

Us - Japan Defense and Security Cooperation Under President Joe Biden (2021-2025)



Tran Anh Cong

Ph.D. Student in International Relations at Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam.

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the evolution and current state of US-Japan defense and security cooperation under Joe Biden's presidency. Building on the historical alliance between the two nations, the Biden administration has emphasized strengthening partnerships to address emerging regional and global security challenges. Key focus areas include countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing defense capabilities, and fostering multilateral cooperation. The research highlights the achievements and challenges of this bilateral relationship, offering insights into its implications for regional stability and global security.

KEYWORDS: *US, Japan, defense and security cooperation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The US-Japan alliance has been a cornerstone of regional security in the Indo-Pacific for decades (Youn, 2023). This strategic partnership has evolved in response to shifting geopolitical realities and security challenges in the aftermath of World War II. As one of the most enduring alliances in modern history, it has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

Since President Joe Biden assumed office in January 2021, his administration has sought to rebuild and strengthen alliances, emphasizing a commitment to multilateralism and a rules-based international order (Singh, 2024). Against rising tensions with China, persistent threats from North Korea, and the increasing importance of technology in security, the US and Japan have intensified their cooperation to address a rapidly changing security environment. Biden's approach contrasts with his predecessor's "America First" stance, which often strained traditional alliances. Instead, Biden's strategy underscores the value of partnerships and collective action in addressing global and regional challenges (Blinken, 2024).

In this context, Japan has emerged as a pivotal partner for the United States in the Indo-Pacific. The country's strategic location, economic power, and shared democratic values make it a natural ally in countering authoritarian influences and ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Japan's willingness to enhance its defense capabilities and take on a more proactive role in regional security reflects its commitment to this partnership (Hughes, 2022).

This paper explores the dynamics of US-Japan defense and security cooperation under the Biden administration. It examines how the alliance has adapted to new challenges, including China's assertive policies in the East and South China Seas, North Korea's missile threats, and the growing significance of cyber and space security. The research highlights key areas of collaboration, identifies challenges that could hinder progress, and assesses the broader implications of this partnership for regional stability and global security.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The US-Japan security alliance originated in the aftermath of World War II, as Japan transitioned from a militaristic empire to a pacifist nation under the oversight of the Allied Powers (Osius, 2002). The 1951 Treaty of San Francisco and the accompanying Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the US and Japan laid the foundation for a strategic partnership. These agreements allowed the US to station military forces in Japan in exchange for a commitment to defend the nation against external threats. This arrangement also provided a framework for Japan's post-war recovery, enabling the country to focus on economic development while the US assumed responsibility for its defense.

During the Cold War, the alliance served as a bulwark against the spread of communism in Asia. US military bases in Japan became critical to American operations in the region, including during the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1955-

Us - Japan Defense and Security Cooperation Under President Joe Biden (2021-2025)

1975). Japan's strategic location made it a vital hub for projecting American power, while the US presence helped ensure regional stability (Sutter, 2019).

The alliance evolved to address new security challenges in the post-Cold War era. The 1990s saw increased cooperation in response to North Korea's nuclear ambitions and missile tests and heightened concerns about regional instability. The 1997 revision of the US-Japan Defense Guidelines expanded the scope of cooperation, allowing Japan to provide logistical support to US forces in regional contingencies. This period also marked the beginning of Japan's gradual shift toward a more proactive security role, facilitated by changes in its domestic policies and public opinion.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US further transformed the alliance. Japan's support for the US-led "War on Terror" included dispatching Maritime Self-Defense Force vessels to provide logistical support in the Indian Ocean and deploying Ground Self-Defense Forces to Iraq for reconstruction efforts. These actions signaled Japan's willingness to expand its security contributions beyond its immediate region.

Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan undertook significant defense reforms, including reinterpreting Article 9 of its constitution to allow for collective self-defense. This shift aligned with US efforts to encourage burden-sharing among allies (Abe, 2022). The Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy further emphasized the importance of the US-Japan alliance in countering China's growing influence and ensuring a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific (Koga, 2020).

The Trump administration's "America First" approach introduced uncertainties, particularly regarding the reliability of US commitments to allies. While the security alliance remained intact, Japan took steps to enhance its defense capabilities, including increasing defense spending and developing advanced systems such as the Aegis Ashore missile defense program. During this period, Japan also sought to strengthen its partnerships with other regional players, such as Australia and India, to hedge against potential US disengagement.

The Biden administration's approach represents a return to traditional alliance management, emphasizing multilateralism and reaffirming commitments to shared security objectives. Building on decades of cooperation, the US-Japan alliance continues to adapt to new challenges, including China's rise as a strategic competitor, advancements in military technology, and the increasing significance of cyber and space domains in modern warfare.

3. KEY AREAS OF COOPERATION UNDER BIDEN

3.1 Strengthening the Indo-Pacific strategy

President Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy significantly emphasizes a "free and open Indo-Pacific," a principle that has resonated strongly with Japan's foreign policy goals (Calabrese, 2023). Both nations view the Indo-Pacific as the primary theater of geopolitical competition, particularly as China seeks to expand its influence through aggressive territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. Joint efforts to counterbalance China include enhanced patrols to ensure freedom of navigation, expanded information-sharing agreements, and a deepened commitment to multilateral frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Japan's proactive participation in these initiatives reflects its alignment with US priorities and its aspirations for regional leadership.

Under the Biden administration, the Quad has transitioned from a loosely coordinated group to a more structured framework, addressing security concerns and broader regional challenges, including economic resilience, technology standards, and public health crises (Cannon & Rossiter, 2022). The US and Japan have both worked to elevate the Quad's profile, using it as a platform to promote regional stability while avoiding overt militarization that could alienate other regional players. Japan's role as a bridge-builder among Quad members has been instrumental in maintaining unity, mainly as the group addresses complex issues like critical supply chains and infrastructure development.

3.2 Enhancing defense capabilities

The Biden administration has prioritized enhancing interoperability between US and Japanese forces, recognizing that effective joint operations are crucial for deterring adversaries and responding to crises (Biden, 2022). Annual military exercises, such as "Keen Sword" and "Resolute Dragon," have been expanded to include scenarios involving island defense, amphibious assaults, and cyber warfare. These exercises are not only opportunities for skill refinement but also demonstrations of the alliance's preparedness to address contingencies in the Indo-Pacific.

Japan's defense modernization under Biden has focused on acquiring advanced technologies that complement US capabilities. The acquisition of F-35 fighter jets, Aegis-equipped destroyers, and advanced radar systems underscores Japan's commitment to strengthening its defensive posture. Collaborative projects, such as the joint development of hypersonic missile defense systems and AI-driven surveillance platforms, highlight the technological depth of the partnership. These advancements enhance Japan's self-defense capabilities and the alliance's collective deterrence against emerging threats.

Us - Japan Defense and Security Cooperation Under President Joe Biden (2021-2025)

A critical development in this area is the Biden administration's decision to deploy additional US military assets to Japan, including state-of-the-art missile systems and surveillance platforms. These deployments aim to bolster forward defense capabilities, ensuring rapid response to potential aggression. Upgrades to US military bases in Okinawa and other locations further illustrate the commitment to maintaining a robust regional presence. Japan's decision to increase its defense budget to 2% of GDP, aligning with NATO standards, demonstrates its determination to assume a more active role in the alliance.

3.3 Addressing emerging threats

Emerging threats like cyberattacks, space-based challenges, and non-traditional security risks like climate change have become central to US-Japan cooperation. Cybersecurity, in particular, has been a key area of focus, with both nations recognizing the vulnerabilities posed by increasingly sophisticated cyber threats. Japan's establishment of a dedicated cyber defense unit within its Self-Defense Forces and the implementation of joint cybersecurity exercises with the US reflect a shared commitment to enhancing resilience against digital attacks.

Space security has also emerged as a priority under Biden, with both nations acknowledging the strategic importance of space assets for communications, navigation, and surveillance. Bilateral initiatives include developing advanced satellite systems, enhanced space situational awareness, and measures to counter anti-satellite weapons. These efforts align with broader US strategies to maintain space as a global commons and prevent its weaponization by adversaries.

Climate change, identified by the Biden administration as a security risk multiplier, has prompted the US and Japan to collaborate on disaster resilience and mitigation strategies. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) exercises, such as the Pacific Partnership, underscore the alliance's capacity to address natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. Japan's expertise in disaster management complements US capabilities, creating a synergistic approach to regional challenges.

Emerging threats like cyberattacks, space-based challenges, and non-traditional security risks like climate change have become central to US-Japan cooperation. Cybersecurity, in particular, has been a key area of focus, with both nations recognizing the vulnerabilities posed by increasingly sophisticated cyber threats. Japan's establishment of a dedicated cyber defense unit within its Self-Defense Forces and the implementation of joint cybersecurity exercises with the US reflect a shared commitment to enhancing resilience against digital attacks.

Space security has also emerged as a priority under Biden, with both nations acknowledging the strategic importance of space assets for communications, navigation, and surveillance. Bilateral initiatives include developing advanced satellite systems, enhanced space situational awareness, and measures to counter anti-satellite weapons. These efforts align with broader US strategies to maintain space as a global commons and prevent its weaponization by adversaries.

Climate change, identified by the Biden administration as a security risk multiplier, has prompted the US and Japan to collaborate on disaster resilience and mitigation strategies. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) exercises, such as the Pacific Partnership, underscore the alliance's capacity to address natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. Japan's expertise in disaster management complements US capabilities, creating a synergistic approach to regional challenges.

4. CHALLENGES IN THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE

4.1 Balancing China Policy

While the US and Japan share concerns about China's assertive behavior, their approaches differ significantly. The US has pursued a more confrontational stance toward Beijing, emphasizing strategic competition and advocating for robust deterrence measures. On the other hand, Japan maintains substantial economic ties with China, making a hardline approach more complex. Balancing economic interdependence with national security concerns presents a unique challenge for Japan, particularly as it navigates its trade reliance and the geopolitical pressures from the US and China. Managing this duality requires nuanced diplomacy, which can sometimes create friction within the alliance (Green & Cronin, 2022).

4.2 Burden-Sharing

The issue of burden-sharing has been a persistent topic in the US-Japan alliance. Japan has made notable strides in increasing its defense spending and taking on greater responsibility for its security. However, debates over the equitable distribution of costs, particularly concerning the hosting of US forces in Japan, remain contentious (Department of Defense, 2022). The Biden administration has continued discussing updating host-nation support agreements to reflect evolving security needs. Furthermore, as Japan enhances its defense capabilities, questions arise about integrating these resources into joint operations and their alignment with broader alliance goals.

Us - Japan Defense and Security Cooperation Under President Joe Biden (2021-2025)

4.3 Domestic constraints

Japan's pacifist constitution, specifically Article 9, continues to impose significant constraints on its defense policies. While recent reinterpretations have allowed for collective self-defense and greater engagement in international security efforts, domestic opposition to constitutional revision remains strong. Public sentiment in Japan often leans toward maintaining its post-war pacifist identity, complicating efforts to expand the role of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) (Abe, 2022). Additionally, political divisions within Japan's government can hinder swift decision-making on critical security issues, affecting the implementation of alliance commitments.

4.4 Technological and operational integration

Challenges have emerged as the US and Japan collaborate on cutting-edge technologies, interoperability, and data-sharing. Differences in military standards, operational doctrines, and cybersecurity frameworks can create barriers to seamless integration. Ensuring that advanced systems, such as missile defense platforms and AI-driven surveillance tools, operate cohesively across both nations' forces requires sustained joint training, infrastructure, and standardization investments. Addressing these technical and operational hurdles is critical for the alliance to maintain its strategic edge (Hughes et al., 2023).

4.5 Regional perceptions and multilateral dynamics

The US-Japan alliance is not isolated; it is part of a broader regional security framework involving other allies and partners. However, the alliance's actions are closely scrutinized by neighboring countries, particularly China and North Korea, which often frame joint US-Japan initiatives as provocative. Additionally, balancing multilateral cooperation within frameworks like the Quad while ensuring the bilateral alliance remains robust presents a diplomatic challenge. Japan's efforts to strengthen ties with other regional powers, such as South Korea and India, must align with its commitments to the US to avoid duplicative or conflicting strategies (Koga, 2020).

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL STABILITY

The strengthened US-Japan alliance under Biden has significant implications for regional stability. It serves as a deterrent against aggressive actions by China and North Korea, reinforcing the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. The alliance's emphasis on multilateralism also enhances the region's capacity to address transnational challenges, from climate change to pandemic response.

However, the alliance must navigate complexities such as economic interdependence with China, technological competition, and maintaining domestic support in both countries. Effective management of these challenges will be crucial to ensuring the long-term viability of the partnership (Green & Cronin, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

Under President Joe Biden, US-Japan defense and security cooperation has deepened, reflecting shared interests in maintaining a stable and secure Indo-Pacific. The alliance's adaptability to evolving threats and its focus on technological innovation underscores its resilience. While challenges remain, the US-Japan partnership is well-positioned to address regional and global security challenges, contributing to a rules-based international order.

Future efforts should prioritize expanding multilateral frameworks, enhancing technological collaboration, and addressing the economic-security nexus. By doing so, the US and Japan can ensure the continued success of their alliance in an increasingly complex security environment.

REFERENCES

- 1) Biden, J. R. (2022). Biden-Harris White House National Security Strategy, October 2022. *Collections, 2022*, 10-12.
- 2) Blinken, A. J. (2024). America's Strategy of Renewal: Rebuilding Leadership for a New World. *Foreign Aff.*, 103, 62.
- 3) Calabrese, J. (2023). Towards a US-led Networked Interregional Architecture for the Indo-Pacific?. *Millennial Asia*, 09763996221150952.
- 4) Cannon, B. J., & Rossiter, A. (2022). Locating the Quad: informality, institutional flexibility, and future alignment in the Indo-Pacific. *International Politics*, 1-22.
- 5) Hughes, C. W. (2022). *Japan as a global military power: New capabilities, alliance integration, bilateralism-plus*. Cambridge University Press.
- 6) Hughes, C. W., Patalano, A., & Ward, R. (2023). *Japan's Grand Strategy: The Abe Era and Its Aftermath*. In *Survival February–March 2021: A House Divided* (pp. 125-159). Routledge.

Us - Japan Defense and Security Cooperation Under President Joe Biden (2021-2025)

- 7) Koga, K. (2020). *Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' question: countering China or shaping a new regional order?*. *International Affairs*, 96(1), 49-73.
- 8) Osius, T. (2002). *The US-Japan security alliance: why it matters and how to strengthen it*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- 9) Singh, R. S. (2024). The Biden and Trump Doctrines in Comparative Perspective. In *Presidential Leadership and Foreign Policy: Comparing the Trump and Biden Doctrines* (pp. 17-39). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- 10) Sutter, R. G. (2019). *The United States and Asia: Regional dynamics and twenty-first-century relations*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- 11) YOUN, Y. K. (2023). *Japan at a Historical Inflection Point: Untangling the Complex Knot of Geopolitics, Domestic Politics, and the Security Alliance*. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 6(5).



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.