

THE DEEPENING U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



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Background

On 10 April 2024, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met U.S. President Joe Biden at the White House, marking the first state visit by a Japanese Prime Minister since 2015.¹ The joint statement issued following their summit meeting highlighted the dawn of a "new era of strategic cooperation" between the U.S. and Japan.² The statement heralded the elevation of the U.S.-Japan alliance to unprecedented levels, with both countries aspiring to broaden their partnership on a global scale. Following the meeting, the two countries announced a series of strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing defence and security collaboration, exploring new horizons in space, fostering technological innovation, fortifying economic resilience, expediting climate mitigation efforts, engaging in joint global diplomacy and development endeavours, and strengthening people-to-people contacts.³ The joint statement

¹ Jeffrey W. Hornung, "America's Best Friend in Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-best-friend-asia>.

² "United States-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement," *The White House*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/10/united-states-japan-joint-leaders-statement/>.

³ Ibid.

also affirmed that the U.S.-Japan mutual security treaty applies to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.⁴

Most significantly, the two countries announced the most substantial upgrade to their security alliance in over six decades.⁵ Specifically, the United States and Japan have outlined plans to integrate the command structures of their armed forces. Both countries have signalled that the U.S. military will establish a corresponding command linked to Japan's military command. Another notable aspect of the visit was the Japanese Prime Minister's address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, where he reaffirmed Japan's backing for the U.S. This address holds great symbolic significance and serves as a powerful manifestation of the deepening ties between the two countries.

Pillars of the Deepening U.S.-Japan Alliance

The U.S. is concentrating on the "three pillars" when it comes to the U.S.-Japan alliance.⁶ These include:

- 1- Enhancing the Alliance's Role, Missions, and Capabilities through Modernization
- 2- Refining Military Posture in the Region through Optimization
- 3- Engaging in Multilateral Networking for Broader Cooperation

As a component of the first pillar, the United States intends to update the roles, objectives, and capabilities of the U.S.-Japan Alliance. This initiative aligns with the U.S. 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy unveiled in 2022, emphasising that the U.S. "will support and empower allies and partners as they take on regional leadership roles themselves."⁷ To this end, the U.S. is collaborating with Japan to procure modern and advanced military equipment and weaponry. Additionally, the U.S. aims to enhance coordination and interoperability between Japanese and U.S. forces through joint training efforts. In January 2024, Japan inked a \$1.7 billion deal with the U.S. for the acquisition of 400

⁴ Sevastopulo and Inagaki, "US and Japan Announce 'Most Significant' Upgrade."

⁵ Demetri Sevastopulo and Kana Inagaki, "US and Japan Announce 'Most Significant' Upgrade to Military Alliance," *Financial Times*, April 11, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/7c87655e-7994-4a34-9a02-497f316dc881>.

⁶ Hornung, "America's Best Friend in Asia."

⁷ "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," *The White House*, February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

Tomahawk Cruise Missiles.⁸ Furthermore, by the end of March 2024, the U.S. Navy had conducted a five-day training session at the Yokosuka base, instructing 25 personnel from the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (JSDF) on the operation of Tomahawk Cruise Missiles.⁹ Additionally, in December 2023, Japan eased its export restrictions, enabling the export of U.S.-designed Patriot Missiles manufactured by Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.¹⁰

Improving the posturing of U.S. forces in the region stands as the second cornerstone of the U.S. strategy in its alliance with Japan. To achieve this objective, the U.S. and Japan have recently announced updates to their security pact, marking a significant milestone after 60 years.¹¹ Among these updates, the alliance has committed to restructuring and modernising the U.S. military's command and control systems in Japan, aiming to bolster operational effectiveness between the two countries. Before this, most of the time Japan had to deal with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) situated over 6200 kilometres away at Camp Smith, New York, resulting in significant time delays.¹²

In the third pillar, the U.S. is prioritizing multilateral networking in the region, aiming to move away from the outdated 'hub-and-spoke' system. It no longer suits the contemporary security landscape of the Asia-Pacific, yielding fragmented and incoherent outcomes.¹³ Working on this pillar, according to the reports, the U.S. has recently proposed transforming AUKUS into JAUkus. In other words, it advocated for Japan's inclusion in the AUKUS security partnership as a technological partner, alongside Australia and the UK.¹⁴

Similarly, the U.S. serves as the primary nexus between Japan and South Korea. Regarding the Philippines, a landmark trilateral summit took place on 11 April 2024 at Washington, bringing

⁸ Kosuke Takahashi, "Japan Inks \$1.7 Billion Contract with the US for 400 Tomahawks," *Naval News*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/01/japan-inks-1-7-billion-contract-with-the-us-for-400-tomahawks/>.

⁹ Ashish Dangwal, "US Trains Japan On Counterstrike Capability; JSDF Learns To Operate Tomahawk Missiles To Deflate China," *The Eurasian Times*, March 30, 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/tg-edited-us-navy-commences-tomahawk-cruise/>.

¹⁰ Motoko Rich, "Breaking With Postwar History, Japan to Sell Patriot Missiles to U.S.," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/21/world/asia/japan-postwar-missile-defense-sales.html>.

¹¹ Demetri Sevastopulo and Kana Inagaki, "US and Japan Plan Biggest Upgrade to Security Pact in over 60 Years," *Financial Times*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/df99994d-ec4b-4c3c-9c42-738ec9b338d0>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hornung, "America's Best Friend."

¹⁴ Demetri Sevastopulo and Kana Inagaki, "Aukus Weighs Expanding Security Pact to Deter China in Indo-Pacific," *Financial Times*, April 7, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/bd94b87a-0395-420b-a35c-909b1762650a>.

together the leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the U.S..¹⁵ Additionally, Japan has supplied advanced radar systems to the Philippines.¹⁶ Furthermore, Japan is collaborating with the UK and Italy to develop stealth fighter jets.¹⁷ The statement of the United States-Japan Joint Leaders' Summit has also pronounced forthcoming regular joint military exercises involving Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom.¹⁸ Last year, the UK and Japan reached an agreement "Hiroshima Accord" aimed at deploying aircraft carrier strike groups to Japan for joint exercises.¹⁹ All these developments signify the expansion of U.S. relations with regional allies, transitioning from bilateral to trilateral or multilateral ones.

Conclusion

The strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance highlights the rapidly evolving security landscape in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan's neighbouring countries closely monitor the deepening ties between the U.S. and Japan, recognising its implications for their security environment. With the significant presence of the U.S. military in Japan and the bilateral security treaty between the two countries, regional powers like China and others may view this alliance as a potential counterweight to their regional influence.

China responded by expressing its strong dissatisfaction over the Biden-Kishida meeting. Beijing criticised the U.S. and Japan for maligning it over Taiwan and the South China Sea, and interfering in its domestic affairs. China also summoned the diplomats of Japan and the Philippines to protest remarks made during the summit, condemning what it sees as manipulation of bloc politics against its interests. Moreover, it warned Tokyo of a response to any 'wrong' moves, indicating a likely adaptation of its military strategy and diplomatic approaches in response to the deepening U.S.-Japan alliance. In this situation, Japan must strike a balance between its national security interests and trade relations with China, given that Beijing is Tokyo's biggest trading partner. At present, Japan lacks a significant alternative, leaving Tokyo grappling with the dilemma of managing its economic reliance on Beijing while strengthening its alliance with Washington. The just convened 9th

¹⁵ "Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States," *The White House*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/11/joint-vision-statement-from-the-leaders-of-japan-the-philippines-and-the-united-states/>.

¹⁶ Joe Saballa, "Philippines Gets Advanced Air Surveillance Radar From Japan," *The Defense Post*, December 21, 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/12/21/philippines-surveillance-radar-japan/>.

¹⁷ "UK, Japan, and Italy Sign International Stealth Fighter Jet Programme Treaty," *Royal Air Force*, December 14, 2023, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/uk-japan-and-italy-sign-international-stealth-fighter-jet-programme-treaty/>.

¹⁸ "United States-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement," *The White House*.

¹⁹ Ken Moriyasu, "U.K. Cements Defense Ties with Japan by Signing Hiroshima Accord," *Nikkei Asia*, May 18, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/G-7-in-Japan/U.K.-cements-defense-ties-with-Japan-by-signing-Hiroshima-Accord>.

Trilateral Summit meeting of China, Japan and South Korea in Seoul illustrates that Japan is cognizant of this imperative and seeking to pursue a more prudent diplomatic outreach.

Overall, the multifaceted deepening of the U.S.-Japan alliance significantly shapes the security dynamics of the Asia-Pacific. This alliance aims to advance the interests of both the U.S. and Japan in the region. As the global geopolitical dynamics are evolving, the implications of the deepening U.S.-Japan alliance would continue to be a key factor in regional and international affairs.