

CNEAS ISSUE BRIEF

Navigating the Pacific Tides: Analysing the Shift in US Foreign Policy towards Asia and its Implications for Japan

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The Obama administration’s strategy towards Asia, dubbed as the “Pivot to Asia,” aimed to establish a strong American presence in the area and counter potential Chinese hegemony in the region.¹ The core theme of the U.S. strategy is that America will play a leading role in Asia for decades to come. U.S. turned its focus towards Asia in terms of multilateral institutions, economy and commerce, security, and democracy. The term ‘Pivot to Asia’² denotes the deliberate change in the United States’ foreign policy towards Asia during the Obama administration. The pivot acknowledges the escalating significance of Asia in the international

¹ Gokhale, V. (2021, February 1). *China’s vision of hegemony: the view from India* | *The Strategist*. The Strategist. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-vision-of-hegemony-the-view-from-india/>

² Davidson, J. (2014). The U.S. “Pivot to Asia.” *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 21, 77–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44289339>

arena and underscores the imperative for the United States to actively involve itself with the area.

The U.S. approach to Asia has undergone several changes in the last decade, focusing specifically on four primary areas: multilateral institutions, economy and commerce, security, and democracy. The United States redirected its attention towards multilateral institutions that involved the United States and uphold ideals that are preferred by Washington, as opposed to Beijing. Within the domain of economics and trade, the United States gave Asia a higher level of importance in its endeavours, exemplified by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).³ Though the United States withdrew from the platform in 2017 under Trump administration, the primary objective of the TPP was to create a top-notch platform for trade and investment.⁴ The United States has demonstrated its dedication to Asian security by prioritizing military deployments and defense expenditures. Furthermore, the United States has intensified its efforts to advance democracy and uphold human rights in the region.⁵

It is crucial to emphasize that China is concerned about these trends, as it regards them as efforts to hold back its growth as a global force. However, the U.S. strategy is not geared at challenging China directly, but rather wants to establish a strong presence in Asia to dissuade potential Chinese hegemony and encourage constructive behaviour.⁶ The success of the pivot depends on a multitude of circumstances, including the USA's capacity to address its domestic budgetary and political issues, the Chinese response to this plan, and the trajectory of China's own prospects. Overall, the pivot to Asia reflects a substantial movement in U.S. foreign policy towards a more active and engaged engagement in the Asia-Pacific region.

³ SICE: Trade Policy Developments: Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement. (n.d.). http://www.sice.oas.org/tpd/tpp/tpp_e.asp

⁴ McBride, J. (2021, September 21). *What's Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?* Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-trans-pacific-partnership-tpp>

⁵ Lieberthal. (2011, December 21). *The American Pivot to Asia*. Brookings <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>

⁶ *Updating America's Asia strategy* | Brookings. (2023, June 19). Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/updating-americas-asia-strategy/>

Decades in Alliance: Tracing the Arc of US-Japan Relations from Truman to Biden

The U.S.-Japan alliance has a significant historical background that originated in the aftermath of World War II. The alliance was officially created in 1951 by the signing of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty.⁷ The treaty bestowed to the United States the privilege of retaining military installations and personnel within Japanese territory, in exchange for its obligation to safeguard Japan. The U.S.-Japan mutual defence treaty allows the U.S. to station more than 50,000 troops and military resources on Japanese soil in exchange for protection.

The U.S.-Japan alliance has been a fundamental element of U.S. security strategy in East Asia since its inception. The alliance has undergone transformation over time in order to tackle the evolving security issues in the region. Japan has recently embraced more forceful security stances, enabling increased adaptability in addressing regional concerns.⁸

A primary security objective that both the United States and Japan have in common is to address and mitigate the risks posed by North Korea and China. Both nations have voiced apprehensions regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile initiatives, as well as China's rising dominance and sway in the area. The United States and Japan have engaged in collaborative efforts pertaining to various domains including science, technology, global health, energy, and climate change.⁹

Economically, it is important to note that while the United States and Japan have not entered into a full bilateral free trade agreement, they have, nonetheless, signed two trade agreements in 2019.¹⁰ These agreements have resulted in the liberalization of certain products trade and the establishment of regulations for digital trade. Japan ranks as the fourth-largest trade partner

⁷ Maizland, L. (2021, November 4). *The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-japan-security-alliance>

⁸ Klinck, H. (2023, June 23). *Japan's Defense Priorities and Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-defense-priorities-and-implications-us-japan-alliance>

⁹ House, W. (2022, May 23). *FACT SHEET: The U.S.-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership*. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-the-u-s-japan-competitiveness-and-resilience-core-partnership/>

¹⁰ *Japan - Trade Agreements*. (n.d.). International Trade Administration | Trade.gov. <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/japan-trade-agreements>

of the United States¹¹ and holds the position of being the primary source of foreign direct investment into the country. Japan became a member of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)¹², a regional initiative led by the United States that focuses on economic and trade matters.



Figure 1 : Map of US Army Bases in Japan
Image Source: [US Army in Japan](#)

Regarding leadership, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida made a significant visit to the United States in January 2023, signifying a substantial shift in the U.S.-Japan relationship. The Kishida administration exhibited a resolute stance in enhancing Japan's defence capabilities, with a collective dedication to addressing the challenges presented by authoritarian powers. The U.S.-Japan partnership was characterized as being "more robust than ever".¹³

In general, the alliance between the United States and Japan has been marked by a strong partnership and collaboration, especially in the domains of security, trade, and regional

¹¹ Branch, F. T. D. D. (n.d.). *Foreign Trade - U.S. Trade with* . <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/toppartners.html>

¹² *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)*. (n.d.). United States Trade Representative. <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/agreements-under-negotiation/indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity-ipef>

¹³ Solis. (2023, January 20). *As Kishida meets Biden, what is the state of the US-Japan alliance?* Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/as-kishida-meets-biden-what-is-the-state-of-the-us-japan-alliance/>

stability. The two nations have underscored common concerns such as unhindered maritime passage, nuclear disarmament, and safeguarding against cyber threats. Nevertheless, the relationship has been occasionally strained due to problems such as territory disputes, cost-sharing, and divergent diplomatic policies towards North Korea and China.¹⁴ Notwithstanding these obstacles, the alliance has persistently developed and adjusted to tackle the constantly shifting dynamics in the East Asian region.

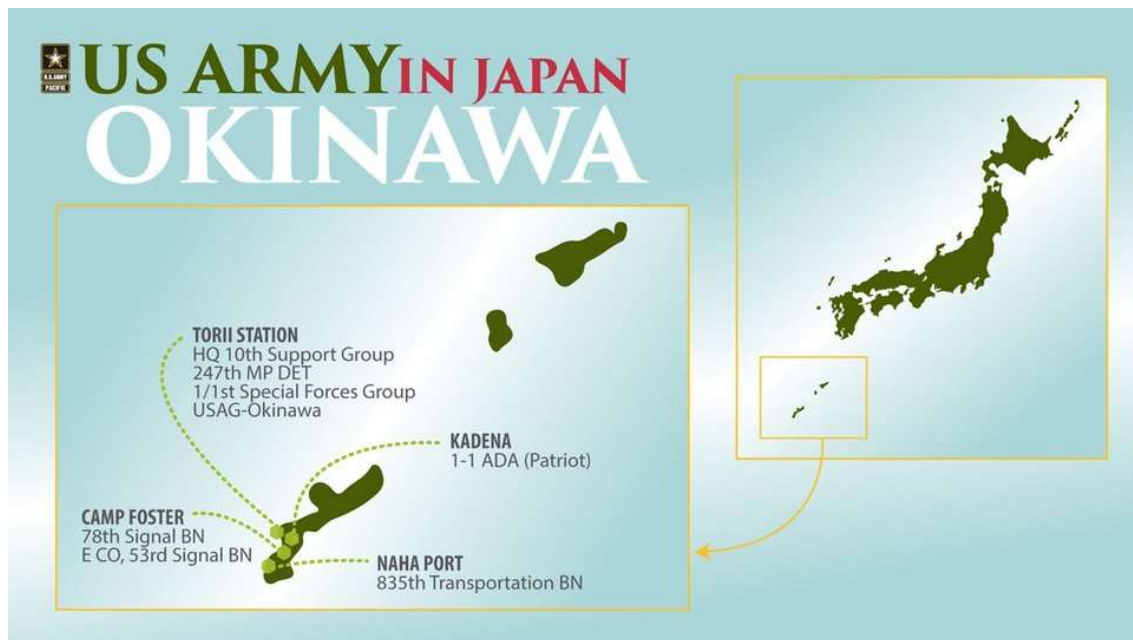


Figure 2: Map of US Bases on Okinawa
Image Source: [US Army in Japan](#)

Japan's Strategic Positioning: A Key Player in the 'Pivot to Asia'

Japan plays a pivotal role in the United States' 'Pivot to Asia' agenda. The Obama administration recognized Japan as a crucial ally in response to China's swift economic and military expansion in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States' strategic emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region has been motivated by the growing geopolitical significance of the area and the difficulties presented by China's ascent.

¹⁴ Turker, H. (2023, August 7). *Shared Goals, Divergent Paths: US-ROK-Japan Relations* | Geopolitical Monitor. Geopolitical Monitor. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/shared-goals-divergent-paths-us-rok-japan-relations/>

The United States considers Japan strategically significant due to its favourable geographical location, which serves as a strategic base for military operations and facilitates maritime dominance in crucial areas such as Taiwan, the Miyako strait, and the Senkaku archipelago. The US relies on Japan's cooperation to uphold a strategic edge, namely in asserting dominance over the seas around Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands.¹⁵

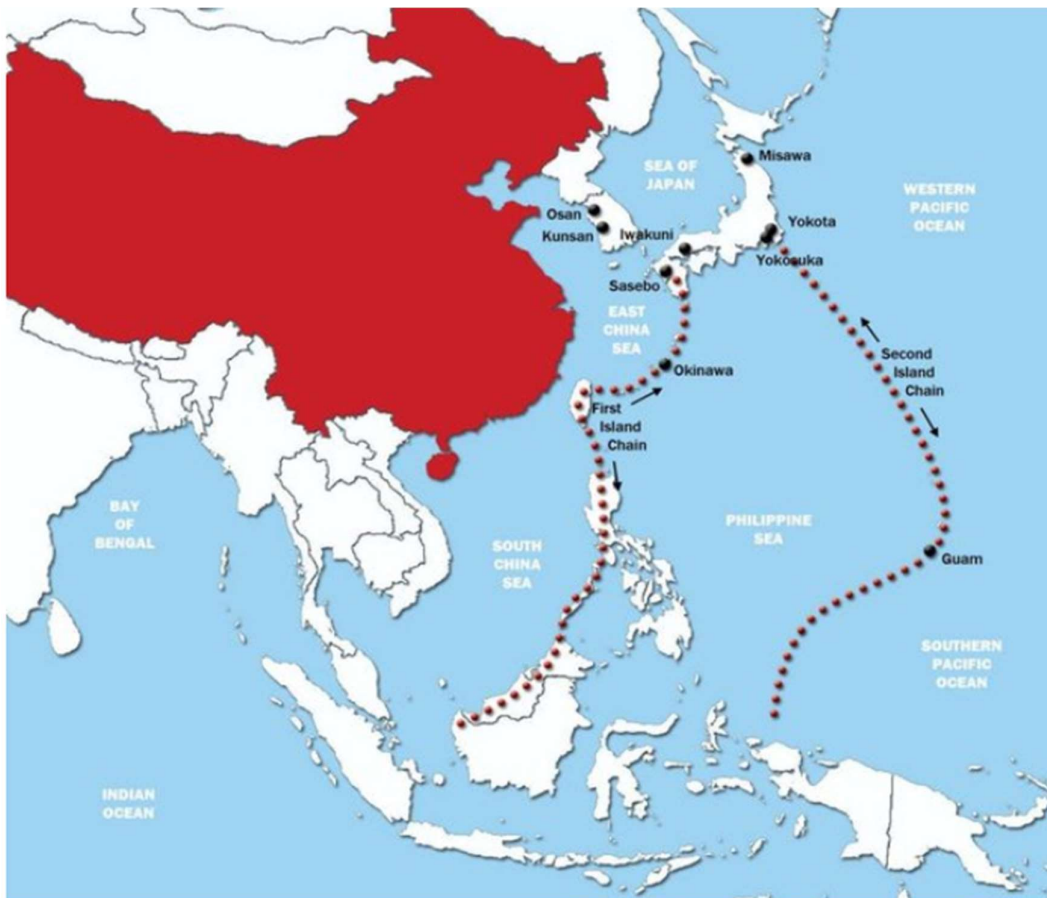


Figure 3: Representation of First and Second Island Chains from Japan to South East Asia
Image Source: [Catama \(2015\)](#)

Since the conclusion of the Cold War, the US-Japan alliance has developed, with Japan taking on a more involved position in the US-led security structure in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States promotes the normalization of Japan's security strategy with the goal of shifting

¹⁵ Rossi, R. (2022, March 1). *Japan in the U.S. Pivot to Asia Policy*. SpecialEurasia. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/03/01/japan-united-states-asia/>

Japan's role from being solely a recipient of security to actively contributing to the alliance and serving as a provider of democratic security.

The US pivot to Asia entails the strategic expansion of alliances, bolstering existing partnerships with countries like Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines, while also establishing new diplomatic channels with former foes like Vietnam and Myanmar.¹⁶ Japan continues to be the central focus of US involvement in the Asia-Pacific region, while the US is also enhancing alliances with other significant players.

Japan's primary role in the 'Pivot to Asia' is to offer strategic assistance to the United States in resisting China's assertive actions and upholding regional stability. Japan's heightened involvement in military operations in close proximity to Taiwan, as well as its collaboration with US military installations, bolster the US strategy of containing China.¹⁷

A critique of US strategy towards Japan is that Japan's increasing integration into the US military complex has resulted in substantial American influence on Japanese decision-making and limitations on Tokyo's ability to maintain independence and avoid getting involved in conflicts. Additionally, it highlights the growing demand for Japan to take on a more proactive military role within the alliance and to reduce the unequal distribution of burdens. These complaints might be viewed as potential drawbacks of Japan's involvement in the Pivot to Asia policy, as they imply a diminished level of independence and heightened reliance on the United States.

¹⁶ *United States' pivot towards Asia-Pacific Region – its results and prospects - National Defence Journal*. (n.d). <http://tapchiquptd.vn/en/events-and-comments/united-states-pivot-towards-asiapacific-region-%E2%80%93-its-results-and-prospects/18362.html>

¹⁷ *China is right about US containment*. (n.d.). Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/bc6685c1-6f17-4e9e-aaaa-922083c06e70>

Reshaping Alliances: The Significance of the Pivot to Asia on Japan

The ramifications of the Pivot to Asia on Japan can be comprehended from multiple perspectives. The Obama administration's deliberate reorientation towards the Asia-Pacific region and the execution of the Pivot to Asia policy have had significant consequences for Japan.¹⁸ Here are several significant effects:

1. **Enhanced Security Partnership:** The United States has recognized Japan as a crucial ally in addressing the growing influence of China in the Asia-Pacific area. Japan has been anticipated to assume a more proactive role in the US-led security framework in the region as part of the Pivot to Asia. Japan has had to increase its responsibilities in terms of ensuring security and discouraging potential threats in the region.
2. **Defense Strategy Realignment:** The evolving security landscape, propelled by China's increasing military capabilities and the US shift in focus, has compelled Japan to reassess its security strategy. Japan is undergoing a shift from being a 'peace-loving country' to being a 'normal nation', after the reinterpretation of Article 9 in the Japanese Constitution¹⁹ and is actively pursuing a process of 'normalization' in its security strategy. Japan's growing reliance on the US military complex has constrained its ability to maintain a level of independence and autonomy in both military and political domains.
3. **Challenges to Autonomy:** The progressive weakening of Japan's post-war ideals of opposition to militarism and constitutional restrictions has been strengthened by the demand from the United States for Japan to take on a more proactive military role in the alliance and distribute the responsibilities more evenly. The diversification of the US-Japan alliance has also reduced Japan's capacity to impose its conditions on the US, as other alliances linking the US with other players in the area become more important.
4. **Geopolitical Significance:** Japan's strategic location, characterized by numerous islands, important maritime passages, and its close proximity to key regions such as the Korean Peninsula, Russian and Chinese coasts, and Taiwan, has positioned it as a vital player in the

¹⁸ Silove, N. (2016). The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia. *International Security*, 40(4), 45–88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43828314>

¹⁹ Japan's "Reinterpretation" of Article 9: A Pyrrhic Victory for American Foreign Policy? (2023, March 5). Iowa Law Review - the University of Iowa. <https://ilr.law.uiowa.edu/print/volume-101-issue-3/japans-reinterpretation-of-article-9-a-pyrrhic-victory-for-american-foreign-policy>

implementation of the Pivot to Asia policy. The increased US military presence in Japan, namely on Okinawa²⁰, is seen as crucial for the US to gain a strategic and operational edge in controlling the seas and exerting its influence in the area.

5. The US pivot has caused a restructuring of US military positioning, involving a decrease in deployed forces in Europe²¹ and potentially the Middle East, and a growing American presence in the Asia-Pacific region. As a result, Japan has taken steps to strengthen its security ties with the US, while the US is looking for further burden-sharing from its allies.

To summarize, the Pivot to Asia has had a profound impact on Japan, resulting in a stronger security role, a change in defense policy, difficulties in maintaining independence, increased strategic importance, and tighter collaboration with the United States.

Unravelling the Backlog: Assessing the Historical Impact of the Pivot to Asia

The critique of the Pivot to Asia encompasses the subsequent points:

1. Washington's shift of focus to Asia was frequently disrupted by problems occurring in other parts of the world, such as the rise of global terrorist organizations and the civil war in Syria. Consequently, the United States was compelled to prioritize the handling of matters in the Middle East, so impeding its capacity to properly implement its all-encompassing strategy for the Asia-Pacific region.²²

2. Incapacity to Concentrate on a Singular Region: Detractors contend that the United States, in its capacity as the global enforcer, was inherently incapable of directing an intense and

²⁰ *United States Forces Japan*. (2024, January 11). Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Forces_Japan

²¹ Radin, A., & Gentile, G. (2023, July 24). *Why the United States Still Needs Ground Forces in Europe*. RAND.
<https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/07/why-the-united-states-still-needs-ground-forces-in.html>

²² Ford, J. (2017, January 23). *The pivot to Asia was Obama's biggest mistake*. The Japan Times.
<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/01/23/commentary/world-commentary/pivot-asia-obamas-biggest-mistake/>

exclusive attention towards a certain region of the world. The United States inherently engages in global politics, diverting its focus and resources from a deliberate shift towards Asia.²³

3. The United States' prolonged involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan²⁴ over the past twenty years have resulted in substantial expenses and obligations, making it difficult to reallocate resources and prioritize the Asia-Pacific region.

4. Uncertainties in the Trump Administration: The Trump administration's foreign policy approach²⁵, which focused on transactions with both adversaries and allies, created uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific region. This raised worries about the consistency and effectiveness of the pivot to Asia plan.

5. China gains from the United States' failure to strategically shift its focus to Asia.²⁶ China's dominance in the region grows whenever the United States allocates political, economic, or military resources outside of Asia. The occurrence of events such as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine diverts attention away from the priorities of the Asia-Pacific region, so allowing China to seize more opportunities to enhance its influence in the area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the "Pivot to Asia" indicates a substantial change in American foreign policy, particularly under the Obama administration, with the goal of forging a robust American presence in the Asia-Pacific area. The expanding geopolitical significance of Asia and worries about China's swift military and economic development were the main drivers of this strategic

²³ Birgbauer, P. (2022, March 31). *The US Pivot to Asia Was Dead on Arrival*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/the-us-pivot-to-asia-was-dead-on-arrival/>

²⁴ Laub, Z. (2017, May 1). *The U.S. War in Afghanistan*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>

²⁵ Waterhouse, B. C. (2017, April 11). *Donald Trump: Foreign Affairs* | Miller Center. Miller Center. <https://millercenter.org/president/trump/foreign-affairs>

²⁶ *The Decade of Living Dangerously: The Impact of U.S.-China Strategic Competition on Asia*. (n.d.). Asia Society. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/decade-living-dangerously-impact-us-china-strategic-competition-asia>

change. This strategy was heavily reliant on the relationship between the United States and Japan, with Japan acting as a vital ally in tackling regional security issues.²⁷

The 'Pivot to Asia' has had a variety of effects on Japan. As a result, Japan and the US now have a stronger security alliance, with Japan playing a more active role in regional security initiatives. But it has also forced Japan to reassess its defense policy and prompted concerns about its independence and autonomy, especially as it gets more entwined with the US military complex.

With Russia invading Ukraine, it is critical that the United States maintain its geopolitical pivot to Asia.²⁸ Although there have been calls to redirect resources and focus on opposing Russia as a result of the European crisis, the author contends that this would be a mistake. The military challenges Russia faces, and Europe's growing defense spending²⁹ present a rare chance for the US to concentrate on China, which poses a more serious long-term threat.

China poses a serious and complex danger to the United States because of its expanding military might, regional ambitions, and economic clout. The pivot to Asia has geopolitical, economic, and military significance in addition to its military application. Ignoring this obstacle could give China the chance to alter the regional order against the security and interests of the United States.

Another threat that arose in the region is North Korea and its missiles, US is challenged on balancing the beam between Japan and South Korea³⁰, who are hostile to each other but are bound to the US. This creates a risk on whose needs to be prioritised, especially after there are concerns of a Chinese Invasion on Taiwan in the near future.

²⁷ Sacks, D. (2022, March 21). *Don't Pivot From the Pivot to Asia*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/dont-pivot-pivot-asia>

²⁸ Blackwill, R. D. (2022, March 15). *Ukraine War Should Slow but not Stop the U.S. Pivot to Asia*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/article/ukraine-war-should-slow-not-stop-us-pivot-asia>

²⁹ *Record increase in EU military spending amid "demanding times."* (2023, November 30). Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/11/30/record-increase-in-eu-military-spending-amid-demanding-times>

³⁰ *Military alliance with US, Japan "will deepen regional" tensions: South Korean opposition leader.* (n.d.). <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/military-alliance-with-us-japan-will-deepen-regional-tensions-south-korean-opposition-leader/2870304>

Therefore, the argument made in the article highlights the value of the alliance between the United States and Japan as well as the necessity of ongoing cooperation to meet the difficulties posed by China's ascent. In light of China's expanding prominence, Japan, a strong ally of the United States, will probably continue to be essential to maintaining regional stability and prosperity.