1 Introduction: Japan’s New Military Profile

The Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF), just over thirty years ago in 1991, undertook its first tentative overseas despatch in the post-war period, taking the form of a small Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) non-combat mine-sweeping mission to the Persian Gulf in the wake of the 1990–1 Gulf War. In the intervening three decades, Japan’s global military engagement has extended ever further outwards geographically from the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The JSDF’s scope of operations as made clear in the revised 2018 National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG) – the document that lays out Japan’s military doctrine alongside the necessary force structure – has also expanded beyond the traditional land, sea, and air domains and into the outer space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains (JMOD 2018). The JSDF has further expanded its range of operations functionally to involve United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKO), counter-piracy missions, maritime security, logistical support, and potentially since 2015, following the passage of a raft of new ‘peace and security legislation’, collective self-defence combat missions.

Japan’s range of partners and frameworks for military cooperation has also grown to now encompass not just the United States as its bilateral security treaty and alliance partner, but new partners in multinational coalitions, multilateral institutions, and new ‘quasi-allies’ such as Australia. Japan has manoeuvred itself, for instance, to be at the core of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Japan hosting its summit in May 2022), or so-called Quad, involving itself, the United States, India, and Australia, and the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), that contain a focus on maritime military cooperation.

Moreover, Japan’s rise and credibility as a global military power has been supported by the incremental but nevertheless relentless build-up of the JSDF’s capabilities. The MSDF, Air Self-Defence Force (ASDF), and Ground Self-Defence Force (GSDF) have long possessed considerable capabilities for Japan’s own immediate territorial defence and to provide a defensive complement to the United States’s offensive power capabilities stationed in and around Japan in a classic ‘shield’ and ‘spear’ division of labour. In more recent years, though, the JSDF has sought to augment its capabilities by investing in advanced military technologies and hardware, to move towards more jointness of inter-service operations with the United States, and to acquire its own mobile and flexible forces able to project power. The JSDF inventory now includes an Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB), amphibious ships, a force of eight ballistic
missile defence (BMD)-capable Aegis destroyers with further maritime BMD assets slated, helicopter carriers, destroyers converted to ‘defensive’ fixed-wing aircraft carriers, the largest force of F-35 fighter aircraft outside the US Air Force (USAF), in-flight refuelling, unmanned aerial and underwater vehicles, joint direct-attack munitions, air-launched stand-off missiles, intelligence satellites, and the probable procurement of cruise missiles and hyper-velocity gliding projectiles (HVGP). All these developments would suggest that Japan can become a more reliable alliance partner, work more effectively with new partners, and deploy force outside its own territory and possibly outside the traditional defensive ‘shield’ role to apply its own element of counter-strike power.

Furthermore, Japan’s enhanced military presence has been reinforced by a seemingly new strategic and political intent to mobilise and utilise its military capabilities for international security ends. Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s administration, from 2012 to 2020, in creating Japan’s first ever National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Security Council (NSC) famously propounded the concept of a ‘proactive contribution to peace’. According to the NSS, Japan would:

‘As a major player in the world politics and the economy, contribute even more proactively in securing peace, stability, and prosperity of the international community, while achieving its own security as well as peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, as a “Proactive Contributor to Peace” based on the principle of international cooperation’ (Cabinet Secretariat 2013).

The administration of Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, from 2020 to 2021, maintained the policy of a proactive contribution to peace, repeating its centrality in international fora such as the UN General Assembly and in domestic settings to reassure the public over Japan’s security direction (Suga 2020). Kishida Fumio, the new prime minister from the end of 2021, was a major advocate of the policy during his previous service as Japan’s longest-serving foreign minister in the post-war era from 2012 to 2017 (MOFA 2016a). Kishida’s own concepts, articulated in 2022, of a ‘Vision for Peace’ and ‘realism diplomacy for a new era’ essentially continue the policy trajectory of Abe in security and defence (Kishida 2022).

This declared intent on Japan’s part has been backed up by the steady removal or de facto hollowing out of many of the constitutional constraints and anti-militaristic principles that in the past were assessed as both symbolic and substantive constraints on its military ambitions and external commitments. Japan’s procurement of long-range missiles, in-flight refuelling, and aircraft carriers has challenged its public pledge throughout the post-war
period ‘not to become a great military power’ (gunji taikoku to naranai). The Japanese government in recent years has effectively overturned bans in 2008 on the peaceful use of space for military purposes, in 2014 on the export of arms and military technology and the institution instead of the Three Principles on the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology, and in 2017 the 1 per cent of GDP limit on defence expenditure (Hughes 2022; Hornung 2020a: 8–9). Most significantly, in 2014 Japan lifted its ban, in place since the early 1950s, on the exercise of collective self-defence (Hughes 2017).

In turn, Japan’s new capabilities and statements of intent have raised enhanced expectations from its partners that it can play a pivotal and ever more forthcoming role in cooperating to consolidate the existing regional and global security orders. Washington DC policymakers have long regarded Japan’s alignment with US military strategy as the ‘cornerstone’ for the maintenance of the entire regional security architecture, and constantly sought a more proactive Japanese military contribution to the alliance, and for Japan to support other US alliance partners in the region. Japan’s perceived increasing activism is thus welcomed by the United States, and the new Joseph R. Biden administration has moved to further strengthen US-Japan alliance ties. The March 2021 Security Consultative Committee (SCC) statement, April 2021 Joint Leaders’ Statement, January 2022 SCC statement, and May 2022 US-Japan Summit (MOFA 2022b) recommitted Japan and the United States to the FOIP, Quad, and ‘rules-based international order’, to deepen defence cooperation across all domains, further cooperation with US allies and partners, and to prevent China from challenging the status quo in the region (MOFA 2021a, 2021b, MOFA 2022a).

At the same time, other regional and global partners – through fora such as the Quad, FOIP, ASEAN, and recently signed bilateral strategic partnerships and dialogues with states as far afield as the United Kingdom, France, European Union (EU), and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – have similarly built expectations that Japan can become a more active and reciprocal military partner. A truly more proactive Japan, with its highly professional JSDF and full array of technologically advanced military capabilities placed at the disposal of existing and new allies, partners, and frameworks, would provide for a formidable strengthening of the international security order, particularly at a time when it is under strain following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Conversely, Japan’s moves to strengthen its military activity outside its traditional confines are clearly of major interest not only to potential partners but also to potential adversaries such as China and North Korea.
1.1 Making Sense of Japan’s Security Trajectory

As Japan continues to change shape and to stretch its presence in terms of geographical reach, traditional and non-traditional domains, functions, partners and frameworks, capabilities, and declared intent, the question is raised, therefore, of how to interpret the trajectory and significance of these new global military ambitions. Not unsurprisingly, given the inherently controversial nature of Japan’s military role in the post-war period, there is no consensus in international and domestic policymaking and academic circles.

Many prevalent strains of analysis of Japan’s expansion and diversification of military commitments have tended to frame developments as a continuation of, and gradual adjustment within, the still dominant post-war patterns of security policy, often seen as essentially a four-fold categorisation derived from the interplay of the degrees to which Japan is willing to utilise force for security and to align itself with the United States (Samuels 2006: 116–17). Japan, for the first and still majority strain of analysis, is viewed as essentially adhering or defaulting, with some modifications, to the post-war grand strategy designed by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (1946–7, 1948–54) and his successors, or the so-called ‘Yoshida Doctrine’. This line is characterised by a minimalist defence posture, dependence on the United States for security, and prioritisation of economic interests (Samuels 2003, 2007; Pyle 2007). If Japan is expanding its military presence, then it is still within the confines of this strategic paradigm (Green 2001; Oros 2008, 2017; Liff 2015; Smith 2019; Hagström and Williamson 2009), remains highly cautious in approach, and a presence and role largely designed to be creating new partners and frameworks to continue its traditional hedging tactics of obviating alliance dilemmas of entrapment and abandonment vis-à-vis its US ally (Hegintbotham and Samuels 2002).

This view of Japan as continuing to hew to the Yoshida line has some overlap with a second still influential strain of analyses that tend also towards arguing for essential continuity in security policy and are derived from an emphasis on the apparent ongoing influence of domestic anti-militaristic sentiment. Japan is regarded as still being heavily constrained in its military activities by attachment to a range of ‘pacificist’ or ‘anti-militaristic’ norms and identities derived from Article 9, or the so-called peace clause, of the 1946 promulgated constitution. Some analyses have tended to regard these norms as seemingly immutable (Berger 1993; Katzenstein and Okawara 1993; Le 2021) and strongly constraining Japan; others have seen norms and identities as more pliable and capable of shifting shape over time (Takao 2008; Hagström and Hanssen 2015; Hatakeyama 2021) to enable some tolerance of military power for national security ends if cast in the name of a contribution to international peace.
A third strain of analyses, again with some overlap with this view of ‘pacifist’ traditions, and to an extent buying into Japanese leaders’ professed desire to contribute to international security, suggest that Japan has a relatively strong streak of internationalism and multilateralism in its strategic thinking (Singh 2008; Midford 2020). Hence, Japan, in reflecting its declared credentials as a liberal and democratic power, or ‘middle power’ (Soeya 2005), is now seeking to enhance its role in international security and work with multiple partners and institutions such as the United Nations (UN) (Dobson 2003) and beyond the bilateralism of the US-Japan alliance, either to complement ties with the United States and moderate its behaviour (Cha 2003), or to forge alternatives to the bilateral alliance to cope with dilemmas of entrapment and abandonment (Midford 2018), and even to lay the ground for new frameworks for regional and global security.

Finally, a fourth and periodically recurrent, but less prevalent, strain of analysis sees Japan’s expansion of its global military profile as presaging enhanced strategic and diplomatic autonomy or even full strategic independence. Japan is viewed as looping back to traditions of earlier strategic thought that argue for retaking its place as a great power as in the pre-war period. In line with this approach, Japan is seen as reaching out regionally and globally to initiate the types of free-flowing partnerships and alliances that might enable it to gradually detach itself from the United States, again, either as insurance against over-dependence on the United States (George Mulgan 2008), or to forge a strategic line that diverges from that of the United States (Fatton 2019).

All these interpretations offer some traction on thinking through Japan’s growing global military presence. But none are sufficient individually, or even if taken in combination, to provide an accurate analysis. The contention that Japan is holding steady within the Yoshida Doctrine, adopting a minimalist military line, and still hedging as hard as in the past and especially against entrapment, appears at odds with the reality of its expanding military prowess and alliance commitments. The argument that Japan continues to be fundamentally constrained by domestic anti-militaristic sentiment struggles to convince in the face of the systematic dismantlement of nearly every post-war constitutional barrier and prohibition on the use of military power. Japan might be engaging with more partners than before and more multilateral frameworks, but the idea that this is designed as an ‘internationalist’ or principal thrust to its security policy, or an alternative to the US-Japan alliance, appears highly questionable. For it needs to be noted that Japan is devoting relatively limited military resources to many of these multilateral activities and is at pains to make sure that those multilateral efforts it does devote resources to usually include the
United States, support US strategy, do not in any way detract from the bilateral relationship, and are focussed on allies and partners of the United States. Finally, although Japan’s desire for greater military autonomy is arguably part of the rhetoric and agenda of many of its leading policymakers, that this spells necessarily a desire for absolute strategic independence, and can be translated into a feasible option of moving away from the US-Japan alliance appears an unpersuasive position given the ever-deepening, and arguably inextricable, integration of bilateral military cooperation.

This Element, therefore, takes a different tack from many of these existing interpretations of Japan’s emergent global military role. The argument is not to deny that these interpretations have utility but instead that it is necessary to progress beyond them to a more critical and effective synthesis, and to offer some sharply revised interpretations, and thus overall different conclusions on Japanese military trajectory. It takes sides with and goes somewhat beyond other literature that has been prepared for some time to argue against the received wisdom and point to new and more radical trajectories in Japan’s military stance (Hughes 2004, 2009, 2015, 2016, 2017; Grönning 2014; Hornung 2014; Maslow 2015; Pyle 2018; Wilkins 2018a; Gustafsson, Hagström, and Hanssen 2018; Hughes, Patalano, and Ward 2021). Hence, this Element’s take on Japan’s military role is that there is far more change than continuity; that there is still some residual minimalism and hedging in approaching security policy and ties with the United States, but this is greatly outweighed by changing and ever deepening US-centred military cooperation; and anti-militarism still to a degree influences Japan’s security debate but has been eroded to the point that it is no longer a fundamental determinant or roadblock for military policy. Similarly, Japan’s internationalism and multilateralism have grown in quantity in certain instances but remain more nominal in quality and relatively limited in scope and substance, and very much subordinate and geared to support the objectives of the US-Japan alliance relationship at the core of Japan’s security (Kawasaki 2007: 78–9). In turn, the strength of this bilateralism means the impulse for a more autonomous Japanese security policy remains largely suppressed and is not yet a serious strategic objective.

In contrast to many of the dominant analyses to date, this Element argues that Japan’s overriding motivation for seeking to change and engage in expanded security activities – whether geographical or functional in scope, or with new bilateral partners or multilateral frameworks – has always been and continues to be to find ways to conform with and ultimately reinforce the US-Japan alliance and US regional security presence for the defence of the Japanese homeland. Japan no longer easily fits the confines of the traditional post-war security categorisations: it is not significantly hedging, is increasingly less averse to
considering the utility of military power in the toolbox of statecraft, is not seeking major multilateral alternatives to the bilateral alliance, and not focussing on attaining strategic autonomy. Instead, Japan is seeking more straightforwardly, and as should be readily apparent from empirical observation of trends in its military posture and its challenging security environment, to become an increasingly capable and reliable US ally. Japan’s interest in the broader security of international society remains of relatively minor importance or even of insignificance at times. Japan’s ‘going global’ in military affairs is thus a means not to ‘de-centre’ but to ‘re-centre’ ultimately towards and reinforce the US security relationship and is dependent upon, constrained, and governed in its overall parameters by traditional bilateral alliance impulses. Japan as a global military power means in effect nothing other than becoming a more integrated US ally and working with other partners in and outside the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific regions in a ‘bilateralism-plus’ mode, even if expanded in scope, that still takes its cue from US-Japan alliance priorities. The expectations of many other states for Japan to become a fully-flledged and reciprocal military partner outside this US-centred framework to assist with their own or wider global security concerns may thus prove limited or illusory.

This Element further explains not only the trajectory, qualities, and limitations but also the principal drivers behind Japan’s emergence and direction as a global military power. Japan’s evolving military stance is part of a broader shift in national grand strategy generated by changing international and domestic drivers, encapsulated by the ‘Abe Doctrine’ as elaborated by recently deceased Prime Minister Abe, and continuing to influence his successors, even if not explicitly using that terminology. The Abe Doctrine posits a more proactive security and military role for Japan but ultimately one that centres on a strengthened US-Japan alliance, with other forms of international military cooperation subordinated to bilateral alliance requirements.

The arguments of this Element are developed across four main sections. Section 2 traces Japan’s changing strategic and military outlook across the post-war era and the ways in which post-Cold War new external threat perceptions and deep concern over the US’s declining hegemonic military power, coupled with domestic political changes, have engineered a decisive shift in grand strategy – culminating in the Abe Doctrine – and over time fundamental changes in military posture. The outcome has been for Japan to talk of a new three-layered security strategy in the form of augmenting its own military capabilities, reinvesting in the US-Japan alliance, and newly exploring supplementary frameworks for international and multilateral cooperation.

Section 3 explores the transformation of defence doctrines and capabilities by the JSDF, making for a more muscular military stance. Japan’s greatly enhanced
capabilities in terms of the procurement of qualitatively advanced weapons systems, mobility, and joint operations are examined across the GSDF, ASDF, and MSDF, and in the domains of space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic warfare. The section explores trends in Japan’s resourcing of its build-up of military systems, and the consideration of a strike option against overseas targets to now move potentially beyond defensive shield functions and acquire its own spear alongside the offensive power of the United States. The key argument is that Japan, in developing these formidable capabilities, is understandably gearing these ever more to the defence of the homeland against China and North Korea and for enhanced compatibility with the US military rather than for any broader international security role or attempt to establish autonomy from the bilateral alliance.

Section 4 analyses the US-Japan alliance and Japan’s radically changing function and terms of engagement within it. The argument is made that Japan is seeking to ‘double down’ on support for the US-Japan alliance and has accepted that it must play a more active role to support its ally, now involving possibly fighting alongside the United States through collective self-defence, and that this involves a strengthened shield role but even, if necessary, a spear role, and the deeper and near inextricable integration of JSDF doctrines and capabilities with those of the United States. Japan is showing reduced inclination to hedge its alliance commitments and is inured to the fact that it now stands on the frontline of US military strategy in the region and might be obligated in attempts to defend the ‘first island chain’ in East Asia and encompassing Taiwan.

Section 5 investigates Japan’s expanding cooperation in international and multilateral frameworks for military cooperation and the degree of significance of these in its overall military posture. It argues that while Japan has upped the quantity of international cooperation in terms of geography, functions, and partners, much of the quality of cooperation is still limited in the relative degree of policy energy and resources devoted to it, is often legitimised, designed, and undertaken primarily to reinforce US-Japan alliance cooperation, and does not offer and is not seeking to lessen dependence on the United States. Japan thus continues its practice of essentially ‘bilateralism-plus’ in international security cooperation, as even with more ‘plus’ partnerships these still only serve as additions to reinforce the US-Japan alliance at the core rather than offer any deviation from its objectives.

2 Japan’s Shifting Strategic and Military Outlook

Japan’s formulation of its grand strategy for security and defence has undergone a radical shift in the post–Cold War period, often proceeding in incremental,
even imperceptible, yet cumulatively significant steps, and at other times in rapid and major jolts forward. The drivers for this change in strategic trajectory have encompassed a range of external security challenges globally and regionally, and, correspondingly, evolving domestic frameworks for security policymaking and fundamental debates over Japan’s international military commitments.

2.1 The Yoshida Doctrine as Grand Strategy

Japan’s default grand strategy for much of the post-war era has been characterised by the Yoshida Doctrine. This grand strategy sought Japan’s adaptation to the immediate and intense set of post-war challenges comprising absolute defeat in the Pacific War, occupation by US-led allied forces, promulgation in 1946 of the constitution and Article 9 ‘peace clause’, general economic devastation, deep domestic fissures between the left and right politically over defence policy, and a hostile East Asia region due to the legacy of Japanese colonialism and rising Cold War tensions. Japan’s resultant choice under Yoshida was alignment with the United States through the signing of the 1951 US-Japan security treaty, limited rearmament leading to the eventual establishment of the JSDF in 1954, and a focus on economic reconstruction. The ‘pragmatist’ successors of Yoshida in the mainstream of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in power from 1955 onwards were then to evolve these choices into an effective, durable, and flexible strategic pathway (Dower 1988: 371–7; Samuels 2003: 203–11).

Japan in effect forged a grand strategic bargain with the United States under the security treaty, accepting the presence on its territory of US bases and forces to project power into the East Asia region in return for de facto – and then later under the revised 1960 security treaty, de jure – security guarantees. In turn, the Japanese pragmatists’ choice of alignment with the United States helped to contain domestic political divides over security policy. The political left and ‘pacifists’, as the then second main competing strain of strategic thought, found mainly in the guise of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) (later reforming as the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) in 1996) and standing on an interpretation of Article 9 as prohibiting the maintenance of any military forces, opposed the US-Japan security treaty and advocated a policy of unarmed neutrality. But the fact that alignment with the United States and dependence on the superpower’s security guarantees required only limited rearmament on the part of Japan deprived the left of many arguments about the risks of remilitarisation and antagonising East Asian states.

At the opposite political pole, the ‘revisionist’ or ‘neo-autonomist’ conservatives as the third strain of strategic thinking, and largely vested in the right of the
LDP, preferred a more independent security policy, free of foreign forces on Japanese territory, facilitating the formation of shifting alliances to respond to the changing balance of power, and significant national rearmament. Again, though, the decision to align with the United States proved tolerable for the revisionists as it indicated a willingness to respond to security challenges rather than retreat to pacifism and the prospect of Japan rebuilding its military power over the longer term.

Japan’s chosen strategic pathway also offered possibilities for the fourth strain of strategic thinking that proposed a more East Asian region-centred, multilateral, and internationalist approach to security policy. Although alignment with the United States meant Japan’s effective isolation from many East Asian states in the communist camp during the Cold War – Japan was unable to normalise ties with China and then sign a peace treaty until 1972 and 1978, and no peace treaty was signed with the USSR and still none with Russia to the present day – integration into the US-led international order provided a framework for Japan to rebuild ties with many newly independent states in the East Asia region and to sponsor entry into global institutions such as the UN.

The ability of the Yoshida Doctrine to respond to Japan’s immediate external challenges and to contain and bridge many domestic strategic debates thus set it on the trajectory to dominate as grand strategy for much of the post-war era. This pathway was further consolidated and given longevity by its capability to flex continually in the face of new security demands.

Japan’s security situation became more complex as the Cold War developed, with the steady rise of the Soviet threat in Northeast Asia and concomitantly US pressure for Japan to expand its security role in response. The Yoshida Doctrine underwent consequent adjustments. The revised ‘mutual’ 1960 security treaty not only made more explicit US obligations to defend Japan under Article 5, but also crucially in Article 6 pointed to the importance of the treaty to function for the wider peace and security of East Asia. Japan, in formulating the 1978 Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation, explored for the first time direct bilateral military cooperation with the United States under Article 6 of the security treaty to contribute to its own and wider regional security. Moreover, throughout the 1980s, the JSDF undertook a major quantitative and qualitative expansion of capabilities in response to the Soviet build-up, including an emphasis on GSDF main battle tanks (MBT) and artillery to counter any invasion in the northern island of Hokkaidō, the strengthening of the MSDF’s destroyer fleet and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, and the ASDF’s upgrading of fighter interceptor capabilities. Through augmenting JSDF capabilities, Japan was providing for its own defence and starting also to create a complementary...