

Japan Matters for Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Prof. Masatoshi Murakami

Prof. Masatoshi Murakami, an associate professor at Kogakkan University and a former career diplomat of Japan, Explains how Japan is cultivating ties with G7 members, NATO, the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, India, and the United States.

As a major power in the Indo-Pacific, Japan is determined to maintain the international order in the region, which is based on universal values shared among the United States and other like-minded countries. Notably, in 2023, Japan will pursue its goals with two capacities, chair of the G7 and a member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Japan is the most frequently elected UNSC non-permanent member in the world, and the United Kingdom supports Japanese permanent membership in the [Integrated Review Refresh 2023](#). Japan could bring the perspective of the Indo-Pacific into the discussions at the UNSC.

The G7's importance is revived due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Unlike the G20, G7 countries find commonality in shared values, making the grouping a powerful platform to impose economic sanctions or speak up about human rights violations in authoritarian regimes. In January 2023, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held a summit meeting with President Joe Biden. Before arriving at the White House, Kishida made diplomatic stops in Paris, Rome, London, and Ottawa to orchestrate G7 efforts. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz subsequently visited Japan in March and May this year, focusing on [economic security and supply chain resilience](#). This year the G7, APEC, and the G20 are chaired by Japan, the United States, and India, respectively, and should be complementary and interconnected.

The security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific is inextricably linked, and something akin to the invasion of Ukraine must not occur in the Indo-Pacific. Japan is dramatically enhancing its [cooperation with NATO](#). Kishida joined the NATO's leaders' meeting in Madrid in June 2022. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Tokyo in March 2023, saying that "[No NATO partner is closer or more capable than Japan](#)." Japan will appoint a new ambassador to NATO separate from the one to Belgium. Japan eagerly collaborates with other major NATO powers as well. Japan, the UK, and Italy have agreed to develop [sixth-generation fighter jets](#) to preserve air supremacy through the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP). Japan reopened a Consular Office in New Caledonia, the site of a major French military base in the Indo-Pacific.

The security environment surrounding Japan is increasingly deteriorating. China is rapidly modernizing its military without transparency. North Korea is developing its nuclear capabilities through missile launches. Russia designated Japan as an unfriendly country and continues its illegal occupation of the [Northern Territories](#), as it does in Crimea. Furthermore, Sino-Russian cooperation is stepping up after the invasion of Ukraine. China and Russia jointly operated their [warships](#) and bombers around the Japanese archipelago, [coinciding with the Quad leaders meeting in Tokyo](#). With the rapid aggravation of the security setting, Japan revised its [National Security Strategy](#) last December. It will double the defense budget and invest in making the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) more capable. Japan aims to restore military parity with China by developing counterstrike capabilities. [Seventy-one percent of the Japanese public](#) supported enhancing defense capabilities. Japan will transform its military posture to not only defend its national interests but also contribute to regional stability.

As a maritime nation, Japan is deeply concerned about Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. The United States and Japan oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo. [President Biden reaffirmed](#) that Article V of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security applies to the Senkaku Islands. In March 2023, the US Marine Corps and the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, a marine unit of JSDF,

conducted the [Iron Fist](#) exercise for the first time on Japanese soil to simulate an island seizure. In November 2021, a Japanese submarine conducted the first [anti-submarine exercise](#) in the South China Sea with the US Navy, providing unusual publicity about submarine actions. Japan possesses a [naval base in Djibouti, Africa](#), to counter piracy and secure the sea lines of communications across the Indian Ocean, which is critical to international trade.

Based on historical ties, Japan maintains a long-standing friendship with the Pacific Island countries. It has hosted the [Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting](#) every three years since 1997 to improve public health or infrastructure, for which assistance recipients are genuinely eager. Japan sustains ten embassies among the Pacific Island countries, while US embassies will increase to nine. In March 2023, Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi visited the Solomon Islands for the first time as the Japanese Foreign Minister while the country signed a security pact with China. Japan, the United States, and Australia can cooperate in the Pacific Island countries with China's penetration in mind.

"Japan is offering quality infrastructure for economic growth in the region. Japan and other like-minded countries do not intend to compete with China dollar for dollar; however, they are ready to offer practical options to regional governments."

Regional capacity building, especially in the maritime domain, is another field that benefits from Japanese contributions. Japan has offered patrol vessels to coast guards in the region. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti have received vessels and boats from Japan. On Palawan Island facing the South China Sea, US Vice President Kamala Harris gave a speech aboard a Philippine coast guard vessel [constructed in Japan](#). Japan has even provided the Philippines with [TC-90](#) aircraft from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force to enhance its naval capabilities.

Japan is offering quality infrastructure for economic growth in the region. Japan and other like-minded countries do not intend to compete with China dollar for dollar; however, they are ready to offer practical options to regional governments. In March 2023, Kishida visited India and held a summit meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to promote the high-speed rail project as a flagship project between the two countries, utilizing the Shinkansen bullet train technology. Japan aims to enhance connectivity throughout the region.

Even if Japan revises the Indo-Pacific policy in the near term, the overall idea will continue. The late former Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe invented](#) the strategic concept of Indo-Pacific. Even after his assassination, his legacy is enduring in Japanese diplomacy. The Japanese bureaucracy is characterized by its continuity with few political appointments. Japanese diplomatic and security policy is handled by top career diplomats—Takeo Akiba, Secretary General of Japan's National Security Secretariat, or Takeo Mori, Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs—ensuring coherent and consistent execution. Abe is also regarded as the ["Quad Father."](#) This Quadrilateral framework, formed by Japan, the US, India, and Australia, is significant to the region, as Assistant Secretary Daniel Kritenbrink emphasized at an [East-West Center event](#). In addition, there is another emerging platform, AUKUS. Japan will advance its cooperation with these minilateral frameworks, including the United States. As illustrated above, Japan has delivered tangible results and will continue to serve as a force for good to regional peace and prosperity.

Prof. Masatoshi Murakami, an associate professor at Kogakkan University and a former career diplomat of Japan, can be contacted at m-murakami@kogakkan-u.ac.jp.