



Japan steps closer to global military power

23 December 2022

Author: Thomas Wilkins, University of Sydney

Realist international relations scholars predicted that after the Cold War Japan would revert to its 'normal' position in the global hierarchy of great powers. In a seminal 1993 article, Kenneth Waltz asserted that 'much in Japan's institutions and behaviour supports the proposition that it will once again take its place among the great powers'.



According to most realist theorists, this entailed the reacquisition of archetypical great power military capabilities and an independent nuclear deterrent. But after decades passed and this prediction failed to eventuate, Japan specialists searched for explanations. They settled on Japan's national identity as a 'global civilian power' and its 'nuclear allergy' — a consequence of the atomic bombings of World War II.

In his [new book](#), leading scholar on [Japanese security policy](#) Christopher Hughes characterised Japan as a 'global' military power. He claims that 'Japan is demonstrating all the indicators of becoming a more capable military actor and of going not just regional but also global in its military profile'. –

No claim to be a global military power is credible without the requisite defence capabilities. Hughes' previous work tracked the steady [remilitarisation](#) of Japan. This began in the 1950s, when the Japan Self-Defense Forces were established and continued with periods of acceleration under former prime ministers Yasuhiro Nakasone, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe.

Koizumi explicitly spoke of becoming a 'normal' country — implying that *not* being a great power was a condition of abnormality to be remedied. Abe certainly believed this when he affirmed that 'Japan will never become a tier two country'. Under the '[Abe doctrine](#)', Hughes argues that the process is reaching fruition.

Japan appears to be transforming into something more like the normal great power that realists predicted decades ago. The country has acquired many necessary accoutrements of [typical great powers](#). The increased centralisation of security policy and the establishment of a National Security Council and National Security Advisor emulate the organisational structure and procedures of other great powers.

Japan has restructured its defence architecture and stated it will build a Multi-Domain Defense Force that will allow it to respond to threats from land, sea, air, space, cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. It has also sought to augment its military capabilities with the creation of an Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, the retrofitting of its helicopter destroyers to take on fixed wing aircraft and increases in submarine, destroyer and air defence and strike capabilities.

Japanese policymakers have sought to eliminate constraints on the employment of such capabilities. The 2016 Peace and Security Legislation permits collective defence alongside allies and partners in several — albeit narrowly circumscribed — contingencies. The loosening of arms exports controls and proposed increase of the national defence budget to 2 per cent of GDP over time also signal paradigmatic shifts in Japan's security posture.

Added to this is the emerging global dimension to Japan's strategic policy. In addition to galvanising its [defence alliance](#) with the United States, Tokyo has built an impressive global network of [strategic partners](#) ranging from Australia, India and the Philippines in the Indo-Pacific to France and the United Kingdom in Europe, along with an institutional partnership with NATO.

Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces have also travelled further afield on military deployments across the Indo-Pacific and have established an overseas military base in the [Horn of Africa](#). Japan has previously sent military forces on various peace keeping and anti-piracy operations and provided support for the US military intervention in Afghanistan.

While many observers may balk at placing Japan in the same category as global military powers such as the United Kingdom and France — let alone the United States — Japan is going global with its military aspirations.

What makes developments in this direction more striking is the contrast with its prior strategic posture. Japan previously banned international arms exports, had a strict ceiling on its defence budget (1 per cent of GDP) and had no international defence partners outside of the United States. Japanese military forces were confined to defending Japanese national territory and had no global presence.

Hughes adopts the role of *agent provocateur* by encouraging readers to think more critically about how Japan's defence posture and military capabilities are transforming. But there is a twist to Hughes' apparent characterisation of a global military power. He contends that most of Japan's globally orientated activities serve the purpose of drawing global allies and partners closer to its primary objective of homeland defence. If the price to pay for this is a more active contribution, it seems to be one that Tokyo is willing to pay.

Other countries view a better armed and more [globally active Japan](#) through different lenses. Supporters such as the United States and Australia welcome greater defence contributions from Japan. Yet China — which is in the midst of its own comprehensive military expansion — views any increase in Japan's capabilities negatively.

Japan is clearly not yet a global military power in the way that the United States, United Kingdom or France are. The absence of offensive force projection capabilities such as strike aircraft carriers or long-range bombers and nuclear arms nominally disqualify it from this rank.

Despite its expanding horizons, Japan's global military footprint remains limited so it can only be considered an incomplete great power.

How one characterises the nature of Japan's power is not immaterial to policy. Hughes' thought-provoking intervention in the debate challenges some of the entrenched assumptions and political euphemisms prevailing in current discourse.

Thomas Wilkins is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney and a Senior Fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI).

Twitter Facebook Reddit LinkedIn Pocket Email Print

View more posts by [Thomas Wilkins](#)

Print This Post

RELATED POSTS



[China-US cooperation is the key to peace](#) by Jia Qingguo



[Pinning the TICAD along the idealism and realism axis](#) by Shinichi Takeuchi



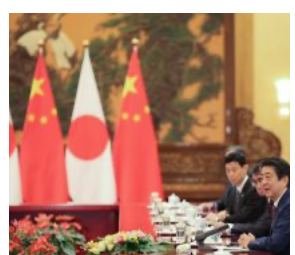
[India and China, two peas in a pod](#) by Chris Ogden



[The costs of containing China](#) by Hugh White



[Australia's incrementalist hedging in a fractured order](#) by Nick Bisley



[The depths of Tokyo's strategic dilemma](#) by Ryo Sahashi



[Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping](#) by Neil Thomas



[Should Japan continue to support the US-led international...](#) by Tomohiko Satake



[Is Lee Kuan Yew's strategic vision for Singapore still...](#) by Han Fook Kwang

WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE READING

[Press freedom is no joke in the Philippines](#)
by Danilo Araña Arao

[US chips war hits allies but likely misses long term Chines...](#)
by Hosuk Lee-Makiyama

[Will Japan's population shrink or swim?](#)
by Noriko Tsuya

[Washington won't chip away at China's military with semicon...](#)
by Gary Hufbauer

[The careful balancing act of Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy](#)
by Nguyen Khac Giang

[Taiwan holds all the chips in US-China tech showdown](#)
by Bo-jiun Jing

NO COMMENTS

Post a comment

East Asia Forum welcomes comments, both for adding depth to analysis and for bringing up important new issues. Original comments adding insight and contributing to analysis are especially encouraged.

The editors retain the right to refuse and edit comments at any time.

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email Address *

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

Post Comment

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

DONATE TO EAF

As a freely accessible resource for the region, East Asia Forum relies on donations from those who believe in its importance. [More information.](#)

Donate

CONTRIBUTE TO EAF

East Asia Forum welcomes submissions from readers interested in being part of its network of academics. [More information.](#)

SUBSCRIBE

Weekly digest Each post

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

[More info and unsubscribe](#)

FOLLOW US

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[LinkedIn](#)

[RSS](#)

ARTICLE BROWSER



FEATURES



[December 25: The travails of the US economy roll on into 2023](#)



[December 18: Kishida's difficult year](#)



[December 11: Washington won't chip away at China's military with semiconductor sanctions](#)



[December 11: US chips war hits allies but likely misses long term Chinese strategic target](#)

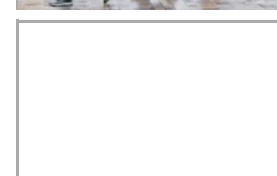
EDITORIALS



[As the United States walks away, Asia can't give up on the rules based economic order](#)



[Japan's big realignment in 2022](#)



[The return of Atlantic industrial policy challenges Asian trade efficiency](#)



[Comprehensive regional security and the future order in Asia](#)

ABOUT

East Asia Forum provides a platform for the best in East Asian analysis, research and policy comment on the Asia Pacific region and world affairs.

- [About Page](#)
- [Comments policy](#)
- [Cross-post and re-use policy](#)

QUARTERLY



October - December 2021

For electronic copies of back issues, links to the individual articles and to subscribe to the hard copies, see the [EAFQ page](#).

LINKS