

The challenges to traditional deterrence: a view from Japan

Interview with Ambassador Nobushige Takamizawa



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Question 1: What was Japan's evaluation of threats in its first National Security Strategy?

Just after he took office in September 2021, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced his initiative to review the 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS), the 2018 National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG) and the 2018 Mid-term (FY 2019-2023) Defence Plan by the end of 2022. The international security environment has deteriorated, and it is increasingly clear that Japan is now facing unprecedented security challenges. These include uncertainty over the existing international order, mutually undermining great power competition in the political, economic and military realms including through hybrid warfare, persistent grey-zone situations with risks of escalation to conflicts, and military build-up and modernization both in the nuclear and conventional fields¹.

¹ 2021 Japan's Defence White Paper.

It is worth taking a look at what was the regional assessment in the 2013 NSS. Japan's first National Security Strategy under the Shinzo Abe Cabinet highlighted two regional challenges among others². First, North Korea's nuclear and missile developments, including missiles with ranges covering the mainland of the United States, along with its continued attempts to miniaturize nuclear weapons. This is substantially aggravating the threat to the security of the region, posing a serious challenge to the entire international community. Second, China's rapid advancement of its military capabilities and intensified activities in various areas, including its continued attempts to unilaterally change the *status quo* by coercion in the South and East China Seas, incompatible with international law.

However, based on its assessment of the international security environment at that time, the overall direction of the 2013 NSS was cautious but leaning towards believing in the resilience of traditional deterrence as well as global and regional stability brought by mutual dependence and international cooperation enhanced by globalization. In dealing with China, the NSS articulated that *"Japan will strive to construct a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests with China from a broad, as well as a medium-to long-term perspective"*³.

With regard to Russia, the NSS stressed that *"Japan will advance cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security and energy, thereby enhancing bilateral relations as a whole"*. Russia was not dealt with in the context of the assessment of challenges at all, both regionally and globally. Even the 2018 NPDG, formulated after the Crimea annexation by Russia in 2014 and against the background of heightened tensions between the United States and Russia, called for enhancing mutual understanding and trust and pointed out that *"Japan will promote security dialogues with Russia including the '2+2', high-level interactions and broad unit-to-unit exchanges, and deepen joint training and exercises"* while noting the challenges that Russia poses⁴.

The Republic of Korea came at the top among those countries with which Japan shares universal values and strategic interests, in parallel with Australia, ASEAN countries and India. The NSS emphasized three points: the ROK's utmost geopolitical importance for the security of Japan; the significance of Japan-ROK close cooperation in addressing North Korean nuclear and missile issues; the importance of building future-oriented and multi-layered relations and of strengthening the foundation for security cooperation including trilateral cooperation among Japan, the United States and the ROK.

Question 2: What are the recent developments that have changed the situation, thus Japan's threat perception?

China is a major factor as we have seen many negative developments such as China's rapidly expanding military build-up, including its nuclear arsenal, provocative activities in a wide range of areas, expansion and establishment of its bases in the South China Sea, greater pressure

² The 2013 NSS lists the following as global challenges: (1) Shift in the Balance of Power and Rapid Progress of Technological Innovation, (2) Threat of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Other Related Materials, (3) Threat of International Terrorism, (4) Risks to Global Commons (maritime space, outer space and cyberspace), (5) Challenges to Human Security, and (6) The Global Economy and Its Risks.

³ The NSS highlights engagement: *"There is an expectation for China to share and comply with international norms, and play a more active and cooperative role for regional and global issues"; "Japan will encourage China to play a responsible and constructive role for the sake of regional peace, stability and prosperity"*.

⁴ The NSS notes that Russia is enhancing its military posture by continuing force modernization efforts with a focus on nuclear forces, and that Russia is in sharp confrontation with Europe and the United States over issues including the situation in Ukraine.

against Taiwan through the exercises and intrusions into the Taiwan ADIZ, increasing and persistent presence and intrusion into areas surrounding Japan's Senkaku Islands. In addition, a lack of transparency in security policy and a huge gap between China's commitments and its actions as in the case of the South China Sea and Hong Kong are increasingly evident source of regional concerns. The cross-strait relationship has been worsened by the deterioration of relations between China and the United States.

The most worrisome, among these concerns, is Xi Jinping's and the CCP's determination to seek to revise the international order to be more advantageous to China's national interests, Beijing's effort to take a more assertive role in global affairs including by relying on military strength and an increased willingness and confidence to confront the United States and other countries in areas where interests diverge⁵.

In this context, experts are debating over the real intention behind recent Chinese attempts to enhance so-called "strategic deterrence" capabilities ranging from the development of new ICBMs, building solid-fuelled ICBM silo fields, to fielding the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV) capable MRBM. Chinese experts have been expressing their positions to the US counterparts that China's nuclear build-up has been motivated by the strong and modernizing U.S. offensive capabilities as well as its growing missile defence capabilities.

This may be true, but there are several questions to ask. Is there a possibility that Chinese experts, in their strategic calculations are talking about the past situation that China has already overcome, and that current and future Chinese strategies are no longer based on these older assumptions? If President Xi Jinping, the CCP and the PLA seek to shape the new world order before the 100th anniversary of the PRC in 2049, is it realistic to assume that China can continue to remain the third nuclear power after the United States and Russia? Is there a possibility that China believes that beefing up its nuclear capabilities in both quality and quantity will be cost-effective and well within its budget allocation given the size and growth of its economic power? Since a peaceful solution across the Taiwan Straits can include applying coercive measures, is not it reasonable for China to attain parity with or supremacy to the United States, and to use its nuclear arsenal to deter the U.S. as well as to coerce its neighbours in respecting China's core interests on China's terms.

Second, North Korea. The concerns and dire situation that the 2013 NSS assessed have been exacerbated by the continued North Korean activities, which represent a grave and immediate threat to the security of Japan and significantly undermines regional as well as international peace and security. As the latest Japan's Defence White Paper analyses, North Korea is relentlessly pursuing increasingly complex and diverse modes of attack and is steadily strengthening and improving its attack capabilities. These enhancements make early detection of the signs of a launch and the interception of the missiles more difficult, thereby posing new challenges for the information gathering, early warning, and interception postures of relevant countries, including Japan⁶. What really matters is the fact that North

⁵ US DOD: China Security Report 2021.

⁶ As concerns North Korea's missile development to date, there are five notable areas that require careful attention: extension of missile ranges, enhancement of accuracy, 24/7 along with higher mobility operational capability to make concentrated attack possible, diversification of launching methods, enhanced surprise attack capability through improvement of secrecy and readiness as well as introduction of terminal manoeuvring capabilities (Japan's Defence White Paper 2021).

Korea decided and articulated the policy of strengthening its nuclear deterrent and continues to strengthen its capabilities⁷.

Third Russia. Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine launched just after the Beijing Olympic Games was not a surprise but it was conducted in a manner that shocked the entire international community: discarding its sincere efforts to pursue a peaceful settlement; violating the Minsk agreement completely; conducting simultaneous assaults on key military facilities and the major cities while attacking civilians; demanding regime change, total disarmament and forcing Ukraine to give up its membership application to NATO; threatening the use of nuclear weapons for coercion. These shape the combination of the worst-case scenarios which experts had not ruled out. This is completely changing the strategic picture and affecting the thinking and concerns not only in Europe but also in Asia and beyond. There are at least three points to note. First, enhanced cooperation mechanisms and greater connections between the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific through various initiatives can and should play a significant role to take concerted actions in dealing with this unprecedented challenge caused by Russia. Second, the role that extended nuclear deterrence can or should play has been challenged and this goes with a lot of questions.

There are differences between the situations with Russia in Europe on the one hand, and China in the Indo-Pacific on the other hand. Russia is a declining energy giant and a nuclear weapon state peering with the United States but being faced with the expansion of NATO and the EU, it is focusing on land warfare and is trying to neutralize countries which were included in the former Soviet Union. China is a rising economic giant and the third nuclear power declaring a minimal deterrent strategy, and focusing on maritime expansion, positioning itself as the centre of Asian neighbours, confronting the United States on all fronts while trying to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies and partners.

Fourth, the ROK. There have been many ups and downs between Japan and the ROK, particularly since President Moon took office in 2017. In his policy speech in the Diet in January 2022, Prime Minister Kishida strongly urged the important neighbour, the ROK, to make appropriate responses based on Japan's consistent position. Foreign Minister Hayashi took the same line in his first diplomatic policy speech to the Diet, stressing the importance of Japan-ROK and Japan-U.S.-ROK coordination, including in dealing with North Korea, for the stability of the region. He also acknowledged that Japan-ROK relations are in an extremely difficult situation, but he emphasized that this should not be left as it is, and that "*keeping promises between countries is the foundation of relations between countries*". He strongly urged the ROK to take appropriate actions to restore sound Japan-ROK relations. It is hard to tell which direction Japan-ROK relations will be going after the new President of the ROK will take office in May. There are also notable policy developments in the ROK such as increased interest in nuclear-powered submarines, strengthening nuclear deterrence (including the issue of nuclear sharing), and promotion of security cooperation coupled with the export of military equipment. The ROK has been running far ahead and Japan seems to have both concerns about and some interest in these issues.

Fifth, the effective use of existing mechanisms as well as newly developed frameworks and initiatives such as CPTPP, RCEP, QUAD and AUKUS, the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the U.S., Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the EU

⁷ The reasons for North Korea to seek a nuclear deterrent are assessed as being the following (2021 Defence White Paper): a) survival of the Kim regime as an ultimate goal, b) own nuclear deterrent to counter U.S. nuclear threats, c) to augment its capability gap in the area of conventional forces in comparison with the Combined U.S.-ROK Forces, while North Korea is insistent it will never give up nuclear weapons and that it is no bargaining chip at all.

Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Given the differences and the diversity of all these agendas, their various scope, purpose and participation/membership, it is important to integrate these mechanisms to lay the groundwork for building trust and confidence and contributing to inclusive, tailored, focused and action-oriented planning.

Question 3: In that context, what are the fundamental challenges to traditional deterrence?

With these developments in Asia and the dire situation in Ukraine and countries surrounding Russia, the strategic landscape has changed dramatically for the more complicated and for the worse. We are facing fundamental challenges in the context of the changing nature of deterrence. Further consideration will be needed to study the link between the issues of Ukraine, North Korea and Taiwan in spite of huge differences between these three cases. At the same time, it is true that Japan's 2013 NSS and Prime Minister Kishida's remarks are a consistent articulation of the two following policies. First, to seek a world without nuclear weapons. According to the NSS, Japan shoulders the responsibility of realizing "a world free of nuclear weapons". Second, to observe the three non-nuclear principles. In addition, Prime Minister Kishida announced his plan to establish an international group of eminent persons for a world free of nuclear weapons, with the participation of current and former political leaders from around the world.

What kind of measures will be needed to enhance or at least maintain deterrence in an integrated manner as well as to build trust and confidence in Asia? Here are some enablers, maybe very limited but that may operate in spite of the increasing strategic competition between the major powers.

First, promote transparency in nuclear doctrines in the framework of the NPT Review Cycle. The postponed 2020 NPT Review Conference and the process up to the 2025 Review Conference should provide the opportunity to deepen the understanding of each nuclear weapon state's updated thinking. Running an interactive session through detailed reporting by the nuclear weapon states and accumulation of reliable open-source information will be anticipated. In this context, it is important for the United States to establish as soon as possible some task force with its allies and partners in the region in order to, at least, assess the resiliency and functioning of deterrence in multipolar nuclear Asia in a comprehensive manner. The assessment should cover the new elements and changes pointed out in this paper as a basis for a thorough review. If all initiatives are realized, it will certainly lay a good basis for bilateral and multilateral dialogue with China focusing on its concept of nuclear deterrence and exploring possible capping or reductions in its nuclear arsenal. This assessment could also lead to highlight measures to be taken to fill the potential political and military capability gap to be collectively borne by the U.S. and its allies, which should include conventional denial capabilities as well as measures to counter influence operations.

Second, build or strengthen bilateral and multilateral mechanisms for sharing information and exchanging views in the planning process of each security/defence strategy making. It will serve to build confidence or at least to raise a common knowledge base or remove misunderstanding. It will begin with the United States and its allies, but it can be expanded beyond that. Introducing an interim guidance in the strategy planning process as in the case of US strategy making is a feasible and practical measure to take. Since there is a debate in the ROK regarding nuclear-powered submarines and the implication of AUKUS, if the mechanism can deal with this issue, it will serve to remove concerns in the region and deepen the understanding of its rationale.

Third, build crisis management mechanisms in a multi-faceted way. Given the changing nature of deterrence and the risk of escalation, bilateral crisis management mechanisms should be structured on a broader basis, including economic security aspects. Strengthening the integration of bilateral mechanisms on a multilateral basis will be vital to prevent the crisis management mechanism from being used for coercion. European experience will help make this mechanism more robust and practical, and further connect the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. It should also lead to establishing a 24-7 sharing information centre with a coordinating function across various domains including sea, air, outer space, cyberspace and underwater as appropriate, and thereby dealing with misinformation and disinformation campaigns from China and Russia.

Fourth, strengthen cooperation between the ROK, Japan and the United States to deal with issues related to North Korea. The agenda and perception set forth in the 2013 NSS seem to be more relevant and urgent given the deteriorating situation, which puts emphasis on bilateral and trilateral cooperation in addressing North Korean nuclear and missile issues. It is vital for the three countries to share information and exchange views on how to effectively deter North Korea, while seeking the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of its nuclear weapons programs.

In conclusion, whether or not all these measures are tested, or fully or partially realized, Japan needs to take concrete measures on its own to maintain or enhance deterrence while seeking the reduction of nuclear weapons. The focus will be on C5ISR, missile defence, extending missile ranges to enhance denial capability, including through active defence. These measures should be taken as essential to maintain deterrence and to lay the groundwork for future arms control and reductions, both nuclear and conventional. Ideally, these measures will be jointly recognized through the mechanism mentioned above.

March 2022
