



# Japan's "Zeitenwende" in Defence Policy: Rationale, Challenges and Implications for Partners

Céline Pajon, Eva Pejsova & Michito  
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## Key Issues

- The Japanese *Zeitenwende* is about the increase in its defence budget from 1% to 2% of GDP by 2027, the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities and better multi-domain capacities, including with United States forces. The war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyser to allow for this new approach.
- The objectives outlined by Japan's National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy provide concrete opportunities to expand and deepen cooperation with allies and partners in political, strategic and technological terms.
- If the Japanese *Zeitenwende* – a sudden jolt after years of a gradual evolution of defence policy – is to be more than political statements, it will have to be supported by considerable efforts over time.

Japan's [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) and [National Defence Strategy](#) (NDS), both adopted in December 2022, represent the country's *Zeitenwende*: it is akin to Germany's own recent evolution following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In other words, the Strategies are the biggest, almost revolutionary, change in the history of Japan's post-war foreign and security policy. Based on a substantial increase in the defence budget of approximately [2% of GDP by 2027](#), and endorsing counterstrike capabilities, the NSS and NDS revise the strategic priorities set in 2013 and chart the course for the next decade. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida argued in his address in Washington in January 2023 that ['this is a moment that will transform history. This is a critical moment, in fact, a moment of truth for Japan'](#).

The risk of unprecedented conflict changes the security equation in Japan. The Japanese security environment has greatly deteriorated over the past decade and the NSS takes note of this new situation. The Chinese coastguard almost permanently patrols the contiguous waters of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, and missiles fired by Beijing crashed into the exclusive economic zone of the archipelago last August. So China is described as an ['unprecedented strategic challenge'](#) and the number one security risk for Japan, even ranking higher than North Korea. However, China is not qualified as a "threat" because of the lack of political consensus on this term, which could call into question the *modus vivendi* that Japan is trying to maintain with its big neighbour and the leading economic partner. China is not the only concern in the NSS,

however, as the Strategy stresses the importance of the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues, the nuclear risk posed by North Korea and Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

This Policy Brief seeks to decipher Japan's *Zeitenwende* in defence policy. To this end, in section one we explain how the war in Ukraine acted as a catalyser to allow for this new approach. Afterwards, we discuss the two key elements of this strategy: namely, counterstrike capabilities and the so-called doubling of the defence budget. These new measures are positive contributions to Japan's international partnerships, but Tokyo will have a number of challenges to address to ensure a success.

### **The impact of the war in Ukraine: a catalyser**

The impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has played a substantial role in affecting the context within which Japanese people understand and discuss the country's security and defence issues. In short, Russia's war has prompted the Japanese to think more seriously about their defence, including what it takes to defend the country. Indeed, the NSS warns about the security challenges Japan is facing and it stresses that Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine highlights how a similar breach of the international order could also occur in East Asia.

The war in Ukraine thus broke a mental barrier in Japan: the risk of a high-intensity conflict is now much more tangible and has convinced Japanese public opinion to support a significant strengthening of defence. A

[integrated deterrence](#); and second, to compensate for possible American relative decline by nurturing additional security partnerships with Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and others. Tokyo is indeed aware of a possible return to domestic political turbulence and isolationism in the US.

Prime Minister Kishida, in his press conference following the release of the NSS, confessed in a surprisingly straight way that '[having conducted quite realistic simulations, it is clear, to be honest, that the current posture \[of the Self-Defense Forces\] is not adequate](#)'. It means, admitted the Prime Minister, that the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) can currently neither deter threats nor defend the country. It is a startling admission from the highest level of the government. That is why, the argument goes, Japan needs to spend more on defence. Therefore, the Japanese *Zeitenwende* is about the announcement of an increase in the defence budget from [1% to 2% of GDP by 2027](#), the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities and better multi-domain capacities, including with US forces.

### **Counterstrike capabilities: deterrence or damage limitation?**

The fundamental reason why Tokyo now thinks it needs to acquire counterstrike capabilities is its realisation that missile defence alone cannot protect the country adequately, especially in light of the growing capability of North Korean and Chinese missiles. With its [300 cruise missiles and more than 1,000 ballistic missiles](#), China now has the means to saturate the Japanese



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[Nikkei poll](#) in April 2022 showed that 55% supported the idea of spending 2% of GDP on defence, while only 33% was against.

Japan understands that if it is to maintain the solidarity of its partners and allies, it must reinforce its own defence. It is therefore now vital for Japan to invest massively in new capabilities: first, in close cooperation with the United States (US) to enhance

anti-missile defence system put in place in the 2000s. Based on this premise, a certain ambiguity can be discerned: it is the question of whether counterstrike capabilities are mainly for deterrence or damage limitation.

It is understandable that politicians want to emphasise the deterrence aspect of counterstrike capabilities because it sounds more peaceful, and few people

oppose the idea of deterrence. However, they do not want to talk about damage limitation, as it presupposes that Japan will suffer damage, including most probably casualties, before being able to use counterstrike capabilities. However, it is notable that the NSS refers to “further attacks”, implying that the first attack will be conducted by Japan’s opponent, without specifically mentioning the idea of damage limitation.

### A “doubling of the defence budget” - really?

In 2000, the Japanese and Chinese defence budgets were equivalent, but, in 2020, Beijing is investing [four times](#) more than Tokyo, fundamentally calling into

debated because the public debt is already [260% of GDP](#), and the fundamentals of the Japanese economy remain sluggish. A fairly large group of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members of the diet [voiced opposition](#) to the idea of increasing taxes and instead supported issuing bonds, out of fear of alienating the public and a belief that economic growth is of higher priority than fiscal discipline.

The “2%” benchmark is often criticised for being “figure-driven”. It is impossible to deny this, as it is obviously a symbolic figure. Yet, in terms of expressing Japan’s political willingness to become more serious about defence and play a bigger security role in the

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question the balance of power and Japan’s deterrent capacity. Even when including the US, the conventional balance between China and the Japan-US alliance is rapidly shifting in favour of China. The Kishida government has therefore decided to increase Japan’s defence budget to around [2% of GDP by 2027](#), aligning itself with NATO benchmarks.

However, this is not a doubling of defence spending *stricto sensu*. The government will broaden the calculation base by including the budget lines dedicated to the coastguard (whose budget will increase by [1.4 by 2027](#)), retirement pensions, research and development (R&D) and, more broadly, expenditure of the various ministries and agencies contributing to defence. Therefore, the new Japanese Ministry of Defense budget should reach around [1.6% of GDP](#).

However, we must remain cautious about the magnitude of the amounts announced: the effects of the exchange rate are not negligible, as the yen has been particularly low against the dollar in recent months (e.g. 131 yen / \$ in December, against 80 yen / \$ last year), and Tokyo plans to purchase substantial amounts of equipment from the US.

Moreover, the financing of such a budgetary effort is

region and beyond, the “2%” target makes political and strategic sense, even if it does not capture the military realities of defence investments.

### Good news for partners

Regardless of the exact breakdown of the budgetary increase, the announcement left no country indifferent. Be it those who support Japan’s greater military role in the region, or those who fear it, world powers have noted the upgrade as a tangible seal of Tokyo’s resolve to bolster its security and defence capabilities. They also recognised that it is part of a trajectory started during the Abe era. In many ways, the objectives outlined by the NSS and NDS provide concrete opportunities to expand and deepen cooperation with allies and partners in political, strategic and technological terms.

At the forefront, the US has been a prime supporter of a stronger and militarily capable Japan for deterrence purposes, especially within the framework of the bilateral security alliance. During the US – Japan “2+2” meeting in January, the two parties reaffirmed the rock-solid foundations of the alliance and committed to working towards a combined command structure, which would significantly strengthen their operational capacity during a crisis. As tensions

in the Strait of Taiwan mount, both partners have focused on boosting defence and deterrence capabilities on Japan's south-western islands, including the deployment of a US Marine Littoral Regiment by 2025. Yet, beyond boosting its troop presence, Washington enjoys priority treatment in Japan's defence technology imports. The 2023 fiscal budget of the Defence Ministry already foresees a fourfold increase to [purchase equipment](#) from the US through its Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme, including Tomahawk cruise missiles, fighter jets and interceptor missiles.

Increasing interoperability with partners within the US-led alliance system has been a crucial driver for Japan's revised defence posture. Bilateral defence cooperation with key US allies such as Australia and the UK has already been advanced. For example, the UK-Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) signed in January 2023 now complements the one signed with Canberra in January 2022. The alignment to the 2% benchmark in defence spending, an objective set in NATO, can be read as Tokyo's determination to play a more meaningful role as a fully-fledged member of the West.

In this context, prospects for cooperation with European countries has also gained traction. During Prime Minister Kishida's tour of G7 partners in Europe in January 2023, there were expressions of appreciation for its new defence posture. Apart from the acknowledgement of shared security concerns in the region, Tokyo's increased defence spending entails the promise of equipment procurement and joint technology development, which many partners welcome. Japan is working with Italy and the UK through the [Global Combat Air Programme](#) (GCAP) to develop a next-generation stealth fighter aircraft, which is supposed to replace the [Japan Air Self-Defence Force fleet by 2035](#). Agreements on the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology have so far been signed with the UK, France, Italy and, most recently, Sweden, shortly after the publication of the Defence Strategy in late December 2022.

Finally, other regional countries may well gain from Japan's defensive build-up, including India and some ASEAN members, who see it as a boost to deterrence against China's possible aggression and an opportunity to [expand bilateral ties and advance their](#)

[own defence industrial objectives](#). However, while Japan's evolving defence posture ultimately boosts the overall capability of the US-led alliance system, it also adds fuel to China's rhetoric of containment and militarisation by the West. While Japan's latest move is designed as a rather belated reaction to China's own military build-up over the past decade or two, Beijing is notoriously fearful of Japan's re-militarisation for historical reasons and has responded immediately to the NSS and NDS with naval drills in Japan's south-western waters. Needless to say, tensions in the region are likely to worsen in the short-term.

### Challenges ahead

Japan's new strategic documents set ambitious goals and achieving them requires being able to overcome several challenges, including:

- *Money*: economic constraints in Japan, combined with a declining population, complicate defence investment trade-offs. The decision to postpone a tax increase to 2024 further increases uncertainty, particularly in the event of government instability.
- *Legislation*: the so-called "pacifist Constitution" appears as an almost false problem for the implementation of the announced strategic turn. However, Tokyo will necessarily have to develop legal frameworks to promote the transfer of defence technologies and equipment and to regulate the new doctrine of "[active cyber defence](#)" aimed at detecting and defeating cyberattacks in a pre-emptive manner.
- *Human resources*: Japan's SDF are having great difficulty in recruiting personnel. Even if the Ministry of Defence is investing in drones and unmanned systems to compensate, the announced increase in power requires dedicated personnel, particularly on cyber issues.
- *Capabilities*: the acquisition of the new capabilities Japan needs will take time, especially for the development of hypersonic capabilities.

Finally, if the Japanese *Zeitenwende* – a sudden jolt after years of a gradual evolution of defence policy – is to mean more than political statements, it will have to be supported by considerable efforts over time.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Céline Pajon

Céline Pajon is a Senior Researcher with the Japan Chair at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She is also Head of Japan Research at the Center for Asian Studies of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Paris.



### Eva Pejsova

Eva Pejsova is the Japan Chair at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She is also an Associate Fellow at the French *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique* (FRS).



### Michito Tsuruoka

Michito Tsuruoka is a Senior Associate Fellow at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He is based in Japan as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University.

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Visitor's address:

Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Mailing address:

Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

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[info\\_bsog@vub.be](mailto:info_bsog@vub.be)

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