

# The most dangerous place in the world

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How Russia's war and China's military build-up are fuelling unprecedented change in Japan – and a new arms race across East Asia

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By Katie Stallard

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As Russian missiles pummelled Ukraine in the early hours of 24 February 2022, Western leaders scrambled to articulate the magnitude of the moment. Joe Biden declared the Russian invasion an “assault on the very principles that uphold global peace”. Boris Johnson called it an “attack on democracy and freedom”. Addressing the Bundestag three days later, Olaf Scholz proclaimed it a *Zeitenwende* – a turning of the eras. During a speech in Washington DC on 13 January, the Japanese prime minister Kishida Fumio recalled his own private thoughts during those first tumultuous hours.

“Witnessing this aggression,” Kishida said, “I thought to myself: this is a moment that will transform history [and] a moment of truth for Japan.” If Russia’s invasion of Ukraine went unchallenged, he went on, “it will happen elsewhere in the world, including Asia.” He distilled those thoughts over the months that followed into a stark warning, which he delivered at a security summit in Singapore in June 2022: “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow.” The foundations of the international order were being “shaken”, he told the audience of military leaders and diplomats, and the world now stood at a “historic crossroads”.

Unlike Scholz’s *Zeitenwende*, however, which has been characterised by equivocation, exemplified in the German chancellor’s hand wringing over sending Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, Kishida has acted. The changes his government has made to Japan’s security policy in recent months amount to a turning point in the country’s post-Second World War history – a true turning of the eras.

Russia’s war against Ukraine was the accelerant, but Japan’s *Zeitenwende* has been decades in the making. It is indicative of the shift taking place across what was already one of the world’s most contested regions – riven by territorial disputes, historical fault lines, and now a new arms race.

China and North Korea are building up their military strength and their nuclear arsenals. The United States is rushing weapons to Taiwan. Australia is constructing nuclear-powered submarines. India has proposed a 13 per cent increase in its defence budget. For the first time in three decades, South Korea has said it will consider acquiring its own nuclear weapons if the threat from Pyongyang continues to grow, and it is stepping up military drills with the US.

As Kishida summed up the situation in January: “Today, both Japan and the United States are facing a severe and complex security environment as never before in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific since the end of World War II.” ▶

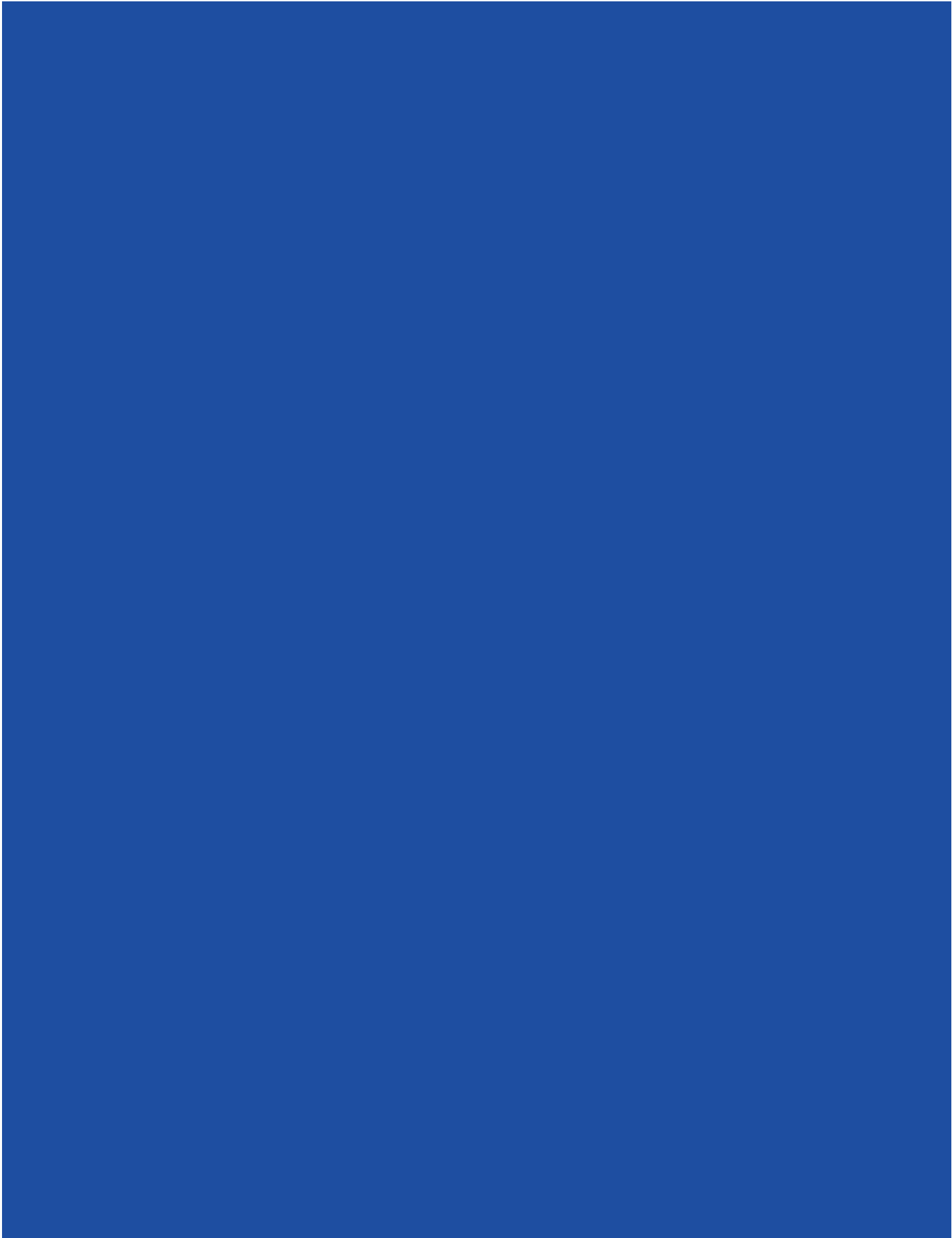


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## Reporter at Large

At the end of last year, Japan's government released a new National Security Strategy, codifying a fundamental shift in the country's approach to defence. For the first time since 1947 – when the defeated nation (then under US occupation) adopted a pacifist constitution, renouncing the right to wage war or to maintain a military with “war potential” – Japan will develop new long-range strike capabilities, including the purchase of hundreds of US-made Tomahawk cruise missiles. The defence budget, which has been fixed at around 1 per cent of GDP for the last half-century, will increase by 60 per cent over the next five years. If you include defence-related spending, such as the coastguard, the figure is closer to 2 per cent of GDP, or double the current level. If these plans are implemented, Japan will move from having the ninth largest defence budget in the world, to the third, behind only the US and China.

But Kishida wasn't finished. In January, he travelled to Washington for a meeting with Biden at the White House, where the two leaders announced a series of measures to strengthen their military alliance. These include establishing a permanent joint military headquarters, as well as new command and control arrangements, and plans to base a US Marine Littoral Regiment in south-western Japan, which would play a crucial role in any conflict with China. “In short,” according to Zack Cooper and Eric Sayers at the American Enterprise Institute, a US think tank, “the US-Japan alliance is shifting to a war footing.”

“This is an inflection point,” Christopher Johnstone, who served on the US National Security Council as director for East Asia until 2022, told me. “Japan's post-World War II defence strategy was characterised by two things: significant restraint in spending, with a de facto cap of 1 per cent of GDP, and self-restraint in the kinds of capabilities that the Japanese military acquired, specifically a decision to forswear power projection capabilities such as aircraft carriers, strategic bombers and long-range missiles. So, these changes represent a major departure.”

Johnstone has spent nearly two decades working on the US-Japan relationship in senior roles within the American government, serving in the Central Intelligence Agency, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and on the National Security Council during the Biden and Obama administrations. I asked

him if he was surprised by the speed with which Tokyo had acted. “This has moved more quickly and more dramatically than I would have imagined,” he said. “Even a few years ago, I would never have imagined a scenario in which Japan increases its defence spending by this amount.”

One example of the urgency with which both Japan and the US are now moving, Johnstone explained, was the announcement of the new Marine Littoral Regiment, which had been proposed less than ten months earlier. “This is very much structured with an eye toward the capabilities that would be needed to fight to defend Taiwan,” he said. “This includes the rapid dispersal of small units acting autonomously with their own intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and weapons systems, designed to be very mobile and to place Chinese ships at risk in a conflict. So, it is the first manifestation in the Indo-Pacific region of how the Marine Corps is redesigning itself to prepare for a potential conflict over Taiwan.”

Japan perceives threats on multiple fronts. In October 2022, North Korea fired an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) over northern Japan, prompting air-raid sirens and warnings to residents to seek immediate shelter. Another barrage of missiles towards the country in November triggered another emergency alert, and later in the month a North Korean ICBM landed approximately 200km off the coast, in the waters of Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

At the same time, Tokyo and Seoul have concerns about whether Donald Trump – or a Trump-like figure – could occupy the White house after the next US election in 2024 and pursue “America First” isolationism.

But while Pyongyang's growing belligerence and its brazen missile tests often dominate the headlines, Japanese officials view China as the real danger.

“The primary driver of the shift in Japan's defence posture is China's growing military

capability, as well as its revisionist and coercive actions in the East and South China Seas and around Taiwan,” explained Mori Satoru, a professor of international politics at Keio University in Tokyo, who previously served in the Japanese foreign ministry. Tokyo and Beijing are engaged in a long-running territorial dispute over what are known respectively as the Senkaku and Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, which Japan nationalised in 2012. It also accuses China of staging repeated incursions around the islands in recent years.

Beginning in 2013, Beijing also built artificial islands in the South China Sea, a maritime trade route used by around one third of global shipping and 42 per cent of Japan's trade. It then militarised the islands, with jets and missile systems, which a former top US admiral called a “Great Wall of SAMs [surface-to-air missiles]”. In 2015, Japan's then prime minister, Abe Shinzo, passed legislation to expand the role of the country's armed forces. Abe, who was assassinated last July, had long pushed for an increase in defence spending. Mori pointed to two developments in 2022, which took place while Japan was revising its security strategy: “Russia invaded Ukraine, and China was coercing Taiwan.”

In March 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, then the head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the threat of a Chinese offensive to seize Taiwan – the self-governing island claimed by Beijing – could take place by 2027. “Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions... And I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years,” he said. While Xi Jinping has been careful not to commit to a timeline, insisting that “time and momentum” are on China's side, Russia's war against Ukraine has forced closer scrutiny of Beijing's intentions.

Last month, a US Air Force general sent a memo to his officers warning them to prepare for war with China within two years. “I hope I am wrong,” wrote General Mike Minihan, head of the Air Mobility Command (responsible for transport and refuelling). “My gut tells me we will fight in 2025.” He ordered all personnel to undertake target practice by the end of February, “with the full understanding that unrepentant lethality matters most. Aim for the head.” The US defence department has stressed that Minihan's comments do not reflect its assessment of the situation. The defence secretary, Lloyd Austin, said in January that he did not believe an invasion was imminent.

Yet there are mounting concerns in both Washington and Tokyo that Beijing appears to be establishing a “new normal” of provocative behaviour around Taiwan, with Chinese fighter jets repeatedly probing the



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island's defences. This could erupt into a new crisis in the coming months as the new US House speaker, Kevin McCarthy, is believed to be planning to visit Taiwan in the spring. When the former House speaker Nancy Pelosi visited in August 2022, the Chinese military staged live-fire exercises encircling the island and fired missiles over it, five of which landed in Japan's EEZ.

"The Russian invasion of Ukraine has compounded Japan's concerns about China," Mirna Galic, a senior policy analyst at the US Institute of Peace, told me. "Particularly in terms of how China is interpreting the impact on rules and norms, which might now be applied to the region." Japan has also revised its view of Russia itself. The two countries are engaged in a territorial dispute over islands known as the Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan, which has prevented them from signing a peace treaty to formally end the Second World War.

Peace talks have broken down and Russia has built new military facilities on the islands over the last five years. "The starkest change you see in Japan's new national security strategy is the description of Russia," Galic said. "In the last strategy document, in 2013, Russia was seen as a partner for peace and stability in the region, and now it's the opposite. They are seen as a destabilising actor; undermining norms and respect for international law, so I think that has also impacted Japan's sense of the stability of the international system."

Tokyo is unnerved, too, by the burgeoning relationship between Russia and China, which has included joint naval drills in the East China Sea, and joint air patrols near Japan and South Korea.

Russia's war against Ukraine has brought these gathering threats into sharp focus. "North Korea has been launching missiles for a long time; they tested their first nuclear weapon in 2006," said Johnstone, who is now with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank. "The China military modernisation story is dramatic, but it's also not new. What is new is the Ukraine war; that's the critical accelerant."

Crucially, Putin's aggression has brought about the one thing that had always eluded Abe in his push to revise Japan's approach to security: public support for increased spending on defence. "There is quite a divisive debate in Japan about how to pay for it, but the [military] build-up itself has strong support across the political spectrum."

**It has fallen to a "dovish" politician to lead Japan's most significant military build-up since 1945**

It is tempting to view this region through the prism of US-China relations; to portray Tokyo as having aligned itself with Washington's assessment of the dangers posed by a more assertive China. But it was Japan that was raising these concerns long before Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" in 2011. "During the 1990s, Japan was among the first to discover that economic interdependence was not slowing China's use of coercion," said Michael Green, the author of *Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzo*. "The Japanese came under serious pressure, with significant events such as China's 1994 nuclear test, and the 1995-1996 Taiwan crisis, when [China] fired missiles right around Japan's islands." Green, who served on the US National Security Council between 2001 and 2005, credits Abe with being the "first mover" in leading the push-back against China.

"When Abe became prime minister in 2012, you had George Osborne in the UK saying that London was going to be the renminbi capital of Europe, and the American public was somewhat evenly divided about whether our future in Asia was with China, or with Japan and our allies," he recalled. "It was Abe who started using the phrase 'free and open Indo-Pacific' [now a key part of US foreign policy]. He championed the Quad [the security grouping of Japan, India, Australia, and the US], and he emphasised the importance of resisting China's Belt and Road Initiative debt traps." Japan now invests more than China on infrastructure across the region. It was not until the Trump administration that Washington embraced Abe's "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy," Green said, which the Biden administration has preserved, along with agreeing the new "Aukus" security pact with the UK and Australia. Russia's war and China's recent behaviour have cemented this shift for both Japan and its Western partners.

On 31 January, Nato's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, travelled to the Iruma air base, north-west of Tokyo, for a meeting with Kishida. This was a "critical moment for Nato and Japan," Stoltenberg warned, with China "watching closely" the world's response to Russia's invasion. The two leaders vowed to deepen their cooperation and agreed that the international community was confronted with "changes defining an era".

Kishida is not a man who is prone to hyperbole. It is ironic that it has fallen to a politician who is known for being cautious and soft-spoken – who has previously described himself as "dovish" – to lead Japan's most significant military build-up since 1945. But he has been clear about what was at stake from those first hours of Russia's war against Ukraine. He understood that this was a moment that would transform history, and that there could be no turning back. ●

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