JAPAN AT A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS: NEW SECURITY AND DEFENCE DYNAMICS

From "Japan is Back" to "Japan on the Move": The Cumulative Transformation of Japan's Security Posture from Prime Minister Abe to Takaichi

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Abstract

Japan's security posture from the 2010s to the present day is best understood as a cumulative transformation rather than a sequence of steady and constant reforms. This essay examines the key developments of the current Takaichi administration while also illuminating the key areas that have been greatly expanded from the past policies of Prime Ministers Abe Shinzō and Kishida Fumio, the two recent prime ministers who have played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's security policy. The essay will show that Japan has moved from the phase of institutional restructuring to one of doctrinal consolidation and, under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Takaichi Sanae, is now entering a new phase in which Japan's security policy is rapidly shifting toward accelerated implementation and externalization. This is attested by both intensified regional diplomatic engagements and deeper integration of security partnerships across the Indo-Pacific region. The essay will also show that Japan's next challenge will be to play a more proactive role as a security provider in the Indo--Pacific region while also remaining structurally anchored to the U.S.–Japan alliance and the extended nuclear deterrence that the alliance provides.

Keywords: Abe Shinzō; economic security; Indo-Pacific; Japan's security policy; Kishida Fumio; New FOIP; supply chain resilience; Takaichi Sanae; Three Core Security Documents; U.S.–Japan alliance.

Resumo

O Japão Está de Volta" a "O Japão em Movimento": A Transformação Cumulativa da Postura de Segurança do Japão, de Abe a Takaichi

A postura de segurança do Japão, desde a década de 2010 até à atualidade, é melhor compreendida como um processo de transformação cumulativa, e não como uma sucessão de reformas constantes e graduais. Este ensaio analisa os principais desenvolvimentos ocorridos durante a atual administração Takaichi, procurando, simultaneamente, evidenciar as áreas fundamentais que foram significativamente ampliadas em relação às políticas adotadas pelos primeiros-ministros Abe Shinzō e Kishida Fumio, os dois mais recentes chefes de governo que desempenharam um papel decisivo na definição da política de segurança do Japão.

O ensaio demonstrará que o Japão passou de uma fase de reestruturação institucional para uma fase de consolidação doutrinária e que, sob a liderança da primeira-ministra Takaichi Sanae, está agora a entrar numa nova etapa, na qual a política de segurança japonesa se orienta rapidamente para uma implementação acelerada e para uma crescente externalização. Esta evolução é evidenciada tanto pela intensificação do envolvimento diplomático regional como por uma integração mais profunda das parcerias de segurança em toda a região do Indo-Pacífico.

O ensaio demonstrará igualmente que o próximo desafio do Japão consistirá em assumir um papel mais proativo enquanto fornecedor de segurança na região do Indo-Pacífico, mantendo simultaneamente a sua ancoragem estrutural na aliança nipo-americana e no mecanismo de dissuasão nuclear alargada proporcionado por essa aliança.

Palavras-chave: *Abe Shinzō; segurança económica; Indo-Pacífico; política de segurança do Japão; Kishida Fumio; Novo FOIP; resiliência das cadeias de abastecimento; Takaichi Sanae; Três Documentos Fundamentais de Segurança; aliança EUA-Japão.*

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Introduction

Since coming to office in October 2025 as Japan's very first female prime minister in its constitutional history, Takaichi Sanae has devoted much of her energy to aggressively redefining Japan's security posture. She has actively pursued Japan's defence buildup while also expanding Japan's national security agenda, which is expected to culminate in the revision of the so-called Three Core Security Documents at the end of 2026. With this as a backdrop, this essay will examine these important changes in the area of national security that have accelerated at a breakneck pace after her landslide electoral victory on 8 February 2026, in which she was able to secure a dominant two-thirds supermajority in the all-important lower house of the Japanese Diet.

By examining what Takaichi has accomplished to date, this essay will show not only that the undergoing changes in Japan are significant, but also that they will eventually pave the path for Japan being able to fundamentally alter its security posture from one that has traditionally placed heavy emphasis on exclusively investing in defence (*senshu bōei*) to one that is much more proactive and robust and which, in the future, will finally enable Japan to function as a regional security provider. Furthermore, the essay will show that the changes currently taking place are much greater than just building upon the policies shaped by the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. Thus, the oft-used refrain "Japan is back!" by his protégé Takaichi is an understatement of the significant changes that are actually occurring now in Japan in the realm of national security. Japan is not standing idly by content with just being back; it is now actively on the move.

This framing of Japan being merely "back" is inherently misleading because it naturally implies a restoration to a prior strategic equilibrium. The genesis of the phrase "Japan is back" can find its origins in Prime Minister Abe's speech given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in February 2013. This speech was a reaction to the Nye-Armitage Report, which questioned whether Japan was willing to accept becoming a second-tier country.

Takaichi's use of this phrase is not only to commemorate Abe's achievement but also to bolster the image of her strong connection to the late prime minister. Of course, in either case "Japan is back" was not initially intended as an analytical basis to understand Japan's policy transformation. However, the Japanese public has interpreted this phrase to mean the end of the long "lost decades" that began after the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in the early 1990s. Therefore, while Takaichi is reusing this phrase to reaffirm Japan's commitment to the U.S.–Japan alliance and to show her commitment in continuing Abe's legacy, it does lead to the image that Japan is still where Abe had left it. Nothing can be further from the truth; Japan has not idly stood by since Abe, and it is actually much more than just back.

Japan is a nation on the move, as attested by Japan's security posture that has undergone a massive and cumulative structural transformation.

At this very moment, this transformation is still in the process of continuously evolving as a result of the harsh present-day geopolitical realities that require Japan to adjust. The nation is surrounded by two ambitious major powers, China and Russia that are desirous of altering the existing rules-based global order. In fact, Russia has already resorted to the use of military force in challenging the status quo by invading Ukraine in February 2022. China, the greater economic power and arguably one that possesses a more formidable military, is also not hesitant in making its territorial ambitions over Taiwan clear. Lastly, North Korea, a nation that would be near irrelevant had it not developed its own nuclear arsenal, comprises the final neighboring country that exists as a serious security menace for Japan.

With this in mind, this essay will posit that Japan's security trajectory is best understood as a three-phase transformation: institutional expansion under Abe Shinzō, doctrinal consolidation under Kishida Fumio, and operational acceleration and implementation under the present prime minister, Takaichi. Furthermore, this essay will show that Japan under the helm of Takaichi is no longer primarily engaged in merely redefining its security constraints, but instead has embarked on operationalizing its security architecture in order to preserve its national interests under intensifying regional security challenges as well as increased strategic uncertainty during the presidency of Trump 2.0.

2. The Beginning: PMs Abe, Kishida, and the Revamping of Japan's Security Policy

Abe Shinzō's second administration (2012-2020) undoubtedly marked the beginning of Japan's postwar security transformation and should be viewed as the moment Japan broke away from the shackles of the long-held Yoshida Doctrine, which prioritized economic prosperity over becoming a formidable military power. It was in 2010 that China surpassed Japan in terms of GDP, and soon tensions arose over the Senkakus islands when a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Japanese Coast Guard ship in September of that year (JCG, 2011). As a consequence, Abe moved swiftly in establishing the National Security Council (NSC) in December 2013. This enabled Japan to centralize its strategic diplomatic and national security decision-making within the executive, which served to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation that had historically characterized Japanese foreign and defence policy (Cabinet Secretariat, 2014). It also should not be overlooked that the State Secrecy Law was passed in the same year, with the intent of better protecting classified information

to allow for a more secure intelligence-sharing mechanism with its key allies such as the United States.

The first National Security Strategy announced shortly thereafter introduced the concept of "Proactive Contribution to Peace," redefining Japan as a proactive contributor to regional stability rather than a passive security beneficiary, along with a new version of the National Defense Program Guidelines (MOD, 2014). In addition, Abe moved quickly to replace the rigid blanket ban on weapons export with his hallmark legislation, the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, which allowed for the first time joint development and exports that supported global peace (MOD, 2014). However, the most consequential shift occurred in July 2014 with the reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's constitution, which for the first time allowed limited collective self-defence. Implemented through the 2015 security legislation, this finally permitted Japan a legal pathway to militarily support its sole alliance partner, the United States, albeit under narrowly defined existential conditions (Cabinet Secretariat, 2014).

Two years later, during TICAD VI held in Nairobi, Kenya, Abe proclaimed his Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, embedding Japan within a broader maritime and economic security architecture that encompassed both the Pacific and Indian Oceans (MOFA, 2016). Hence, Abe's chief legacy lies in expanding Japan's institutional and constitutional limits to a degree not seen since 1960, when his grandfather Kishi Nobusuke boldly revised the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty. In this way, the Abe administration expanded Japan's security architecture through institutional innovation and constitutional reinterpretation, which most notably can be seen in the aforementioned creation of the National Security Council as well as the 2015 security legislation that allowed for collective self-defence.

Furthermore, Abe shifted Japan's defence posture to one that placed more strategic focus on defending the southwestern Nansei Islands as a way to counter rising maritime pressures by China in the East China Sea. It should also not be forgotten that it was Abe who revitalized the Quad by actively working to institutionalize the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Japan, the U.S., Australia, and India as a counterweight to regional security challenges posed primarily by China. In this way, if one were to look back, it is clear that Abe played a pivotal role in transforming Japan's national security policy into one that more directly and coherently addressed the regional threats the nation faced.

On the other hand, the ensuing Kishida administration (2021-2024) that succeeded the short-lived Suga administration (2020-2021) translated institutional flexibility into formal doctrine and capability development. Prime Minister Kishida continued his predecessor's transformation of national security policy, highlighted by the revision of the National Security Strategy, the commitment to double Japan's defence spending, and the enactment of the Economic Security Promotion Act

(Cabinet Secretariat, 2022). In December 2022, Kishida's cabinet adopted major revisions to the Three Core Documents on Security – National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program – making a clear break from the traditional postwar self-limitations on defence (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022).

To elaborate further, Kishida authorized Japan to acquire counter-strike capabilities based on long-range cruise missiles, enabling Japan to develop standoff capabilities to respond more effectively to missile threats as well as to strengthen regional deterrence against rising threats from both China and North Korea. To make this possible, he not only increased Japan's defence budget but also made a future commitment to increase defence-related spending to 2% of GDP by fiscal year 2027. In addition, Kishida worked to ease restrictions on lethal defence equipment exports, enabling joint international programs like the U.S. $6.1 billion next-generation fighter jet development with the UK and Italy (Global Combat Air Programme – GCAP). Furthermore, outlays for the Japan Coast Guard – responsible for law enforcement within the EEZ – grew by an astounding 30% (Gresh, 2026).

It was also under Kishida that Japan actively pitched the sale of its state-of-the-art *Mogami*-class to its Quad partner, Australia. The 11-ship deal was finally sealed in April 2026 under Takaichi, as both countries signed a historic U.S. $6.5 billion defence contract in Melbourne. Under the terms of the contract, the first three ships will be built in Japan, with delivery scheduled for December 2029, and the remaining eight will be constructed in Western Australia. Considering Japan's longtime postwar ban on arms exports, this marks an astounding shift in Japan's security posture.

Following on the heels of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kishida also enacted the landmark Economic and Regional Security Promotion Act in May 2022 that aimed to strengthen supply chains, protect vital infrastructure, safeguard sensitive technologies, and promote public-private technology collaborations. This allowed for further integration of industrial policy and supply chain resilience into national security planning. Moreover, in the area of foreign policy, his most notable achievement was to strengthen ties with South Korea. With the support of President Joe Biden, Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol institutionalized security and intelligence cooperation against regional contingencies at the historic Camp David Summit in August 2023.

Therefore, Kishida's security policies, epitomized by the December 2022 revision to the Three Core Security Documents, became a major inflection point, as these documents were clearly cognizant of an increasingly dangerous regional security environment. However, it should be noted that he did not merely continue on the tracks laid by Abe, but extended them in order to establish a more robust and long-term defence policy for Japan. Thus, Kishida played a pivotal role in formalizing and providing the necessary financial resources, which enabled Japan to expand its strategic security posture.

In this manner, Abe and Kishida together laid the foundation for Japan’s contemporary security architecture that centralized executive security coordination, expanded the collective self-defence interpretation as well as counter-strike doctrine, and bolstered economic security integration while also sustaining a positive defence investment trajectory. As we will examine next, these are the facets that comprised the basis for Prime Minister Takaichi’s current ongoing security policy.

3. Moving Further Forward: Takaichi’s Quest for Operational Acceleration and Implementation

Despite being prime minister for less than a year, Takaichi can already boast a remarkable list of key achievements: increasing the defence budget as well as defence capabilities; further strengthening the U.S.–Japan alliance in a period where NATO is struggling to manage its alliance with the United States; advancing Japan’s economic security by bolstering supply chain resilience, bolstering cyber resilience, and creating a new and expanded intelligence council. Moreover, while still a work in progress, she has also made a campaign pledge to revise Japan’s Three Core Security Documents, which are comprised of the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Force Development Plan, by the end of 2026. In this way, Takaichi is actively steering Japan in a direction in which the nation can survive in an increasingly unstable global security environment.

Among her many achievements, in April 2026, Takaichi convened a 15-member panel of experts to finalise the revisions on arms exports (PMO, 2026). At present, she is actively pursuing the development of advanced standoff capabilities while strengthening integrated air and missile defenses, and bolstering warfare capabilities in the space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains. In addition, Takaichi has increased defence spending while striving to expand Japan’s industrial capacity. This can be attested by the fact that Japan’s defence spending has nearly doubled to 2% of GDP, a whole year earlier than initially planned. The prime minister also approved a record-high FY2026 budget allocating a historic ¥9.04 trillion for defence, which is a remarkable 9.4% increase year-on-year (Cabinet Secretariat, 2026). In addition, Takaichi has also instituted a multiyear budget allocation to support defence industrial development – particularly in shipbuilding and aerospace – and has taken concrete steps to eliminate lingering export restrictions on defence equipment with the intent of strengthening strategic cooperation with allies and like-minded partners.

By actively working to strengthen the U.S.–Japan alliance, Takaichi has placed utmost emphasis on promoting further military integration with the United States

to counter the multitude of regional threats. An additional boost for the prime minister was the successful bilateral summit with President Donald Trump, where she was able to establish a solid personal relationship with a mercurial leader. During the summit, the two leaders pledged to usher in a "new golden age of the U.S.–Japan alliance" that would enhance joint deterrence, response capabilities, and interoperability (MOFA, 2026).

Takaichi has also pushed for greater economic and technological security, drawing on her experience as Japan's Minister for Economic Security. This is evidenced by legislation advanced under Takaichi that strengthens the links between basic scientific research and national security. In July 2026, she formally adopted an integrated innovation strategy that seeks to deepen public-sector, academic, and industry partnerships on dual-use technologies. Takaichi has also been a vocal advocate of pursuing initiatives that can secure supply chains for critical materials such as rare earths, and has even proposed screening mechanisms for overseas investments in sensitive domestic sectors. To achieve this, Takaichi is working to revise the Economic Security Promotion Act with the intent on protecting critical supply chains, semiconductors, and advanced AI technologies. In a similar vein, she recently launched Japan's version of the U.S. Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) to be called the Japan Foreign Investment Committee (JFIC), which will serve to screen future foreign investments (Cabinet Secretariat, 2026).

Another matter of urgency for Takaichi is to consolidate Japan's intelligence capabilities to address perceived gaps in intelligence gathering and interdepartmental coordination. To this end, she has initiated the creation of a centralized National Intelligence Bureau that will be chaired by the prime minister herself. The organization will seek to consolidate information gathered across the varying agencies – including the police and defence ministries – to streamline decision-making during a national crisis (Cabinet Secretariat, 2026). Additionally, she has built upon her earlier work establishing a formal "security clearance" system to prevent both intentional and unintentional dissemination of highly sensitive, classified information. This will allow for more seamless intelligence sharing with other intelligence organizations of like-minded partners.

Furthermore, Takaichi has been active in promoting the Synchronized Hybrid Integrated and Enhanced Littoral Defense (SHIELD program) to safeguard Japan's southwestern island chain using multi-layered missile defence and autonomous assets (MOD, 2026). In this way, she has laboured to further lift restrictions on non-lethal defence equipment exports as well as to permit the transfer of lethal arms to the 17 nations that have defence equipment transfer agreements with Japan, such as the UK and Australia. Takaichi is also actively seeking to establish a domestic mass-production base for advanced hardware, including combat drones and

next-generation fighters. Thus, it can be seen that Takaichi is wasting no time in actively building upon the achievements of Prime Ministers Abe and Kishida; Japan is definitely on the move.

In the realm of foreign policy, Takaichi has also actively worked to expand upon Abe’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in order to further bolster Japan’s strategic global partnerships with the intent to effectively counter regional threats in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, she has already held high-level summits with India, Vietnam, Australia, and the Philippines. These bilateral summits have focused on maritime security, trusted supply chains, and defence technology cooperation. Her updated Free and Open Indo-Pacific (New FOIP) strategy shifts Japan’s diplomatic focus more toward economic security, technological autonomy, and supply chain resilience.

The New FOIP strategy was unveiled during Takaichi’s official visit to Vietnam. It aims to counter economic coercion and ensure regional stability through three key pillars: building economic infrastructure in the age of AI and data supply chain resilience; expanding the U.S. $10 billion Partnership on Wide Energy and Resources Resilience Asia (POWERR Asia initiative) to secure stable energy supplies and critical minerals while restructuring supply chains away from over-reliance on single nations; promoting the FOIP Digital Corridor Concept, which focuses on undersea cables, Open RAN technology, satellite communications, and all-optical networks (METI, 2026).

Therefore, Takaichi’s FOIP should be viewed as an effort to ensure countries in the Indo-Pacific remain “stronger and more prosperous together” (MOFA, 2026) by prioritizing autonomy and the rule of law, the latter a concept that the present U.S. administration has been much less vocal about. This updated FOIP clearly serves as a pragmatic response to shifting geopolitical dynamics, emerging technologies like AI, and rising protectionism with the aim of deepening trade and economic ties with ASEAN and India (MOFA, 2026).

Takaichi also launched the Japan-ASEAN Co-Creation Initiative for AI and is actively pushing for the expansion of this 12-nation initiative. The U.K. became the latest member to join in December 2024 the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which comprises 14% of global GDP. In Vietnam specifically, Japan has committed to increasing investments and expanding bilateral trade to U.S. $60 billion by 2030. Japan is also in the process of enhancing its maritime security cooperation with other ASEAN partners such as Malaysia and the Philippines through its Official Security Assistance (OSA) as well as Official Development Assistance (ODA). The aim is to assist its ASEAN partners to establish more robust deterrence and resilience capabilities. The prime minister is also pushing for the establishment of a CPTPP office in Tokyo so that Japan can function as the crucial lynchpin in this free trade framework.

Through Japan's proactive engagement with ASEAN, many regional actors are increasingly viewing Japan as a stabilizing security node within the broader Indo-Pacific architecture. In other words, Japan is being increasingly viewed as a provider of capacity-building, maritime domain awareness, and industrial cooperation outside traditional alliance structures. Hence, Japan's emerging role is less one of hierarchical leadership than of a team player, emphasizing mutual connectivity and integration across multiple layers of the regional security architecture. As we have seen, Japan under Takaichi has spared no time in intensifying structured engagements across the Indo-Pacific. These numerous engagements should be understood as all vital components of a broader process of security externalization. Rather than being insular, Japan is deeply embedding itself within a layered regional security system involving maritime cooperation, intelligence sharing, and defence industrial coordination. Collectively, these relationships reflect Japan's growing role as a connective security node that links multiple regional frameworks. Undoubtedly, the desired result is not to replace the U.S. alliance, but rather to further supplement it by increasing the quality and density of regional security linkages that surround it.

Despite these vast changes taking place in Japan's security policy, Takaichi's actions represent a critical shift in emphasis rather than a drastic change in direction. Restated, Japan's basic security architecture forged under Abe remains intact, but the policy focus has moved to accelerated implementation, operational readiness, and externalization. Unmistakably, what has prompted these bolder initiatives are ever-increasing external pressures such as China's rapid military modernisation, North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development, the long-term implications of Russia's war in Ukraine for industrial mobilization and deterrence endurance, and finally, the volatility of the current Trump administration. However, the key defining feature of these changes is not merely a more acute threat perception but strong political leadership that is pushing for greater acceleration in changing Japan's security posture in order to counter these threats.

4. PM Takaichi and the Implementation and Externalization of Security Policy

A central feature of the Takaichi administration is the acceleration of implementation under the 2022 defence framework. Japan's defence system has historically been constrained by slow procurement cycles, fragmented acquisition processes, and severely limited stockpiles of munitions and other hardware. Cognizant of these deficiencies, Takaichi is striving to overcome these constraints through a more flexible and rapid procurement system, improved readiness metrics, and expanded munitions and drone production.

As such, industrial mobilization has become a central element of Japan’s defence planning. Therefore, defence production is increasingly being treated as strategic infrastructure rather than merely as a component of the procurement system.

A critical but often underemphasized dimension of Japan’s security transformation is the condition of its defence industrial base. While doctrinal reforms have progressed rapidly, industrial capacity remains a binding constraint on sustained operational readiness. This is due to the fact that Japan’s defence production system has historically been optimized for low-volume, high-precision procurement rather than sustained high-intensity output. The shift toward counter-strike capability and prolonged contingency planning necessarily requires a fundamentally different industrial model. Key existing constraints include limited munitions stockpiles relative to scenario-based planning assumptions, fragmented production lines across major defence contractors, procurement cycles that remain slow relative to operational requirements, and dependence on specialized components.

Acutely aware of these limitations, Takaichi has moved to alleviate the obstacles to increased industrial mobilization capacity. She is pressing for a policy that will expand and enhance production scalability, improve supply chain resilience, and incentivize sustained defence manufacturing output. Despite this, structural challenges persist. Japan’s defence industrial base is constrained not only by production capacity but also by workforce demographics, cost structures, and limited export scalability. Naturally, this creates an internal strategic tension in which Japan’s doctrinal ambition increasingly assumes sustained operational capability, while industrial systems remain stubbornly based on legacy production models. Ultimately, the resolution of this tension will not only define Takaichi’s security policy but will also be imperative for the success of Japan’s long-term security posture.

Another Achilles heel of Japan’s security transformation is the tendency to focus on doctrine while underplaying implementation mechanisms. In practice, Japan’s evolving security posture is heavily shaped by bureaucratic coordination structures centered on the Cabinet Secretariat and the National Security Secretariat (NSS). The creation of the National Security Council in 2013 fundamentally altered inter-ministerial coordination by centralizing strategic decision-making within the executive (MOFA, 2013). However, the practical significance of this reform lies not in formal structure, but in the operational authority of the Cabinet Secretariat to coordinate defence, foreign policy, and intelligence priorities.

Under Takaichi’s leadership, implementation pressure has increasingly shifted from doctrinal formulation to execution management. The NSS functions as the primary coordination hub for aligning defence planning, budget execution, and diplomatic signaling. This includes synchronization between the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other relevant ministries in relation to

supply chain security and critical technology protection. In particular, the Ministry of Defense has undergone significant internal reorganisation, particularly in the areas of procurement reform and capability planning. However, significant structural constraints remain. Procurement cycles continue to reflect legacy systems designed for peacetime acquisition rather than sustained contingency operations. Consequently, the current security policy is defined less by new doctrinal innovation than by attempts to compress and accelerate implementation timelines. That being said, one notable feature of Takaichi's security policy is that it tends to place more emphasis on sustainment-based deterrence logic than platform-based defence planning, which had been the norm.

It goes without saying that the U.S.–Japan alliance remains the foundational pillar of Japan's security architecture. However, the alliance is no longer defined primarily by deterrence signaling. Rather, the operational character of the alliance has evolved toward multi-domain integration. Coordination now extends across missile defence, cyber operations, space systems, and joint planning structures. Under Takaichi, alliance management has shifted toward continuous operational synchronization rather than episodic consultation that was typical in the past. However, structural asymmetry persists as Japan is expanding its operational responsibility while simultaneously remaining dependent on U.S. extended deterrence. Despite this, a key breakthrough has been the deepening of joint planning structures and interoperability frameworks, which include enhanced coordination in missile defence, maritime domain awareness, and integrated air and naval operations. The shift toward multi-domain operations reflects broader changes in the strategy of the United States for the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the emphasis on distributed deterrence and integrated command structures.

As we have seen, moving in lockstep with these changes, alliance coordination has increasingly moved toward operational synchronization rather than consultation under Takaichi. This is attested by improved alignment of procurement cycles, joint exercises at scale, and interoperability in emerging domains such as cyber and space. Undoubtedly, the evolution of this alliance coordination is the outcome of changing expectations regarding burden-sharing.

Therefore, Japan's sustained increase in defence spending and the development of counter-strike capabilities should be understood not merely as domestic policy choices, but also as part of broader alliance expectations aimed at strengthening regional deterrence and strategic stability.

Another notable achievement in this regard is the establishment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) Joint Operations Command (JJOC), located at the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya, Tokyo. This permanent headquarters was created to centrally unify and command the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces so they can execute seamless cross-domain operations. This will play a core role in

strengthening Japan’s Indo-Pacific deterrence and disaster-response capabilities. The earliest concept of a joint operations command emerged in 2006 when the Japan Joint Staff Office (JJSO) was created to advise the Minister of Defense. While officials from the Maritime Staff Office noted the necessity of a dedicated joint headquarters for a unified defence system, the JJSO became the *de facto* headquarters, and plans for a separate command were temporarily shelved. Astonishingly, for nearly two decades, the JSDF relied on *ad hoc*, temporary joint commands to handle specific contingencies and large-scale natural disasters, which often complicated operational efficiency (MOD, 2026).

However, geopolitical shifts and increasingly complex security threats made a major restructuring a matter of survival, and the concept was formally revived in December 2022 under Kishida when the Japanese government released its revised National Defense Strategy and Defense Buildup Plan. This led to the official activation of the JSDF Joint Operations Command (JJOC) on 24 March 2025. The new permanent command assumed the key responsibility of managing real-time operations across land, sea, air, cyberspace, and outer space (MOD, 2026).

This structural change allowed the Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff to focus entirely on advising the prime minister and the minister of defense, rather than juggling operational command during emergencies. As of 2026, the JJOC is currently led by Commander Admiral Tawara Tateki and coordinates closely with the U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) and the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) as well as with its like-minded partners in Europe. But despite such deepening operational integration, the U.S. continues to provide extended deterrence guarantees that Japan can in no way independently replicate. This creates a dual structure: increased Japanese operational responsibility that is paired with enduring strategic dependence. In this manner, Japan’s new security posture has nothing to do with an abrupt transition toward autonomy, but rather with providing greater operational contribution within the alliance framework that it is so dependent upon.

Notwithstanding, the credibility of Japan’s deterrence posture will increasingly depend upon its ability to sustain operations over time. Japan’s evolving security role has produced a tiered regional response characterized by adaptation rather than alignment or opposition. Thus, Japan’s security transformation can be understood as both cumulative and coherent, while remaining an ongoing and evolving process.

Looking back, we can see that Abe expanded institutional capacity, whereas Kishida formalized and resourced it. Now, Takaichi is amidst a process of operationalizing and externalizing so that Japan can survive in an increasingly tumultuous regional security environment.

5. Revising the Three Core Security Documents: Takaichi's Near-term Strategic Priority

The defining feature of the Takaichi administration's early security agenda was the decision to prioritize an early revision of Japan's Three Core Security Documents – the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program of 2022. While these documents were widely regarded as a watershed in Japan's post-war security policy, Takaichi's position is that the rapid deterioration of the security situation has already outpaced key assumptions embedded in the original framework.

In official statements, Takaichi has emphasized three primary drivers of revision. First, the continued acceleration of China's military modernisation, particularly in relation to naval expansion, missile forces, and integrated joint operations capabilities. Second, North Korea's sustained development of ballistic missile systems, including solid-fuel and potentially multiple-warhead technologies. Third, the structural impact of Russia's war in Ukraine, which has reinforced concerns about protracted high-intensity warfare, ammunition consumption rates, and the importance of industrial mobilization capacity (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022; MOD, 2024).

Within this context, Takaichi's strategic rationale should be understood as not a total revamping of the 2022 documents, but instead a starting line in transforming Japan's security posture to one that is much more robust and effective. The 2022 Three Core Security Documents themselves described the international environment as "the most severe and complex since the end of the Second World War" (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022), but Takaichi has interpreted subsequent developments as clear evidence that this assessment no longer accurately reflects the new realities.

Facing an increasingly dangerous security situation, the following three areas have been of particular focus in Takaichi's security policy discussions:

1) **Deterrence posture**: Takaichi has shown a profound interest in strengthening the credibility, survivability, and responsiveness of Japan's standoff and counter-strike capabilities. This includes not only platform acquisition but also command-and-control resilience, targeting integration with allies, and munitions stockpiling.
2) **Defence industrial capacity**: Drawing lessons from Ukraine, Takaichi has placed an increased emphasis on sustained production capacity rather than peacetime procurement cycles. This includes ammunition replenishment rates, supply chain resilience, and defence-industrial coordination with partner States.
3) **Cross-domain integration**: Takaichi has highlighted the need to better integrate cyber, space, electromagnetic, and information domains into conven-

tional force planning to adapt to the increasing complexity of modern multi-domain operations.

While formal revisions to the Three Core Security Documents are currently ongoing, the policy direction thus far indicates continuity with Kishida-era reforms combined with an emphasis on speed of implementation and operational readiness. In this respect, Takaichi’s approach should be interpreted as an adaptive acceleration rather than a wholesale structural redesign. In other words, what is being pursued is a sequence of iterative adjustments rather than the creation of a single comprehensive all-in-one reform package. While the revision of the Three Core Security Documents is unquestionably a vital policy objective, there are a multitude of other policy developments that illuminate the general direction of the administration in the realm of national security. For example, Takaichi has emphasized a strategic reassessment of policy review mechanisms, including the establishment of interagency working groups tasked with evaluating gaps in the implementation of the 2022 Defense Buildup Program. These reviews focus on readiness levels, stockpile adequacy, and procurement timelines, particularly for munitions and standoff systems.

Another indicator of the direction that Takaichi is heading is her emphasis on defence production and industrial resilience. Building on measures initiated under Kishida, the current administration has sought to further stabilize long-term procurement contracts with domestic defence firms while simultaneously encouraging increased production capacity for ammunition and other critical defence components. This clearly reflects a growing concern that Japan’s deterrence credibility depends not only on advanced platforms but also on sustained industrial output that can ensure adequate supplies under conditions of prolonged conflict. To be sure, the lessons of Ukraine have not been lost on Japan.

Another vital policy direction of Takaichi concerns that of alliance coordination, particularly with the U.S. While the U.S.–Japan alliance remains structurally stable, increased attention has been placed on operational integration, including joint planning for contingency scenarios in the East China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This has included discussions on C4 interoperability, logistics coordination, intelligence sharing, and vastly expanded joint exercises. Parallel to these developments, Takaichi has also pushed for Japan’s continued expansion of economic security policy, including measures related to critical infrastructure protection and a more robust supply chain for strategic technologies. These initiatives will build directly on the 2022 Economic Security Promotion Act, but greater emphasis will be placed on implementation and enforcement rather than the mere broadening of existing legislation.

One should be mindful, however, that at the present stage there are no indications of a fundamental doctrinal break from the initial 2022 NSS framework. Instead,

policy progression has taken the form of incremental recalibration, with a focus more on eliminating implementation gaps, increasing operational readiness, and better adapting to new security threats. Therefore, the revision process of the Three Core Security Documents serves as both a policy instrument and as a signaling mechanism to both its friends – particularly the U.S. – and neighboring adversaries that Japan is keenly aware of the current strategic situation and is quickly evolving its policies so that it can more effectively respond to these challenges.

Conclusion

The evolution of Japan's security policy under Prime Ministers Abe, Kishida, and Takaichi should be understood as an incremental build-up or a cumulative transformation rather than as individual developments that took place during each respective administration. In other words, these three prime ministers have all contributed vital layers in shaping Japan's current defence posture that have been mutually complementary and do not possess a competing and divergent strategic logic.

As this essay has shown, Abe's most enduring legacy lies in his bold initiation of a strategic redefinition of Japan's defence posture. By taking the key steps in establishing the National Security Council and reinterpreting collective self-defence, he successfully expanded the conceptual boundaries of Japanese security policy and paved a path toward Japan's being able to take a more proactive strategic orientation (Cabinet Secretariat, 2013; Hughes, 2015). On the other hand, the contribution of Kishida, who succeeded him, was more narrowly focused on institutional consolidation. Through the 2022 Three Core Security Documents, he succeeded in translating Japan's strategic intent into a more coherent doctrine. However, Kishida was not content with stopping there, as under his helm, Japan significantly increased its defence spending as well as obtained counter-strike capabilities for the first time (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022). Hence, this can be viewed as a key phase in which Japan's security policy was transformed from an evolving framework into an operationalized strategy, which was now grounded on a much more solid national strategic foundation.

In contrast, Takaichi's role thus far can be understood as being both adaptive and accelerative. This is because she has not introduced a fundamentally new strategic paradigm for Japan but instead has steadfastly emphasized and pushed for the urgent need to revise, refine, and quickly implement the 2022 framework in response to an increasingly unstable regional environment. Therefore, a natural analytical question would be not if Japan is becoming a more determined and potent military actor – this trajectory is already well established – but rather how

rapidly and in what form will Japan's military capability be realized and operationalized. In this regard, Takaichi's repeated pledge of revising the Three Core Security Documents by the end of 2026 suggests a critical policy shift from one that hitherto emphasized strategic intent to one that places a sharper focus on strategic implementation with an added sense of urgency.

That being said, several key constraints remain. First, Japan's constitutional framework, namely Article 9, will continue to determine the limits of permissible military action, even while the constitutional interpretations of Article 9 have expanded over the years. Second, fiscal pressures associated with sustained defence spending increases will also become a constraint on long-term procurement ambitions. Unquestionably, the rapidly changing national demographics as well as the weak yen will be detrimental in this regard. Third, alliance dependency on the U.S. for extended deterrence will remain a structural *sine qua non* of Japan's security posture for the foreseeable future. Lastly, since Japan's security transformation has been largely driven by the elite-level policy experts from both the civilian and military sectors, a holistic security perception and awareness by the public is still lacking. This can be seen as a possible impediment that will prevent a durable and fully consolidated shift in Japan's security identity.

Public opinion surveys continue to show persistent ambivalence toward constitutional revision, particularly Article 9, with roughly half of respondents remaining cautious or opposed to a formal revision (NHK, 2026). Furthermore, a significant segment of society and certain portions of the political establishment continue to view Japan primarily as a security recipient that should remain dependent on the U.S. for extended deterrence and strategic assurances. This leads one to surmise what portion of the public actually grasps the essence of Japan's major policy changes and embraces Japan's new emerging security posture. It should not go unnoticed that national security remains a sensitive topic in Japan that is seldom taught in schools with an overtly military component. Moreover, JSDF personnel are seldom seen in public with their uniforms, and the majority of the public perceives that the primary function of their "military" is to respond to domestic natural disasters. Of course, one also cannot overlook the fact that Japanese domestic law does not recognize the existence of a full-fledged military, and thus the JSDF is deemed officially as special public employees. This fact is reflected in the nomenclature of their ranks, which makes a clear break from the Second World War and does not conform to international norms. Furthermore, the JSDF even lacks a military tribunal, and its personnel can only be tried in civilian courts. One can only ponder how such a non-traditional institution will fare in an actual full-fledged war.

Taken together, these constraints clearly show that Japan's security transformation remains far from complete. It is still an ongoing process of adaptation and evolution that successive future administrations will need to tackle while also balancing

constitutional constraints, strategic necessity, and alliance management. Of course, the ultimate question becomes: how much time does Japan have left? From this perspective, the true significance of Takaichi's policies perhaps is not that she initiated a new era of Japanese security policy, but that she realized that time is of the essence and thus rapidly pushed the boundaries of the existing framework to one that can better deal with Japan's existential security threats.

To be sure, if Takaichi can gain control of the upper house in the elections scheduled for some time in 2028, she may decide to take even bolder action and go far beyond the implementation of the 2026 Three Core Security Documents by moving toward actual constitutional revision. This would be something that even Abe himself could not accomplish during the zenith of his political power. No doubt, it remains to be seen if Takaichi will actually pursue, let alone succeed, in what will amount to be a massive paradigm shift of postwar Japanese security policy. But at the end of the day, it may very well be an external national security crisis that gives Japan no choice but to abruptly move in that direction regardless of who the prime minister is.

In this way, in the realm of security, Japan's policy trajectory cannot be explained by a mere "Japan is back" remark that has become a trademark phrase of the prime minister. This is because, as we have seen, Japan has been undergoing a layered transformation in its security policy that has now clearly entered a phase of operational acceleration in which the defining feature is the convergence of internal capability expansion along with external network construction. Japan is not just back; it is on the move. Japan is increasingly, albeit cautiously, cognizant of the fact that it will someday need to function as a security provider within the Indo-Pacific region while remaining anchored to the U.S.–Japan alliance in order to maintain maximum deterrence assurances. The ensuing result could be an emergence of a "normal state" that is characterized by an enhanced sense of security agency and a nation that sees itself as a stakeholder in its own national security destiny, as well as the pursuit of further defence integration with the U.S. in order to make the alliance much more robust and mutual.

Undoubtedly, this transition is far from complete, as crucial structural weaknesses still need to be addressed. For example, Japan's operational role is expanding much faster than its industrial capacity base, which leads to a persistent gap between strategic ambition and sustained capacity. This must be resolved if Japan is to attain a more formidable and sustainable security posture. Furthermore, although Japan's future security policy trajectory appears remarkably clear, the nation's underlying societal and security identity foundations have not kept pace with such rapid evolution.

These issues reflect a deeper structural tension in Japan's strategic posture. These need to be resolved, as a healthy democracy necessitates that its citizens understand the fundamental changes in security policy that Japan is currently undergoing.

In turn, this allows Japan to be more effective in pursuing a path in which the country not only becomes a regional security provider but also enhances its deterrence capabilities, thereby deepening defence integration with other like-minded partners, and expanding the operational roles of the JSDF.

While material capabilities and institutional frameworks have moved significantly forward, the domestic consensus regarding the meaning of Japan’s strategic normalization will remain incomplete unless public awareness is increased and the public can grasp the logic and reason behind Japan’s security transformation. This duality is central to understanding the limits of Japan’s ongoing security transformation. In this way, Takaichi’s decisive actions toward revising the Three Core Security Documents inherently reflect a combination of external pressure and internal recognition that will surely require further societal adjustments.

For these reasons, Japan should be more appropriately understood as a nation that is undergoing an extended and transformative strategic transition in which institutional change is increasingly outpacing the consolidation of public opinion. In the end, the trajectory of this transformation will depend not merely on policy implementation at the executive level, but on whether or not a durable domestic consensus can emerge regarding Japan’s security identity as a “proactive security provider” in an ever more volatile Indo-Pacific region.

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