

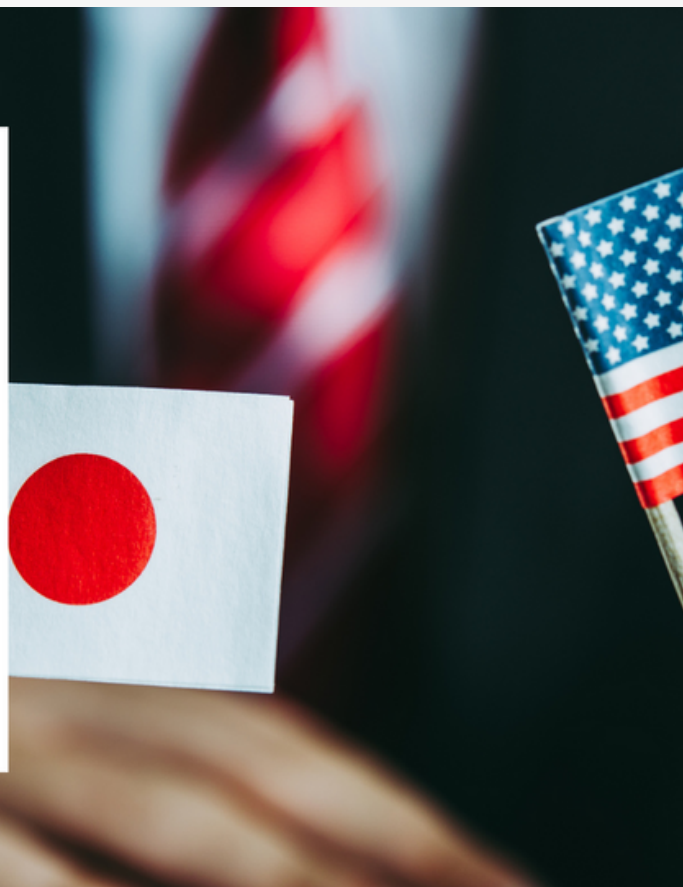
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**STRENGTHENING MILITARY COOPERATION  
BETWEEN JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES IN  
RESPONSE TO REGIONAL INSTABILITY:  
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND  
CONTEMPORARY SECURITY DYNAMICS**



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**WRITTEN BY: VALENTINA RUARO**



**WRITTEN BY**

VALENTINA RUARO

**EDITED BY**

MICHELE PUGGIA

**SUPERVISED BY**

MIGUEL REYES CASTRO

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## Abstract

Despite their complex shared histories, the United States and Japan have significantly bolstered their military cooperation. The primary catalyst behind this strengthening of defence collaboration is the mounting instability within the Asia Pacific region. Japan confronts a multitude of challenges. These include the increasingly assertive China, which is pursuing a more aggressive regional security policy, and the persistent threat posed by North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities, including their missile launches targeting Japanese territory. Moreover, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia contributes to the volatility in the region. The resulting instability underscores the paramount importance of the alliance between the U.S. and Japan, emphasising the need to modernise their forces and project their combined influence. This is crucial for promoting stability and upholding the rule of law in an international system that is growing increasingly turbulent. This InfoFlash examines its historical background to provide a comprehensive analysis of the U.S.-Japan military cooperation. It delves into the current security situation shaping the Asia Pacific region, serving as the driving force behind the ongoing efforts to modernise and enhance military collaboration between the two nations.

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## Historical Background of U.S. – Japan Military Alliance

The military partnership between the two countries originated after World War II when the United States occupied Japan (Green, 2007). Adhering to a pacifist constitution, Japan agreed to allow the presence of US military forces on its soil in exchange for protection (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). The formal establishment of the US-Japan alliance occurred in 1951 with the signing of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, which authorised the continued presence of US forces in Japan in accordance with Japan's pacifist constitution (Mansfield, 1989). This treaty aligned with the Yoshida Doctrine, a post-war strategy devised by Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, which emphasised Japan's reliance on the United States for security while focusing on economic recovery (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). As a result, Japan has maintained a defence budget of less than one per cent of GDP over the years (Mansfield, 2011).

The alliance benefited the US by enhancing its strategic presence in East Asia during the Cold War era, given the expanding capabilities of the Chinese and Soviet militaries in the region (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). In 1954, the Yoshida government established the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) in 1954 (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). This was done despite domestic objections and Article Nine of the Japanese post-war Constitution, which forbids "the maintenance of military forces or the use of those forces to settle international disputes," (Maizland & Cheng, 2021, para. 4).

In 1960, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America (hereafter the US-Japan Treaty) was signed, granting Washington permission (Article VI) to establish military bases on Japanese territory in exchange for the commitment to defend Japan (US-Japan Treaty, 1960). It also committed (Article V) both nations to defend each other if one or the other is attacked in territories administered by Japan (US-Japan Treaty, 1960). Furthermore, the Treaty mandated (Article IV) that the US consult with Japan before initiating direct combat operations (US-Japan Treaty, 1960). Later, in 1967, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato implemented the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, which prohibited Japan from possessing, producing or introducing nuclear arms (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). This policy aimed to allay concerns about the presence of nuclear weapons on US bases in Japan and to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella as a deterrent against potential aggressors (Maizland & Cheng, 2021).

The Alliance has transformed along with evolving regional and global security challenges. As Japan's role expanded in the region and worldwide, the Alliance adapted to accommodate these changes (Chase & Mori & Iida, 2019). For instance, following the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam, Japan began to assert a more significant role within the alliance, issuing its first defence strategy in the post-war era (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Moreover, the two allies also engaged in joint studies to enhance interoperability and initiated collaborative training exercises (Maizland & Cheng, 2021).

Furthermore, the 1990-91 Gulf War shifted Japan's military deployment approach. Accordingly, while Japan remained on the sidelines during the UN coalition intervention, its government reluctantly provided \$13 billion in support of the war effort (Green, 2007). However, this non-participation was also negatively perceived by the Japanese government, which felt left behind by the international community (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). This led to the enactment of a new law in 1992, which allowed

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for the potential deployment of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) in UN peacekeeping operations (Maizland & Cheng, 2021).

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about further changes in Japan, with the formulation of new guidelines in 1997 that expanded Japan's military operations beyond its home islands to encompass its surrounding areas, emphasising a greater responsibility for its defence (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). The American and Japanese governments also conducted a comprehensive review of their alliance that same year, reaffirming its significance and announcing an expansion of defence cooperation (Green, 2007). They also collaborated on missile defence initiatives in response to the North Korean threat (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Moreover, both governments agreed to revise the original 1978 US-Japan Defense Guidelines, explicitly incorporating cooperation in the "areas surrounding Japan" (Maizland & Cheng, 2021, para. 3). This marked the first explicit step for U.S. and Japanese forces to jointly address the security concerns of Asia beyond Japan's immediate home islands (Maizland & Cheng, 2021).

### **The Security Scenario in the North East Asia Region Since the 21st Century**

Following the conclusion of the Cold War, both nations recognised the enduring significance of the Alliance in an increasingly complex world that no longer adhered to clear bipolar divisions (Green, 2007). Within this context, both countries identified North Korea as the most immediate threat to regional security, given its powerful million-man army and ongoing development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles (Cronin, 2005). Moreover, the escalating assertiveness displayed by China further solidified the need for enhanced security cooperation between Japan and the United States (Chase & Mori & Iida, 2019).

The North Korean threat, characterised by Japan as "grave and imminent," had significantly influenced the focus of the Alliance since the mid-1990s, when North Korea launched a ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan and withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Tokyo and Washington began to collaborate more closely on missile defence following another missile launch by North Korea over Japan in 1998 (Cronin, 2005). Subsequently, North Korea continued to conduct numerous missile launches over Japanese territory and claimed the ability to mass-produce medium-range missiles (Cronin, 2021). The intensifying threat prompted debates within Japan regarding acquiring nuclear weapons for self-defence and developing pre-emptive strike capabilities (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). In 2022, Kim Jong-un oversaw the launch of over 90 ballistic missiles, with ongoing concerns among American, Japanese and South Korean officials about the possibility of a nuclear test by North Korea (Wong, 2023).

For its part, and under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China is pursuing a more assertive regional security policy, prioritising coercion over adherence to international law in its territorial claims (Solís, 2023). This has resulted in establishing a regional security order characterised by increased Chinese influence and diminished US influence. In this line, the growing operational capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) also hold significant implications for the United States, Japan and their Alliance (Chase et al., 2019).

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A key source of tension between China and Japan is the long-standing territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, a group of uninhabited islets in the East China Sea (Chase et al., 2019). China has made various attempts to challenge Japan's administrative control over the Senkaku Islands and has constructed military facilities on Chinese-built islands in the South China Sea (Chase et al., 2019). And while the US has maintained a neutral stance on the islands' sovereignty, it has recognised Japan's administration of the islands (Chase et al., 2019). It considers them covered by the US-Japan security treaty since the Obama administration (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Furthermore, and in response to concerns about China's behaviour in the region, the Trump administration revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as the "Quad", a security arrangement between the U.S., Australia, India and Japan (Maizland & Cheng, 2021).

Taiwan has also gained increasing relevance, as reflected in Japan's 2021 defence strategy, highlighting the importance of maintaining stability across the Taiwan Strait for Japan's security (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Moreover, President Biden and Prime Minister Suga expressed concerns about China's actions toward Taiwan in a joint statement (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Moreover, Japanese defence officials have advocated for Japan's defence of Taiwan in the event of a conflict (Maizland & Cheng, 2021).

### **A Renewed Form of U.S. – Japan Cooperation?**

Despite the complexities of their shared histories, the military alliance and intelligence cooperation between the United States and Japan have significantly strengthened in recent years, primarily in response to China's expanding military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region (Vincent, 2023). A notable development occurred on 12 January 2023, when the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee (SCC) convened in Washington, D.C. During the SCC meeting, which involved the foreign and defence ministers of both countries, a joint statement was issued endorsing the modernisation of the Alliance to align with the prevailing security situation in Northeast Asia (Vincent, 2023). The aim was to jointly exert influence to promote stability and the rule of law in a turbulent international system (Solís, 2023) while establishing a shared commitment to integrated deterrence (AgenziaNova, 2023).

The ministers from both nations agreed to enhance the interoperability between their respective military forces and collaborate in the "effective deployment" of Japan's newly acquired long-range strike capabilities (AgenziaNova, 2023). The defence cooperation between the United States and Japan will also focus on developing "advanced materials" in response to China's advancements in hypersonic ballistic weapons (AgenziaNova, 2023). Additionally, the ministers agreed to expand the coverage of their bilateral security treaty to include space, encompassing areas such as the joint protection of satellites (AgenziaNova, 2023). Furthermore, specific agreements were made concerning defence research, development, and supply chain security (Vincent, 2023). One such agreement, the non-binding Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA), aims to establish critical connections between their defence industries and enable deeper cooperation within their respective supply chains (Vincent, 2023).

Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine has expanded the scope of strategic coordination between the United States and Japan (Solís, 2023). The presence of three revisionist powers has become a focal

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point of their agenda: North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, China's use of coercion instead of international law to advance its territorial claims, and Russia's large-scale conflict in Europe (Solís, 2023). In response to this challenging security environment, Japan has moved away from the informal limit on defence expenditures set at 1% of GDP (Solís, 2023). Over the next five years, Japan aims to increase these expenditures to 2% of GDP (Solís, 2023). One notable development in Japan's National Security Strategy (NSS) is adopting counterstrike capabilities (AgenziaNova, 2023), enabling the country to respond to an attack by striking deep into enemy territory (Solís, 2023). However, the threshold for using force still requires Japan's territorial integrity to be at stake (Solís, 2023).

In the context of modernising the US-Japan military alliance, efforts are underway to transform the American marines stationed in Okinawa into a more mobile unit, facilitating their movement to other islands along the coast when necessary and enabling faster deployment in case of escalating tensions in the region (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). The new littoral regiment will consist of battalion-size units totalling approximately 2,000 troops, with long-range firepower capable of targeting ships (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Currently, most land is of exclusive use to US military facilities in Japan, about 70.6% of which is concentrated in Okinawa (Tasevski, 2022). Nonetheless, Okinawa plays a strategic but controversial role, as it is home to more than half of the 50,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan (Tasevski, 2022). Still, the presence of US military bases in Okinawa has been a divisive issue, facing public condemnation due to pollution, noise and incidents involving US base personnel and Okinawans (Tasevski, 2022; Grimaldi, 2023). These negative impacts have led to the formation of an anti-U.S. military base movement, driven by concerns about the environment, quality of life and incidents involving base personnel (Tasevski, 2022).

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## Conclusion

The growing military cooperation between Japan and the United States is driven by the escalating instability in the Southeast Asia region, characterised by an assertive China, the persistent nuclear threat from North Korea, and Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine (Maizland & Cheng, 2021; Solís, 2023). The historical background of the US-Japan military alliance, starting from Japan's post-World War II occupation, laid the foundation for their defence cooperation (Mansfield, 1989; 2011). Over the years, the partnership has adapted to evolving security challenges, including Japan's expanding role in the region and worldwide (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). However, presently it is both the North Korean threat and China's assertiveness that have significantly shaped the alliance's focus.

Recent developments in the US-Japan military alliance have shown a renewed commitment to enhancing their interoperability and defence capabilities (Vincent, 2023). The joint statement issued during the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee meeting highlights the will to modernise the alliance to address the prevailing security situation in Northeast Asia (Solís, 2023). The ministers agreed to collaborate on various fronts, including effectively deploying Japan's long-range strike capabilities, developing advanced materials and expanding the security treaty's coverage to include space cooperation (Vincent, 2023). And as discussed before, Japan's National Security Strategy also provides for adopting counter-strike capabilities, while current efforts to transform the American Marines stationed in Okinawa into a more mobile unit, will allow for more effortless movement and faster deployments vis-à-vis escalating regional tensions.

At the current state, the most pressing security threats that Japan faces and must deal with are North Korea's ongoing development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. This threat is coupled with its provocative behaviour and China's assertive military operations, which disregard international law and lack transparency. Overall, these increasingly hostile activities by all these nations, in land, sea and air, all add to the complex security landscape in the Asia-Pacific region.

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