

Security Dilemma: US National Defense Strategy and Japan's Defense Posture in the Shadow of China

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This essay explores the concept of the security dilemma and its implications for current US strategy in East Asia, drawing upon the foundational theories presented in the works of Jervis.¹ The security dilemma, where one nation's defense efforts alarm others, is starkly evident between the US and East Asia, driving a cycle of military build-ups. Grasping this tension is critical for today's strategists to navigate the delicate balance between deterrence and diplomacy to prevent regional conflict escalation.

The discussion will explain the security dilemma. Then, it will delve into the United States (US) National Defense Strategy (NDS) 2022.² After that, I will analyze how the NDS connection with Japan's latest 2023 Defense White Paper (DWP). Next I will explain how the White Paper creates a security dilemma in East Asia.³ Concluding with recommendations, the essay will suggest how Japan can navigate its defense strategy, ensuring that the vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" is realized.

The Security Dilemma

The "Security Dilemma" refers to the dilemma nations encounter when their efforts to safeguard their security by strengthening their military capabilities provoke competition in armament, escalating the risk of conflict and undermining the security they aim to bolster. Countries can adopt a defensive stance or collaborate by forming alliances to safeguard their

¹ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>.

² "United States National Defense Strategy 2022," U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/National-Defense-Strategy/>.

³ "2023 Japan Defense White Paper," Japan Ministry of Defense, accessed February 11, 2024, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/>.

national interests. This strategy will become a paradox, resulting in a security problem. The fog of defensive, offensive measures can lead to an arms race, escalation of tensions, or regional conflict.

Jervis establishes a correlation between the Security Dilemma and the Prisoner's Dilemma theory in international affairs (see Figure 1). He utilizes the concept of "the cost of being Exploited." This idea reveals the potential dread and repercussions when one nation takes advantage of another.⁴ Nations exercise cautiousness in their strategic approach. If countries are subjected to exploitation, it can lead to significant consequences. Countries will experience a substantial loss of strategic advantage and become vulnerable to attack. Similarly, the Prisoner's Dilemma demonstrates how rational individuals, limited by mutual suspicion and lacking a reliable means to convey their intents and guarantees, may choose competing tactics that result in less-than-ideal results for everyone involved. Therefore, the US must be aware of the effect of strategic competition with the PRC, which will alert East Asian Countries to be more aware of their defense posture.

		A	
		COOPERATE	DEFECT
B	COOPERATE	2	1
	DEFECT	4	3

Figure 1: Prisoner dilemma, when connected to international affairs, minimizes the negative impact when countries might choose a cooperative strategy and another country decides to defect, which will cause a fear of "being exploited."⁵

⁴ Jervis, 172–76.

⁵ Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," 171.

US Defense Strategy 2022

The 2022 US NDS emphasizes strengthening America's strategic presence in East Asia. The strategy addresses broader issues by compiling a comprehensive plan to support the US defense against the People's Republic of China (PRC).⁶ This strategy requires a robust security structure to keep the region open and safe. The plan outlines "integrated Deterrence," which synchronizes strategic planning to strengthen alliances with Japan, deepen connections with Australia, advance technological collaborations through AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Quad, and promote regional security collaboration.⁷

Japan Defense Whitepaper 2023

Japan, a vital ally of the US in East Asia with a history of disputes with the PRC, is committed to enhancing its role in countering the PRC's influence in the region. Emphasizing deterrence and the principle of "defend our country by ourselves," Japan aims to safeguard its interests by convincing potential adversaries that attacking Japan would be futile in achieving their objectives.⁸ This strategy underscores Japan's determination to maintain its sovereignty and regional stability amidst rising tensions.

The White Paper also reveals the desire of Japan's military to acquire a standoff defense capability. This capability stops the adversary by initiating the attack from a safe distance. The primary armament used for this strategy will include the improvement of surface-to-surface missile Type-10 and Type-12, unmanned defense capability, integrated air and missile capability, and emphasized military capability building in Japan's southwest region. This ambitious strategy will

⁶ "United States National Defense Strategy 2022," 4.

⁷ See Integrated Deterrence. "United States National Defense Strategy 2022," 4–11.

⁸ Addressed as the opening of 2022 Japan's Defense White paper by Japan's MOD. "2023 Japan Defense White Paper," 4.

be planned to be done in FY 2027 and significantly quadruple the military budget in 2023. Thus, it ends up with significant increases in Japan's military expenditure (see Figure 2).

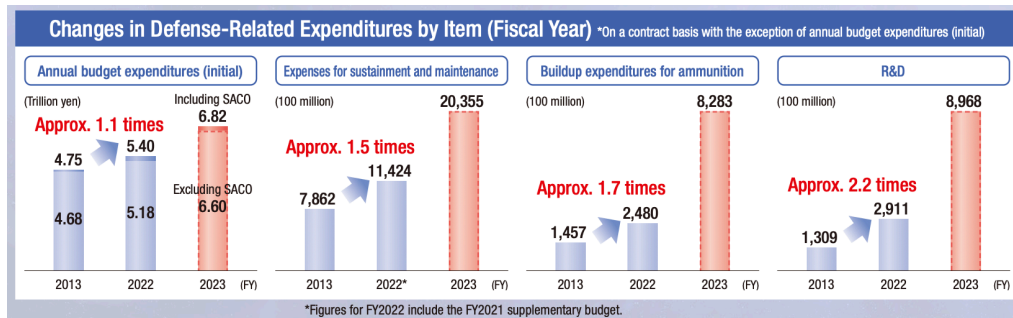


Figure 2: Significant increases in Japan's defense expenditure.⁹

How the Japanese White Paper Creates a Security Dilemma

Japan's Defense White Paper (DWP) describes a strategy for deterring attack that includes denial and punishment, blurring the distinction between defensive and offensive military postures. This strategy explicitly states that nuclear-armed countries, including the PRC, are a threat. Therefore, the security concern mentioned in the document creates a security dilemma because it raises questions about the legitimacy of Japan's threats and the possibility of increasing regional tensions.

The DWP's focus on Japan's capability for preemptive attacks blurs the line between defense and offense, contributing to an international culture of competitiveness and suspicions, especially in crucial locations, such as the Miyako Strait. Japan's improved defense capabilities directly challenge the PRC's regional ambitions, particularly those involving Taiwan. Such developments may elicit a more robust response from Beijing, increasing the possibility of misinterpretation and conflict.

⁹ "2023 Japan Defense White Paper," 3.

In short, Japan's DWP contributes to a security dilemma by pursuing a strategy that, while intended to deter, may speed up an arms race and increase the risk of regional instability. This policy highlights the challenge of balancing Japan's security demands and strategic foresight in a continuously changing geopolitical scene.

To further address the broader implications of the security dilemma in East Asia, it is essential to consider how these dynamics impact regional stability and international relations. Escalating mutual suspicions and arms races strain bilateral ties and complicate the broader network of alliances and partnerships. In a domino effect, security dilemmas can undermine efforts to address urgent security issues in peacetime, such as climate change, pandemics, and cyber-attacks, which require cooperative international approaches. The focus on military competition diminishes the capacity and willingness of states to collaborate on these critical issues, potentially exacerbating global challenges. Furthermore, heightened military tensions increase the risk of accidental encounters or miscalculations that could escalate into open conflict, jeopardizing regional peace, global security, and economic stability, given East Asia's central role in international trade and supply chains.

Recommendation

To support Japan as an ally while minimizing the potential security dilemma and arms races in East Asia, the United States should prioritize diplomatic engagement alongside its military alliances. Enhanced diplomatic efforts are crucial for maintaining open lines of communication with China to mitigate misunderstandings and manage tensions. The US can facilitate dialogue about transparency regarding military capabilities and intentions between Japan and China, reducing the likelihood of perceived threats escalating into conflict. By emphasizing conflict

prevention and crisis management mechanisms within the framework of the US-Japan alliance, the US can help ensure that military enhancements are viewed as defensive rather than provocative.

Furthermore, the US should encourage and support Japan in developing and articulating precise defensive postures easily distinguishable from offensive capabilities. This strategy involves assisting Japan in establishing a defense strategy that prioritizes minimal force projection beyond its borders, focusing instead on defensive capabilities aligned with the principles of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." By doing so, the US can help Japan strengthen its deterrence capabilities without exacerbating the security dilemma. Collaborative exercises, information sharing, and joint development of defensive technologies can reinforce this stance, emphasizing the defensive nature of their strategic partnership with the international community.

Through a balanced approach that combines strategic deterrence with diplomatic outreach and multilateral engagement, the US can support Japan in navigating its defense strategy while minimizing the risk of exacerbating regional security dilemmas.

Conclusion

The security dilemma is a lens through which the US must look at Japan's extended defense strategy in an era of great power competition between the US and China. US and the PRC's growing great power rivalry constructs a security dilemma for East Asia, especially for Japan. This tension is embodied in Japan's move towards a standoff defense policy, as demonstrated by the country's 2023 DWP, which details a significant increase in the military budget. Even though the goal is to strengthen deterrence, such a step risks starting an arms race and jeopardizing East Asian security. The US, Japan's primary ally, is vital in helping Japan make its defensive goals more apparent to the surrounding countries. The balancing of deterrence and diplomacy is necessary to signal to the region the true intention of Japan as it increases its defense posture while preventing

escalation in the region and exploitation by the PRC. The US can support Japan in minimizing tension by balancing diplomacy with deterrence and carefully adhering to the ideals of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." This strategy helps to preserve regional peace and stability in the face of escalating geopolitical tensions and emphasizes the defensive character of Japan's military upgrades.

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