

Japan's Decaying Antimilitarism Ecosystem

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Japan's postwar military posture has always demanded careful analysis, given its intricacies and implications for East Asian security. Right now, it warrants even greater attention with the government's avowed intention in its 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) to "fundamentally reinforce Japan's defense capabilities."¹ Tom Phuong Le's *Japan's Aging Peace: Pacifism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century* forms a key part of the debate on Japan's military trajectory and should be read by all scholars and practitioners engaged in this topic. It contains much that is valuable, innovative, and provocative. At the same time, the volume presents overextended claims and argumentation that undermine its conclusions and impact. These issues were evident upon the volume's release in mid-2021, and events thereafter—Japan's further "major shift" or "major transformation" of its defense posture—have confirmed these flaws.²

The essential contention of *Japan's Aging Peace* is that many scholars and practitioners, and particularly "realists," have too readily accepted the factors contributing to Japanese "remilitarization" or "normalization" but have not focused enough on the continuing and dominant strength of internal obstacles—both material and ideational—in forming an "antimilitarism ecosystem" (p. 33) that prevents Japan from remilitarizing, or at least remilitarizing along a certain trajectory. If Japan is experiencing any change in its military posture, then it is toward types of "militarism" that leave the constraints of the past intact and contribute to nontraditional security objectives, such as UN peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

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¹ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *National Defense Strategy* (Tokyo, December 16, 2022), 4 [≈ https://www.mod.go.jp/jp/policy/agenda/guideline/index.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/jp/policy/agenda/guideline/index.html). Similar language is used in Cabinet of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo, December 2022), 2 [≈ https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf](https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf).

² Fumio Kishida, "Japan's Decisions at History's Turning Point, Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)," Prime Minister's Office of Japan, January 13, 2023 [≈ https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202301/_00005.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202301/_00005.html).

The “antimilitarism ecosystem” is laid out across several substantial chapters providing detailed and creative analysis of how this ecosystem has constrained Japan’s defense posture in the past and explaining why remilitarization is not an easy pathway for contemporary policymakers to pursue. The volume points out obstacles that the country must overcome, including demographics and recruitment for the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), technical-infrastructure needs for indigenous defense production, defense budget resourcing, and a domestic antimilitaristic culture. The chapter on demographics (chap. 3) is a well-researched reminder of this important variable in shaping Japan’s military policy.

There is much to agree with in the discussion of key areas that Japan needs to address to facilitate fundamental change in its military posture. But the volume subsequently falters in important aspects of argumentation. Specifically, it presents fallacious benchmarks for just how far and in which direction Japan needs to shift to achieve a remilitarization trajectory; fails to recognize that Japan’s potential for remilitarization is not to be found solely within its own national resources and strategy but also must account for the crucial importance of its U.S. alliance linkages; and underestimates how far Japan’s policymakers and public, in committing to shifts in military trajectory, have diminished the constraints of the antimilitarism ecosystem.

False Benchmarks and Strawmen

Although the book’s acceptance of the concepts of militarism and remilitarization as legitimate social science frameworks for assessing change in all states—with Japan as no exception—is important and welcome, the actual deployment of the remilitarization framework is problematic. The result is assertions that risk caricaturing the arguments of others and a tendency toward the use of strawmen.

The most pivotal examples are the benchmarks that are set. The book, ironically, is evasive in its own definitions but repeatedly suggests that Japan cannot be viewed as moving toward any form of remilitarization unless it utilizes its military as in the 1930s or prewar periods for purposes that are “aggressive,” “offensive,” “autonomous,” “expansive,” or otherwise challenging to the “status quo” (chap. 2). Not only does the volume set egregious, and thus nearly unchallengeable, benchmarks for Japanese remilitarization, but it misrepresents much of the debate on remilitarization that it claims to counter. No serious contemporary analysis of Japan’s security policy, or at least none cited in the volume, argues that Japan is rewinding its military stance to the

prewar era. In fact, most analysts indicate that the trajectory of Japanese remilitarization is directed toward a more proactive defense of the Japanese homeland, contributing to the defense of the surrounding Northeast Asia region, and intended to integrate with the U.S.-centered military strategy and alliance system in the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, contrary to assertions in the volume, much of the realist literature does provide clear definitions and benchmarks of remilitarization related to facets of military policy, such as the procurement and doctrines for use of certain types of capabilities, civil-military relations, defense production, external military and alliance commitments, and internal political, legal, and public opinion constraints. For a long time in the postwar period, the Japanese government has publicly declared similar benchmarks of a demilitarized stance, including the non-exercise of collective self-defense, the eschewing of power-projection capabilities, the peaceful use of space, the limitation of defense spending to 1% of GDP, and restrictions on the export of arms and military technology. These benchmarks imply what changes might indicate a shift toward remilitarization. If they are used consistently, as in most realist analysis, and alarmist-labeling definitions of remilitarization as spelling a return to the 1930s are set aside, then there is ample opportunity for identifying Japan's breaching of these benchmarks and remilitarization in objective social science terms. The extent and implications of remilitarization might still be the subject of disagreement, but to dismiss it entirely based on extreme and unattainable benchmarking is unpersuasive.

Missing the Bigger Picture and Underplaying the U.S.-Japan Alliance

There is a surprising lack of attention in the book to the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Out of approximately 270 pages (excluding appendices, the bibliography, and the index), there are only around 12 pages of sustained examination of the U.S.-Japan alliance—despite the fact that the trajectory of Japan's defense posture has been bound up inextricably with the development of the alliance. In recent years, Japanese policymakers have moved to further integrate JSDF doctrine and capabilities into a framework of bilateral U.S.-Japan regional and global military strategy through the revised 2015 Defense Guidelines and related security legislation, the 2+2 Security Consultative Committee, and the NSS and NDS processes. Any balanced analysis of Japan's remilitarization trajectory, therefore, must

fully account for the influence of the U.S.-Japan alliance in amplifying Japan's military power and reach.

Japan's Aging Peace, nonetheless, focuses on Japan's own national capabilities, largely isolated from the U.S.-Japan alliance context, and extrapolates from this analysis the possibilities for and concomitant limits of Japanese remilitarization. The volume overlooks the full implications of the increasing U.S.-Japan alliance integration over recent decades, which is accelerating in the current period. The alliance functions as a multiplier for the JSDF and Japanese base infrastructure. In turn, the alliance not only contributes to the defense of the Japanese homeland but also enables JSDF projection of force in and around the Japanese archipelago, and it supports the functional and geographic scope of U.S. military operations for Japan's defense and U.S. power projection in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Where the U.S.-Japan alliance is examined in the volume, it is categorized as a constraint on Japanese remilitarization, buying into a version of the tired "cork in the bottle" argument.

Fast-Aging Conclusions


Japan's Aging Peace does alight on and usefully examine many important aspects of Japan's developing military profile that influence trajectories of militarism and remilitarization. However, in line with its approach in steering toward forms of militarism that it endorses, such as UN peacekeeping operations, the volume downplays change to the point of absolute denial. The consequence is that much of the analysis feels dated in casting back to the past halcyon days of the antimilitarism ecosystem and projecting this forward intact to the present day. The determination to prove no substantive change in Japanese remilitarization appears ever more obsolete given recent shifts in Japanese defense policy.

In discussing JSDF capabilities, for instance, the volume attempts to explain procurements in recent years as simply incremental additions and "upgrades" that cannot be categorized as remilitarization because they are not, in some way, abrupt game-changers and do not match in exact proportion China's investments in new capabilities. Although we should calibrate carefully the significance of Japan's capabilities, the notion that incremental change cannot eventuate in something more significant over time, that accumulated upgrades cannot be significant, or that a remilitarized posture can only be achieved through "pound-for-pound" improvements in capability are again unreasonable benchmarks.

The arguments set forth in the book are also strategically myopic in overlooking the military value of recently introduced JSDF weapons systems if they are deployed within a particular offshore island defense strategy (or even in support of a U.S. intervention strategy to defend Taiwan), used in joint or cross-domain fashion, and crucially linked to U.S. force deployments.

The limited longevity of the analysis has been further demonstrated with Japan's moves in the 2022 NDS to acquire an inventory of "upgraded" and new cruise missiles (including initially 400 Tomahawks) and to utilize these for counterstrike in conjunction with U.S. capabilities. The NDS and Defense Buildup Program will further procure for Japan combat drones, "active" cyberdefense capabilities, military satellite constellations, and improved command-and-control functions.³ The volume might dismiss these procurements as just continuations of previous programs and doctrine, as not "offensive" in orientation, and thus failing to meet its benchmarks for remilitarization. But it surely stretches all credibility not to recognize that the recent policy documents, taken in totality, amount to step changes in Japanese military capability for serious power projection and a shift in alliance functions that will allow Japan to be equipped with a "spear" alongside its "shield" in complementing the U.S. "spear." This is hardly the inability, material or ideational, to invest in power-projection capabilities or a mark of essential continuity with the antimilitarism ecosystem.

Other factors that the volume claims act as a drag on Japan's remilitarization, and that policymakers and the public supposedly lack the will to overcome, also stack up poorly against recent developments. The conclusion that Japan's constrained defense budget is a near absolute bar on remilitarization is now dated with the decision in 2022 to push defense expenditure to around 2% of GDP, furnishing the country with the third-largest defense budget in the world. Japan will use this budget to address several issues that the volume seems to view as immovable obstacles: improving conditions for the JSDF to boost recruitment; fostering "sustainability and resilience" for combat operations, with investment in ammunition and missile stocks and storage; hardening bases and command-and-control facilities; and increasing mobility through improved sea and air lift and logistics.

³ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Defense Buildup Program* (Tokyo, December 16, 2022)  https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program_en.pdf.

The book's view of normative constraints also appears increasingly moribund. In placing so much emphasis on internal domestic norms and constraints, it underestimates Japanese assessments of the changing international security environment, and thus the extent to which Japanese policymakers and the public, when faced with sufficiently pressing threats—as is the case with the reverberations from the Ukraine war, China's rise and intimidation of Taiwan, and North Korea's missile and nuclear threats—are prepared to suppress antimilitaristic instincts and acquiesce in shifting Japan's military posture. Indeed, perhaps the most notable feature of recent security policy changes is the absence of any significant political or public protest against doubling the defense budget and developing counterstrike capabilities. Moreover, in promoting UN peacekeeping operations as its preferred alternative of "militarism," the volume is removed from empirical reality in that the JSDF has not effectively engaged in these operations since 2017, which hardly suggests this a higher priority for military policy than strengthening JSDF doctrine, capabilities, and the U.S.-Japan alliance for traditional warfighting.

Overall, the volume is certainly a thought-provoking work and a must-read for anyone interested in Japan's military policy, and it contains many individual sections of original research, critique, and ingenious argumentation. However, while the volume asks many of the right questions and investigates many of the right areas, in the end it comes up with erroneous conclusions given its determination to set unreasonable benchmarks and bypass important aspects of Japan's military policy and empirical evidence that inconvenience its arguments. Japan's transformation to become a more muscular military actor in its own right and effective U.S. alliance partner is not yet entirely complete or obstacle-free, but this is the indisputable and accelerating overall trajectory. ◆