

# Considerations on the Role of Japan in a New Era of Multilateral Security Cooperation

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Debate

## Abstract

Global politics has suffered a dramatic remilitarization as a consequence of the geopolitical instability that impacts some regions. East Asia is a highly convulsed zone, where several territorial disputes and diplomatic issues have deteriorated its security environment. In this context, Japan has proposed a new security rationale for which it has simultaneously increased both its military capabilities and its presence in some of the most outstanding security cooperation dialogues. This paper aims to evaluate the current role Japan has in multilateral security cooperation, and to figure out whether or not it has gained political influence by fostering these mechanisms.

**KEYWORDS:** Japan, security cooperation, multilateralism, strategic competition, East Asia.

## Consideraciones sobre el rol de Japón en una nueva era de cooperación multilateral en materia de seguridad

## Resumen

La política global ha sufrido una dramática remilitarización como consecuencia de la inestabilidad geopolítica que ha impactado algunas regiones. Asia del Este es una zona convulsa, pues las disputas territoriales y dificultades diplomáticas han deteriorado su entorno de seguridad. Bajo estas condiciones, Japón ha propuesto un nuevo enfoque de seguridad que busca incrementar de manera simultánea su capacidad militar y su membrecía en los diálogos de cooperación en seguridad más significativos. El objetivo del trabajo es evaluar el rol de Japón en los mecanismos de cooperación multilateral en asuntos de seguridad y sopesar su grado de influencia en ellos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Japón, cooperación en seguridad, multilateralismo, competencia estratégica, Asia del Este.

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## 1. Introduction

Japan has been one of the most long-lasting pacifist nations in contemporary history; the country, that was once the most powerful military actor in Asia, experienced deep transformations after World War II. These forced its political elite to establish a non-warlike State framework, in which security issues were not pivotal for its post-war reconstruction. This approach was kept, with only some gradual changes due to strategic decisions linked to its alliance with the United States, during the last five decades of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the 21st century has brought deep transformations to international politics which have led to an inflection point in the security policies of some countries, including Japan, that show a remilitarization of international relations. It can be argued that one of the main traits of the political decision-making process of Japan during the last decade has been defined by a securitization approach that has characterized its defense policies and international agenda. This may have profound repercussions in the personality attained to the country as an international powerful actor.

Plenty of factors have mobilized the Japanese political agenda to one mainly concerned with security issues. Some of them include: regional tensions on economic power and territorial matters; nuclear threats; international instability; and the fact that East Asia is nowadays, behind East Europe and the Middle East, one of the regions with the highest levels of geopolitical strains in the world. To de-risk the regional threats posed by its most immediate neighbors, Japan has endorsed a multi-level security architecture based on a renewed and ambitious national defense plan, and a proactive multilateral security agenda with like-minded liberal actors such as; Australia, India, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and its central security partner, the United States.

These last changes can be considered as historical, and have posed new commitments and pressures since “Japan is indeed committing to its most meaningful boost in defense capabilities since the end of World War II” (Ashley, 2023, n.p.). The new plan does not only involve an unprecedented spending program, but also gives Japan a new role in the regional sphere that demands; primarily, determination; and additionally, coherence with its pacifist nature. As a result, the country still faces a dilemma that implies internal political debate between the governing political party and the opposition leaders. Albeit the contradictions and challenges, Japan has not only assumed an internal security stance, it is also part of a huge and determined multilateral security program. The program seeks to establish

a robust agenda in which the Indo-Pacific is the geographical basis for the common purpose of protecting the liberal state of affairs, and stopping China's economic and military ambitions in the region.

Thus, this article aims to analyze the Japanese performance within some multilateral security cooperation mechanisms by reviewing some theoretical proposals from the securitization theory, and the neo-realist school of thought. Additionally, by considering the external context and its implications in the Japanese stance on military issues, and lastly, the country's role on three essential multilateral security mechanisms: the Indo-Pacific Agenda; the QUAD; and the trilateral alliance with the United States and South Korea. Consequently, this paper will provide evidence to answer two important questions; 1) In which ways are the Japanese security policies affecting regional and international politics? 2) Is Japan a paramount actor in the new liberal security agenda? With this, it is expected to reach some conclusions to explain Japan's current position in terms of security issues in the international spectrum.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: The Securitization Theory and the Neo-Realist Proponents**

The central objective of this paper is to figure out whether Japan's new security plan has preponderance on the regional and global security architecture. Many comments, and much analysis, have recently been written by experts on Japanese studies from different world regions. However, only a few have been dedicated to reason as to the significance it may have on global security issues, and these have failed to determine the theories or schools of thought that serve to interpret the moves Japan has made to its security framework. Considering this, there are two theoretical approaches that can be reviewed to explain the subject of analysis of this text. First, the securitization theory based on the assumptions made by the Copenhagen School; and second, the defensive realism stance proposed by neo-realism.

### **2.1. The securitization theory proponents for evaluating the Japanese security stance**

One of the main premises of security studies is that there is a threat that needs to be tackled so an actor can guarantee its survival. The fact that a country is a threat to another is rarely questioned, but the securitization theory has a critical perspective towards the question of what makes something a threat, and insists in the performative character of the word

‘security’. Hence, securitization is “when a securitizing actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is “normal politics” (Balzacq, Leonard and Ruzicka, 2016, p. 2). Although this theory is based on a particular understanding over security that is not essential in this study because, as it will be reasoned in the second section, there is enough evidence about the threatening environment Japan faces, it offers key concepts that are particularly relevant when reasoning on security planning.

In relation to this, Balzacq, Leonard and Ruzicka (2016) point out that:

The core concepts of the theory are arguably the securitizing actor (i.e. the agent who presents an issue as a threat through a securitizing move), the referent subject (i.e. the entity that is threatening), the referent object (i.e. the entity that is threatened), the audience (the agreement of which is necessary to confer an intersubjective status to the threat), the context and the adoption of distinctive policies (‘exceptional’ or not). (pp. 2-3)

In the security Nippon surrounding, the securitizing actor is the government, and the referent object is represented by the State. The referent subjects are arguably North Korea, Russia and China; the audience is the Japanese society, but also the like-minded partners that recognize the menaces posed by these countries. The context and adoption of distinctive policies are the mechanisms of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral cooperation, and the brand-new Japanese defense plan. The level of animosity of the referent objects is something aimed to be discussed in the next section of this article; nonetheless, it is necessary to part from the idea that the geographical environment itself is unstable enough and the physical (military) capabilities are not the same among the members of the region.

Despite the fact that the traditional securitization theory, proposed by the Copenhagen School in the 1980s, is critical with the objective construction of the notion of security and insists on the idea that anyone or anything can be a threat, it offers crucial aspects that serve to comprehend the way security decision-making processes function. There are two important elements that are key; the securitizing move and the audience. The securitizing move “commands actions and obligates as well as enables the securitizing actor to a particular subsequent behavior: if you construct a threat image, you more or less have to act upon” (Sjöstedt, 2020, n.p.). If the political history of Japan during this Century is reviewed, this move started in 2007 when the former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe,

implemented a proactive diplomatic agenda based on the idea that China's economic expansion will ultimately affect the economic security of the nations around the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Moreover, Japan has been able to propose a widely accepted foreign policy agenda based on the promotion of a more sensitive speech in relation to security issues in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Concerning this, Mimaki (2023) comments that for the Japanese government “a threat that cannot be dealt with by military means alone must be brought under control through dialogue and other means” (n.p.). This dialogue does not only refer to diplomatic talks with its adversaries, but also a fluent and proactive communication with its allies and, mostly, with the ones who are still doubtful about its strategy, including the ASEAN countries and South Korea.

The second aspect is the audience. It is pivotal for the recognition of security as a relevant matter; “the audience itself does not only consist of one but consists of several groups which are categorized as audience... it determines the acceptance of speech act where an issue can be categorized as a security issue or not” (Maulidia, 2018, p. 1). Another important remark linked to this factor is mentioned by Roe (2008, cited by Sjöstedt, 2020) “it is generally suggested that the conception of audience is related to the securitizing actor; if the latter is the head of the government, the audience could be the broader political elite in the parliament; the general public, or both” (n.p.). These two definitions are useful to explain that security is not only about the facts upon which an actor or situation is considered a threat, but the level of acceptance and support a securitizing agent gets from others; be it from internal or external actors.

For Japan, the audience is divided into two complementary groups; the Japanese society, and its allies. Concerning the internal acceptance of the defense policies, the polls that are conducted by the government every three years to measure the level of acceptance of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) are worthy of mention. In the last poll, undertaken in December 2022, just days after the release of the new Defense Plan, 3,000 adults, aged 18 and older, were targeted in the mail survey. Of these, 1,602 people (53.4 %) responded showing the following results:

Regarding the size of the SDF, 53 percent said that the current level is fine, while 41.5 percent said that it should be reinforced. Asked about what kind of defense issues they are interested in, again with multiple answers allowed, “North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development” was the top choice given by 68.9 percent of respondents. That was followed by “Japan's defense capabilities” (64 percent), “China's military modernization

and activities around Japan” (61.3 percent) and “Russia’s aggression toward Ukraine and its impact” (52.1 percent). When asked whether the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty is useful for Japan’s peace and security, a record high of 89.7 percent said yes, while 9.1 percent said no (Kosuke, 2023, n.p.).

Albeit that the participation was not high, the results show that the reluctance Japanese people had shown to get involved in discussion on this topic in the past is moving away because of the regional situation. Furthermore, the fact that people greatly approve of the security agreement with the US shows that the modifications made to the defense framework is not considered robust enough to guarantee the country’s safety. On the other hand, opposition parties like the *Constitutional Democratic Party* (CDP), *Nippon Ishin and the Democratic Party* for the People have also agreed on the importance of rising the defense capabilities of the country. However, the main point of controversy with the ruling party is related to budget increase, since they pledge the boost will have a negative effect on tax payment. In the CDP understanding “the government’s broad-brush pledge to spend 43 trillion yen (\$330 billion) over the next five years lacks rationality” (Moriyasu, 2023). Despite this, the consensus is an indicator of the sense of menace that the Japanese society has towards the regional and global environment, which provides the government with an essential backing to display the strategy as planned.

An elemental aspect that most securitization theory analysis neglects to review is the role played by external actors. It can be a disadvantage because a more integral view on this concept can lead to a better understanding of the way security policy-making functions. In relation to this, Stritzel (2007, quoted in Demurtas, 2019) argues that “it is difficult to determine which audience is more relevant... and which implications we may have if there are several audiences” (p. 178). The role that foreign actors play is vital because Japan has been able to bolster its defense structure, as a result of internal moves, but also with the backing of political partners.

Hence, a central part of the Japanese security framework is the allied nations that support the country’s concern about its safety. The countries that have backed Japan’s security notion with a high level of commitment are; Australia, India, the United States, and more recently, South Korea. There are also other nations that are committed to actively cooperate with the country such as; Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Italy and The United Kingdom. An aspect to be highlighted is the growing Japan-Southeast Asia relations because of the geographical importance these countries have. Regarding this, Chanlett-Avery (2023) comments that; “regional public

opinion polls show that Japan is seen as the most reliable and trusted nation by ASEAN thought leaders. This favorable view is partially the result of decades of official development assistance, nearly \$130 billion worth to date” (n.p.). This position is remarkable since the Sino relations have been predominant for the international and internal politics of Southeast Asia; the fact that Japan has become an actor with centrality in the region shows the efficiency the policies of the country have had in the long term.

It can be argued that the securitization theory is particularly helpful to explain the process by which Japan has developed its security agenda, as well as the actors, interests and outcomes of it. It is also vital to mention that the context in which Japan has built its security strategy has not only been determined by the current characteristics of the regional environment, but is the result of long-lasting struggles and animosities with its neighbors. There is a very important point that is worthy of mention regarding the unstable Japanese surrounding; it cannot be considered as mere rhetoric of speech, but is a reality that has permeated East Asia during the last decade, and the global tendency of conflicts indicates that security issues might continue to determine the political agenda of the vast majority of countries in the Pacific zone.

## **2.2. Defensive realism and the Japanese deterrence defense strategy**

Evaluating the current Japanese view on security issues implies comprehending the elements that determined the country’s new “National Security Strategy” which was passed in December 2022. To study the new Nippon notion on defense, this article considers neo-realism, specifically defensive realism, as a proper approach to evaluate the deterrence defense strategy, that is the basis of the Japanese defense plan. Defensive realism, as any other proponent of the neo-realist school, centers on anarchy as the main motivator behind political action, as Lobell (2017) explains, countries with a defensive stance on security issues “seek to maximize security, preserve the existing distribution of power, are not inherently aggressive, and avoid relative losses due to shifts in their relative position and ranking” (n.p.). This is particularly relevant when trying to portray the intentions of actors that keep a cooperation-prone approach over security matters, and those that prefer to attain to a defense system, rather than an offensive one, such as in the case of Japan.

Another significant notion found in defensive realism is moderation. This approach “predicts greater variation in internationally driven expansion

and suggests that states ought to generally pursue moderate strategies as the best route to security” (Taliaferro, 2001, p. 129). The matter of moderation has had remarkable implications in the Nippon policy-making over security issues. The prevalent defense path permits the nation to accelerate its capabilities, but without having a coercive behavior towards its most immediate adversaries. One of the most valuable aspects of the Japanese new program that gives it a moderate nature, is that it is based on deterrence as a strategy that seeks to convince other actors not to act, by maximizing its military capabilities, focusing on a robust counterstrike system, and cross-domain operation capabilities that include; space, cyber, electromagnetic and ground, maritime and air domains.

Now, understanding what deterrence is, and its implications in politics, is essential for this study. Deterrence has been defined as “the practice of discouraging or restraining someone from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack” (Mazarr, 2018, p. 1). There are two approaches on the notion; *deterrence by denial* and *deterrence by punishment*. About this, Bojang and Jacobs (2019) mention that:

The strategy of deterrence by denial requires convincing an opponent that he will not attain his goals on the battlefield, the strategy of deterrence by punishment involves threatening an opponent that retaliation will follow any aggression. The strategy of deterrence by denial is likely to result in a large military build-up in the area under threat by the defender, while the strategy of deterrence by punishment often leads to the setup of a token force. (p. 16)

The Nippon deterrence approach can be explained with deterrence by denial since it is based upon persuasion rather than on aggression, upon maximizing its material (military) power to show its defense readiness, and upon not commanding actions against its most immediate counterparts. The Japanese shift has to do, mainly, with the constant Chinese military drills, and the North Korean missile activities. Both have posed a strategic challenge for the country’s security system. Additionally, Japan has dedicated itself to enhancing its military alliance with the U.S. by fostering joint counterstrike capabilities that; “push for new expensive capabilities, but also an awareness that after years of under-investment in key initiatives... vastly greater resources are needed to strengthen deterrence and resilience” (Liff and Horung, 2023, n.p). Deterrence is the manner the country has to deal with menaces; this has also allowed it to complement efforts with diplomacy and multilateral cooperation.



An inquiry that is essential for understanding defensive realism is why moderation and deterrence are preferred over compellence. Here, Lobell (2017) reflects that “attempts to achieve hegemony are self-defeating and can leave the state weaker and less secure because it provokes counterbalancing behavior and aggression tends to meet resistance” (n.p.). The Japanese management of the threats posed by its most immediate neighbors is still reactionary rather than erosive; it has to do with the fact that the country has to attain to a constitution that was settled to avoid a war-like mentality/behavior and, also, with the *status quo* stand that it has fostered internationally, in which the nation is primarily reliant on international norms.

Leaders’ perceptions and calculations is another central component of defensive realism because “material power drives states’ foreign policies through the medium of leaders’ calculations and perceptions... there is a straightforward relation between material power and state behavior” (Tang, 2010, p. 20). Japanese leadership has been fundamental for the acceleration of the nation’s military means; a key figure was Shinzo Abe, who had the strong conviction that only by enhancing and changing the country’s military nature, it could recover the prominence in the regional and global contexts. On the other hand, the current prime minister, Fumio Kishida, has continued to have a proactive position on military issues, and has committed his mandate to increase the country’s military spending, “the Japanese government had set a goal of spending 43 trillion yen or \$302 billion on defence in the timeframe of 2023-2027” (Mahadzir, 2023, n.p.). With this increase, the political elite of the country is looking to change the policy-making approach to one that can capture the demands of the global security environment with a more sophisticated, and long-lasting, military architecture.

As Hideshi (2023) reasons, the new Japanese military vision and program are “not a fundamental shift of trajectory but an acceleration of the previous course of action, provoked by the recent deterioration of the security environment. In this sense, the dramatic transformation is not a revolution but an evolution with a giant leap” (n.p.). The uncertainty and threats that are part of the regional context have moved Japan to make internal changes that need to be articulated to foreign policies that seek for stability, and guarantee the course of law and peace. The approximation to this subject entails the comprehension of, both; the way the country has bolstered its own security structure during the last decade, and the engagement the country has gotten from its central like-minded partners. Albeit the implementation of the plan has a long way to go, it seems the current

Japanese government is certain and decisive on the road, and upon steps it has to take for guaranteeing the nation's territorial safety and stability.

### **3. The Japanese regional geopolitical context's implication on its security planning**

To have a better picture of the topic studied in this article, it is pivotal to consider the conditions in East Asia that have fostered the establishment and implementation of the new Nippon defense plan. Japan is surrounded by three major military and nuclear powers; China, North Korea and Russia. Their military actions, controversies over some territorial enclaves, and historical animosities, have been rising with time and have limited Japanese efforts to guarantee its security by military infrastructure, and diplomatic means. This section aims to study the nature of the regional environment Japan has dealt with, in order to understand how threatening it is, and the motivations behind the latest update to its defense strategy.

Understanding what encourages an actor's decision-making process in the international political realm is essential in any foreign policy analysis. Consequently, reviewing the traits of the security context in East Asia and its impact on the Japanese defense structure is pivotal. It can be argued that East Asia has transformed in a central geopolitical enclave in international politics; the shift in the consideration global leaders make on this zone is the consequence of the dynamics imposed by the consistent economic and political growth China has experienced this century. This expansion has also had some implications in the security environment because the country has emerged as the military hegemon of the region. It is the second most powerful nation worldwide; "after the U.S, China spends more than any other country on its military. In 2022, the U.S. spent \$877 billion, or 39 percent of global defense spending, compared to China's \$292 billion, or 13 percent" (Walters, 2023, p.1).

After China, North Korea is also an important geopolitical country in the region. It poses the main menace to the Japanese defense system because of the recurrent missile launches over, or close to, Japanese territory. In 2022, the country launched a ballistic missile over the Japanese Archipelago, which was the "23rd missile event by North Korea this year, already three more than the previous record of 20 set in 2016" (Cha et al., 2022, n.p). Russia is also worthy of mentioning. Although it is not part of the East Asian region, it is central in the analysis because of two interrelated reasons; first, the territorial dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands and

the impossibility to sign a peace agreement with Japan after World War II; and second, the ramification of the Russian invasion to Ukraine in 2022 that shows the Russian willingness to solve controversies with coercion. An inflection point in the bilateral relations was reached in March 2022, when Japan condemned the Russian intrusion to Ukraine. The Russian government decided to cancel the negotiations of a peace agreement, and they have not been undertaken them again. Moreover, on March 26th 2022, Russia undertook some military exercises in the Kuril Islands that “involved repelling amphibious warfare, including destroying defence aircraft carrying troops and testing skills to operate fire control systems of anti-tank guided missiles” (Reuters, 2022).

This tendency shows the need Japan has to bolster its military expenditures, specifically in the counterattack technology and maritime domain because, as a peninsular nation, it is essential to secure the sea spectrum. In the latest defense strategy “Japan’s new commitments are undoubtedly significant. It intends to raise defense spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2027, or 60 percent over five years” (Kavanagh, 2023, n.p.). With this, the country intends to reduce the gap in military capabilities in relation to its neighbor counterpart nations.

As shown in Chart 1, the differences in military expenditures between Japan, China and Russia in the last five years show that the gap is still big. In relation to North Korea, despite there not being official data, the central issue is the nuclear factor.

CHART 1  
 MILITARY EXPENDITURES (US\$) OF JAPAN COMPARED TO THE ONES  
 OF CHINA, NORTH KOREA AND RUSSIA (2018-2022)

COUNTRY	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
China	232530.60	240332.56	257973.43	285930.52	291958.43
North Korea	1604.44	no data	no data	no data	no data
Russia	61609.20	65201.34	61712.54	65907.71	86373.10
Japan	48535.91	50778.01	257973.43	50957.47	45992.09











Source: Made by the author with the data obtained from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023.

The contrast shown on the chart can be explained by considering a couple elements. Firstly, the Chinese outstanding momentum in terms of strategical growth, and also the fact that the country needs to secure its

supremacy by investing, and having updates in central areas such as the military one. In fact, “for at least a decade, Beijing has made significant investments in its military and security, particularly naval, forces while expanding the boundaries of its desired area of control around its mainland” (Walters, 2023, n.p.). The greatest investment the country has made is in its maritime technology, specifically in its coast guard and maritime militia. On the other hand, Russia’s consistent growth in military expenditures has a strategic motivation in order to maintain a hegemonic position in Eastern Europe, but also in other regions. To do so, the country has increased the number of active military personnel, which reached two million people in 2023 and, also, trusts in the stock of nuclear warheads; 5.977 in total (Statista, 2023).

The military increase trend of these three countries has generated an unstable environment in the region; and for Japan to be surrounded by countries that have greater military and nuclear weapons’ technology, implies to boost defense budget to keep the differences somehow under control. As it is shown in Chart 2, focused on the top 10 nations with the highest military strength, albeit Japan increased its position in 2023, it is still distant from its neighbors. Additionally, even though North Korea is not part of the first ten, the nuclear stock issue gives it a tremendous advantage.

CHART 2  
TOP 10 MILITARY STRENGTH RANKING 2024

POSITION	COUNTRY	POSITION COMPARED TO 2023
1	The United States	Same 
2	Russia	Same 
3	China	Same 
4	India	Same 
5	South Korea	Went up 
6	The United Kingdom	Went down 
7	Japan	Went up 
8	Turkiye	Went up 
9	Pakistan	Went down 
10	Italy	Same 

Source: Made by the author with the data obtained from the Global Fire Power Ranking, 2024

Another aspect that sheds some light on the Japanese motivation for accelerating its defense and security structure is the coercive actions, indirectly or directly, exercised by the three countries mentioned above. China and North Korea are the countries with the highest military activities near Japanese territory. In the case of China; it has a very active presence in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, as well as in the Pacific Ocean, and it has recently conducted different military drills with Russia.

According to the official data released in several documents by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2023, there has been a boost in the military presence of China that can be summarized in the following way; there have been continuous military drills in the Senkaku Island territory since 2012. As a matter of fact, since that year, 1.201 vessels of the China Coast Guard have intruded the Japanese contiguous zone of the islands, but the air force's activities have also been part of the Chinese strategy in this territory. The scope of the People's Liberation Army near the Senkaku islands have tended to expand southward, with several scrambles from the Japan's defense forces that reached a dangerous peak in 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023).

In the Sea of Japan, there have been two movements. First, the Chinese intensification of sea and air forces activities and, second, the acceleration of joint actions with Russia. There is no data collected from Chinese and Russian official sources (which might make the analysis more integral). There is, however, information compiled and published by the Japanese government that serve to quantify the level of activity in the zone. According to this data, Chinese military aircrafts and vessels have been confirmed to pass the Tsushima Trait since 2015. Furthermore, the joint actions of China and Russia include the "Joint Sea 2021", which was the first navigation near Japan, and in July 2023, Russian Navy joined China's military in the "Northern Interaction 2023" in which vessels fired at sea in the waters around 400 km north Oki Islands (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023).

The Russian military activity near Japan is less intense, but it shows an intensification of the country's presence in the region, and the fact that it has conducted several military drills with China, indicates a military alliance that raises the security concerns on the Japanese side. Consequently, it is necessary to mention some of the Russian activities in the disputed territory of the Kuril Islands. These have included the buildup of military infrastructure and the deployment of missiles in the island of Matua. Furthermore, after abandoning the peace dialogues with Japan in 2022, which

also ended economic cooperation between the two countries around the area, Russia conducted military exercises in the islands focused on training to repel invasion, and “the Vostok 2022 naval exercises” (Barrash, 2022, n.p.).

North Korea is the nation that has deployed more military activity over Japanese territory. The constant modernization of its missile technology, and the continuous launches of these weapons near or above Japan, have permeated the political debate at societal and governmental levels, which has ultimately had repercussions on the buildup of the new Japanese security strategy. Between 2021 and 2023 Pyongyang conducted a record number of missiles launches, and in October 2022, “North Korea fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), Hwasong-12, over the Japanese archipelago into the Pacific Ocean” (Cha, Kim and Lin, 2022, n.p.). It was the first time since 2017 that the country reached the Japanese territory, and demonstrates the North Korean capacity and eagerness to attack Japan. Also, there is a recent shift that can accelerate the North Korean animosity towards Japan; it is the trilateral alliance between Japan, South Korea and the United States, which has also led to joint military exercises as a way of showing their strength in response to Pyongyang’s nuclear threat.

The joint menace that China, Russia and North Korea have posed on Japan has been central for strategic defense planning. External actors always push governments to rethink on security strategies and plans. When there are threats there is uncertainty and “governments have had a hard time incorporating change into their defence planning systems, and to accommodate the condition of deep uncertainty” (Breitenbauch and Jakobsson, 2018, p. 260). It can be argued that a shift that is efficient enough in keeping appropriate security policies has been complicated for the Japanese government because of the rapid modernization and improvement of the military capabilities of countries in East Asia and the world, and the internal political and social debate that has made the process of implementation of the defense structure slower and rocky.

An important inquiry is to what extent the three Japanese neighbors have motivated the intensification of defense expenditure and the engrossment in the military strength of the country’s defense architecture. Considering the data portrayed, and the studies reviewed in this section, it can be stated that even though it is not the only element in the equation, the threatening geopolitical context has certainly put pressure on the Japanese political leaders to move faster towards a defense strategy that can counter the solid and robust military capacity of border nations. A question to which the answer remains unclear is whether or not Japan will be able to maintain

an enduring safety environment in a context dominated by offensive-prone countries, and how external conflicts such as the one in the Strait of Taiwan, can affect the validity of its latest defense strategy.

#### **4. The Japanese role on multilateral security cooperation mechanisms**

Multilateralism has been one of the main features of international politics during this century. It has encompassed one of the central topics of concern for policy makers, which is security. An important limitation for security cooperation in the present is great-power competition. Nonetheless, there are some states, such as Japan, that seek for promoting multilateralism as a way of strengthening a cooperation system on some crucial issues, including the security one. Hence, analyzing the biggest security mechanisms Japan is part of, and its role and level of influence is pivotal. Especially considering that it allows us to gain an awareness of the effectiveness of the current Japanese stance on security matters, and its role within strategic competition.

Multilateral cooperation can be understood as the political activity that is arranged by a group of countries, it is “an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of ‘generalised’ principles of conduct” (Jokela et al, 2023, p. 20). It is usually characterized by more horizontal relations in terms of power, in which the system usually behaves in a multipolar way. An important part of multilateral cooperation is that all countries that are part of this type of mechanisms share the same normative vision and, also, that “the parties involved in multilateral cooperation have expectations of a rough equivalence of benefits in the aggregate and over time” (Jokela et al., p. 21). In this sense, Japan has understood the importance of bolstering multilateral security cooperation as a way of being a relevant actor for strategic competition within East Asia, as well as guaranteeing a group of partners that can minimize risks in a stage of deteriorating regional and international security environment.

One of the reasons why the Japanese government has adopted a more integral approach on security has to do with military power, specifically with military spending. The data obtained from 2021 points out that between 2000 and 2020 “Japan’s defense spending as a share of East Asia’s total fell by half, dropping from nearly equivalent to China’s share to less than a quarter of it” (Takahashi, 2022, p. 277). It is an indicator of the disbalance that has emerged in the region over the last two decades, and the need to

find a way to shield its national security program. The strategy that the Japanese government has used to look for international security support is to prompt military readiness and to promote a series of multilateral security mechanisms with like-minded liberal partners.

The central security mechanism in the Japanese foreign policy making is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). The Indo-Pacific is a geostrategic concept that originated at the beginning of this century when China surpassed Japan as the third biggest world economy. It resulted in “Japan’s immediate apprehension of maritime security and long-term trepidation of China’s behavior prompted actions to protect the established rule of law and serve the common interest of the liberal order” (Choudhury, 2023, p.2). A fundamental rationale on the Indo-Pacific, that is usually neglected from the International Relations literature, is that it emerged from an Asian (Japanese-Indian) outlook and lately transformed into a strategy that permeated the foreign policy agenda of Western great-powers, such as the U.S. or the European Union.

The FOIP agenda was officially established as a vital part of the Nippon foreign policy in 2016. For Japan, it is a way of concentrating cooperation efforts in three essential areas: economy, security and international (liberal) norms. Concerning security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific zone, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has undertaken a stance based on three objectives; “securing the stable use of major sea lanes by way of defense cooperation and exchange activities; preventing contingencies through confidence building and mutual understanding; contributing to peace and stability through active engagement in the region, in cooperation with partner countries” (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023). To achieve these goals, the current Japanese prime minister declared in the release of the new plan for the Indo-Pacific that the country:

Has been working on the joint training between the Self-Defense Forces and each country’s armed forces, and the development of legal infrastructure such as the RAA and ACSA. A new framework for grant aid to armed forces and other related organizations of like-minded countries has also been established... The Maritime Self-Defense Forces is a “Force for Peace” that contributes to regional maritime peace and stability. We will promote joint training with India and the U.S., and goodwill training with ASEAN countries and Pacific Island countries. (2023)

The plan shows a direct relation with its national security strategy because it focuses on maritime military cooperation and defense infras-



tructure. As long as a significant number of countries in the Indo-Pacific region backup the FOIP agenda, Japan guarantees cooperation towards a goal that is common, and which serves its major interest of reducing risks of hostile activity near its territory. The Japanese partners in the Indo-Pacific cooperation system are essential. The most vital one is the United States; apart from the fact that they have had a long-lasting bilateral cooperation agreement, they established the U.S.-Japan bilateral naval exercises as part of the Indo-Pacific deployment (IPD) (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023). Moreover, The U.S. has established its own Indo Pacific program, the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which somehow shares the same pillars with the Nippon ones, but different goals and levels of influence.

There are also other significant allies like Australia and New Zealand. In relation to these two, Japan has participated in an Australia-led capacity building exercise in Timor-Leste (Hari'i Hamutuk), and the Operation Christmas Drop which is usually launched every year. Additionally, the country has participated in the Japan-France-Australia-U.S. quadrilateral naval exercise (La Pérouse), which is a biannual naval exercise that started in 2021. The nation has constantly participated in the Japan-UK Army bilateral training (Vigilant Isles, Guardian North), which takes place annually, and involves functional and comprehensive bilateral training. India is also a vital ally of Japan in security matters, with whom Japan has undertaken multilateral exercises for the Shinyuu Maitri, Malabar and Daruma Guardian services. Additionally, they have now undertaken the First Japan-India Ministerial “2+2” meeting, for which both governments committed to strengthen the shared security goals of the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023).

A significant outcome of the Japanese Indo-Pacific initiative, and proactivity, is the acceptance that ASEAN countries and South Korea have granted it. According to Toshihide (2023) “a number of like-minded countries have laid out their own visions for the Indo-Pacific...it is well recognized that there are a number of commonalities that they share: common areas of interest and common means of cooperation” (p. 30). It can be argued that the synergy in the security cooperation system linked to the Indo-Pacific is not only constraining the Chinese unilateral stance on foreign politics; it has also allowed Japan to build strong relations with countries that serve as solid allies in the promotion of common values in the region. This can be problematic for China in the long term if the country does not manage to put pressure on the Indo-Pacific development.

Another dialogue that is part of the current Japanese security cooperation agenda is the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which is mainly a minilateral consultation group formed by Australia, India, Japan and the United States. It originated in 2007, but its path has been rough and uncertain because of the lack of consistency the members have shown through the years. In 2023, the dialogue was modified to QUAD 3.0, which is simply a shift in the principles, since its members are now having regular meetings on military issues. It has encouraged discussions on whether the dialogue has become a security grouping, in fact “the senior-level military commander’s meeting of the Quad countries at Sunnylands in California, US in 2023... has stirred debates about whether the Quad would now have an obvious security orientation” (Saha and Mishra, 2023, n.p.).

This mechanism has transformed over the years, moving away from its initial goals, which were merely focused on promoting human development; and it does not represent a significant multilateral dialogue since the new approach of the four members is directed to enrich the Indo-Pacific strategy. Another shift in the alliance is that it has greatly shifted to cover the U.S. interests, which has avoided partners such as India to integrate with diligence and willingness. Concerning Japan’s role, Koga (2021) reflects, “Japan took a more supportive role in the post-Abe administrations because of a plethora of immediate domestic issues, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic confusion, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, and leadership transitions” (p. 158). Evidently, Abe’s figure was fundamental to keep a more decisive and leading role; even though the country still plays an important position as a diplomatic bridge between other nations, it is not the main arranger anymore.

Even though the QUAD’s members are more aware of the ramifications of the delicate security environment in the Pacific region, and after pondering the consequences of the Malabar military exercises, which have taken place since 2007 in the Indic Ocean region and more recently in Australian waters, in the last leaders’ meeting, in 2023, “the joint statements clearly showed that the focus of the grouping would be on non-traditional security issues like vaccine diplomacy, critical and emerging technology, climate change, maritime domain awareness, among others” (Saha and Mishra, 2023, n.p.). Considering this, it is important to point out that the members of the dialogue have not yet decided on what path to follow; it is not a military consultation or a common trade group, and it does not have an institutionalized framework. Hence, it can be evaluated as an important referent of multilateral cooperation, but not as a paramount apparatus for the Japanese foreign politics efforts on security.

A recent and transcendental move for regional power configuration was the trilateral alliance, inaugurated by Japan, South Korea and the United States in August 2023 in Camp David, in the United States. It is relevant because South Korea has been a very unlikely ally for Japan because of their bilateral relations history. In fact, the decision made by the Seoul's government has been quite unpopular within the population due to several issues, including the Nippon position denying the crimes against the Korean comfort women during World War II. It can be argued that there are two factors that have allowed the agreement between the two countries. First, the American role as a diplomatic bridge and, additionally, the high level of instability in the region that, in this case, includes the threats posed by North Korea and the Chinese dispute over the Strait of Taiwan.

The alliance has not been institutionalized yet, but it can be considered as the first step for forming an agreement that would have strong repercussions upon the power balance in East Asia. In a joint document, the countries committed to:

Consult with each other in an expeditious manner to coordinate our responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats that affect our collective interests and security... To hold trilateral meetings between our leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers, and national security advisors at least annually... We will also launch an annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to coordinate implementation of our Indo-Pacific approaches and to continually identify new areas for common action. (The White House, 2023)

The first step was to conduct military drills. The first one took place in August 2023, in which the countries “conducted a trilateral ballistic missile defense exercise in the East China Sea... in response to North Korea’s failed satellite launch last week” (Mahadzir, 2023). After this, in October 2023, they “hold a joint aerial exercise near the Korean peninsula, which would be the first time the three countries are conducting such a drill” (Reuters, 2023). This year, in January, the countries “held three-day joint naval drills on the Korean Peninsula, as North Korea has suggested it would re-define its ties with Seoul, calling it a “principal enemy” (Khaliq, 2024).

This new coalition gives Japan the opportunity to count on an ally that can give a brand-new nature to its security plan because of three complementary reasons. First, it allows the country to have military activity that is targeted to an area that is essential to its security, the East China

Sea; second, it represents a unique opportunity to unify efforts from a more regional stance to block North Korea's ambitions and; third, as a trilateral mechanism, if it is successful enough, it can produce a balance of power that favors the Japanese side. Nevertheless, the operability of the alliance in the long-term is uncertain due to political internal changes and external response.

## 5. Conclusion

The current Japanese rationale on security issues has arguably been promoted by the nature of the regional environment, its main allies, the most important of these being the United States; and the calculations of the country's political elite to find a Japanese way to guarantee the nation's safety, but also its predominance in East Asia and the world. After having analyzed theoretical and functional aspects linked to the security and defense framework of the country, the following remarks can be presented. First, the Japanese government has been able to show and persuade about the high risk its neighbor countries represent for its safety, and has been successful in earning support, from both its own society and allied nations, to develop a new security strategy. This strategy, albeit having the same nature than the previous one, seeks for modernizing the military capabilities of the country in the long term without the need to have an offensive approach, which in turn permits the government to cooperate beyond its territory.

Second, the deterrence by denial approach of its security plan is beneficial in two ways: it does not bring a sense of threat to other countries; and it can be a catalyst for more assertive diplomatic talks with its counterparts. Here, a limit might still be the defense alliance with the U.S., and the level of distrust it has on countries such as China. It means that Japan, even though it does not seem to be a mere third party in the struggle for influence in East Asia, has to face the implications of being dependent on and the biggest American military partner in the region. This is not beneficial for its political influence; world history has shown that any hegemonic State is reliant on other.

Third, the multidimensional stance that the government has on security issues is the normal trajectory path of a nation that has struggled with internal economic issues, and with the animosity and military growth of China, North Korea and Russia. The acceleration to its defense agenda also needs proper implementation and regular updates because it is what the rapid changes to the regional and world stability demand; and Japan is

aware that East Asia is a fertile soil for conflicts. Also, if the country wants to become a relevant actor within security matters, and to have more significance in the regional and global spectrum, it needs to show consistency and a leadership that is not dependent on the American moves.

Fourth, there is enough evidence that indicates that the country has been a proactive promoter of multilateral security cooperation, and has moved forward as an actor that is able to influence the decision-making process of its allies. Japan is a top influential player in the Indo-Pacific, nonetheless, its impact on the QUAD has been diminishing as a result of the Biden's administration capacity to be the conductor of the alliance agenda. Finally, the biggest move in security cooperation has been the trilateral dialogue established with South Korea and The United States. Albeit its beginning has been vigorous, its implementation route and institutionalization is still not clear, and the Nippon role is not that prominent if it is noticed that the main supporter is the U.S. Thus, if Japan wants to have centrality on multilateral security cooperation dialogues, it has to keep firmly enhancing the Indo-Pacific strategy as its most significant security milestone.

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