

The evolution of the situation in Ukraine and Japan's position

Interview with Tsuyoshi Goroku



Tsuyoshi Goroku, Associate Professor, Faculty of International Politics and Economics, Nishogakusha University

Question 1: How has the war in Ukraine influenced Japan's approach to its national security?

In December 2022, the Kishida administration adopted three major strategic documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program (DBP). This is a practical response to *"the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II"* facing Japan, as mentioned in these documents. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 occurred just as Tokyo was beginning the process of discussing and formulating these strategic documents. Thus, the unfolding of the first months of the war in Ukraine certainly influenced the drafting process and the final content.

Even before 2022, Japan recognized that its regional security environment was rapidly deteriorating. Now the NSS identifies China as an “*unprecedented strategic challenge*” and North Korea as “*an even more grave and imminent threat*”. Moreover, in a departure from the previous 2013 NSS, Russia, along with its strategic coordination with China, is now described as a “*strong security concern*”.

In light of this assessment, the strategy calls for a substantial defense buildup for Japan, including a significant increase in the defense budget and the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities. Japan has long debated whether to acquire such capabilities, which would enable it to launch retaliatory strikes on an adversary’s territory but decided against possessing them as a matter of policy. Japan has thus taken a historic step this time, but it does not represent a sudden reversal of its traditional defense policy principles. Rather, it reaffirms Tokyo’s recognition of the deteriorating security environment and represents the culmination of a series of incremental changes over the past two decades. Nevertheless, Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine was a wake-up call for Japan. It reinforced this grim assessment and accelerated these changes.

Japan has learned many lessons from the ongoing war in Ukraine in various fields and is trying to internalize them. These include the importance of logistics, ammunition stocks, unmanned systems, and the survivability of military bases and facilities; the protection of civilians in the event of a crisis; international strategic communication; or the negative aspects of excessive economic interdependence.

In addition, the willingness of Ukraine’s political leaders, military, and ordinary people to fight and resist Russia was remarkable and one of the key lessons for Japan, as it triggered international support, including arms supplies to Ukraine. Combined with President Biden’s remarks on the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, there is a growing realization that the world will only help those who help themselves first.¹

This shift should not be seen as Japan distancing itself from the United States. On the contrary, as the NSS indicates, the importance of strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance is growing as the security environment deteriorates and Japan begins to strengthen its defense capabilities. Moreover, the fact that Russia has so far not attacked a NATO member, but only Ukraine, a NATO partner but not a treaty ally, reminds Japan of the importance of “Article 5” (collective defense) and the strengthening of its alliance with the United States. But how to manage the relations with Washington if Trump, who has questioned the value of alliances, becomes president again? It will be a serious challenge not only for Europe but also for Japan.

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¹ “Remarks by president Biden on the drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan”, [White House](#), 8 July 2021.

Question 2: How does the Japanese public view this historic shift in security policy?

Japan has enjoyed security and prosperity under a rules-based international order. But Tokyo now recognizes that this order is in deep crisis. As the NSS notes, *“Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has easily breached the very foundation of the rules that shape the international order. The possibility cannot be precluded that a similar serious situation may arise in the future in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in East Asia”*. Over the past two years, Prime Minister Kishida has repeatedly warned that *“today’s Ukraine could be tomorrow’s East Asia”* and that *“the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific are inseparable”*.

This sense of crisis seems to be shared by much of the Japanese public. In the wake of Russia’s invasion, several opinion polls have shown a growing concern among the Japanese public that Japan’s security is under threat. And a survey conducted by the Nikkei newspaper in March 2022 showed that 77 percent of respondents were “concerned” that if the international community failed to stop Russia’s invasion and border changes, it would spill over into China’s use of force against Taiwan. Whether the Russian invasion and its potential success will encourage China to use force remains a matter of debate, but such fears are evident among the Japanese public.

Against this background, public support for further strengthening Japan’s defense capabilities remains high, with 62 percent of those surveyed responding in the affirmative in a joint poll conducted by the Asahi Shimbun and the University of Tokyo one year after the Russian aggression began. This was much higher than the 12 percent who were “against” or “somewhat against” the defense buildup. Russia’s behavior reminded many Japanese people of the importance of deterrence and defense. Similarly, most polls have shown that more than half of respondents support the possession of counterstrike capabilities. Although some have criticized the lack of sufficient debate during the decision-making process, the Kishida administration was able to decide on this orientation without a major political backlash. It could be analyzed that the war in Ukraine had an effect on both the decision-making process and the support from the public.

On the other hand, several polls conducted after Prime Minister Kishida’s call for a portion of defense spending to be financed by taxes showed that the public opinion was divided or dominated by those who opposed increasing defense spending. A majority of respondents, and even many supporters of the ruling party of Prime Minister Kishida (LDP), oppose raising taxes to pay for the defense buildup plans. As a result, Kishida has reportedly postponed the decision on when to introduce the tax hikes. It remains to be seen how the political debate over resources and the implementation of the defense strategy will unfold.

Question 3: How might the protracted conflict in Ukraine affect Japan’s relations with Russia and Europe?

For a decade, Japan, especially under the leadership of former Prime Minister Abe, had pursued a policy of engagement with Russia. This was driven by Abe’s desire to resolve the Northern Territories issue and to sign a peace treaty with Russia as well as his geopolitical calculation to drive a wedge between Russia and China. This approach did not change after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Japan reluctantly joined the sanctions

against Russia and Abe tried to build a personal relationship with President Putin (they met 27 times between 2012 and 2020) to use it as leverage to achieve his goals. But his attempt yielded no results.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine put an end to this approach. Japan, along with the United States and Europe, promptly imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia and provided financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Relations with Russia have deteriorated sharply. Russia reiterates that a condition for the normalization of Japan-Russia relations is that the Japanese government must first abandon its hostile policy toward Russia. But it is Russia's continued aggression that precludes the possibility of mending the fences.

In this context, as the NSS points out, Japan is wary of Russian military activities and its strategic coordination with China in the Indo-Pacific region. And as the war drags on, North Korea is reportedly supplying Russia with missiles and ammunition. The military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang casts an even darker shadow over both regions, Europe and Asia.

On the other hand, Japan has been forging a strategic relationship with other like-minded countries, including in Europe. Japan has been enhancing its strategic ties with the United Kingdom and France, which were the first to engage militarily in the Indo-Pacific region in the past decade. Now, Japan's security cooperation with Italy has deepened, notably through the joint development of next-generation fighter aircraft. Relations with Germany have also strengthened since the first meeting of foreign and defense ministers ("2+2") in 2021, and the two signed the ACSA (Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement) in January this year.

Japan's security dialogue with other European countries, especially Central and Eastern European countries, and Nordic-Baltic countries, has been active due to the war in Ukraine. Relations with the EU and NATO have also developed significantly. Prime Minister Kishida was the first Japanese Prime minister to attend a NATO summit immediately after Russia's invasion, and he was invited to the summit two years in a row along with other leaders of NATO's Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4). Japan and NATO adopted the Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP) last July, which identifies areas of cooperation. While it is natural that Europe is now focused on strengthening its own deterrence and defense posture in the European theater, Tokyo welcomes the fact that Europe has not weakened its engagement in the Indo-Pacific, including with Japan, even amid Russia's ongoing war. Europe is increasingly seen as a key player in stabilizing the region. Depending on the political situation in the United States, it will become more important and urgent to strengthen Japan-Europe strategic relations.

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