

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Rewiring Japan's National Security Strategy in Post-COVID Indo-Pacific

Titli Basu

August 20, 2020

S*ummary*

Japan is revisiting its National Security Strategy. The immediate question dominating Japanese security thinking, following the cancellation of Aegis Ashore system, is anchored on missile defence and “enemy-base strike”. As his official term draws closer, Prime Minister Abe will leave behind a Japan whose changing nature as a security actor will be an important variable in framing the strategic equilibrium in not just East Asia, but the Indo-Pacific. Abe's legacy will be defined by his resolve to turn around the narrative of a “reactive” Japan, by pushing the envelope from passive/negative pacifism to active/positive pacifism, under the banner of Proactive Contribution to Peace.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has tasked Japan's National Security Council (NSC) this summer to "hammer out a new direction"¹ in the National Security Strategy (NSS) with the objective of maintaining a favourable strategic posture in the post-COVID balance of power and order. As his official term draws closer, Prime Minister Abe will leave behind a Japan whose changing nature as a security actor will be an important variable in framing the strategic equilibrium in not just East Asia, but also the Indo-Pacific.

Coming into *Kantei*, Prime Minister Abe introduced Japan's maiden NSS in 2013. The strategic environment has changed considerably since then. With the pandemic in the mix, Japan's policy choices are stretched thin amidst Sino-US strategic contestation. While the US-Japan alliance remains the foundational pillar of post-war security policy, Donald Trump's presidency has sometimes undercut the shields of the republic,² with a transactional and unilateral America First model. Alliance management under President Trump, between a pandemic and an upcoming election, will be demanding.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the American leadership deficit. Also, China has moved further away from the rules-based order and is fostering illiberalism. In the middle of a pandemic and ensuing contraction of the global economy, China has pursued geopolitical goals, rather aggressively, in important theatres of the Indo-Pacific including South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Himalayas. The Chinese narrative suggests that Beijing's "assertiveness" is merely its response to the sovereignty challenges. Given the favourable military balance, Beijing "doesn't need to make use of the 'chance' provided by the pandemic".³ Although Article 5 of the US-Japan treaty encompasses the contested Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands, Chinese maritime militia is likely to escalate operations beginning in the second half of August as the fishing suspension ends.

Re-conceptualising Japan's defence in a post-COVID scenario will have to navigate pressing economic contraction, demographic dilemma, constitutional constraints, and alliance politics. Tokyo is at the front line of East Asian security — a region fraught with a turbulent history and intensified nationalism 75 years after World War II. There are Cold War structures in place. There are nuclear powers with advanced missile technologies in the neighbourhood. There are disputed sovereignty claims. With Chinese unilateral efforts altering the maritime status quo on the one hand and lack of progress on denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula as indicated

¹ **"Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe"**, *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet*, June 18, 2020.

² Mira Rapp-Hooper, **"Saving America's Alliances"**, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020.

³ Zhou Bo, **"Why China must beware a less confident US, politically divided and pessimistic about its future"**, *South China Morning Post*, July 27, 2020.

by the United Nations interim report⁴ on the other, Japan is revisiting its strategic options.

National Security and Making of Abe's Legacy

The Abe era will be defined by his unrelenting vision to position Japan as a “tier-one country”,⁵ invested as an advocate of international rules, custodian of global commons, and defender of the liberal order. He followed up his vision with decisive policies reorienting the exclusively defence-oriented post-war security posture while pushing the envelope from passive/negative pacifism to active/positive pacifism.⁶ He has drawn motivation from his grandfather and former Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke and sharpened his outlook on security issues during his tenure as chief cabinet secretary in 2005 under the Koizumi Junichiro administration.

Since returning to power in December 2012, Abe steered key policy drives: reorganising policy apparatus with the institution of the NSC; reinterpreting Article 9 and enacting security legislation to expand the scope of the right to collective self-defence; bringing in the specially designated secrets law to bolster intelligence sharing within the alliance framework; strategising aid to support maritime capacity building of the Southeast Asian states; scrapping the defence spending limit of one per cent of GDP; easing the three principles of arms export; and centralising management and processing of defence-related investments with the establishment of Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA). Tokyo has sent peacekeeping mission to South Sudan, sailed destroyers in the Middle East for intelligence gathering, and stepped up joint exercises in the critical sea-lanes of Indo-Pacific with the US, Australia and India.

Latest policy manoeuvring has renewed the national debate on strike capability or what is referred to as “enemy-base strike”. This comes after the crucial decision in June to cancel the deployment of Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defence system. Situating this development in the regional backdrop — grim progress on Peninsula’s denuclearisation, rocky inter-Korea balance, and escalating tensions in Japan-South Korea relations— is intriguing. The central question dominating the current Japanese security thinking is anchored on missile defence and strike capability. The primary task for defence planners as Japan debates and decides on the alternative to Aegis Ashore, is to avert any gap in Japan’s defence. As Japan draws up the plan,

⁴ **“Military closely monitoring N. Korea amid U.N. report on miniaturized nuclear devices”**, *Yonhap News Agency*, August 04, 2020.

⁵ Shinzo Abe, **“Japan is Back”**, Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, February 22, 2013.

⁶ Akimoto Daisuke, *The Abe Doctrine: Japan's Proactive Pacifism and Security Strategy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

key policy documents including the National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG) and the Mid-Term Defence Programme (MTDP) will have to be revisited.

Abe's legacy will be defined by his resolve to turn around the usual narrative of a "reactive" Japan under the banner of *Proactive Contribution to Peace*. Whether it is steering the strategic conceptualisation of Indo-Pacific underpinned by the Confluence of the Two Seas or designing the Quad,⁷ Abe led the way for Washington to follow. As the NSC weighs the overall policy options this summer, this may be Abe's final opportunity before he leaves office to infuse fresh momentum to his agenda of redefining Japan's post-war security outlook.

"Enemy-base Strike" and North Korea

Japan's 2020 Defence White Paper stresses on the "grave and imminent threats" posed by North Korea, with miniaturised nuclear weapons that fit ballistic missile warheads. Additionally, the short-range ballistic missiles launched have flown on a lower orbit which can circumvent defence networks. In 2017, Tokyo picked Aegis Ashore over Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) with the objective of augmenting existing ballistic missile defence system. It was not just to manage threats emanating from North Korea but also to moderate stress on Aegis destroyer.

But in June 2020, Tokyo decided to shelve the deployment of Aegis Ashore owing to ballooning costs, technical impediments, protracted timeline and domestic politics. Following this, the defence planners in Tokyo began debating the option of "enemy-base strike" or strike capability. Even though it is not a new subject in the Japanese security discourse, and political posturing can be traced back to Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichiro in 1956, harvesting public understanding on strike capability within the parameters of Article 9 of the pacifist constitution may pose a challenge. While Japan is expected to invest political capital on constructing a defensive narrative on strike capability, managing regional concerns over incremental "normalisation" of Japan and its implications on East Asian security dynamics will be noteworthy.

So, how Japan positions its strike capability will be critical. There are reservations framing it as a pre-emptive strike capability.⁸ Conversation on the subject reveals ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) inclination towards "self-defence counterattack capability" or "enemy-base counterattack capability" to garner public support. In 2017, the LDP pushed for a "counterattack capability" to strike enemy missile bases.⁹ Tokyo has already opted for hypersonic cruise missiles and

⁷ Shinzo Abe, "[Asia's Democratic Security Diamond](#)", *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012.

⁸ Daishi Abe, "[Pacifist Japan seeks new name for defensive strikes](#)", *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 08, 2020.

⁹ Yuki Tatsumi, "[Japan Eyes 'Counter-Attack' Capability Against North Korea Missile Threat](#)", *The Diplomat*, March 31, 2017.

hypervelocity guiding projectiles. There is a view that Japan needs “limited” strike capability in order to preserve the regional military balance.¹⁰ After the cancellation of Aegis Ashore, the LDP in its policy recommendation in July 2020 urged Prime Minister Abe to push forward “the ability to head off missiles in enemy territory”.¹¹

Policy deliberations on defence and security matters more often than not slip into constitutional and legal debates constraining Japan’s posture. Leading strategic thinkers like Kanehara Nobukatsu, who played a crucial role in shaping the NSC, supports a balance of offense and defence capabilities.¹² Foremost security scholars like Hosoya Yuichi echo similar position on strike capability and further urged serious debate on the feasibility of excessive reliance on the US commitment to the region post COVID-19.¹³ There is a school of thought which argues that striking the enemy to neutralise its military capacity with the aim of securing Japan is a defensive military strategy - ‘offensive defence’ or ‘active defence’.¹⁴

Rejecting a China-centric Order

As one of the key pillars in the hub-and-spokes San Francisco system of alliances, Tokyo has remained a flag-bearer of the US-led order.¹⁵ With an economy two-and-a-half times larger and military spending five times larger than Japan’s, China constitutes a potent military threat in the East China Sea. Notwithstanding the institution of China-Japan Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism, in the 2020 Defence White Paper, Tokyo’s defence administration articulated “grave” concerns regarding its threat perception from Chinese “relentless” attempts to unilaterally change the status quo around the contested Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands.¹⁶ Beijing’s grey zone tactics and unmanned systems operations in the East China Sea are essentially to project in the long term that China is controlling this area. Beijing’s military manoeuvring vis-à-vis Taiwan further muddles the East China Sea situation as activities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the east of Taiwan, through the Miyako Strait and the Bashi Channel, are noteworthy.

¹⁰ Narushige Michishita, **“Myths and Realities of Japan’s Security Policy”**, *Wilson Centre*, February 18, 2020.

¹¹ **“Abe calls for national security-framework review”**, *NHK*, August 04, 2020; and Daishi Abe & Oki Nagai, **“Japan’s ruling party broadens vision for defensive strike option”**, *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 31, 2020.

¹² Masuda Tsuyoshi, **“Top Japan strategist says defense policy at turning point”**, *NHK*, July 03, 2020.

¹³ Yukio Tajima, **“Japan must rethink excessive reliance on US security, says expert”**, *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 07, 2020.

¹⁴ Sugio Takahashi, **“Dealing with the Ballistic Missile Threat: Whether Japan Should Have a Strike Capability under its Exclusively Defense Oriented Policy”**, *NIDS Security Reports*, No. 7, December 2006.

¹⁵ Ryo Sahashi, **“The depths of Tokyo’s strategic dilemma”**, *East Asia Forum*, December 21, 2018; and Toshihiro Nakayama, **“Japan’s Not Hedging... Yet”**, *The Diplomat*, December 21, 2018.

¹⁶ **“Defense of Japan 2020”**, *Japan Ministry of Defense*, July 14, 2020.

Reunification, if achieved, may tilt the balance favouring Beijing in the East China Sea.¹⁷

To defend southwestern islands, surface-to-air missile unit and surface-to-ship guided missile unit are deployed at Miyakojima Island. Area security unit in charge of the initial response will be deployed in Ishigaki Island. As the Coast Guard remains the first responder to the grey zone challenge, a special unit exclusively for patrolling the disputed Islands with augmented surveillance capabilities is established. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard and the Maritime Self-defence Forces (MSDF) have strengthened coordination through joint training. Going forward, their “perception gap” has to be bridged for an effective response because the Coast Guard considers the grey zone challenges as law enforcement issues, and the MSDF considers the same as paramilitary challenges.¹⁸

Furthermore, Chinese intermediate-range missiles are a concern for defence planners and there is a strike gap between the US-Japan alliance and China,¹⁹ owing to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty that expired last year. Thus, there is an urgent need for the alliance to have a well-adjusted defensive and offensive capabilities to manage threats from Chinese missiles.

Economic security is also a concern. Japan has instituted an economic unit at the National Security Secretariat. While complete decoupling is inconceivable but securing Japan from Chinese instruments of economic statecraft including 5G and foreign investment in “core industries” is a priority.

Over the decades, the China-Japan relations have been largely defined by nationalism, contested historical narratives and territorial disputes despite deep economic interdependence, entrenched in thickly integrated supply chains and trade and investment flows. The tactical détente²⁰ in the relation, as reflected since 2018, in no way indicates a fundamental change in their attitude since contentious issues remain unsettled. Deep economic roots have not yielded peace. China debate amongst Japanese academics suggests that Tokyo’s approach has remained prudent and nuanced, and not “monomaniacally” absorbed on being tough on China.²¹ However, with recent developments in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, escalation in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and detention of Japanese scholars in China, the

¹⁷ Tetsuo Kotani, **“China’s Military and Paramilitary Activities in the East China Sea: Trends and Assessments for the U.S.-Japan Alliance”**, *Asia Policy*, 15 (3), July 2020, pp. 7-17.

¹⁸ Eric Sayers and Tetsuo Kotani, **“An Alliance Strategy for the East China Sea”**, *Asia Strategy Initiative*, Policy Memorandum 2, September 2019.

¹⁹ Kenji Minemura, **“As China builds up missile forces, Japan lacks policy discussion”**, *The Asahi Shimbun*, May 20, 2020.

²⁰ Hiroyuki Akita, **“Can Japan and China move beyond a tactical detente?”**, *East Asia Forum Quarterly*, 10 (3), July-September 2018.

²¹ Toshihiro Nakayama, **“Confrontation for Its Own Sake Is No Policy at All”**, *The American Interest*, July 24, 2020.

moderate school within the LDP may be overshadowed by the hard-liners, advocating being more firm on Beijing.²²

The Alliance: Between Pandemic and US Elections

The US-Japan alliance was conceived to further the US post-war imperative to design a favourable strategic order through forward presence and maximise the US leverage by containing communism. US-Japan Security Treaty, which is at 60 today, continues to be the core of Japan's security policy and serves as a regional public good in maintaining strategic stability. The alliance features as the mainstay in Japan's major policy documents including the NSS and the NDPG. Meanwhile, it also forms one of the key pillars of important policy documents and directives from the Trump administration including the US National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy, Asia Reassurance Initiative Act and the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.

In the middle of a pandemic, maintaining effective deterrence and operational capacities²³ is vitally important for the alliance. As the US military navigates through this public health emergency, Chinese maritime assertiveness and North Korean belligerence demonstrate that contingencies may not wait for the pandemic to get over. Defence planners in Washington and Tokyo will have to debate how to bolster alliance capacity at the earliest. But alliance management is not without its share of challenges. Equitable distribution of burden sharing has dominated Washington's rhetoric and criticism of Japan being a "free rider". Conversation on burden sharing is anchored on a straight build-up/specific reciprocity approach and a division of labour/diffused reciprocity approach.²⁴ As alliance managers will negotiate Host Nation Support in the coming months, incoming US ambassador to Japan, Kenneth Weinstein has pushed Tokyo for shouldering the greater burden. But pandemic and the economic recession will be constraining variables in these abnormal times.²⁵ Japan's economy contracted 7.8 per cent in April-June or at an annualised rate of 27.8 per cent.

As the US heads for election and even though Japan seemingly prefers Republican presidents, a recent poll conducted by *NHK* reflects that 57 per cent believe that the re-election of Donald Trump would have a negative impact on Japan.²⁶ While the Democratic presidential nominee, Joe Biden, might have a relatively more nuanced

²² Satoshi Sugiyama, "[China hawks gain ground among Japan's conservatives, long divided on Beijing](#)", *The Japan Times*, July 29, 2020.

²³ Yuki Tatsumi and Yoshimitsu Sato, "[What COVID-19 Means for the US-Japan Alliance](#)", *The Diplomat*, May 29, 2020.

²⁴ "[U.S.-Japan Burden Sharing](#)", *US General Accounting Office*, 1989.

²⁵ Jeffrey W. Hornung and Scott W. Harold, "[As COVID-19 Makes Clear, U.S. Allies in the Indo-Pacific, Not the Money They Pay to Host U.S. Forces, Are the Value Proposition](#)", *The Diplomat*, June 12, 2020.

²⁶ "[Survey suggests growing concern among Japanese at prospect of Trump re-election](#)", *NHK*, May 19, 2020.

understanding of alliance politics but *Kantei* is already habituated to Trump.²⁷ Some have argued that managing relations with the US have always been challenging for Tokyo irrespective of the President. Alliance dilemma has compelled Tokyo, which is a secondary power dependent on the system leader, to manage the fear of abandonment and entrapment.²⁸

The US-Japan alliance over the decades has added strategic depth with a clear division of roles through Defence Guidelines, bolstering seamless operational coordination. The strategic scope has deepened with the evolving dynamics of warfare and new domains of power projection such as space, cyber, and the electromagnetic spectrum. Even though China perceives the US-Japan alliance as a Cold War relic which compromises Beijing's national security interests,²⁹ Washington and Tokyo will have to further fortify the alliance and integrate strategies to preserve the regional order.

Leading the Indo-Pacific

COVID-19 has presented fractured power structures, contested global governance and diluted multilateral institutions. It requires middle powers like Japan to step up and ease the stress on rules-based liberal order in the Indo-Pacific. There is an urgent need to mobilise strategic resources to deliver global public goods. Going forward, Japan will continue to work with the priority countries as identified in the NSS 2013. Keeping the US-Japan alliance at the core, Japan will continue to align its security interests with countries like Australia, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India to keep the Indo-Pacific region free and open. While South Korea also featured as a priority country in the NSS 2013, the relation is currently weighed down by the baggage of history. But policy planners in Tokyo must be careful not to allow this to adversely affect the strategic objectives of the US-Japan-South Korea coordination while dealing with the North Korean threat.

At a time when China is advancing a maritime order based on its historical representation of the sea and not on international law, Japan has vociferously advocated international maritime principles. Upholding the rule of law, bolstering the maritime security and capacity building are the primary objectives driving Japan's engagement with ASEAN under the Vientiane Vision 2.0. In July, Japan has extended ODA loan to Vietnam under the Maritime Security and Safety Capacity

²⁷ Kunihiro Miyake, "**Trump vs. Biden: Who is better for Japan?**", *The Japan Times*, June 15, 2020.

²⁸ Kei Koga, "**The Concept of 'Hedging' Revisited: The Case of Japan's Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia's Power Shift**", *International Studies Review*, 20 (4), December 2018.

²⁹ Wu Xinbo, "**The end of the silver lining: A Chinese view of the U.S.-Japanese alliance**", *The Washington Quarterly*, 29 (1), Winter 2005-2006, pp. 119-130.

Improvement Project to build six patrol vessels.³⁰ Similarly in the Philippines under the Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project, Japan is helping with the Multi-Role Response Vessel (MRRV), which is under construction by Mitsubishi Shipbuilding. Whether it is advocating freedom of the seas in Quad consultations; the 2+2 dialogue with the US, Australia and India, respectively; or key trilateral frameworks including the US-Japan-Australia, US-Japan-India and Japan-India-Australia — Japan has demonstrated leadership in upholding a rules-based maritime order.

Tokyo has stepped up interoperability, information sharing, cross-servicing and joint defence research projects with key strategic partners. It is engaging in joint exercises with allies in bilateral or trilateral formats in critical theatres of the Indo-Pacific, including the East China Sea, Philippines Sea, Andaman Sea and the Indian Ocean to keep the maritime highways free and open. It has successfully advocated expanding the India-US-Japan Malabar exercise with Australia. Furthermore, it has bolstered security cooperation through Reciprocal Access Agreement with Australia, Revised Logistics Interoperability Framework with the US, and finalised Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement with India.

Japan has carved out a leadership role in steering the post-COVID solutions by strategically coordinating responses with key Indo-Pacific partners on critical issues. It has joined the European Union (EU) and other allies in supporting a resolution at the 73rd World Health Assembly to initiate an independent investigation into the World Health Organisation (WHO) coordinated global health response to COVID-19. From advancing the post-COVID strategic coordination at the Quad Plus, high-quality infrastructure under Blue dot network, reducing dependency on China through India-Japan-Australia Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI),³¹ D-10 alliance of democracies on 5G, Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), and a possible seat at the Five Eye intelligence alliance under the Five Eye Plus framework – Tokyo is positioned to effectively shape the post-COVID order.

Remaking the Security Doctrine

2020 marks the 75th anniversary of World War II. As Japan deliberates its security doctrine in the coming weeks, the region will watch warily if Japan alters its fundamental nature of being just a defensive shield in the US-Japan alliance with counterattack capability. The broad contours of the alliance so far have been defined by the spear and shield strategy, delegating the spear responsibility of offensive

³⁰ **“Signing of Japanese ODA Loan Agreement with Viet Nam: Strengthening the maritime security and safety capability of the Vietnam Coast Guard”**, *Japan International Cooperation Agency*, July 30, 2020.

³¹ Pranab Dhal Samanta, **“India-Japan-Australia supply chain in the works to counter China”**, *The Economic Times*, August 19, 2020.

capability to the Americans and shield responsibility of defence to the Japanese. While Tokyo will invest political energy in building a strong defensive narrative on strike capability, the region may perceive it as a step towards “normalisation” of Japan and its ramifications on East Asian security dynamics will be notable.

As the government engages in policy discussion in the coming weeks, the domestic debate is ripe on getting the capability to counterattack enemy bases. Threats emanating from conventional and nuclear missiles are real and the existing missile defence system alone may not be effective in shooting every missile. Consequently, a view is emerging that Japan should pursue deterrence with a missile defence system and counterattack capabilities.³² Discussions on missile defence will have to balance active and passive defence measures. Going forward, Japan will reorient its defence posture in close coordination with the US strategy and systems. As the nature and complexity of threat have evolved considerably, it is time to analyse options systematically instead of diverting the debate on constitutional legality.

Abe has set out a bold agenda for the defence administration in the next couple of weeks. The decision to scrap US\$ 4.1 billion Aegis Ashore deal has demonstrated courageous leadership but rewiring the key defence policy guidelines and force posture should not be hurried. The timeline set to draw up options related to Japan's missile defence system, aligning it with the schedule of ministries to make budget requests for 2021, is rather brash.³³ Meticulously weighing alternatives that can effectively enhance Japan's deterrent capability against ballistic missile threats without stressing the defence budget is the immediate priority. But, in the process, the defence administration should not lose sight of the ultimate goal of bolstering Japan's national security policy to decisively respond to the most severe security situation in post-war history.

³² Hiroyuki Akita, [“Why Japan should have the capability to counterattack enemies”](#), *Nikkei Asia Review*, August 07, 2020.

³³ Tatsumi Yuki, [“Is the Aegis Ashore cancellation a mixed blessing?”](#), *The Japan Times*, July 10, 2020.

About the Authors



Titli Basu is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in MP-IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the MP-IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 2020