



The Role of Japan in the US Strategy for the Indo-Pacific Region Under President Joe Biden

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Abstract

This article analyzes Japan's role in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy under President Joe Biden's administration from the perspective of realist theory. In the context of intensifying US-China strategic competition and the rise of the Indo-Pacific region as a global geopolitical focal point, Japan's role as a key US ally has become increasingly important in shaping the regional security space and order led by Washington. The research results show that Japan plays a pivotal role for the US in balancing power and preventing the Russia-China alliance from restructuring the security space in Northeast Asia in particular and the Indo-Pacific in general. Finally, the article concludes that Japan's active participation has made a significant contribution to maintaining a rules-based regional order while enhancing both Japan's and the US's positions in the region.

Keywords: *Japan; US; Indo-Pacific; President Joe Biden; Realism*

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region is emerging as a global geopolitical focal point in the 21st century, with strategic competition between major powers and the formation of multifaceted security challenges (Fulton et al., 2023). Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas, this region encompasses countries in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, as well as some nations in the Middle East and Africa. With a population accounting for more than half of humanity, the Indo-Pacific is not only a concentration of abundant human resources but also possesses rich natural resources. This region is the main growth engine of the global economy, with the presence of four of the world's largest economies - the US, China, Japan, and India. Additionally, the region is home to 7 of the 10 largest militaries in the world, including the US, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan, and Australia (Binh & Quang, 2020). Moreover, the Indo-Pacific contains many vital sea lanes for global trade. In particular, straits such as Malacca and Lombok play a crucial role in transporting oil, gas, and goods between the

Middle East, East Asia, and the rest of the world. Therefore, its unique geographical position, enormous economic potential, and strategic importance have transformed the Indo-Pacific into a key region in the foreign policy of many major powers. Maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity in this region is not only significant for countries within the region but also profoundly affects the world order in the 21st century.

In this context, the US strategy towards the region has undergone important changes, especially under the previous administration of Donald Trump, whose “America First” policy significantly weakened military alliance relationships with partners (Kaufman, 2017). However, the current Biden administration has returned to the traditional approach that has been in place for over seven decades since the end of World War II, with adjustments aimed at reinforcing alliance relations, bringing the US “*back to a central position of world leadership to build a democratic, free, and prosperous world*” (Sokolshchik, 2024). One of the pivotal partners emphasized by President Joe Biden is Japan - the US’ traditional and most important ally in Asia in particular and globally in general (White House, 2024).

Entering the 21st century, the rise of China as a global power and Beijing’s assertive actions in the East Sea and East China Sea have raised concerns about the restructuring of the balance of power in the region. At the same time, the increasingly close Russia-China relationship since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022 has posed serious challenges to the US-led regional order (Meyer zum Felde, 2022). In the context of an increasingly unpredictable and unstable global security situation, the Biden administration has sought to mend and strengthen alliance and partnership relations in the region through inheriting and issuing the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” and announcing the “National Defense Industrial Strategy”, in which Japan plays a central role.

This article aims to analyze Japan’s role in the US strategy for the Indo-Pacific region under President Joe Biden from the perspective of realist theory. The article poses the main research question: How does Japan play a role in the US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region under President Joe Biden? To answer this question, the study will examine three aspects: (1) The development of the US-Japan alliance in the context of US-China strategic competition; (2) Japan’s role in balancing power and deterring the Russia-China alliance in Northeast Asia; and (3) The impact of Japan’s active participation on the positions of Washington and Tokyo in the region.

2. Methodology

This article applies a qualitative analysis method based on realist theory in international relations to assess Japan’s role in the US strategy for the Indo-Pacific region under President Joe Biden. Realism, with its core assumptions about the anarchic nature of the international system, the importance of power and national security, as well as the central role of states as the main actors in international politics (Hong & Hiep, 2014, p. 93-99), provides a useful analytical lens to understand the complex geopolitical dynamics forming in the region.

First, the study uses the concept of “balance of power” from realism to analyze the development of the US-Japan alliance in the context of escalating US-China strategic competition. From this perspective, the US strengthening of its alliance with Japan is seen as an effort to counterbalance China’s rise and maintain the US hegemonic position in the region. The study examines policy statements, bilateral and multilateral security agreements, as well as joint military activities between the US and Japan under President Joe Biden to assess the level of strategic cooperation between the two countries.

Second, the study applies the concept of “security dilemma” from realism to analyze Japan’s role in preventing the Russia-China alliance from restructuring the security space in Northeast Asia.

According to this view, a country's efforts to enhance its security can be perceived as a threat by other countries, leading to a trajectory of tense confrontational escalation. The study evaluates how Japan balances between strengthening its national security defense capabilities and maintaining regional stability, while also examining the reactions of Russia and China to the increasing US-Japan military presence in Northeast Asia.

Third, the study assesses the impact of Japan's active participation on the positions of Washington and Tokyo in the region from the perspective of prominent realist scholars. This includes examining how the US-Japan alliance affects the regional balance of power, the ability to deter potential threats mainly from Russia, China, and North Korea, and forecasting the potential to shape geopolitical outcomes favorable to both Washington and Tokyo in the coming period.

In conclusion, although realism provides a robust analytical framework for this study, this theory also has certain limitations. In particular, it may not be sufficient to fully explain the role of intangible factors such as culture, ideology, or international norms in shaping US foreign policy. Therefore, the study acknowledges these limitations and hopes that new research will supplement perspectives from other theories (especially liberalism) to provide a more comprehensive picture of Japan's role in the US Indo-Pacific strategy under President Joe Biden.

3. Results

3.1. The Development of the US-Japan Alliance in the Context of US-China Strategic Competition

The US-Japan alliance has undergone a new transformation under President Joe Biden, reflecting changes in the regional and global power structure. The rise of China as a counterbalancing power has created new challenges to the US-led order in the Indo-Pacific region, forcing Washington to adjust its strategy and strengthen relations with key allies, especially Japan - America's number one allied power in maintaining a balanced power equilibrium in the region (O'Shea & Maslow, 2024).

The US-Japan alliance had been seriously weakened when President Donald Trump disregarded traditional commitments to military allies, causing Japan to perceive insecurity and potential threats as the US created a "vacuum" that could potentially abandon the region in the future. Solís (2019) even argued:

"Japan is facing an unprecedented challenge in the 'Trump shock', a US president who denies and could dismantle the key principles of the post-war liberal order that the US initially built - multilateral organizations, a rule-based economic order, and alliances maintained by the convergence of both interests and values".

The US electoral political system shows the harm of discontinuity and inconsistency in the country's foreign policy, which has worried senior Japanese leaders about the possibility of a future presidency with isolationist foreign policy, disregarding the traditional liberal values of American democracy like Donald Trump. If this scenario occurs, it would put Japan's national security situation in a state of serious alert. Consequently, Japan has somewhat weakened its faith in US protection and implemented a "hedging" policy, improving relations with China and enhancing domestic defense capabilities (Rachman, 2024). Therefore, to mend the traditional alliance relationship with Japan, the Biden administration has made efforts to restore and strengthen this relationship. This is clearly demonstrated by Japan being one of the first countries President Joe Biden welcomed to the White House after taking office. The summit meeting between President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in April 2021 reaffirmed the US commitment to Japan's security and emphasized the

importance of the alliance in maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia in particular and the Indo-Pacific in general (White House, 2021).

From a balance of power perspective, the US strengthening of relations with Japan is seen as an effort to contain China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The Biden administration has actively promoted multilateral security initiatives such as the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, or cooperation frameworks between US-Japan-South Korea, US-Japan-Philippines, with the most focus on QUAD between the US, Japan, India, and Australia, in which Japan plays a key role in containing China's power expansion into the East China Sea and East Sea (Koga, 2024). QUAD is seen as a mechanism to counter China's regional hegemonic ambitions, while enhancing coordination capabilities among democratic powers under US leadership in the region, as Kei Koga (2024) argued:

"In this context, the US has tried to build strong strategic alliances with 'like-minded' countries in containing China, such as key US allies and partners, by facilitating small multilateralism to protect the existing international order, demonstrating the power struggle between great powers in the process of power transition".

Japan is the most reliable ally of the US. Besides the shared interests in institutions, economy, and politics in the US-Japan alliance, Japan's support for the US is somewhat influenced by the existing historical legacies in the region, especially with China. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping - a purely nationalist leader who always uses "historical memory" to evoke loyalty and enthusiasm of the Chinese people. Therefore, the historical legacies from the Japanese Imperial era - especially the 1937 Nanjing Massacre - have caused serious resentment among Chinese people towards Japan, and the possibility of "revanchism" rising is likely to occur when the "dragon" is stretching to become a global hegemon. The case of the German Empire's "revenge" in World War II has always been a persistent obsession for world leaders, especially in Europe. As argued by leading realist theorists Stephen M. Walt and Robert A. Belfer (2017): *"The history of war profoundly affects the psychology of national leaders. Even the most rational leaders are influenced by the power of collective memory"*. However, the likelihood of China and Japan reaching that level is unreasonable, but using geographical advantages in the East Sea to make "claims" or create obstacles for Japan is possible when the balance of power in the region tilts towards China.

Therefore, with high consensus, the US and Japan have strengthened bilateral military cooperation through joint exercises and defense technology sharing since President Joe Biden took office. On April 10, 2024, the US-Japan alliance reached a "new era in strategic cooperation" and the leaders of both countries declared to *"continue our tireless work, together and with other partners, to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific and world"* (White House, 2024). In the 5200-word Joint Statement of US-Japan Leaders in Washington, both sides agreed to plan 6 priority cooperation areas, including: defense-security, space, technological innovation and economic security, climate change, cooperation on international issues, and strengthening educational and cultural exchanges (White House, 2024). Among these, military cooperation is seen as marking a comprehensive upgrade of the US-Japan alliance relationship to address emerging regional and global challenges¹. This not only aims to enhance

¹ The specific initiatives are as follows: (1) The US reaffirms its commitment to defend Japan under Article V of the Security Treaty, including the use of nuclear capabilities; (2) Japan commits to significantly strengthen its defense capabilities; (3) Japan will complete its plan to increase the defense budget to 2% of GDP by 2027; (4) Both countries announce their intention to upgrade bilateral command and control frameworks to enhance interoperability and planning between US and Japanese forces; (5) The US commits to begin training and modifying ships for Japan to operate the Tomahawk land-attack missile system; (6) Both sides reaffirm pursuit of the cooperative Glide Phase Interceptor development program to counter advanced regional hypersonic threats; (7) Announcement of a cooperation vision on integrated air defense architecture between the US, Japan and Australia; (8) AUKUS partners (Australia, UK, US) are considering cooperation with Japan on AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects; (9) Establishment of an annual multi-domain exercise between the US, Japan and South Korea; (10) Announcement of plans for regular US-Japan-UK trilateral exercises, starting in 2025; (11) Establishment of the Defense Industry Cooperation, Acquisition and Sustainment (DICAS) Forum co-chaired by the US Department of Defense and Japan's

interoperability between the two forces but also sends a strong deterrent message to China about the alliance's determination to protect the rules-based regional order.

However, the development of the US-Japan alliance also faces serious challenges. Strengthening military cooperation between the US and Japan could be perceived by China as a threat, leading to strong reactions and regional tension escalation. This requires both Washington and Tokyo to carefully consider the deployment of security initiatives to avoid provoking an unwanted arms race. In particular, recently the US has relaxed restrictions on strengthening Japan's defense capabilities and the country has announced an increase in spending to 2% of GDP by 2027 (Schwartz & Johnstone, 2022), which has somewhat caused China to view it as an action escalating regional tensions. Because if Japan's defense strength continues to increase, it will put pressure on China's ability to reclaim Taiwan in the near future. Therefore, this may prompt China to take strong action on the Taiwan peninsula before Japan's defense strength recovers.

In conclusion, the development of the US-Japan alliance in the context of US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region clearly reflects the basic principles of realism in international relations. This alliance plays a key role in the US balance of power strategy, while helping Japan enhance its position and protect national interests in an increasingly complex and unpredictable regional security environment. However, maintaining and developing this alliance relationship also poses serious challenges, requiring skillfulness and flexibility in the foreign policies of both the US and Japan.

3.2. Japan's Role in Balancing Power and Preventing the Russia-China Alliance in Northeast Asia

In the complex and volatile geopolitical context of Northeast Asia following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Japan's role in the US strategy to balance power and contain the Russia-China alliance in restructuring the regional security space has become more urgent than ever. Through the lens of realism, Tokyo's active participation in Washington-led regional security initiatives can be seen as an effort to maintain the rules-based international order and prevent the erosion of Western influence in the Indo-Pacific region in general and Northeast Asia in particular. Consequently, the strengthening of military cooperation between the Russia-China and US-Japan alliances to deter each other is leading to a dangerous cycle of escalating antagonism, establishing a "security dilemma" where both sides are constantly engaged in an arms race, intensifying competition, and expanding influence in the region.

First, it must be recognized that the increasingly close relationship between Russia and China has been creating significant challenges to the regional security structure established in the 20th century under US patronage (Bossuyt & Kaczmarek, 2021). The Russia-China strategic cooperation, manifested through China's refusal to condemn Russia's war actions in Ukraine, economic cooperation with Russia, and intensified security cooperation activities, including naval patrols around Japanese territory and Taiwan, has contributed to changing the balance of power in Northeast Asia unfavorably for the US and its allies (Sent et al., 2024). In this context, Japan, as a key US ally in the region, has played a crucial role in maintaining Washington's presence and influence in the Island Chain strategy. Japan has many reasons to be directly involved in this issue; Japan's territorial disputes with both Russia (Kuril Islands) and China (Senkaku Islands) can be seen as important motivations compelling Japan to play a pivotal role in the US strategy in the region. One of the concrete manifestations of this role is Japan's active participation in US-initiated multilateral security mechanisms, especially QUAD. Although not publicly identified as a military alliance, QUAD has clearly become an important tool in the US power balancing strategy in the Indo-Pacific region (Wei, 2022). Japan's active participation in QUAD not only contributes to enhancing coordination capabilities among democratic powers in the region but also sends a strong deterrent

Ministry of Defense; (12) Formation of a working group to explore training and readiness opportunities for future fighter pilots; (13) Commitment to implement the stable relocation of US forces in Japan under the Okinawa Consolidation Plan, including the construction of the Futenma Replacement Facility in Henoko.

message to China and Russia about these countries' determination to maintain the status quo of the existing security structure, indicating that any attempt by the Russia-China alliance to reestablish regional order will lead to a resolute response from the US, Japan, and other allies.

Furthermore, Japan has played an important role in enhancing the missile defense capabilities of the US-Japan alliance, a move seen as countering the growing threat from North Korea's nuclear missile program as well as China's increasingly improved military capabilities. The deployment of Aegis and PAC-3 missile defense systems in Japan, despite some technical and political obstacles, has demonstrated Tokyo's strong commitment to contributing to the alliance's common defense capabilities. This not only enhances deterrence against potential threats but also complicates the strategic calculations of Russia and China, risking falling into a zero-sum game. Additionally, Japan has actively participated in diplomatic efforts to strengthen the US network of allies and partners in Northeast Asia. In particular, improving relations with South Korea - another important US ally in the region - through resolving historical disputes and enhancing security cooperation was a major effort at the Trilateral Summit held in August 2023. President Joe Biden acknowledged that the US-Japan-South Korea alliance will "*continue to counter threats from North Korea, including cryptocurrency money laundering worth billions of dollars and potential weapons transfers to support Russia's brutal war against Ukraine; protect international law, freedom of navigation, and peaceful resolution of disputes in the East Sea*" (US Department of Defense, 2023). The Japan-South Korea relationship is heavily influenced by historical legacies and the Liancourt Islands sovereignty dispute. Therefore, President Yoon Suk-yeol's efforts, with the support of President Joe Biden, to appease domestic public opinion have laid the groundwork for forming a close alliance between the three leading democracies in the region (Terry & Boot, 2023). Closer cooperation between Japan and South Korea not only contributes to enhancing coordination capabilities within the US-Japan-South Korea alliance but also creates a considerable counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region.

However, it is necessary to recognize that Japan's role in balancing power and preventing the Russia-China alliance from restructuring the security space in Northeast Asia also poses some significant challenges and risks:

First, Japan's enhancement of military capabilities and expansion of security activities may be perceived by China and Russia as a potential threat, leading to strong reactions and escalation of regional tensions. This could create a "security dilemma", where efforts to enhance one country's security lead to insecurity and similar reactions from other countries, ultimately reducing the overall security of all parties involved (Butfoy, 1997). Therefore, the coming period will witness an arms race, strengthening defense capabilities of countries in the region, especially when the Russia-Ukraine conflict has changed perceptions about warfare technology in the 21st century. Electronic warfare equipment, drones, AI-integrated technology devices, semiconductor technology, etc., will dominate the defense market of major powers in the coming time.

Second, Japan's increasing dependence on the alliance with the US in the context of US-China strategic competition may limit Tokyo's diplomatic space and flexibility in foreign policy. This could be disadvantageous for Japan's economic interests, especially given that its economy still has close ties with the Chinese market, with bilateral trade reaching \$283.94 billion in 2023, although this figure has decreased significantly from the previous year's \$335.4 billion, China remains Japan's number one trading partner (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). The delicate balance between security commitments to the US and economic interests with China will continue to be a major challenge for Japanese policymakers in the coming time. Moreover, Japan's more active role in regional security issues may also face opposition from a segment of domestic public opinion, especially those concerned about the country's potential involvement in unwanted conflicts. Japan's peace constitution, amended under the influence of General Douglas MacArthur during the 1945-1951 period, although "flexibly" interpreted by

the US and Japan to allow collective self-defense rights through the establishment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in 1954, still imposes significant restrictions on the country's ability to use force. Therefore, balancing commitments to allies with legal constraints, as well as public expectations, will continue to be an important challenge for the Japanese government.

In conclusion, Japan's role in balancing power and preventing the Russia-China alliance in Northeast Asia is a clear testament to the importance of alliances in contemporary international politics. Through strengthening security cooperation with the US and other regional partners, Japan has made a significant contribution to maintaining the rules-based international order and preventing the erosion of Western influence in Northeast Asia. However, to ensure the long-term effectiveness of this strategy, both the US and Japan need to continue adjusting and carefully considering their approach, in order to avoid unintended consequences and maintain long-term stability in the region.

3.3. The Impact of Japan's Active Participation on the Status of Washington and Tokyo in the Region

Japan's active participation in the US Indo-Pacific strategy has created significant impacts on the status of both Washington and Tokyo in the region (Tien & Trang, 2023, p. 333). From a realist perspective, analyzing these impacts needs to be placed in the context of power competition between major powers and efforts to maintain regional strategic balance.

First, Japan's active participation has contributed to consolidating the US position as a leading power in the Indo-Pacific region. Through enhancing military cooperation and sharing the security burden with Japan, the US has been able to maintain and expand its presence in the region more cost-effectively. This aligns with the realist argument about the importance of alliances in balancing power and maintaining hegemonic status (Walt, 1985). Specifically, Japan's agreement to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2027, improve domestic defense capabilities, and enhance defense cooperation with other allies not only helps reduce the financial burden for the US but also strengthens deterrence against potential threats in the region. Moreover, Japan's strong support for US-initiated regional security initiatives, especially QUAD, has helped enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of these mechanisms. According to Wei (2022), QUAD will create a joint operational security mechanism linking from the Indian Ocean (India) to the Pacific (Australia, Japan, and US military bases in Guam and Midway), forming a closed arc encircling China's maritime space.

Second, for Tokyo, active participation in the US strategy has significantly enhanced Japan's status and influence in the region. According to O'Shea and Maslow (2024), Japan's key role in regional security initiatives has helped the country move beyond the image of an economically powerful but security-passive nation, becoming a comprehensive strategic partner of the US and other countries in the region. This reflects a shift in Japan's foreign policy from passive pacifism to active internationalism, consistent with the theory of foreign policy change in neoclassical realism (Rose, 1998). Specifically, Japan's active role in promoting a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" has helped Tokyo expand its geopolitical and economic influence beyond traditional East Asia. Through economic initiatives such as the "Quality Infrastructure Partnership" and the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework", Japan has actively shaped the region's economic and strategic environment in a way that benefits its interests (Koga, 2024). This reflects the realist argument that states seek to maximize their power and influence in the international system (Hong & Hiep, 2014, p. 94).

Third, Japan's active participation has significantly enhanced the deterrence capability of the US-Japan alliance against potential threats, especially from China, Russia, and North Korea. Japan's investment in advanced missile defense systems, enhancement of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, as well as expanding military cooperation with the US and other regional partners have created a significant defense barrier (Hughes, 2022). This deterrence capability not

only helps protect the security interests of the US and Japan but also contributes to maintaining regional stability by preventing potential aggressive actions. As a result, the US-Japan alliance has shown positive effects in shaping geopolitical outcomes favorable to both Washington and Tokyo. Through multilateral security and economic initiatives, both countries have succeeded in promoting a regional order based on rules, freedom of navigation, and global trade. This not only aligns with the strategic interests of the US and Japan but also enhances their position as leading nations in addressing regional challenges.

In conclusion, Japan's active participation in the US Indo-Pacific strategy has created significant impacts on the status of both Washington and Tokyo in the region. While helping to consolidate the US leadership position and enhance Japan's influence, it also poses new challenges in terms of strategic balance and risk management. From a realist perspective, these developments reflect the complex dynamics of power competition and efforts to maintain strategic balance in an anarchic international system. To maintain the long-term effectiveness of this strategy, both the US and Japan need to continue adjusting and carefully considering their approach, aiming to maximize common interests while minimizing the risk of escalating tensions in the region.

Conclusion

Through analyzing Japan's role in the US Indo-Pacific strategy under President Joe Biden's administration, several conclusions can be drawn:

First, Japan's active participation has created a significant "strategic leverage effect", considerably enhancing the effectiveness of the US "pivot" policy in the region. Through sharing the security burden and participating in multilateral mechanisms such as QUAD, Japan has contributed to creating a "multi-layered security network", strengthening the "comprehensive deterrence" capability of the US-Japan alliance against regional challenges. Additionally, Japan's role in the US strategy reflects an important shift from the traditional "hub-and-spoke" model to a more flexible and multidimensional regional security structure. This not only enhances the alliance's adaptability to diverse challenges but also creates a "positive spillover effect", encouraging other countries in the region to participate more actively in maintaining a rules-based regional order.

Second, the development of the US-Japan alliance in the context of US-China strategic competition has created a new power balance dynamic in the Indo-Pacific region. However, this also gives rise to new challenges, especially the risk of escalating tensions and the "security dilemma" between major powers. Therefore, maintaining a delicate balance between deterrence and dialogue will be a crucial challenge for both Washington and Tokyo in the coming time. Furthermore, Japan's increasing role in shaping the regional order has contributed to creating a "strategic resonance effect" between security and economic initiatives. This not only enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of the US Indo-Pacific strategy but also opens up opportunities for building a more comprehensive and sustainable regional security structure. However, while Japan's active participation has created significant positive impacts, it also poses new challenges in risk management and balancing interests. In the context of increasingly complex regional geopolitics, both the US and Japan need to continue adjusting and fine-tuning their strategies to ensure long-term flexibility and sustainability.

In summary, Japan's role in the US Indo-Pacific strategy under President Joe Biden has created an important strategic catalyst, contributing to reshaping the regional security structure in a way that benefits both Washington and Tokyo. However, to maintain the long-term effectiveness of this strategy, both countries need to continue adapting and innovating in their approach, while enhancing dialogue and cooperation with other stakeholders to build a stable, prosperous, and rules-based regional order.

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