

The impact of Russia-Ukraine conflict on the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region

Interview with Yuki Tatsumi



Yuki Tatsumi is a Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the East Asia Program and Director of the Japan Program at the Stimson Center. Before joining Stimson, Tatsumi worked as a research associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and as the special assistant for political affairs at the Embassy of Japan in Washington.

Question 1: Do you think that the US engagement in the Asia-Pacific could be challenged by the war in Ukraine?

When U.S. president Joe Biden visited Warsaw days before the one-year anniversary of Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, he called the Russia-Ukraine war “*the largest land war in Europe since World War Two*”. Describing the war as the moment when “*the principles that had been the cornerstone of peace, prosperity, and stability on this planet for more than 75 years were at risk of being shattered*”, he renewed the commitment of the United States to stand with its Western allies and partners in its unwavering support for Ukraine.

Indeed, after one year has passed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on February

24, 2022, the war between the two countries shows no sign of ending. In fact, with the two sides showing little appetite to even begin a negotiation to end the conflict, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is turning into a protracted war.

The prolonged Russia-Ukraine war can be problematic for U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), released in October 2022, identifies Russia and China as the two main strategic competitors of the United States. The NSS argues that Russia and China present different types of challenges, with Russia posing a more immediate threat to the international order and China identified as *“the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective”*. Likewise, the National Defense Strategy, released a few weeks after the NSS in late October 2022, branded China as the top challenge in the Indo-Pacific and Russia – in Europe. In other words, these strategies assume that the United States can face the challenges from Russia and those from China at different points in time.

However, the protracted Russia-Ukraine war means an increasing probability that the United States may have to address these challenges at the same time. To be sure, as these strategy documents suggest, the challenges that China and Russia respectively present are qualitatively different; the former’s require more of the “all-of-the-government” approach while the latter’s requires largely a military response. But since the explicit military challenge that Russia poses is far more visible, it attracts far greater and more immediate public attention. This means that the longer the Russia-Ukraine war continues, the United States will have to prioritize responding to the Russian challenge, leaving less time to focus on its strategic competition with China.

To some extent, this is already happening. In recent months, the U.S. Congress has been increasingly getting ahead of the Biden administration when it comes to China policy, and not necessarily in a helpful way. The Republicans, having won the majority in the House of Representatives after the mid-term election last year, has taken several actions that leave the Biden administration with very little room to engage China in a more balanced way. For one, at the initiative of the House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, the House Select Committee on China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established on January 10. The Committee Chairman Rep. Mike Gallagher defined the Chinese Communist Party as the greatest threat to the United States, and vowed that the Select Committee will work to counter threats from the CCP *“in bipartisan fashion before it is too late”*. As McCarthy explored the opportunity to visit Taiwan before Taiwanese president Tsai In-Wei suggested that she would rather meet him in California during her upcoming visit to the United States, Gallagher continues to express his hope to hold a Committee hearing in Taiwan. These actions by the Congress, while intended to support Taiwan, aggravates the tension between Beijing and Washington, leaving the Biden administration less room to shape its own narratives about its China policy.

“The challenges that China and Russia respectively present are qualitatively different; the former’s require more of the “all-of-the-government” approach while the latter’s requires largely a military response.”

Question 2: What are the main factors that can allow to further improve U.S.-Japan defense relations?

As the United States is facing the daunting task of responding to two geostrategic challenges – Russia in Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific – almost simultaneously, Japan, arguably the most important ally of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, overhauled its national security strategic guidance. Tokyo’s new National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Build-up Plan (DBP), released in December 2022, all identified China as the greatest national security challenge, and fundamentally reoriented Japan’s national security approaches around the goal of deterring China. Doubling down on its commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance is an integral part of Tokyo’s such effort.

Moving forward, Japan can improve its defense relations in several ways to effectively deter China. One is to improve its own defense capability. For example, after lengthy internal debates, Japan decided to introduce a counterstrike capability. Furthermore, it made a departure from its postwar practice and decided to double its defense spending to roughly 2 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With a spending increase in sight, Japan can finally invest in areas such as military medicine, ammunition supply – all of which are critical in enabling Japan to be resilient in case of contingencies – while continuing to build the capability in new military domains such as cyber and space.

More importantly, Japan can further improve its defense relation with the United States by enhancing its own ties with other U.S. allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, this effort has been well under way as Japan continues to institutionalize security relations with countries such as Australia, India and the Philippines as well as key U.S. allies in Europe such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany. With the recent decision by South Korea to address the wartime forced labor issue with Japan, Tokyo and Seoul also can revitalize their effort to strengthen their security ties in earnest.

March 2023
