



The Future of the U.S.-Japan Alliance: A Global Partnership

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June 2024

Executive Summary

The second Biden-Kishida summit held in Washington on April 10, 2024, marked another ratcheting up of the partnership, with President Biden referring to it as “the most significant upgrade in our alliance...since it was first established.”² Defense cooperation featured prominently at the summit, with announcements on joint missile production, increased intelligence sharing, and an upgrade to command-and-control structures. Japan is leaning forward as a regional defense player in close coordination with the United States to enhance networked partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) organized a U.S.-Japan conference in late April 2024 with experts, scholars, and former officials to discuss opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance to effectively meet evolving global security and economic challenges against the backdrop of global and domestic uncertainties. Participants roundly agreed the U.S. and Japan need to sustain this positive momentum, but multiple variables will impact the extent to which progress can move forward. The following are key recommendations and takeaways for the U.S.-Japan alliance in maintaining stability in a turbulent international security environment:

- The economic pillar of the U.S.-Japan alliance needs bolstering, as regional economic integration and connectivity remain essential to prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, Washington should pursue more meaningful economic leadership in the region, including efforts to strengthen the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) by expanding market access. With little appetite for free-trade agreements (FTAs) in the U.S. Congress, and as the Biden administration pursues de-risking strategies in response to perceived security threats posed by China, Japan and other U.S. allies have become more agile in pursuing a free-trade agenda in the Asia-Pacific region. If the U.S. is not involved in multilateral FTAs such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), allies like Japan should continue to lead in shaping the rules and norms for economic integration in the Asia Pacific.

¹ This report reflects the notes and observations of the authors alone and is not a consensus document.

² The White House. “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference.” April 10, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/04/10/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-kishida-fumio-of-japan-in-joint-press-conference/>

- Participants praised the Biden administration for its continued focus on coalition building in the Asia-Pacific region, which has become a significant framing for U.S. security interests. Maritime security will remain a priority for the region because these economies rely on continued access to open sea lanes and fisheries. Participants urged the institutionalization of these minilateral mechanisms, including careful management of the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral that has seen historic efforts to coordinate on regional security issues. Sustaining momentum in other minilateral arrangements, such as AUKUS and the Quad, is also important to maintain momentum for the Indo-Pacific strategy. In addition, the U.S. and Japan should pursue more engagement with Southeast Asia, with participants highlighting Tokyo's provision of official security assistance (OSA) as helpful, but insufficient.
- While participants acknowledged the benefits of having numerous minilateral mechanisms for cooperation in the absence of functional multilateralism, there is an urgent need for prioritization and addressing issues of overlap for effective alliance management and sustaining momentum. In the current "lattice-work" security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region, it would be helpful to identify the different purposes and goals of these diverse frameworks and to promote greater inclusivity in regional cooperation and avoid actively fomenting exclusionary blocs.
- Finally, the U.S. and Japan should hold more candid discussions on global governance and values in the international system. In the current international environment where the mechanisms to maintain peace and stability have been called into question, the issue of global norms should be a higher priority for the two allies.

Adapting to a Fraught International Security Environment

It was evident at the recent summit, as well as in his speech to the U.S. Congress, that Prime Minister Kishida is thinking to the future, focusing on cooperation with global partners. No matter who takes office in the White House next year, the importance of the alliance in maintaining peace and stability will remain.

The unstable global strategic environment, however, has had profound implications for regional security. Japanese participants wondered how much U.S. political attention and resources can truly focus on the Indo-Pacific region with ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Changes in the regional security environment were also a key point of discussion: increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, closer Moscow-Pyongyang ties and continued Moscow-Beijing collaboration, and nuclear threats by Russian President Putin. Global events have bled into the Asia-Pacific region and are accelerating the change of pace in alliance adaptation—the war in Ukraine, in particular, demonstrates the importance of stockpiling and defense supply chains, prompting the U.S. and Japan to hold high-level bilateral dialogue on defense industrial cooperation.

Furthermore, multilateral cooperation has become more difficult than ever, and participants were resigned to the fact that significant progress in multilateral frameworks and international institutions remain unlikely in the near term. In the meantime, Washington is emphatically pursuing minilateral cooperation through a “latticework” of security ties, while Tokyo is also promoting a strategy of “multi-layered partnerships. Participants highlighted the first-ever U.S.-Japan-Philippines trilateral that immediately followed the Biden-Kishida summit in Washington, referring to the event as a very strong signal to China about their willingness to respond to coercive activities in the South China Sea, and to also support the economic resilience of the Philippines. The U.S. and Japan have a shared interest in pursuing trilateral forums, particularly cooperating with Southeast Asian countries to reinforce the latticework networking structure that has become a feature in the regional security architecture.

Participants highlighted Japan’s promotion of ASEAN-centrality for sustained cooperation and investment in the region. There are multiple Indo-Pacific strategies in the region, with ASEAN having its own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) aimed at maritime cooperation, economics, connectivity, and sustainable development. Japanese participants highlighted that the AOIP is the only strategy supported by China. To promote inclusive architecture in the region, genuine engagement with ASEAN is a necessity. As currently pursued, both China and ASEAN are left out of the Indo-Pacific.

The U.S.-Japan-ROK security trilateral is fundamental to maintaining a stabilizing U.S. leadership presence in the region, particularly regarding the threat posed by a nuclear DPRK. Institutionalization of the Quad—featuring the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India—was a major initiative in the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy. However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine made it evident that the four countries will not necessarily be strategically aligned, and security cooperation in the Quad has lagged. The recent announcement that AUKUS is consulting with Japan, the first named partner, on tech cooperation on Pillar Two was welcomed by participants from both sides. Some American participants cautioned that alignment among the core AUKUS members—Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.—has been difficult due to the necessity of these three countries trusting each other to integrate their industrial bases.

Free Trade and Globalization are Not Dead

The Indo-Pacific region is the most dynamic and fastest-growing region in the world. In pursuit of the development of the global economy, it is necessary to promote and maintain stability and prosperity in the region. Japan has been praised as a leader in promoting and protecting the free trade system in the region, yet Japanese participants lamented the U.S. labor-centered trade policies in protecting American workers at the expense of a U.S.-led free-trade system. Despite the fixation on protectionism, de-risking, and the concerns raised by U.S. allies like Japan, participants hoped that free trade and globalization are not dead.

While Washington and Tokyo are at pains to appear aligned on “friend-shoring” with respect to reliance on China, Japanese participants argued that Japan’s approach towards economic relations with China will not necessarily follow the U.S. While Japan has been vocal about pointing out China’s coercive behavior in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, as well as having its own investment screening and economic security laws, Tokyo has been more cautious in pursuit of sanctions and other coercive measures.

One area of common interest that needs more focus in the U.S.-Japan alliance is the provision of public goods to the international community. While security is important, the leaders of “Global South” countries see advancing development as their highest priority. American participants noted that Prime Minister Kishida seems focused on engaging the Global South and advocated more frank discussions on the provision of public goods and changes needed in the current international system to assure their continuance. Japanese participants perceived that western preoccupation with Ukraine and the Middle East as absorbed considerable resources and alienated much of the Global South, which worries more about economic stability and climate change. The key to addressing these concerns and the needs of emerging developing countries is to have a strong, economic agenda.

Domestic Politics Matter

Anxieties over the uncertainty of the U.S. presidential election in November loomed over much of the discussion. U.S. allies are bracing for a potential second Trump administration and the impact that might have on progress achieved in coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific region. American participants applauded Prime Minister Kishida for what they view as a very sophisticated understanding of U.S. politics, most notably demonstrated in his speech to the U.S. Congress during his visit to Washington in April. The speech was unusually direct in challenging the “Make America Great Again” mindset and growing isolationism, noting the U.S. is not alone in carrying the burden of maintaining the rules-based international order.³

Japanese participants responded by emphasizing the importance of domestic politics and the need to maintain domestic support for the alliance. One aspect of Prime Minister Kishida’s visit to the United States that did not get much press attention was his visit to the Toyota and Honda factories in North Carolina. Kishida’s focus on auto manufacturing that creates jobs in the U.S. was a riposte to protectionists in a year where politicians are competing on anti-trade and xenophobic platforms.

Japanese domestic politics are also a factor in alliance management. Prime Minister Kishida has managed to postpone giving specific information on the question of how the country will pay for Japan’s defense strategy, but Tokyo will eventually need to have a conversation with the Japanese people on how this is in Japan’s interest. Although participants noted that Japanese politics are unlikely to change the direction of recent, more muscular defense moves, they may slow the momentum that has been accelerated under Prime Minister Kishida and President Biden.

³ Prime Minister’s Office of Japan. “Address by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at a Joint Meeting of the United States Congress (“For the Future: Our Global Partnership”)”. April 11, 2024.
https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202404/11speech.html

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