, resilient regional *Observe* and *Orient* capabilities.

To abandon or underutilize this architecture because of complexity would be a strategic miscalculation. The PLA is not waiting for consensus. Neither should we.

Conclusions

China's militarization of three artificial islands in the SCS has rightly triggered alarm among US defense planners and regional allies. At first glance, these hardened outposts suggest a *fait accompli*—concrete proof that Beijing has tilted the power balance in its favor. But this study contends otherwise. The islands are not linchpins of firepower projection; they are sensors, data hubs, and cognitive platforms designed to secure *intelligence dominance*. And that changes everything.

Because their primary function is informational—not kinetic—their value can be neutralized without being physically dismantled. Rather than focus on the impossible task of demilitarization, the United States must pursue functional obsolescence—rendering the islands irrelevant through superior regional *Observe* and *Orient* capabilities.

This study draws a critical strategic lesson from the war in Ukraine: space capabilities are no longer peripheral—they are decisive. From ISR to communications to targeting, the side that commands the informational domain dictates the tempo and terms of conflict. The United States must apply that lesson to the Indo-Pacific. Intelligence—not tonnage, not proximity—now determines control.

The tool already exists. The HSA-MSMU-PA, if institutionalized, expanded, and localized, offers a viable path toward regaining informational superiority. It has been tested. It has a coalition foundation. It complements the HSA-DIU effort already underway. Together, they can form a resilient, integrated, multi-domain architecture that outpaces Chinese informational warfare.

Yes, there are challenges. Space-based surveillance has limitations. Multinational intelligence-sharing is inherently complex. Southeast Asian states may hesitate to choose sides. And commercial integration into national security structures brings legal and operational risks. These are real. But they are not insurmountable.

The real question is not one of feasibility—it is one of will.

If the United States is serious about restoring strategic equilibrium in the SCS, it must move now—before China cements its cognitive perimeter. The stakes are not limited to reef outposts or maritime transit. At issue is the entire information architecture of the Indo-Pacific—and with it, the balance of power for decades to come.

The choice is stark: Accept informational inferiority, and watch the region drift into Beijing's orbit. Or rise to meet the challenge, and seize back the initiative—one satellite, one decision cycle, and one allied partnership at a time.

The islands can be bypassed. The data war cannot. ♣

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Japan–India Strategic Evolution in the Indo-Pacific

Partnerships, Security, and Regional Order

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Abstract

Japan and India have undergone a profound strategic realignment in the Indo-Pacific, driven by shared concerns over China's growing assertiveness. Once distant partners, the two nations have deepened their security ties through joint military exercises, technology transfers, and coordinated regional policies. India's traditional wariness of military alliances has softened, leading to greater engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue while maintaining strategic autonomy. Japan, historically restrained in defense cooperation, has adjusted its policies to accommodate India's approach, fostering deeper collaboration in maritime security, antisubmarine warfare, and infrastructure development. This article examines the evolving Japan–India partnership, emphasizing its implications for regional stability, defense modernization, and multilateral cooperation. As China's assertiveness continues to escalate, Tokyo and New Delhi's alignment will shape the Indo-Pacific's strategic landscape, providing a model for flexible, issue-based security partnerships among middle powers navigating the complexities of great-power competition.

The strategic posture of the Japan–India partnership in the Indo-Pacific has undergone a fundamental transformation in the twenty-first century. This shift marks a decisive break from both nations' traditional approaches to regional security, driven by China's growing assertiveness and the imperative for robust security alliances. This article examines how Japan and India's evolving relationship, engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and comprehensive approach to regional security reflect a calculated response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. While Japan's impetus for closer ties with India stems from the Chinese threat, India has demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to forge stronger security partnerships and play a more active role in shaping the regional security architecture—all while maintaining its core principle of strategic autonomy.

Japan: Beyond Historical Connections

The most striking manifestation of this strategic shift is the fundamental reassessment of Japan's and India's perceptions of each other. Once characterized by minimal

engagement during the Cold War, their relationship has evolved into a comprehensive strategic partnership encompassing security cooperation, infrastructure development, and technological collaboration. The historical context makes this transformation even more remarkable. Cold War alignments and geographical distance kept their ties underdeveloped for decades, despite enduring cultural linkages through Buddhism and historical moments of goodwill, such as Japan's support for India's independence movement under Subhas Chandra Bose and Justice Radhabinod Pal's lone dissenting opinion at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal.

The speed and depth of this transformation since 2000 have been extraordinary.¹ The partnership now spans strategic technology transfers, tangible military collaboration, and symbolic gestures that reinforce institutional ties. Annual summit meetings between prime ministers, frequent "2+2" dialogues between foreign and defense ministers, and coordinated statements on regional security underscore the growing depth of engagement. The two nations have formalized agreements to share sensitive military intelligence and defense technologies, and their respective armed forces—army, navy, and air force—have conducted joint combat exercises. Moreover, joint weapons development initiatives, such as unmanned ground vehicles and the Unicorn-class naval radar system, have already gained traction.

India–Japan security cooperation, particularly within the Japan–United States–Australia framework, has advanced at an unprecedented pace. This shift is particularly significant given Japan's historically restrictive defense policies, which limited security collaboration to its alliance with the United States. Equally noteworthy is the persistence of pacifist sentiment within segments of the Japanese public, which continues to oppose military entanglements. Meanwhile, India's deepening security engagement with Japan marks a sharp departure from its traditional reluctance to form close military partnerships with major powers. This evolving dynamic signals a broader realignment of Indo-Pacific security architecture, with Tokyo and New Delhi positioning themselves as pivotal actors in maintaining regional stability.

The China Challenge

Shared concerns over China's growing assertiveness have been the primary catalyst for the deepening Japan–India partnership. Beijing has intensified its naval and air operations around Japan, including in the East China Sea, the waters surrounding Taiwan, and the South China Sea.² Simultaneously, China has significantly expanded

¹ Satoru Nagao, "Rapid Development of India-Japan Cooperation: Its Chance and Challenges," in *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy*, ed. Aparna Pande (New York, Routledge, 2022), 248–265.

² Ministry of Defense of Japan, "China's Activities in the South China Sea," October 2020.

its military footprint along the disputed India–China border, constructed infrastructure in contested areas, and increased its naval activity in the Indian Ocean since 2000.³ The scale of this challenge became unmistakable during the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes—the first deadly confrontation between Indian and Chinese troops in more than four decades.

China’s actions present direct security threats to both Japan and India. For Japan, Chinese incursions in the East China Sea and its expanding military presence endanger critical maritime routes and regional stability. For India, Beijing’s infrastructure expansion and military build-up along the Himalayan frontier pose an immediate, territorial challenge to its sovereignty. This convergence of strategic threats has forged a strong foundation for Japan–India security cooperation, breaking down traditional barriers to closer alignment. In a historic move, Japan issued a statement in 2017 explicitly opposing unilateral attempts to alter the status quo by force, signaling support for India during the Doklam standoff—its most direct stance on a military confrontation since World War II.⁴

Yet, reducing the Japan–India relationship to mere China containment would be an oversimplification.⁵ The partnership has developed its own strategic logic, extending beyond shared concerns over Beijing. In particular, India sees Japan as a reliable partner in its modernization efforts, especially in infrastructure and defense technology. Japan’s investments in India’s northeastern regions, including major road and connectivity projects, illustrate the broader scope of their collaboration.

The alliance also enhances both nations’ strategic flexibility in dealing with other major powers, particularly the United States. For Japan, engagement with India allows for a more diversified security approach beyond its reliance on Washington. For India, cooperation with Japan aligns with its principle of strategic autonomy, enabling it to balance relationships with other global powers while reinforcing its position in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

The Quad Multilateral Security Framework

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who championed the concepts of the Quad and the Indo-Pacific, saw cooperation with India as essential to counterbalancing

³ Satoru Nagao, “The Japan-India-Australia ‘Alliance’ as Key Agreement in the Indo-Pacific,” ISPSW Strategy Series (September 2015).

⁴ “Doklam stand-off: Japan backs India, says no one should try to change status quo by force,” *The Times of India*, August 18, 2017; Satoru Nagao, “What is Japan’s Role in the Indo-China border conflict?” *Society of Security and Diplomatic Policy Studies* (October 2017).

⁵ Aparna Pande, *From Chanakya to Modi: The Evolution of India’s Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2017); Aparna Pande, *Making India Great: The Promise of A Reluctant Global Power* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2020).

China's expanding influence in the region.⁶ Japan's position within the Quad has remained relatively clear. Its *2022 National Security Strategy* explicitly designated China as a top-tier "challenge" and reaffirmed Tokyo's commitment to maintaining and strengthening a "Free and Open International Order" through Quad partnerships.⁷

India, however, has approached the Quad with a distinct strategic calculus.⁸ Initially wary of joining any arrangement that might be perceived as an overtly anti-China alliance, India has gradually embraced the Quad as a flexible mechanism for advancing its regional priorities. This evolution reflects a broader recognition that preserving regional stability requires innovative multilateral frameworks beyond traditional bilateral partnerships.

The Quad provides India with several strategic advantages. First, it enables New Delhi to uphold its strategic autonomy while coordinating responses to regional challenges. Second, it enhances India's access to intelligence-sharing networks and cutting-edge military technology. Third, it offers an alternative platform for infrastructure financing, countering China's Belt and Road Initiative. Most importantly, the Quad allows India to play a central role in shaping the regional security architecture without being bound by formal alliance commitments. Recognizing India's priorities, Japan has tailored its Quad engagement to align with New Delhi's strategic interests, reinforcing the coalition's adaptability and long-term viability.

Land Border Security

If China devotes substantial resources to its border with India, it must divide its military budget to address both the Indian and Japanese fronts simultaneously. The security dynamics of the India-China border and the maritime tensions in the waters surrounding Japan are inherently linked. Since 2020, particularly after the Ladakh clashes, the situation along the India-China border has undergone a significant transformation.

India's evolving approach to border security reflects a broader reassessment of its strategic posture. The violent confrontations in Ladakh in late 2020 marked a turning point, prompting India to adopt a more comprehensive approach to securing its frontier. This shift has led to an accelerated infrastructure push, enhanced military capabilities, and improved surveillance measures.

⁶ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," Project Syndicate, December 27, 2012, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>

⁷ Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Japan, "National Security Strategy," December 2022

⁸ Manjeet S. Pardesi, "Evolution of India-Japan Ties: Prospects and Limitations," in India and Japan: Assessing the Strategic Partnership, ed. Rajesh Basrur and Sumitha Narayanan Kutty (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 15-40.

A key focus has been the construction of advanced military infrastructure in forward areas, including all-weather roads and upgraded airstrips capable of supporting rapid troop deployment. India has not only developed specialized high-altitude warfare capabilities but has also integrated cutting-edge surveillance technology to monitor Chinese movements more effectively.

As India has reinforced its land border defenses, its security cooperation with Japan has expanded beyond maritime engagements to include air operations. Before the 2020 clashes, India hosted multinational naval exercises with Quad members, such as Malabar and Milan. However, by 2022, India had taken the unprecedented step of allowing US land forces to conduct joint exercises near the India-China border. In 2023, for the first time, India hosted US B-1 bombers at an airbase capable of striking deep into Chinese territory. In 2024, India further expanded its defense cooperation by hosting *Tarang Shakti*, a multilateral air combat exercise involving all Quad members. While India's military drills with the Quad have traditionally focused on naval cooperation, this air force engagement has bridged the gap between maritime security and land-based strategic concerns—an evolution that aligns with Japan's broader security approach.

Beyond military coordination, Japan and India have deepened their collaboration in advanced technology and intelligence sharing—critical components of their modernization efforts. Joint initiatives in artificial intelligence, space, and cyber defense have gained momentum, reinforcing their strategic alignment in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition.

Maritime Strategy

China's expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean poses a direct strategic challenge to Japan, compelling Tokyo to strengthen its partnership with India to counterbalance Beijing's growing influence. India's rising naval power offers Japan a critical opportunity to reinforce Indo-Pacific security.

India's evolving maritime posture reflects its increasing confidence in securing the Indian Ocean. Beijing's expanded naval operations—including submarine deployments and port construction in strategically located nations—have driven India to enhance its naval capabilities, fortify island territories as strategic outposts, and improve marine domain awareness.

Crucially, India has moved beyond unilateral responses, building a network of security partnerships to share the burden of maritime defense. Among these, cooperation with Japan has been particularly significant, evident in joint naval drills, intelligence sharing, and coordinated maritime patrols. This networked approach not only reinforces India's dominant position in the Indian Ocean but also ensures that regional security responsibilities are distributed among like-minded allies.

A key vulnerability in India's naval capabilities remains antisubmarine warfare. China's submarines threaten India's sea lines of communication, its nuclear ballistic submarine fleet, and, by extension, its strategic deterrence. In contrast, Japan's navy has developed world-class antisubmarine warfare capabilities. Recognizing this synergy, a 2017 joint statement explicitly highlighted Japan's commitment to cooperating with India in antisubmarine operations.⁹

Beyond military collaboration, Japan has played a vital role in developing India's maritime infrastructure. Tokyo has supported the modernization of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands—critical to controlling access to the Malacca Strait. Additionally, Japanese firms have laid fiber-optic cables between mainland India and the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, enhancing communications infrastructure. Some analysts suggest that Tokyo and New Delhi are also working together to deploy undersea detection sensors, with initial cooperation already underway in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰

As China continues to expand its maritime reach, the Japan–India partnership has grown from ad hoc coordination into a structured and strategic collaboration—one that strengthens the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific and reinforces both nations' ability to counter emerging threats.

Key Arguments and Strategic Implications

United by shared concerns over China's assertiveness, Japan and India have deepened their strategic cooperation. However, their approaches diverge in key respects. Japan seeks to strengthen the Quad as a security-oriented framework to counter China's growing influence, whereas India remains committed to its policy of strategic autonomy and avoids formal military alliances. Recognizing these differences, Japan has adjusted its position to align more closely with India's perspective, fostering a partnership that balances flexibility with shared strategic interests.

India's evolving security posture offers critical insights into the country's broader strategic recalibration. First, New Delhi has demonstrated a sophisticated ability to form security partnerships that expand its strategic options rather than constrain them. The Japan–India relationship exemplifies this approach, illustrating how India engages in deep security cooperation while preserving its independent decision-making.

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-India Joint Statement: Toward a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific," September 14, 2017.

¹⁰ Abhijit Singh, "India's 'Undersea Wall' in the Eastern Indian Ocean," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, June 15, 2016.

Second, India's response to China's aggression has shifted from a reactive stance to a comprehensive strategy that integrates military modernization, infrastructure expansion, and strategic partnerships. This marks a decisive departure from its traditionally cautious approach to regional security challenges.

Third, India has signaled a greater willingness to take on a leadership role in shaping regional security architecture, particularly in the maritime domain. This growing strategic confidence not only enhances India's ability to project power but also reinforces its commitment to providing viable alternatives to China's regional influence.

As a result, Japan has adapted to India's strategic outlook while continuing to encourage New Delhi's deeper involvement in balancing China's expansionism. Rather than pushing India toward a rigid alliance framework, Japan has fostered a partnership that respects India's strategic autonomy while reinforcing the broader security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament, he articulated Japan's strategic vision with clarity: "A strong India is in the best interest of Japan, and a strong Japan is in the best interest of India."¹¹ This statement encapsulates Japan's commitment to deepening security cooperation with India, a trajectory that is becoming increasingly evident. As part of its newly established Official Security Assistance program, Japan plans to provide drones to like-minded countries, including India. Beyond this, Tokyo is prepared to supply heavy machinery for infrastructure development in border areas and to support India's regional security network by donating radars, patrol boats, and aircraft to neighboring nations. However, Japan has made clear that such initiatives will proceed in close coordination with India, ensuring that New Delhi's strategic preferences guide these efforts.

While Japan's policy direction is explicit, the more dynamic factor is India's evolving stance—a shift that Tokyo carefully respects. Looking ahead, several factors will determine the effectiveness of India's strategic approach. Maintaining military modernization efforts while managing fiscal constraints will be critical. Equally important will be India's ability to strengthen institutional security frameworks, particularly within the Quad, while preserving its commitment to strategic flexibility.

India's expanding strategic capabilities reflect a pragmatic response to the region's shifting power dynamics. Challenges remain, particularly in balancing military modernization with complex diplomatic engagements. However, India's trajectory

¹¹ Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas" (speech, Parliament of the Republic of India, New Delhi, August 22, 2007), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

signals growing confidence in its ability to shape regional security rather than merely react to it. To navigate these challenges effectively, India must continue to cultivate partnerships with Japan while maintaining the flexibility necessary to safeguard its strategic autonomy.

The implications of India's evolving strategy extend beyond its immediate security interests. The Indo-Pacific remains a theater of great-power competition and fluid security dynamics. How India manages to sustain regional stability while advancing its strategic objectives will play a decisive role in shaping the broader regional order. Its success—or failure—will influence how other middle powers approach similar security dilemmas. More significantly, India's ability to strike a balance between strategic independence and substantive security cooperation could serve as a model for other nations seeking to maintain sovereignty while forging strong defense ties in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific.

Amid these shifting dynamics, one constant remains: China. The more assertive Beijing becomes, the more Japan and India find common cause in counterbalancing its influence. In this sense, China itself is the most powerful catalyst for closer Japan–India strategic cooperation. ★

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