

Evolution of Japanese strategy: toward a new path

Interview with Rui Matsukawa



Ms. Matsukawa worked at Japan's Ministry of Foreign affairs for 23 years in various positions, including Japan-ASEAN cooperation, international law affairs, and women's empowerment. Her overseas posts include: the Mission of Japan to the Conference of Disarmament (Geneva) and Deputy-Secretary General of the Information Cooperation Service (Seoul). During her service, she obtained a M.A. at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. In 2016, she left MOFA and got elected as a senator. She served as Parliamentary Secretary of Defense from 2020 to 2021. In July 2022, she got elected for the second time, and she now serves as the Director-General of Women's Affairs Bureau of the Liberal Democratic Party.

Question 1: What are the key strategic challenges facing Japan?

In the past, Japan has transformed itself several times in order to survive. The first was the Battle of Baekchon River in 633, the first war Japan fought to prevent the Korean Peninsula, which borders Japan, from being controlled by China's Tang Dynasty. After the defeat, Japan established a centralized government and formed a defensive line facing the Korean peninsula. The second was the Meiji Restoration in 1868. In order to prevent possible colonial occupation by Western Europe, the Edo Shogunate handed over its governing authority to the Meiji government. The country's policy of isolation was abandoned to

promote Western-style modernization and realize the goal of a “rich nation, strong military”. Today, Japan is undergoing the “third self-transformation”, which is a major shift in postwar security policy toward the gradual acquisition of defense capabilities and a strategy of “defending our nation by ourselves”.

The greatest security challenge for Japan in the coming years is to deter contingencies in the Taiwan Strait. Unfortunately, President Xi Jinping has stated that “*China will not hesitate to reunify Taiwan by military means if necessary*”, and China is indeed improving its ability to invade Taiwan. As the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe insightfully said, “*Taiwan’s crisis is Japan’s crisis*”. Japan’s Yonaguni Island is only 110 kilometers from Taiwan, and it is highly likely that Japan’s southwestern islands, including Yonaguni, will become part of the theater of war if China militarily invades Taiwan.

Taiwan is a strategic hub that determines whether China controls the western Pacific where Japan is located, and the Taiwan and the Bashi Straits are critical sea lanes for Japan to transport oil from the Middle East and trade with Europe. Taiwan produces 60 % of the most advanced semiconductors in the world, which are essential to our industry. Taiwan is our friend and we share the principles of freedom and democracy. Taiwan cannot be allowed to be militarily annexed by China against its will. Therefore, maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait is vital for Japan’s own security and economy. For the world as well, it should be vital to prevent a crisis in Taiwan, which would most likely mean a military conflict between the United States and China. Accordingly, it is important for as many countries as possible, including European nations, to work together to deter such a crisis.

Beyond the Taiwan Strait, the strategic environment surrounding Japan has become more challenging. While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, North Korea’s nuclear missile development, and China’s increasing military pressure on Taiwan and Japan’s Senkaku Islands continue, US-China conventional military capabilities have moved toward parity in Asia. Therefore, instead of relying on the United States alone, it has become essential for Japan to drastically strengthen its own defense capabilities.

Japan is also seeking to further deepen security cooperation with Australia, the United Kingdom, which have become quasi-allies, and major European countries, including France. I would like to call on European countries, which may be far away from East Asia but share common values and strategic interests with other democracies in Asia, to contribute to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the Indo-Pacific region, as a crisis in the region ultimately affects the world as a whole. The more partners are interested in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the deeper their commitment, the greater their ability to deter a Taiwan crisis.

At the same time, Japan is determined to engage in direct dialogue with China, as it did at the Japan-China Summit on the sidelines of APEC in Thailand in November 2022. Japan earnestly wishes constructive and stable relations with China and only wants peace. This is a very consistent Japanese policy, as China is an important geographical and historical neighbor for Japan, and this situation will not change. In order to maintain stable relations between Japan and China however, China’s temptation to militarily invade Taiwan to achieve “reunification” must be deterred. Therefore, direct and frequent communication

with the Chinese leadership is even more important for Japan. Japan and China should not misunderstand each other's intentions and must explore every possible cooperation path to reduce tensions in the region. Deterrence and security assurance must go together.

Defense prepares for the worst, and diplomacy strives for the best. With both these means, Japan is determined to work with like-minded countries around the world to build peace in the Indo-Pacific region.

Question 2: Is Japanese public opinion ready to accept a significant increase in the defense budget?

Since its defeat in the Pacific War, Japan has pursued a distorted defense policy in which it relies entirely on its ally, the United States, for its defense. But at the end of last year, in December 2022, the Japanese government decided to drastically strengthen its own defense capabilities through a cabinet decision on three security-related documents, including the National Security Strategy. Defense spending, which has been less than 1 % of GDP, will double over the next five years. Japan has decided to build an independent deterrence capacity by developing a counterstrike capability with domestically produced long-range missiles. It also aims to improve capabilities in new areas such as space and cyberspace. Although this is being done within the limits allowed by international law and the Japanese Constitution, Japan has finally decided to join the world's common position that "one should protect one's nation by oneself".

More than 60 % of the Japanese people support the idea of strengthening Japan's defense capabilities. However, 60 % also oppose raising taxes to finance the enhanced defense effort. The Japanese government has decided to continue discussing appropriate spending cuts and tax increases to fund the increase in the defense budget and will adopt the corresponding measures by the end of this year. Japanese politicians and parliamentarians will have to contribute to a better understanding of these developments once the resolutions are finalized.

The United States, which has been calling on its allies to do more, welcomed Japan's choice, and Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries which are concerned about Chinese pressure also welcomed Japan's decision to strengthen its defense capabilities, which could be part of the regional balance of power with China.

"Since its defeat in the Pacific War, Japan has pursued a distorted defense policy in which it relies entirely on its ally, the United States, for its defense. But at the end of last year, in December 2022, the Japanese government decided to drastically strengthen its own defense capabilities through a cabinet decision on three security-related documents, including the National Security Strategy."

Question 3: What is the future of the US-Japan-South Korea strategic triangle?

Under the previous Moon Jae-in administration, relations between Japan and South Korea fell to their lowest point in history. However, the new conservative government of President Yoon Seong-nyeol has made consistent efforts to improve them. In the event of a Taiwan emergency, there is a possibility that China and Russia would work together, and North Korea may decide to take action against South Korea in tandem. Thus, South Korea can share the same interests as Japan in deterring a Taiwan crisis. South Korea is a liberal democratic neighbor and a military power in the region with 600,000 troops. In this challenging security environment, Japan-US-ROK cooperation has never been more important. President Yoon Seon-yeol shares security concerns about North Korea and China with Japan and the United States and is deeply committed to improving relations with Japan. To make it happen, he seems to be determined to resolve the current thorniest issue of a South Korean domestic court reopening the former labor issue under Japanese occupation which had been resolved by the Japan-South Korea Basic Agreement in 1965. I really hope that we can normalize Japan-South Korean relations. Now is the time for the two countries to make utmost efforts to open a new page in their diplomatic and strategic ties. The surrounding security environment for our two nations is really severe, which should prevent us from playing around past history issues. Whether we like it or not, Japan-US-South Korea security cooperation has never been this important, and it is time for us to face the reality.

March 2023
