



WHEN SHIFTING THREAT PERCEPTIONS ACTIVATE GEOPOLITICAL DISRUPTION: THE CASE OF JAPAN AS A THOUGHT LEADER IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Moksha Pillai* and Prof. (Dr.) Nagalaxmi M Raman**

ABSTRACT

With a growing nationalistic fervour, sweeping across countries opting to disengage from binding agreements, forfeit the more far-flung universalistic aspirations of the international liberal order and the win-win dynamic inherent to international cooperation; in favour of protecting their national interests and sovereignty; Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" is more relevant now than ever. In light of the above events, the last decade has been one of the most exciting and eventful periods in the history of the Indo-Pacific. As an active theatre for the projection of geopolitical ambitions of its surrounding littoral states and extra-regional players; the growing cases of non-traditional security threats have re-awakened a sense of "self-assertiveness" and "strategic autonomy" amongst countries brushed by the tides of the Indo-Pacific.

Japan's latest version of its National Security Strategy (NSS) reflects its self-assured response to the geopolitical tensions brewing in the Indo-Pacific. In a departure from its usual peaceful overtures, Japan's NSS 2022 projects resilience, displays an eagerness to adapt to changing security environments and reaffirms its allegiance to hold its national interests paramount. This article analysis the reasons behind Japan's change of heart and explains Tokyo's case as an exemplar of 'innovative and disruptive thought leadership' amidst shifting threat perceptions in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Geopolitical disruption, Japan, Indo-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

'In an ideal world, where there are only good states, power would be largely irrelevant.'

-John Mearsheimer (Tragedy of Great Power Politics, Chapter 1, p.16)

The last decade has been one of the most geopolitically eventful periods in the history of the Indo-Pacific. As an active theatre for the projection of power amongst its littoral states and extra-regional players, mounting instances of traditional and non-traditional security threats have drawn the region into a state of 'strategic flux'ⁱ. While the rising great-power contestations in the Indo-Pacific have resulted in the birth of multiple need-based partnerships like the Quad and Malabar Exercises, most countries in the neighbourhood have begun to see renewed merit in 'looking inwards' to respond to the changing realities of the 21st century.

In an instance of *finding the answer within*, Japan unveiled the latest edition of its National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2022, guided by the intent to recalibrate its military and foreign policy blueprint against belligerent behaviours that seek to challenge the rules-based international order in its sphere of influence. The NSS reaffirms that Japan should play a role 'commensurate with its national strength'ⁱⁱ to protect its crumbling regional security environment, primarily induced by revanchist tendencies of its geographically contiguous neighbours-China, North Korea, and Russia.

Beijing's expansion of its nuclear arsenal and naval capabilities, territorial claims over the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and militarisation of the East China Sea over the past decade have exacerbated existing power asymmetries between Japan and its strategically endowed nemesis. On the other hand, the key advancements to Pyongyang's missile designs and their strike capabilities have pushed Tokyo to formulate a comprehensive security approach to protect its sovereignty and regional integrity. Kremlin's unresolved disputes with Tokyo over the South Kuril Islands/Northern Territories and its amplified military activities in the Sea of Okhotskⁱⁱⁱ have further heightened Japan's threat perceptions in the region and nudged it to assert its strategic autonomy through the NSS.

THE CHINA FACTOR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON JAPAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (NSS):

‘Men at some time are masters of their fates.’^{iv}

-Shakespeare (Julius Caesar, Act I, Scene II, pg. 140–143)

Thus, being best equipped to analyse and redress the tides of geopolitical turbulence that it is currently faced with, Japan's reconnaissance of its security challenges and the strong vocalisation of its causal factors in the NSS 2022 is both refreshingly honest and a paradigm shift from the 2013 iteration of the same document. The NSS 2013 had initially perceived Russia as a ‘partner to face the rising China’^v, whereas the latest instalment of the security strategy document pronounced Russia as a ‘grave security concern’, in the light of its invasion of Ukraine^{vi}. This sentiment was also echoed in Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's remark, ‘Today's Ukraine could be tomorrow's East Asia’^{vii}, delivered at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in 2022, highlighting Tokyo's concerns about the possibility of a similar conflict in its backyard.

While Japan's NSS 2022 has certainly ruffled the feathers of the parties it was aimed at, it has managed to set a precedent by stating non-tolerance for unilaterally altering the status quo and subtly disapproving of the offenders of the international rules-based order through the means of an official national security strategy document; the first for any country in the Indo-Pacific region. Tokyo's strategy to clearly articulate its aspirations for a peaceful security dynamic in the Indo-Pacific through the NSS also stands as a sharp contradiction to the *enabler parent* approach predominantly adopted by smaller island states in the region. Malaysia and the Philippines, much like enabler parents, have often overlooked cases of United Nations Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) violations by China to prevent the risk of a possible conflict escalation in the South China Sea.

Japan's tactical move also represents a proactive step towards adopting *overt, decisive, and defence-oriented postures* to consciously protect its national interests, as ‘the primary responsibility for defending Japan lies with itself’^{viii}. At a time when interstate wars are a reality and danger is omnipresent, the highly pertinent National Security Strategy 2022 allows the leadership to identify policy gaps, address geopolitical challenges internally, and diversify Tokyo's cooperation matrix with its allies. Though this Japanese exemplar of self-assertion is yet to be adopted by fellow allies in the region, the ambitious NSS 2022 continues to live up to the legacy of Tokyo's role as *a vanguard of new foreign policy and security paradigms* that have set the tone for engagement amongst likeminded stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific since 2007.

EMBRACING THE CONTINUITY AND CHANGE OF JAPAN'S THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

'It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because, the innovator has for enemies, all those who have done well under the old conditions and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new'^{ix}.

-Niccolo Machiavelli (The Prince, Chapter VI, pg.2)

The world's geostrategic pivot towards Japan, under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership, is one for the books. His visionary speech addressed to the Indian Parliament in 2007 on the 'Confluence of the Seas' served as an inflexion point in the study of the Asia-Pacific region as those ideas soon became the guiding principles for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept. Similarly, Abe's proposal for the realisation of an 'Asian Democratic Security Diamond' (now known as the QUAD) is a testimony to Japan's pioneering thought leadership in envisioning the Indo-Pacific as a strategic security concept. Centred on the attainment of principles like peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific and Indian Ocean, Abe construed the high seas as an arena for cooperation amongst regional stakeholders rather than a theatre for military coercion and confrontation.

The diverging interpretations over the use of global commons to further regional development, propounded by popular political thinkers over time allude to changing notions of territoriality and power. Shinzo Abe's ideation of the Indo-Pacific concept was built on the spirit of ally-ship amongst like-minded partners, brushed by the tides of the Indian and Pacific Oceans (both, global commons) with the aim to manifest the arc of freedom and common prosperity for all in the region. His pacifist interpretation of the *use of global commons for global good* could be considered as an antithesis to Alfred Thayer Mahan's realist theory of sea power hinged on securing national prosperity through economic and military expansion in the sea at the cost of frequent wars among states.

It is interesting to note that while threat perceptions and power asymmetries amongst nations have persisted or even exacerbated over time, the mechanisms adopted by nation-states to deal with sovereignty breaches have evolved. Japan, while necessitating the need for a regional alliance in the Indo-Pacific has been inconspicuously practising 'Zone Balancing'^x, where the balancer enlists other states in its strategy by regarding them as partners aligned in that same strategic project—adding power to the other corners of the security diamond, with varying levels of political, economic, and military commitment.

By recognising the centrality of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, Abe thus played a significant role in formulating a new security architecture which embodied the aspirations of nations wanting to maintain peace and preserve the status quo. Under his regime, the concept of zone balancing, when extrapolated into the Indo-Pacific through Tokyo's Proactive Contribution to Peace Policy, helped the maritime expanse become synonymous with the idea of 'principled regionalism'^{xi}.

While the neoteric leader behind the Indo-Pacific concept has passed on, Shinzo Abe's indelible legacy lives on through Japan's continued allegiance to the principles of pacifism, self-determination and maritime rules-based order, as elucidated in the NSS 2022. Tokyo's *Yin* or the *continuity* in its approach to transforming into a self-sufficient player in the Indo-Pacific depends on the advancement of its diplomatic capabilities and intensified economic engagement among allies through free and fair trade practices. Japan intends to capitalise

on its advanced technological expertise to address global socio-environmental challenges (e.g. climate change and oil spills) and bolster its intelligence processing capacities^{xii}.

Most detractors would be quick to criticise Tokyo's latest policies to facilitate hard power manoeuvres. Conversely, its latest security policy blueprint continues to remain aligned with its ideological lighthouse i.e. the post-war '*Senshu Bōei*' principle, which encompasses its traditional self-defence criteria, allowing for the use of 'minimum necessary force for self-defence'^{xiii}. Standing by its decision to exert its strategic autonomy and aid successful deterrence, the Japanese government believes that the prevailing geopolitical challenges in its neighbourhood have necessitated the need for augmenting its military architecture and developing counter-strike capabilities.

The *Yang* or the *changes* in Tokyo's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, however, lie in its newfound rigour to overcome its 'wishful thinking and wilful blindness'^{xiv} while formulating defensive strategies for the region. Japan's adoption of 'realistic diplomacy for the new era *Shinjidai Riarizumu Gaikō*) is a testimony to this change. As a spiritual successor to its pacifist temperament, Tokyo's scheme to address imminent security threats lies in augmenting its hard power capabilities without using brute force; unless provoked. While defence continues to remain Japan's 'last guarantor of peace', the nation believes that strengthening its deterrence mechanisms can cultivate a desirable security environment and defend itself from potential hazards and threats of an unprecedented scale.

The recent reform in Japan's 'Basic Defence Doctrine of 1976 (*Kibanteki Bōeiryoku*) is another example of the state's leap towards an optimal defensive posture. Tokyo initially capped its defence expenditure at up to 1% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP)^{xv}; however, the growing threat perceptions in the region prompted the Diet to suggest increasing its defence spending to 2% of its GDP over a period of 5 years^{xvi}. As inconsequential as it might seem, this significant restructuring of Japan's budget is expected to reinforce its deterrence umbrella by building up fuel and ammunition supplies to sustain the possibility of long war and face the triple threat of Russia, China, and North Korea.

CONCLUSION

Thus, by suggesting the formulation of a pre-emptive security strategy built on forging symbiotic partnerships with like-minded stakeholders in the region, Tokyo helped political thinkers and world leaders redirect their focus from the need for *hegemony over global commons* to *amity over global commons*. Japan's sustained thought leadership helped crystallise the concept of zone balancing in the Indo-Pacific and its acknowledgement of changing threat perceptions in its neighbourhood managed to disrupt traditional studies pivoted around the Asia-Pacific region. The Japanese exemplar in the Indo-Pacific, therefore, facilitated the emergence of geopolitically relevant discourses on the need for freedom of navigation in the seas without overriding every state's claims to sovereignty and territorial integrity to materialise the principle of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in its truest sense.

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