

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY WITHIN HEGEMONIC ALLIANCES: JAPAN'S PURSUIT OF INDEPENDENT DECISION-MAKING CAPACITY IN THE U.S.- JAPAN ALLIANCE FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This article examines how Japan is shaping and expanding its strategic autonomy within the framework of the U.S.-Japan alliance, one of the most consequential bilateral security partnerships in the contemporary Indo-Pacific. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of vertical binding and horizontal binding (Simón & Klose, 2025), hedging (Sims & Chinfulli, 2025), and middle power typologies (Harijanto, 2023), the article argues that Japan is pursuing strategic autonomy not by distancing itself from its alliance with the United States, but by becoming a more capable, more indispensable, and more strategically relevant partner within that alliance. The article situates Japan's strategic evolution within two major geopolitical drivers: the uncertainty introduced by the Trump administrations regarding U.S. alliance commitments, and the growing military challenge posed by China's rapid modernization and regional assertiveness. Empirical evidence – including Japan's unprecedented defense spending increases to 2% of GDP, its acquisition of counterstrike capabilities, the establishment of a new Joint Operations Command, and its expanding regional partnerships through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision – demonstrates that Japan's pursuit of strategic autonomy is backed by substantial and historically unprecedented policy commitments. The article concludes that Japan's experience offers important lessons for understanding how middle powers navigate the tension between security dependence and strategic independence in an era of intensifying great power competition.

Keywords

strategic autonomy, U.S.-Japan alliance, middle power, vertical binding, horizontal binding, hedging, Indo-Pacific, Japan defense policy, Trump administration, China rise

Introduction

The question of how middle powers navigate the tension between security dependence and strategic autonomy within hegemonic alliance systems has become one of the most pressing issues in contemporary international relations scholarship. For Japan, this tension has assumed particular urgency in the context of two converging geopolitical pressures: the uncertainty introduced by the Trump administrations regarding the reliability of U.S. alliance commitments, and the accelerating military modernization of the People's Republic of China. These pressures have prompted Japan to undertake the most dramatic transformation of its security policy since the end of the Second World War, raising fundamental questions about how much strategic autonomy a middle power can realistically achieve within a hegemonic alliance.

Since the establishment of the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty in 1951, Japan has relied heavily on American extended deterrence and security guarantees. This arrangement provided Japan with the strategic stability necessary for its postwar economic recovery and development, while enabling the United States to maintain a critical forward presence in East Asia. However, the contemporary Indo-Pacific security environment has fundamentally altered the assumptions underpinning this arrangement. China's official military budget now exceeds 1.67 trillion yuan – approximately 230 billion U.S. dollars annually – and the People's Liberation Army has invested heavily in capabilities specifically designed to challenge American military dominance in the Western Pacific. At the same time, the Trump administration's "America First" agenda introduced new uncertainties about the reliability of American security commitments, compelling Japanese policymakers to reassess the degree to which Japan can rely exclusively on American protection.

This article examines Japan's response to these pressures through the lens of strategic autonomy theory, arguing that Japan is pursuing a distinctive strategy that combines deeper alliance integration with independent capability development and expanded regional partnerships. The central argument is that Japan is achieving strategic autonomy not by rejecting its alliance with the United States, but by transforming the nature of that alliance – becoming more capable, more indispensable, and more influential within it. This argument has important implications for how we understand the relationship between alliance dependence and strategic independence, and for how middle powers more broadly can pursue autonomous agency within asymmetric security relationships.

Theoretical Framework: Binding, Hedging, and Middle Power Typologies

The analysis in this article draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive account of how middle powers pursue strategic autonomy within hegemonic alliance systems.

The first framework is provided by Simón and Klose (2025), who develop a network theory of secondary state behavior within alliances built around two primary strategies: vertical binding and horizontal binding. Vertical binding refers to the deepening of direct ties with the great power patron – in Japan’s case, the United States – through military modernization, expanded command integration, and the development of new operational capabilities. The central insight of vertical binding theory is counterintuitive: by becoming more indispensable to Washington’s regional strategy, Japan paradoxically gains greater influence over American decision-making and expands its own autonomous strategic options. Horizontal binding, by contrast, involves strengthening relationships with other middle and secondary powers – such as Australia, India, South Korea, and ASEAN members – through multilateral frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative. Horizontal binding reduces overdependence on any single patron while simultaneously expanding Japan’s diplomatic influence and strategic leverage.

The second framework is provided by Sims and Chinfulli (2025), whose research on hedging strategies among Latin American states under U.S. hegemony offers important comparative insights. They define hedging as the practice of maintaining relationships with competing great powers simultaneously, allowing states to maximize economic and diplomatic benefits while minimizing strategic risks. Applied to Japan, hedging explains why Tokyo has maintained substantial economic engagement with China – bilateral trade regularly exceeds 300 billion U.S. dollars annually – despite deepening security competition between the two countries. Sims and Chinfulli identify three prerequisites for successful hedging: strong state capacity, political stability, and healthy macroeconomic fundamentals. Japan possesses all three, providing the domestic foundation necessary to sustain a dual-track approach of security alignment with the United States while preserving economic engagement with China.

The third framework is provided by Harijanto (2023), who develops a two-dimensional typology of middle power behavior in the Indo-Pacific. The first dimension distinguishes between Status Quoist middle powers – which seek to preserve the existing U.S.-led international order – and Reformist middle powers, which advocate for changes to regional governance. The second dimension distinguishes between Lockean approaches – emphasizing military alliances,

balancing, and deterrence – and Kantian approaches, which prioritize multilateralism, diplomacy, and institutional cooperation. Japan emerges from this analysis as a fundamentally Status Quoist middle power that is undergoing a significant transition from its historically Kantian orientation toward an increasingly Lockean strategic posture, driven by the deteriorating security environment and the perceived inadequacy of purely diplomatic approaches to regional security challenges.

Geopolitical Drivers of Japan's Strategic Transformation

3.1 The Trump Factor and Alliance Uncertainty

The Trump administrations have served as a crucial catalyst for Japan's pursuit of greater strategic autonomy. Trump's "America First" agenda introduced a transactional approach to alliance management that repeatedly questioned whether U.S. security commitments adequately served American interests. Demands for increased burden-sharing, threats of tariffs on Japanese exports, and uncertainty about long-term U.S. engagement in Asia collectively compelled Japanese policymakers to reassess their strategic assumptions and prepare for scenarios in which American support might become less reliable or predictable.

Japan's response to Trump's first administration (2017–2021) was sophisticated and multidimensional. Rather than simply complying with American demands or resisting them, Tokyo pursued a dual strategy: maintaining close diplomatic relations with Washington – exemplified by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cultivation of a personal relationship with Trump – while simultaneously accelerating its strategic diversification through initiatives like the FOIP vision and deeper engagement with Australia, India, and ASEAN partners. This response demonstrated that Japan was capable of managing alliance uncertainty without sacrificing either its security relationship with the United States or its broader regional ambitions.

The return of Trump to the White House for a second term (2025–2029) has intensified these dynamics. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2026), Japan has responded with a dual strategy of sustaining close ties with Washington while simultaneously strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries. A significant development in this period has been the emergence of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, whose conservative security agenda has provided the political leadership necessary to overcome longstanding constitutional and normative barriers to defense development. Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi's statement that "our national defense should be based on our own independent decision" epitomizes the assertive autonomy-seeking

stance that now characterizes Tokyo's approach. At the March 2026 U.S.-Japan summit, Japan committed over 100 billion U.S. dollars in investment in the United States alongside military cooperation initiatives including a fourfold increase in Standard Missile-3 production – a development that simultaneously addressed American burden-sharing expectations and enhanced Japan's own deterrence capabilities.

3.2 China's Rise and Japan's Threat Perceptions

China's military modernization represents the primary structural driver of Japan's strategic transformation. The People's Liberation Army has invested heavily in Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities designed to challenge American military dominance in the Western Pacific, creating direct threats to Japan's security and to the operational effectiveness of the U.S.-Japan alliance. China's Coast Guard has intensified its activities around the Senkaku Islands – uninhabited islands administered by Japan but claimed by China – creating a persistent daily security challenge that tests Japan's coast guard and Self-Defense Forces. Japan's National Security Strategy, revised in December 2022, explicitly identified China as “the greatest strategic challenge ever faced by Japan,” marking a historic escalation in official Japanese threat assessment.

The Taiwan question has emerged as perhaps the most consequential element of Japan's threat environment. Japan's westernmost territory lies approximately 110 kilometers from Taiwan, and any military conflict over Taiwan would have immediate implications for Japanese territory, maritime trade routes, and the U.S. military facilities on Japanese soil that would almost certainly be involved in any American military response. Prime Minister Takaichi's statement in January 2026 that the U.S.-Japan alliance “would collapse” if Tokyo ignored a Taiwan crisis reflects the growing consensus within Japan's strategic community that Taiwan's security is indivisible from Japan's own.

Despite these security tensions, Japan has maintained substantial economic engagement with China, with bilateral trade regularly exceeding 300 billion U.S. dollars annually. This coexistence of security competition and economic interdependence reflects Japan's hedging strategy – preserving the economic relationship with China that provides diplomatic flexibility and economic stability while simultaneously strengthening the military capabilities and alliance relationships necessary to deter Chinese aggression. However, Japan is actively diversifying its supply chains in critical sectors such as semiconductors and rare earth minerals to reduce strategic vulnerabilities associated with excessive economic dependence on China.

Japan's Strategic Autonomy in Practice

4.1 Defense Spending and Military Modernization

The most concrete and quantifiable expression of Japan's pursuit of strategic autonomy has been its unprecedented expansion of defense spending. Japan's fiscal year 2026 defense budget reached a record 9.04 trillion yen – approximately 57.8 billion U.S. dollars – marking the fourteenth consecutive annual increase in defense expenditure (The Diplomat, 2025). This figure represents an increase of approximately 67% from Japan's defense spending of 5.4 trillion yen in 2022, achieved in just four fiscal years. More significantly, Japan reached its target of spending 2% of GDP on defense in fiscal year 2025 – two years ahead of the original 2027 deadline established in the 2022 National Security Strategy – breaking the “one percent rule” that had constrained Japanese defense spending for nearly eight decades.

These spending increases are embedded within Japan's five-year Defense Buildup Program (2023–2027), which allocates 43 trillion yen – approximately 275 billion U.S. dollars – toward comprehensive military modernization. Funding priorities under the program include stand-off missile systems, integrated missile defense, advanced unmanned platforms, cyber and space capabilities, and command-and-control modernization. The composition of Japan's defense investments reflects a deliberate strategy of acquiring qualitatively new capabilities that expand Japan's strategic options rather than simply expanding existing force structures.

4.2 Counterstrike Capabilities: A Historic Normative Departure

Perhaps the most symbolically significant development in Japan's defense transformation has been the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities – the ability to strike hostile targets before or during an attack. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2026), Japan is deploying upgraded Type-12 surface-to-ship missiles with a range of approximately 1,000 kilometers and acquiring 400 U.S.-made Tomahawk cruise missiles, while developing a satellite constellation to improve long-range surveillance and targeting capabilities. The IISS characterizes these developments as a “substantive recalibration of Japan's defence posture,” representing a decisive departure from the exclusively defensive military orientation that characterized Japanese security policy since 1947.

The acquisition of counterstrike capabilities required a significant reinterpretation of Japan's constitutional and normative framework, particularly the principle of *senshu boei* – exclusive self-defense – that had prohibited any military action that could be characterized as offensive in nature. As analyzed by

Taylor & Francis (2025), this reinterpretation reflects growing concerns about China's military rise and North Korea's expanding missile capabilities, and represents a historic shift in Japan's understanding of national defense. Importantly, Japanese policymakers have framed counterstrike capabilities as deterrent and defensive in nature, emphasizing that their purpose is to deny adversaries the ability to complete attacks against Japan rather than to project power offensively.

4.3 Institutional Reforms and Alliance Integration

Japan's defense transformation extends beyond weapons acquisition to encompass significant institutional reforms. The establishment of Japan's Joint Operations Command (JJOC) in 2024 represents a fundamental restructuring of how Japan's Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces coordinate their operations, creating for the first time a unified command authority capable of directing joint operations across all three services. The JJOC provides the institutional foundation necessary for Japan to effectively employ its new counterstrike capabilities and to operate more independently in complex security scenarios.

The JJOC also has important implications for Japan's relationship with the United States. According to CSIS (2026), the Department of Defense is working to upgrade U.S. Forces Japan into a genuine Joint Force Headquarters capable of serving as a real counterpart to Japan's new command structure. This parallel development of both Japanese and American command structures reflects a broader evolution of the alliance from a hub-and-spoke relationship toward a more balanced partnership with more equal roles and responsibilities.

4.4 Horizontal Binding: The Quad and Regional Partnerships

Alongside its vertical binding strategy of deepening alliance integration with the United States, Japan has pursued an ambitious program of horizontal binding through regional partnership development. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – comprising Japan, the United States, Australia, and India – has emerged as the most visible expression of Japan's horizontal binding strategy. At the May 2026 Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting, Japan participated in the announcement of the Critical Minerals Initiative, a multilateral framework designed to reduce collective dependence on Chinese supply chains in strategically important sectors. This initiative exemplifies how horizontal binding translates theoretical concepts into concrete strategic advantages: by embedding itself in a multilateral economic security network, Japan simultaneously reduces its vulnerability to Chinese economic coercion and strengthens its relationships with key regional partners.

Japan's horizontal binding extends beyond the Quad to encompass a growing network of bilateral and trilateral security arrangements. Japan's first participation in the Balikatan military exercises with the United States and the Philippines in 2026 marked an unprecedented expansion of Japan's security cooperation into Southeast Asia. Defense cooperation agreements with Australia, the United Kingdom, and European partners have created a web of relationships through which Japan shares intelligence, conducts joint exercises, and develops interoperable capabilities. These partnerships collectively provide Japan with strategic options and diplomatic leverage that would be unavailable if it relied exclusively on the bilateral U.S.-Japan alliance.

Discussion: Autonomy Within the Alliance

The empirical evidence examined in this article demonstrates that Japan's pursuit of strategic autonomy is not merely rhetorical but is backed by substantial and historically unprecedented policy commitments. Japan has acquired counterstrike capabilities that give it the ability to strike adversary territory independently of American action; it has increased defense spending by 67% in four years to reach the historically significant threshold of 2% of GDP; it has restructured its military command arrangements to enable more effective joint operations; and it has built the broadest regional partnership network among all U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific. Together, these developments represent a comprehensive and coherent strategy of autonomy-building within the alliance framework.

The theoretical frameworks applied in this article help explain why Japan's strategy takes this particular form. Vertical binding theory explains why Japan is deepening rather than limiting its military integration with the United States: by becoming more indispensable to American regional strategy, Japan gains greater influence over American decision-making and expands the range of outcomes it can achieve within the alliance. Hedging theory explains why Japan has maintained economic engagement with China despite growing security competition: this engagement provides diplomatic flexibility and economic stability that would be sacrificed by complete decoupling. And Harijanto's typology helps explain Japan's distinctive combination of Status Quoist goals – preserving the U.S.-led regional order – with an evolving mix of Kantian and increasingly Lockean strategic approaches.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the significant limits that constrain Japan's strategic autonomy. The fundamental power asymmetry between Japan and China – China's military budget of approximately 230 billion U.S.

dollars annually dwarfs Japan's even after Tokyo's historic increases – means that Japan cannot achieve genuine independence from the U.S. alliance in the face of Chinese power. Japan's counterstrike capabilities depend heavily on American technology and logistical support, limiting the degree to which these capabilities represent truly autonomous military options. And the intensification of U.S.–China competition is gradually narrowing the space for Japan's hedging strategy, making it increasingly difficult to maintain meaningful economic engagement with China while deepening security cooperation with the United States. These constraints ensure that Japan's strategic autonomy will remain partial and incremental, achieved within rather than outside the alliance framework.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Japan is shaping and expanding its strategic autonomy within the U.S.–Japan alliance, arguing that Japan is pursuing what can be characterized as “autonomy through indispensability” – becoming more capable, more valuable, and more strategically relevant to the United States while simultaneously developing independent capabilities and expanding regional partnerships. The empirical evidence examined – Japan's unprecedented defense spending increases, its acquisition of counterstrike capabilities, its institutional reforms, and its diplomatic engagement through the Quad and FOIP – demonstrates that this strategy is backed by substantial and historically significant policy commitments.

Japan's experience carries important implications for theoretical debates about middle power behavior and alliance politics. It demonstrates that for middle powers in asymmetric alliances, the path to genuine strategic autonomy runs through alliance deepening and capability development, not alliance rejection. The alliance is not the limit of Japan's autonomy; it is the platform from which Japan's autonomy is being constructed. This finding challenges conventional assumptions about the trade-off between security dependence and strategic independence and suggests that the relationship between alliance cooperation and autonomous agency is more complex and mutually reinforcing than is often assumed.

For policymakers, Japan's experience offers important lessons about how middle powers can expand their strategic agency in an era of intensifying great power competition. States that invest in genuine military capabilities, build diverse regional partnerships, and manage their economic relationships with rival powers carefully can achieve meaningful strategic autonomy even within deeply asymmetric alliance relationships. As the Indo-Pacific security environment continues to evolve, the questions examined in this article will only become more

pressing, and Japan's ongoing strategic transformation will continue to provide important insights for scholars and practitioners alike.

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