

# America needs Japan... and a new Japan policy

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When Donald Trump becomes the US' 47<sup>th</sup> president on 20 January 2025, one of his foreign policy tasks will be setting the trajectory of his administration's security partnership with Japan. This may be subject to some complications.

Japan's new prime minister, Ishiba Shigeru, has [proposed](#) measures to transform the power balance in the two nations' security alliance, some of which have [cross-bench backing](#). But an even more significant portent of bilateral tensions is Ishiba's ill-fated '[Asian NATO](#)' proposal, published two days before he was elected as the head of the Liberal Democratic Party in September.

While the proposal has been [rebuffed](#) by Washington and [shelved](#) by Ishiba's cabinet, it reflects discontentment at the US' Indo-Pacific strategy in the National Diet—sentiments likely to drive suggestions that may be at odds with a Trump administration 'America first' agenda.

## The inner meaning of Ishiba's Asian NATO proposal

The shortcomings of Ishiba's 'Asian NATO' proposal are obvious to the point that they could raise suspicions of being a leadership advertorial as opposed to a serious foreign policy proposal. First, the proposal, echoing the [failed advocacy](#) of former prime minister Abe Shinzo, appears to imply that Washington and Japan should abandon the policy of strategic ambiguity on Taiwan—hitherto seen as an essential condition for avoiding a conflict.

Second, it is unclear how Asia-Pacific states would apply what is largely a continental mutual-defence pact model—in which key trigger mechanisms apply to incursions across well established land borders—to a complex and contested maritime theatre where 'grey zones' make the demarcation of 'red lines' difficult.

Third, and perhaps the biggest obstacle for such a proposal, is Japan itself. Despite Tokyo's refusal to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, on the [grounds](#) that the US nuclear umbrella is 'indispensable' for Japan's security, the country itself [remains](#) fiercely anti-nuclear. Moreover, while Tokyo since Abe has partially dismantled its post-war pacifist constitution, the nation stands out as likely to encounter constitutional and political obstructions to executing mutual-defence obligations.

But while the 'Asian NATO' proposal fails to outline a plausible solution, it does highlight the nature of the problem as seen in Tokyo.

## From US dependence to mutual dependence

Central to the issue are perceptions of the diminishing appropriateness of the region's legacy San Francisco System of American alliances in the region, better known as the 'hub-and-spokes' model. One grievance is that the system, which refers to a series of bilateral relations between the US and its regional partners, allows Washington to exploit relationship asymmetries with individual nations to impose its strategic agenda—in contrast to the relative majoritarianism of NATO.

But the bigger issue is the rising view that the hub-and-spokes model is now largely defunct, having been replaced by a latticework of trilateral/micro-multilateral agreements, seminars and exercises, as well as horizontal bilateral ones between US allies. Most importantly, Tokyo feels that its role as a co-shaper and core contributor to this network remains grossly underappreciated by Washington.

Japan's engagement in [joint exercises](#) with partners other than the US, for example, increased by roughly 500 percent between 2012 to 2021, reaching an annual total of nearly 100 exercises with 20 different partners. In early 2023, Japan established an [Official Security Assistance](#) cooperation framework, which has provided security assistance to Indo-Pacific nations including Bangladesh, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Notably, the defence forces of the Philippines, which has been the most prominent target of concerted Chinese efforts to enforce unsanctioned territorial claims, has been a [major recipient](#) of Japanese assistance and coordination efforts.

Adding to this are growing sentiments that US-Japan security relationship asymmetries have not reflected an overarching shift from absolute Japanese reliance on US military supremacy to a co-dependency. Backing this view have not only been measures to [strengthen](#) Japan's military, including its [power projection](#) capacity, but also the impact of China's rise on the strategic gravity of Japan's geography.

For instance, Taiwan invasion scenario wargames carried out in early 2023 by the Washington-based [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) and Japan's [Sasakawa Peace Foundation](#) found that for the US alliance to prevail, Japan was the 'linchpin' because US forward bases there enabled its assets to 'effectively participate in the war,' augmented by contributions from Japan's air force and navy. This reinforces the notion that Japan is now an indispensable pillar of the region's balance of power.

## Sinking confidence in US planning

To the extent that the 'Asian NATO' proposal aimed to strengthen the weight of Tokyo and its Asian allies' perspectives and interests in Washington's regional security strategy, this was most likely energised by Tokyo's growing concerns about the latter's resolve and acumen. There has, for instance, been some concern that a Trump administration may take a [weaker position](#) on defending Taiwan—despite many Japanese elites' [views](#) that the defence of the island is an existential matter to Japan's own territorial integrity, and/or a litmus test of Washington's resolve to come to Tokyo's own defence. Indeed, Japan's recent [Defence White Paper](#) has confirmed that Japan is now pursuing the development of asymmetric capacities so that the nation can [defend itself independently](#).

Intersecting with these queries as to US resolve are questions of strategy. Part of this has been a growing perception that the US has effectively surrendered strategic initiative to its geostrategic rivals, allowing Beijing, in particular, to prosecute its 'grey zone' activities with virtual impunity.

In Japan's case, not only have Chinese coast guard incursions into the Senkaku Islands' [significantly increased](#), but they have been accompanied by intrusions into non-contested areas, including [Japanese airspace](#) near the Danjo Islands, and [territorial waters](#) near Kuchinoerabu Island. While the Joe Biden administration has responded to escalations of this kind with criticisms and post factum military exercises/patrols, there have been no direct punitive responses targeting Beijing, whether economic or otherwise.

The reason why this might relate to the search for stronger multilateral security arrangements, and not just rebalancing US-Japan security relations, is that Japan—as a resource-poor island and the world's second

largest [importer of food](#) and [iron ore](#)—also faces an existential threat in China’s territorial claims and aggressive actions across the lines of communication the two Asian nations’ share, especially in the South China Sea.

Growing security cooperation between Japan and the Philippines in this sense reflects growing disappointment at the diminishing deterrence value of the US’ security partnership with the Philippines, as Manila’s frustration has grown at Washington’s reluctance to draw—let alone enforce—a red line against increasingly violent maritime engagements and flagrant disregard of the islands’ sovereignty. It also reflects deeper fears that Washington’s weak response will help Beijing’s campaign of intimidation succeed, motivating smaller states to come to an accord with Beijing on the latter’s terms which could facilitate, if not outright announce, a regional Chinese hegemony.

In this sense Ishiba’s ‘Asian NATO’ proposal is a logical, albeit clumsy, extension of Abe’s [Indo-Pacific vision](#). However, while Abe sought to strengthen Japan’s security by securing the goodwill of a benefactor, today’s Tokyo, both more assured of its strategic value and fearful of US isolationism, may be more inclined to seek to impose obligations—something unlikely to sit well with an ‘America first’ agenda.

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