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“Japan’s New NSS: *Zeitenwende* or Time-Tested Tradition?”

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Essay by Erik Isaksson, Free University of Berlin

Japan’s new National Security Strategy (NSS) and its associated National Defense Strategy and National Buildup Program, which were announced on 16 December, have provoked commentary on the radical change in Japanese security policy.¹ The country’s first ever National Security Strategy was introduced in 2013, and a revision of that document had long been in the cards. As has been widely reported in media coverage and expert commentary,² some of the most high-profile additions include a raising of Japanese defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2027 and Japan’s acquisition of counterstrike capabilities, both of which are indeed big steps for a nominally ‘pacifist’ country.

Sharply increased defense spending and counterstrike capabilities are certainly noteworthy, and there is a palatable Japanese sense of urgency after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and recent aggressive behavior by China. Japanese security policy has, however, been on an expansive course regarding increased defense spending and greater military capability for some time, particularly during the Abe administration (2012–2020). This general argument on the relative continuity in Japan’s foreign policy direction has been made in greater detail elsewhere from various perspectives.³ Here, I will briefly sketch how this trend correlates with a long-standing domestic preoccupation with how Japan is seen internationally, a tendency that has often been observable in official government discourse, emphasizing the importance of Japan making a ‘contribution’ to international society in its foreign policy, and urging that Japan play a greater role on the world stage. This

¹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “Japan’s New Strategic Direction,” *The Diplomat*, December 30, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/japans-new-strategic-direction/>; Chietigj Bajpae, “2022: The Year Japan and Germany Became ‘Normal’ Countries”, *The Diplomat*, December 30, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/2022-the-year-japan-and-germany-became-normal-countries/>; and Simran Walia, “Makeover for Japan’s Security Strategy,” *ISDP Voices*, December 29, 2022, <https://isdpeu.com/makeover-for-japans-security-strategy/>.

² Justin McCurry, “Japan Approves Biggest Military Buildup since Second World War amid China Fears,” *The Guardian*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/16/japan-approves-biggest-military-buildup-since-second-world-war-amid-china-fears>; and Ryan Ashley, “Japan’s New National Security Strategy Is Making Waves,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute Analysis*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/japans-new-national-security-strategy-is-making-waves/>.

³ H. D. P. Envall, “The ‘Abe Doctrine’: Japan’s New Regional Realism,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 20:1 (2020): 31–59; Tom Le, “A Japanese Security Sea Change? Let’s See Change First,” *Critical Asian Studies*, January 4, 2023, <https://criticalasianstudies.org/commentary/2023/1/3/commentary-tom-le-a-japanese-security-sea-change-lets-see-change-first>.

tendency is in the NSS too, but its emphasis is less on Japan's international society 'contribution,' and more on a greater (often military) role. It puts a greater emphasis on Japanese leadership on 'universal values,' a discursive effort to divide the international community into those countries which support universal values and are also called 'likeminded countries,' and those which challenge universal values and thus should be securitized.

Looking back at some of the other past policy changes and international events that have themselves been deemed 'transformative' or constituting 'a new normal' in Japanese foreign policy provides a useful illustration. After the oil shocks of the early 1970s and President Richard Nixon's putting an end to the Gold Standard and normalizing of relations with China, Japanese leaders started developing new foreign policy strategy that was supposed to account for the economic and trade—and not just the military—dimensions of security. This was articulated toward the end of the decade as 'comprehensive security.' In 1979, the year after its introduction, Foreign Minister Sunao Sonoda wrote in the ministry's yearly bluebook that his diplomatic goal was for Japan to be a country that was "useful" and indeed, "indispensable to the world". The "worth" and "importance" of states in international society had become based not on "strength," but on how they managed to "contribute to the interests of international society as a whole," he wrote.⁴ The 2022 NSS ends with a paragraph emphasizing how Japan will "continue to fulfill a leading and constructive role in resolving a broad array of issues. Japan's actions in this way worldwide will further enhance its presence and credibility in the international arena and expand the circle of like-minded countries [...] (36),⁵ echoing Sonoda's call for importance, but importance rather to a "minilateral" group of likeminded partners than to a broader international society.

The desire to make a 'contribution' has, of course, been heavily influenced by external factors. At the dawn of the Gulf War, Japanese leaders experienced acute pressure to 'step up Japan's game' and assist the UN forces which were intervening against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Recently declassified Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) documents from 1991 show how, after the Kuwaiti government's 'thank you' ad in US papers on February 1991 that excluded mentioning Japan—which had 'only' contributed money for non-military assistance to Kuwait—MOFA officials were determined to make "personnel contributions" toward landmine removal.⁶ Not much later in 1992, Japan sent its first-ever UN peacekeeping troops to Cambodia through the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) after the passing of a new Peacekeeping Operations law to allow such participation. This development had strong connections to the Japanese Gulf War experience: there was a sense in the government that Japan had humiliated itself in the eyes of the rest of the world by not contributing military personnel to Kuwait. As Hiromi Nagata Fujishige, Yuji Uesugi, and Tomoaki Honda argue, participation in UNTAC was preceded by the "political obsession" of Japanese leaders with contributing troops internationally which is captured in the informal catchphrase "international contribution" (87).⁷ This general push for "contribution" was partly born out of Japanese fear of abandonment by the US should the latter have sustained too many casualties in the Gulf, an outcome which Japanese leaders feared would leave to domestic isolationism (68).⁸ The NSS also reveals concern that the United States will no longer be there for Japan is alive: the text points to "changing power balances and

⁴ "わが外交の近況 1979年版(第23号)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/1979/s54-contents.htm>.

⁵ "National Security Strategy of Japan," Cabinet Secretariat, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>. Direct English language NSS quotes are from the provisional translation of the Japanese language original document, which has been checked for potential discrepancies in each case.

⁶ Hiroyuki Maekawa, "自衛隊初の海外派遣 「武力行使でない」との政治決断に至るまで", *Asahi Shimbun*, December 22, 2022, <https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASQDG6J2LQD5UTIL02Y.html?pn=8&unlock=1#continuehere>.

⁷ Hiromi Nagata Fujishige, Yuji Uesugi, and Tomoaki Honda, *Japan's Peacekeeping at a Crossroads* (Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2022).

⁸ Amy L. Catalinac, "Identity Theory and Foreign Policy: Explaining Japan's Responses to the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 U.S. War in Iraq," *Politics and Policy* 35:1 (2007): 58-100.

diversifying values” as the reasons that why “strong international leadership is being lost in the global governance structure at large” (7).⁹ It is furthermore “becoming increasingly difficult for the United States, Japan’s ally with the world’s greatest comprehensive power [...] to manage risks in the international community and to maintain and develop a free and open international order” (5).¹⁰ These points both appear under “Global Security Environment and Challenges,” and, as such, are the backdrop to the decision to expand military capabilities. “Diversifying values” is a term that is used elsewhere in the NSS and appears as a construction that separates Japan and its likeminded partners, who are said to be guided by “universal values,” from “some nations” who are “not sharing universal values” and “are making attempts to revise the existing international order” (1).¹¹ This illustrates how strategic concerns of “abandonment” by the US mix with discursive efforts toward ‘likeminded’ unilateralism.

In 2004, Japan sent troops to Iraq, which participated until 2006 in reconstruction efforts in non-combat zones (whether they managed to stay completely out of “combat zones,” has, however, been put into question through official Ground Self-Defense Forces logs).¹² This move prompted newspaper headlines, for example *The Guardian’s* of 26 July 2003 that proclaimed the “End of an Era,” that one would be forgiven for thinking are drawn from the present day.¹³ In the run-up to passing the law that enabled the sending of troops, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas for a summit meeting. In the statement that followed, Japan declared that it “would proactively consider what to do for the reconstruction of Iraq, and play a positive role,” as well as that “Japan wished to make a contribution commensurate with its national power and standing.”¹⁴ The NSS arguably represents one step further for this discourse in the direction of ‘likeminded’ unilateralism: its second paragraph states that “to date, advanced democratic countries, including Japan, have devoted themselves to upholding universal values such as freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights, and the rule of law, and to spearheading the effort to shape the international society of coexistence and coprosperity” (1). Key here is the identification of Japan with “advanced democratic countries” that “spearhead” the shaping of international society; Japan has, in a way, taken the step from talking about its desire to “contribute commensurate to its national power” to articulating how it already belongs to this high-status group of likeminded partners.

The late Shinzo Abe, whose legacy is currently the subject of intense debate on the direction of Japanese foreign policy,¹⁵ had already been prime minister once in 2006-2007 before he returned for his second stint between 2012-2020. This tenure brought about many of the concepts which are hotly debated today, such as the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP). Decisions that were controversial but have since receded from public discourse, like the reinterpretation of the constitution to allow for Japan’s participation in collective self-defense, are also hallmarks of Abe’s premiership. One of the discursive turns in security policy taken under Abe was the emphasis on ‘Proactive Pacifism.’ Shinichi Kitaoka, a former diplomat and head of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) described Proactive Pacifism (and incidentally associated it with the spirit of the first National Security Strategy) as differing from “passive pacifism, which posits that the less militarized Japan is, the more peaceful the world becomes... But Japan is now a major power regarded as

⁹ “National Security Strategy of Japan”

¹⁰ “National Security Strategy of Japan”

¹¹ “National Security Strategy of Japan”

¹² Masaya Kato, “SDF Logs Cast Doubt over Legality of Japan’s Iraq Mission,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 17, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/SDF-logs-cast-doubt-over-legality-of-Japan-s-Iraq-mission>.

¹³ Jonathan Watts, “End of an Era as Japan enters Iraq,” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/26/iraq.japan>.

¹⁴ “Overview of Japan-US Summit Meeting,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/pmv0305/overview.html>.

¹⁵ Editorial Board, ANU, “Shinzo Abe’s legacy,” *East Asia Forum*, July 18, 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/07/18/shinzo-abes-legacy/>; Yoshiyuki Komurata, “敵基地攻撃、防衛費急増……外交はどこに? 田中均さんの危機感とは,” *Asahi Shimbun*, December 20, 2022, https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASQDM41MNQDJUPQJ00P.html?iref=pc_ss_date_article.

important by other countries in the world. Simply doing no wrong is no longer sufficient.”¹⁶ While FOIP has superseded Proactive Pacifism as the language of choice for the government to talk about its ‘international contribution,’ the latter is still listed on the MOFA webpage, with one document describing it as aiming to fulfill an “expectation” from international society that Japan take a “more proactive role” (9) toward peace and stability.¹⁷ In the NSS too, FOIP occupies an important role as one of eight “strategic approaches and ways and means” to advance national security. FOIP is emphasized to mean “deepening cooperation with likeminded countries” (13),¹⁸ which hints at the unilateral nature of the strategy, and at the shift away from a broader ‘international society contribution’ to a contribution to Japan’s ‘in-group’ of likeminded countries.

The skeptic might ask what difference this makes. Japanese officials have a long history of making proclamations about their country’s expanding international role, and this is reflected in the new NSS, with a lesser focus on a contribution to international society and a greater one on Japan’s role within a unilateral coalition. It could be argued that there is nothing novel about state actors seeking a larger role, or status on the world stage. The elephant in the room, the skeptic might say, is China, and the “room” is a quintessentially realpolitik room, paraphrasing Alessio Patalano.¹⁹ Thus the NSS is a reaction to aggressive Chinese behavior and military buildup. The latter point is well-taken: far from an anonymous elephant in the room, China is, after all, explicitly singled out in the NSS as the “greatest strategic challenge” to the “peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community” (9).²⁰

However, the meaningfulness of the long-lasting official story produced by Japanese actors in which they seek ‘importance’ by making ‘contributions’—either to ‘international society’ or to “enhance security cooperation”²¹ (14)—that correspond to Japan’s ‘national power and standing’ as shown in the short examples above, provides reference points for us to think about how international actors conceive of their ‘international standing’; what exactly it is that they seek when they seek status.²² In the NSS, the familiar status-seeking language appears alongside newer securitized, unilateral language in a way that might suggest that for Japanese leaders, military power and identification with a specific set of countries—as opposed to “international society—is increasingly seen as an acceptable or desirable way to ‘contribute’ and to be ‘important’; to gain status. That is not to say that China does not matter to Japan’s NSS or its foreign policy trajectory, but rather that there is more to Japanese foreign policy and specifically to Japanese agency in its foreign policy than an exclusive focus on the China threat reveals.

Erik Isaksson is Research Associate and Ph.D. Candidate at the Section for Politics and Economy, Institute of Japan Studies, Free University of Berlin, and an Associate Fellow at the Asia Program, Swedish Institute of International Affairs. His recent publications include “Grand Strategy or Grand Identity? Narratives of “Universal Values” and Autonomy in Japanese Foreign Policy,” *Quaderni di Scienze Politiche*, 21/2022, 95–113, and “Longtime Democrat, Future Leader: The Particular Logic of Japan’s Values Discourse,” *UI Brief* (2022)

¹⁶ Shinichi Kitaoka, “Japan’s New National Security Policy Based on ‘Proactive Pacifism,’” *Nikkei Asia*, February 2, 2014, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-s-new-national-security-policy-based-on-proactive-pacifism>.

¹⁷ “日本の安全保障政策 積極的平和主義,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000117309.pdf#page=2>.

¹⁸ “National Security Strategy of Japan.”

¹⁹ Alessio Patalano, “Japan’s New Security Strategy is about Defense, Not Offense,” *Nikkei Asia*, December 22, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-s-new-security-strategy-is-about-defense-not-offense>.

²⁰ “National Security Strategy of Japan.”

²¹ “National Security Strategy of Japan.”

²² For a general overview of status-seeking in IR, see Paul D. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “The Status of Status in World Politics,” *World Politics* 73:2 (2021): 358–391. For status-seeking in the case of Japan, see Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2010) and Shogo Suzuki, “Japanese Revisionists and the ‘Korea Threat’: Insights from Ontological Security,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32:3 (2019): 303–321.

<https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2022/ui-brief-no.-2-2022.pdf>. His primary research interests are issues of identity, status, and recognition in international relations, with a particular focus on Japan and East Asia.