

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

China's Strategic Assessment of Japan

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S*ummary*

Chinese policymakers' distrust of Japan could deepen the political chasm between the two countries, as Japan is at the cusp of a leadership change.

Introduction

The resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida triggered widespread discussions within the Chinese strategic community over the impending leadership transition in Japan. While China’s Foreign Ministry’s offered a muted response keeping in line with diplomatic protocols,¹ active debate has been underway among foreign policy and strategic observers regarding the cause of the change of leadership, possible foreign policy orientation of a new Japanese government and the likely implication on China–Japan ties.

As expressed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during a meeting with his Japanese counterpart Yoko Kamikawa in July 2024, Beijing believes that China–Japan ties are at a critical phase.² Escalating tensions over Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, South China Sea, Taiwan Straits, high-tech export controls, Japan’s discharge of nuclear water from Fukushima plant and China’s ban on import of seafood from Japan are disrupting efforts to maintain a mutually beneficial partnership.³

On account of unresolved territorial issues and geo-economic competition, the friction between the two countries is likely to continue as has been the case over the past decade. China’s response will be shaped largely by Beijing’s assessment of the new Japanese government’s position on three significant issues—Sino-US rivalry; Japan’s military modernisation; and Taiwan Straits.

Japan and Sino-US Rivalry

Chinese strategists see Japan as a key player in Sino-US rivalry. The prevalent opinion among Chinese foreign policy observers is that Japan not only wields considerable diplomatic influence in East and Southeast Asia through its Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and various other technological and civil assistance programmes but that Tokyo occupies a pivotal role in Washington’s strategy to contain China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific.⁴ The Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) has become central to the US’ strategy to deal with military challenge from China, thus making Japan a frontline state.⁵

¹ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Remarks on August 14, 2024”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 14 August 2024.

² [“Chinese Foreign Minister Warns Relations With Japan Risk Going Backwards”](#), SCMP, 26 July 2024.

³ [“Ties With China Will Stay On Track If Japan Keeps Word, Principles: Global Times Editorial”](#), *Global Times*, 18 November 2023.

⁴ Hu Jiping, [“Current Sino-Japanese Relations”](#), Aisixiang, 5 September 2023; Lu Wei, [“Analysis of Japan’s Policy Choices in the Context of Sino-US Competition”](#), Aisixiang, 3 March 2022.

⁵ Wu Yin, [“China-Japan Relations Amidst Unprecedented Changes in a Century”](#), *Japanese Journal*, No. 3, 2021.

In view of Japan’s geographical location in East Asia, its integration in the US-led post Second World War security architecture, the intensity of economic, technological and strategic cooperation between the two countries, Chinese policy elites have long recognised Japan’s role in the US strategic calculus *vis-à-vis* China. However, assessing the down turn in Sino-Japanese relations in the recent years, they perceive that Japan has shifted its previous strategic orientation of maintaining a distance from Sino-US rivalry to closely following US strategic guidance regarding China.

Referring to Japan’s criticism of China on human rights, trade policies, military modernisation and instituting US-like technological controls, Chinese observers contend that Japan is increasingly being driven by the China threat theory and like the US, believes China to be a disruptive power.⁶ In that context, it is surmised that Tokyo probably considers US hegemonic presence in the Indo-Pacific as the ultimate security guarantee against China and therefore will cooperate closely with the US to jointly suppress China. Moreover, besides strengthening anti-China alliance with the US, Japan using the issues of East and South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits could induce the US to get more involved and intervene deeply in East and Southeast Asia, thus deepening Sino-US rivalry.⁷

Japanese Military Modernisation

Beijing has traditionally been critical of any move by Japanese leaders to amend Article 9 of the Japanese constitution⁸ or increase the defence budget. Any proposal to dilute the provisions of the peace constitution or to give the SDF more power is claimed by China as Japan’s return to militarism and violation of its post-war commitment to peaceful development. The publication of the National Security Documents in 2022 which declared Tokyo’s intent to increase defence budget and acquire counter-strike capabilities for SDF, citing increasing strategic challenge from China, prompted strong reactions from Beijing.⁹

⁶ Meng Xiaoxu, “[Japan's Strategic Direction and Sino-Japanese Relations Under the Changing International Situation](#)”, Aisixiang, 25 November 2022; Lu Hao, “[Trends in the China-US-Japan Trilateral Relationship and Japan's Strategic Response](#)”, *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, No. 5, 2021.

⁷ Wu Huaizhong, “[Japan's Security Strategy Towards China: A Recent Analysis of a Balancing Agenda](#)”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, No. 5, 10 December 2021; Wu Huaizhong, “[Japan's China Policy has Reached a Critical Crossroads](#)”, Aisixiang, 11 June 2022.

⁸ Article 9 of the Japanese constitution limits Japan’s right to have a fully functional defence force and undertake forward defense.

⁹ “[China Condemns Japan's New National Security Strategies for Stoking Regional Tensions](#)”, *CGTN*, 16 December 2022.

The Chinese Embassy in Japan, evoking memory of Japanese aggression during the Second World War, observed that the documents indicated revival of Japanese militarism and departure from post-war peaceful development.¹⁰ Similarly, Japan’s 2024 Defense White Paper drew sharp criticism from China. Taking note of the cover which featured swords, Chinese commentators interpreted that Japan departing from the principle of ‘exclusive defense’ is now developing ‘out-of-area defense capabilities’.¹¹

The trend in Japanese military modernisation has emerged as a point of concern for Chinese analysts and commentators. Seeing this in tandem with Japan’s deepening convergence with the US, they perceive that Japan is engaged in classic hard-balancing tactic through developing both internal and external checks and balances.¹² While strengthening its external strategic and military cooperation with the US and other Western countries, Tokyo is simultaneously enhancing its own military power to reduce dependence on the US military power in the long run. As Japan continues to build offensive and pre-emptive attack capabilities, some observers note that rather than being a shield to the US spear, Japan is now aspiring to become a spear itself against Chinese military.¹³

Taiwan Straits

Fumio Kishida’s statement in 2022, warning that the invasion of Ukraine would be replicated in Taiwan Straits if major powers failed to act together, alarmed Beijing. It was seen as advancing Shinzo Abe’s position that if something happens to Taiwan, it means something happens to Japan and the Japan–US alliance, and that the United States should abandon its "ambiguous strategy" and clarify its position of

¹⁰ [“Japan’s Passage of Defense Documents Brings Country Away from Track of Post-War Peaceful Development: Chinese Embassy”](#), *Global Times*, 16 December 2022.

¹¹ Leshui, [“‘China Threat Theory’ is Not an Excuse for Japan to Expand its Military”](#), *China.com*, 18 July 2024; Jun Zhengping, [“Forging a Sword is Not for Drawing It? Japan, Which Has Not Thoroughly Reflected on Itself, Has No Right to Say This”](#), *Guancha.cn*, 16 July 2024.

¹² Zhang Wang, [“Japan’s China Policy Under Abe: From Strategic Checks and Balances to Tactical Risk Aversion”](#), *International Security Studies*, No. 2, 2021; Meng Xiaoxu, [“Japan’s Strategic Direction and Sino-Japanese Relations Under the Changing International Situation”](#), *Aisixiang*, 25 November 2022; Zhu Feng, [“Where Will China-Japan Relations Go in the ‘post-Abe Era’?”](#), *Aisixiang*, 10 July 2022.

¹³ Wu Huaizhong, [“An Analysis of the Kishida Cabinet’s Military Security Cooperation between Japan and NATO”](#), *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, No. 4, 2023; Wu Huaizhong, [“The Deepening of Japan’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ During the Kishida Period: Background, Manifestations and Impact on China”](#), *Japanese Studies*, No. 2, 2023; Lu Hao, [“Japan’s Strategic Choice in the Context of the United States’ Efforts to Contain China”](#), *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, No. 4, 2022.

"protecting Taiwan with force".¹⁴ Chinese strategists argue that Japan’s defence and security policies have undergone major changes, under the Abe government which was continued by the Kishida administration. They note that Japan is constructing a threat scenario of Chinese military invasion of Taiwan in order to mobilise public support at home for military modernisation.¹⁵

As the Japanese public opposes departure from the peace constitution and increase in defence budget amidst economic downturn, the Japanese government considers promotion of China threat theory as a means to build public legitimacy for these decisions.¹⁶ Further, Japanese strategy is also to make the US commit more strongly to Sino-Japan alliance. Chinese observers believe that Japan is wary of US future intentions to manage Indo-Pacific affairs and rapprochement between Washington and Beijing could lead to failure of US–Japan alliance. Therefore, the prospect of Chinese military invasion could be a binding factor between the two countries.¹⁷

While Chinese strategic community agree that Japan intends to use Taiwan as a ‘strategic chess piece’, they are divided over the prospect of Japanese intervention in Taiwan Straits. While some argue that Japan is unlikely to intervene directly in a military conflict in Taiwan straits owing to domestic public opposition, lack of strategic depth and military power,¹⁸ certain sections warn that Japan’s increasing military cooperation with US and Tokyo’s military deployments and infrastructure building in the south-west part of the country facing the first island chain indicates Japan’s intent to militarily intervene.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ben Blanchard, [“Former PM Abe Says Japan, U.S. Could Not Stand By If China Attacked Taiwan”](#), *Reuters*, 1 December 2021; Abe Shinzō, [“US Strategic Ambiguity Over Taiwan Must End”](#), Project Syndicate, 12 April 2022.

¹⁵ Sun Moon Tan Tian, “Beware! “If Taiwan Has Problems, Japan Has Problems? Japan Has Taken a Dangerous Step”, *CCTV*, 15 April 2024.

¹⁶ Wu Huaizhong, [“An Analysis of the Kishida Cabinet's Military Security Cooperation between Japan and NATO”](#), *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, No. 4, 2023; Wu Huaizhong, [“The Deepening of Japan's ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ During the Kishida Period: Background, Manifestations and Impact on China”](#), *Japanese Studies*, No. 2, 2023; Lu Hao, [“Japan's Strategic Choice in the Context of the United States' Efforts to Contain China”](#), *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, No. 4, 2022.

¹⁷ Ibid. Wu Huaizhong [“Japan's China Policy Has Reached a Critical Crossroads”](#), *Aisixiang*, 11 June 2022.

¹⁸ He Sishen, [“The Direction of Sino-Japanese Relations Under Kishida's Diplomacy of Leaning Toward the United States and Resisting China”](#), *Aisixiang*, 18 April 2023; Huang Jichao, [“Japan's Multi-faceted Hedging Strategies in the Taiwan Strait Under the New Pattern of Sino-US Asia-Pacific Competition”](#), *Aisixiang*, 8 April 2022.

¹⁹ Sun Moon Tan Tian, “Beware! “If Taiwan Has Problems, Japan Has Problems? Japan Has Taken a Dangerous Step”, *CCTV*, 15 April 2024; Yang Bojiang, [“Two Major Variables in Sino-Japanese Relations”](#), *Aisixiang*, 7 April 2022; Wu Huaizhong, [“Japan's China Policy Has Reached a Critical Crossroads”](#), *Aisixiang*, 11 June 2022.

Conclusion: Key Takeaways

In view of Tokyo’s close alignment with the US, its rapid military modernisation and tough stand on Taiwan, Chinese policy observers’ strategic assessment of Japan is negative. Also, they perceive that there is very less hope of improvement of bilateral ties in the foreseeable future. Although Japan cannot completely decouple from China and continues to be economically dependent, commentators note that Japan has initiated de-risking to allow it more strategic flexibility.

Chinese policy experts also fear that Japan and the US are likely to follow a containment policy against China more vigorously. Further, besides cooperating with the US, Japan is also trying hard to get closer to the EU and NATO, attempting to shrink China’s strategic space. Moreover, Tokyo’s military normalisation could trigger provocative behaviour on behalf of SDF with regard to Taiwan and in the waters of East and South China Sea.

Finally, Chinese commentators warn that in the short-term, Sino-Japanese ties are full of uncertainty and even high-level dialogue could be a delaying tactic to gain more time and space to strengthen military alliances against China.

As Japan is at the cusp of leadership change, these perceptions are likely to increase Chinese policymakers’ distrust of Japan and deepen the political chasm between the two countries. There are apprehensions about a right-wing leadership coming to power resulting in complete departure from the post-Second World War arrangements. In this context, Japan could be the target of further coercive diplomacy and military pressure as Beijing’s security concerns deepen. China is also likely to enhance strategic, economic and technological cooperation with Russia as a counter to Japan–US alliance.

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