

U.S.–Japan Summit Provides Opportunity for Greater Security Cooperation

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S.–Japan alliance is the strongest it has ever been, driven by shared values, objectives, and the necessity of responding to growing security threats.

By boosting its security posture and aligning with partners against regional challenges, Japan has shown that it is an increasingly important U.S. security partner.

President Biden should use Prime Minister Kishida’s April 10 visit to affirm the strength of the bilateral relationship and U.S. commitment to Japan’s defense.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s April 10 state visit with President Joe Biden comes amid an invigorated alliance with the U.S. as well as vastly improved relations with South Korea. Tokyo’s sweeping defense reforms announced in December 2022, which enabled a more robust regional security role, were well-received in Washington as was the resumption earlier that year of trilateral military exercises with the U.S. and South Korea after a five-year hiatus. The historic August 2023 trilateral Camp David summit created a foundation for greater security coordination against the Chinese and North Korea threats.

Security issues will feature prominently during Kishida’s visit. The U.S. and Japan will reportedly announce significant changes in the military command structure for U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) to

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improve its interaction with Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF). Though details remain uncertain, they will likely redress long-standing constraints that hindered effective military command and control between the two allies. Given its post-war pacifist constitution, Tokyo had long opposed any measures that suggested an integrated command structure. Biden and Kishida should build on recent successes to further strengthen security and economic measures to counter common threats.

Japan's Expanding Security Role

Japan warned in its December 2022 National Defense Strategy that its regional security environment has deteriorated precipitously. The Kishida administration characterizes China as an “unprecedented...strategic challenge” and is increasingly concerned about the growing potential for a Chinese attack on Taiwan, which could spill over to nearby Japanese islands.¹ In recent years, Japanese politicians have been increasingly vocal in their criticism of Beijing's sovereignty transgressions and making statements linking Japan's security more directly to that of Taiwan.

Tokyo fears that it could be drawn into a Taiwan conflict either indirectly, given its proximity, or directly if China were to attack U.S. bases in Japan that were being used as staging points to defend Taiwan.

Japan assesses that North Korea is an “even more grave and imminent threat to Japan's national security than ever before” because of the regime's continued augmentation of its nuclear and missile arsenal.² Tokyo has declared that North Korea's actions “significantly undermine the peace, stability and security of the region and the international community.”³

The Kishida administration responded to these growing challenges by announcing revolutionary changes in its national security strategy after decades of Japanese reluctance. The most sweeping changes were the decisions to double the defense budget to 2 percent of Japan's gross domestic product (GDP) and to develop counterstrike capabilities.⁴

Japan will purchase 400 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the United States while developing indigenous long-range missiles. Deploying counterstrike capabilities would extend the range of the Self-Defense Forces' ability to defend Japan, protect U.S. forces in Japan, and protect the approach routes to Taiwan.

Another positive development in Japan's national security documents was its commitment to establish a permanent joint headquarters by March 2025 to unify command of the ground, naval, and air forces. The Self-Defense Forces are currently stovepiped with insufficient ability to

communicate, plan, or operate across services. Creating a Japanese joint operational command will enhance the Japanese military's readiness and ability to fight as a cohesive force.

Improving Allied Warfighting Cohesion

Despite those improvements, U.S.–Japan military coordination has remained hindered by the maintenance of separate and parallel command structures. Each country conducts joint operations of its own services within separate chains of command. This structure is inherently weaker than the integrated command structure of the U.S.–South Korea Combined Forces Command.

A further hindrance is that U.S. Forces Japan does not have operational control of military units in Japan during wartime, nor is it an operational or warfighting command. Tokyo has to coordinate military operations with U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) in Hawaii.

However, recent media reports indicate that during Kishida's visit, the U.S. and Japan will announce the bilateral alliance's biggest upgrade since the signing of the mutual defense treaty in 1960.⁵ Details have yet to be released, but it is expected that this upgrade will include restructuring the U.S. military command in Japan and providing greater command authority to the U.S. commander in Japan. Doing so would enhance bilateral operational planning, exercises, and deterrence capabilities as well as decision-making during a crisis.

The two leaders will reportedly discuss ways to enhance joint production of defense equipment and Japanese repairing of U.S. warships and fighter jets in-country to increase readiness. Kishida and Biden will also have the first trilateral summit with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The U.S. has been striving for greater regional coordination against the growing Chinese threat, and the leaders may agree to joint trilateral naval patrols in the South China Sea.⁶

Coordinating Outreach to North Korea

Biden and Kishida will want to synchronize policies toward Pyongyang. During the past year, Kishida and other senior Japanese officials had publicly advocated for a bilateral summit meeting with North Korea. The regime had hinted at a senior-level meeting with Japan only to dash hopes when Tokyo would not capitulate to North Korea's terms.

Kim Yo-jong, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's powerful sister,

initially seemed amenable to a summit meeting. However, she couched her acquiescence to a summit on condition that Japan agree to discuss neither North Korea's nuclear weapons nor the issue of Pyongyang's past abduction of Japanese nationals. The Kishida administration did not accept the conditions, and Kim abruptly reversed course and rejected any further dialogue.

North Korea had sought to drive a wedge among Japan, South Korea, and the United States. In the past, the three countries often had divergent policy priorities, making them vulnerable to North Korean siren songs on such issues as improving inter-Korean relations with minimal conditions or resolving the Japanese abduction issue. Tokyo's diplomatic efforts were the only outreach to have gained any ground with North Korea; the regime had rejected all entreaties from Washington and Seoul since 2019.

The collapse of Japan's dialogue with North Korea leaves no current venue for seeking diplomatic means to reduce tensions or discuss risk-reduction measures. In the absence of dialogue, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea need to maintain solidarity on deterrence measures as well as on enhancing enforcement of international sanctions.

What Washington and Tokyo Should Do

To augment allied deterrence and defense capabilities against the growing Chinese and North Korean threats, Washington and Tokyo should:

- **Increase USFJ command authorities.** Currently, each U.S. service in Japan reports separately to its respective component under USINDOPACOM in Hawaii. Washington should make USFJ a joint operational command in Japan with authority over forces deployed in Japan. USFJ should also establish greater connectivity and coordination with Combined Forces Command in South Korea.
- **Improve alliance military coordination.** The lack of a unified U.S.–Japan command constrains the conduct of combined operations. A U.S.–Japan Combined Forces Command, like that of the United States and South Korea, is unlikely given Japanese constitutional and legal restrictions. However, Washington and Tokyo should develop command structures that are more capable of joint and combined planning, crisis management, and military operations.
- **Establish a U.S.–Japan Combined Joint Task Force.** The task force commander would report to the U.S. Commander of INDOPACOM

and the Japanese commander of the new combined headquarters in the same manner that the Commander of Combined Forces Command in South Korea concurrently reports to both countries' national command authorities.

- **Expand co-production of munitions and weapons.** The U.S. is looking to expand military co-development and co-production with allies and partners to replenish depleted reserves and prepare for potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Japan is an obvious candidate because it has co-produced SM-3 missile interceptors in the past. The U.S. could license production of precision-guided strike munitions such as joint air-to-surface standoff missiles (JASSM) and long-range anti-ship missiles (LRASM) to Japan.⁷
- **Increase regional coordination for a Taiwan contingency.** An international response to Chinese attacks on Taiwan would not necessarily be restricted to the Taiwan area of operations but could target Chinese interests in a far broader geographic area. Japan could deny China's freedom of navigation through straits in the first island chain while regional partners, such as Australia, could interdict Chinese military and commercial transit in the South China Sea.

The U.S. should privately engage with Japan and South Korea to develop military plans for responding to simultaneous Taiwan and North Korea scenarios. To date, South Korea has been extremely reluctant to discuss its possible involvement in a Taiwan contingency.

- **Increase communication and coordination with Taiwan.** While direct Japanese senior-level political and military contact with Taipei could be unnecessarily provocative, both countries' coast guards and air traffic control authorities could be used as proxies for coordinating maritime and aerial surveillance and reconnaissance, situational awareness, and real-time intelligence exchanges of information on Chinese military movements in the East China Sea. The U.S. and Japan should also work to expand trilateral intelligence-sharing and contingency-planning with Taiwan.

Conclusion

The U.S.–Japan alliance is currently the strongest it has ever been, driven by shared values, objectives, and the necessity of responding to growing security threats. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida should be commended for boldly pushing beyond long-standing Japanese constraints to boost his country’s security posture and align with regional partners to face growing challenges.

Japan has demonstrated that it is an increasingly important U.S. security partner. President Biden should use Kishida’s visit to underscore the strength of the bilateral relationship, affirm U.S. commitment to Japan’s defense, and seek additional measures to enhance allied deterrence and defense capabilities.

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Endnotes

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4. Government of Japan, Ministry of Defense, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, pp. 19 and 20.
5. Demetri Sevastopulo and Kana Inagaki, "US and Japan Plan Biggest Upgrade to Security Pact in Over 60 Years," *Financial Times*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/df99994d-ec4b-4c3c-9c42-738ec9b338d0> (accessed April 4, 2024).
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