



CSDS-SWJ STRATEGY DEBRIEF • 2/2023

# Unlike Russia, the West has a better chance of deterring China from invading Taiwan

Interview by Octavian Manea



## Masafumi Ishii

was Japan's Ambassador to Indonesia until December 2020 and he retired from the

Japanese Foreign Service in January 2021, having served the Service for more than 40 years. In the past, he was Director for Policy Planning, Special Assistant to the Foreign Minister and Director General for Global Issues and Legal Advisor. He served as Japan's Ambassador to Washington DC (twice), London, Belgium and NATO. He is presently teaching International Law at Gakushuin University.

**We have seen a lot of attention paid to Japan's publication of three important security documents in December 2022, including a national security and defence strategy. What do you see as the major developments stemming from these documents?**

Those three publications are somewhat of a watershed moment for Japanese defence, as they call for a doubling of defence spending up to 2% of GDP by 2027 as well as underlining the importance of acquiring counterstrike capabilities. In particular, these two developments are catching the media headlines but there are important strategic matters that cannot be found in the documents.

**Interesting. What are some of these strategic matters? Can you please elaborate?**

Well, firstly any strategy must be based on a long-term strategic horizon of 10 to 20 years that includes an understanding of the future international and regional situation for Japan. As far as I am concerned, there are at least three major trends that Japan needs to be aware of. First, the United States (US) is still the only superpower for now but by the 2030s a "G3" will emerge of the US, China and India. Today, American GDP is 1.3 times more than China and its defence spending is at least 2.5 times more than what Beijing is investing. In 10 to 20 years' time, however, China will inevitably match the US on both counts. For

its part, India's GDP will be more than Japan's and its population will keep on rising well beyond 2040. The US, China and India will decide the course of international relations in the future.

Second, India and Indonesia will become decisive in the future as they will be two big powers that are unlikely to align with any other state. Indonesia's GDP is predicted to overtake Japan's rate sometime in the 2040s at the latest. Both India and Indonesia will make decisions purely based on their national interests, and so this poses a challenge for managing future conflicts. It is unclear how India and Indonesia would align in case of a US-China conflict or a worsening of the situation in Europe with Russia. For this reason, we should not stop trying to bring India and Indonesia closer to our interests.

Third, while ASEAN continuously say that they do not want to choose between the US and China, they have already chosen in their hearts. Indeed, the "Big 3" in ASEAN – Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam – are closer to Japan and the US today than China. Other countries, such as Singapore, have decided to maintain strong links with the US and Japan and China. That is why Singapore hosts US forces but also accepts lot of immigrants from China. All of this means that there is a *de facto* division in ASEAN that can be manipulated by various forces.

### **And what do you think these three trends mean for Japan's security policy?**

The most obvious answer is that Japan must continue to ally with the strongest and most trustworthy country: the US. With the Americans supporting us, we are able to coexist with China without fear of Beijing trying to intimidate Japan. The US remains the only superpower in the world, but, even if it does decline in relative terms, it will remain the strongest state. Japan's basic security policy does not have to change radically, therefore.

### **But what would you say about potential American decline? How much is that a fear for Japan?**

It is obvious that the US' supremacy is in relative and steady decline, and this means that business as usual is not an option. While Japan recognises the US as a major power, this is no excuse not to strengthen three elements of the Japan-US alliance. First, Japan has to become stronger for itself. A sharp increase in the defence budget and acquiring counterstrike capabilities are precisely designed for this purpose. Second, we need much closer Japan-US alliance management and coordination including for Taiwan-related contingencies. In this respect, the decision to establish a Permanent Joint Headquarters in the Self-Defence Forces in addition to the existing Joint Chief of Staff is a very important step. Furthermore, the three new strategy documents introduce interesting new measures such as the creation of a new budget for defence-related cooperation, official security assistance and the liberalisation of the provision of defence equipment.

### **These are clearly steps designed to improve Japan's defence and deterrence, but what role should partners and non-military measures have in Japan's strategy?**

We definitely need to attract able and like-minded partners for Japan's defence. The Quad is the best example of this but so is the relationship between Japan, the US and South Korea. We have also noted that NATO's new Strategic Concept makes reference to the Indo-Pacific and China as a systemic challenge. It is about time to specify what Japan, the US and NATO can do together. Japan also needs to design tailor-made approaches to Southeast Asia together with the US, as states in the region have different priorities. Coordination will be key here so as to understand what partners really expect of each other.

### **Do you see a role for Europe in Japan's security and the broader Indo-Pacific?**

I have already mentioned NATO, but Europe as a whole can do more for the security of the Indo-Pacific. An occasional visit by European naval vessels to the South China Sea would work, as Beijing clearly spotted past visits and this sent a powerful signal to them. Nevertheless, if Europe is able to fill the gap of patrolling the western part of the Indian Ocean this would be an extremely important contribution to security in the Indo-Pacific. Sometimes I have the impression that Europeans do not feel as though they have a role in the Indo-Pacific, but they should not underestimate the impact of European actions on China's own strategic calculations.

### **Because of the war on Ukraine, many in Europe are thinking about Taiwan and potential conflict. How do you view these tensions?**

For me, the Taiwan issue is a great example of how Japan and its partners should seek more support from like-minded countries in South Asia. Our collective question today is how should we deal with a Taiwan contingency. In short, the answer is deterrence – it is the only option. Should wars break out, there will be no winners. We seriously have to invest in deterrence and make sure it works. Unlike Russia, I believe the West has a better chance of deterring China from invading Taiwan. For China, the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party is under pressure because while a successful invasion of Taiwan may strengthen the Party-State, a failure in Taiwan would be catastrophic for the leadership and party. If the leadership believe there is a risk of failure in Taiwan, they are less likely to invade. Strategic communication is needed more than ever to signal to President Xi Jinping that invading Taiwan would be unbelievably damaging to his grip on power.

### **But what if the countries of Southeastern Asia do not follow the logic of deterring China?**

This is why prioritising Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam sooner rather than later is so important. Indonesia may support a UN General Assembly resolution condemning China in case of an invasion of Taiwan but they will not participate in a sanctions regime. Even so, we need to help develop Indonesia's coast guard and navy so that it is better able keep open the alternative sea lanes of communication through the Lombok-Macassar Straits should the Taiwan and Malacca Straits and Bashi Channel be closed during war. The Philippines have already made it clear that the US-Japan and Philippines should develop more scenario-based joint exercises in order to help the Philippines become a prepositioning and logistical hub. Vietnam is also worried about China's intrusion into the South China Sea, both before or during any Taiwan contingencies. For this purpose, I believe Japan needs to exchange intelligence with Vietnam about the situation in the East China Sea and Taiwan.

### **Singapore would also be vital too, no?**

Indeed, I believe that Singapore is expected to maintain its present support to the US Airforce and Navy, even after a Taiwan contingency starts. Nevertheless, we should make any attempts necessary to keep the Malacca Straits open and safe. Here, European engagement could be extremely useful and it would send a message to China that Europe would be involved in any crisis. Joint exercises with Singapore in or near the Straits would be a wise move.

### **And finally, how do you view India's role in any possible China-Taiwan conflict?**

We saw how countries such as India have not aligned themselves on any side of the Ukraine war. Building on this lesson, we need to work with India to deter China. I am sure that India

already understands that China is its biggest challenge. In this sense, it already relies on the Quad for maritime security but India is less secure on the Indo-China border and with Pakistan. The Quad cannot play a meaningful role in these other areas, and this is partly why they cannot disassociate themselves from Russia: India's biggest fear is that Russia and China align over the Indo-China border dispute. In any conflict over Taiwan, India would do well to strengthen its military presence in the North of the country along its border with China, but this is not easy. Nevertheless, as a signal to China and Russia it might be worth exploring how the US, Japan, India and European countries can jointly undertake joint military exercises with India not only among their navies but also among their armies.

*This Strategy Debrief was conducted in the context of a CSDS Conversation hosted by the [Japan Chair](#) on 10 March 2023, featuring Ambassador Masafumi Ishii and Dr. Michael Green. The Conversation debated Japan's security-defence build-up and the implications for allies and partners.*



This interview was conducted by Octavian Manea who is a PhD researcher at CSDS. He is interested in great power transitions, the changing character of conflict as well as the implications of such alterations for the US-led alliance system.

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