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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral pattern, similar to the journal's logo, is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text area.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

IX *Foreword*

- 1 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China in 2023: Stimulating Economic Recovery along with Patriotic Education*
- 23 GIULIA SCIORATI, *China in 2023: A «Global-Security-Attentive» Foreign Policy*
- 39 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization*
- 65 GIULIO PUGLIESE & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō's footsteps*
- 125 THAN KIŪ, *Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province*
- 145 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 Elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign*
- 167 MIGUEL ENRICO G. AYSON & LARA GIANINA S. REYES, *The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership*
- 187 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI, *Malaysia 2023: A reform agenda overshadowed by identity politics*
- 203 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2020-2023: Covid Pandemic Recovery, Unprecedented Leadership Turnover, and Continued Multilateralism*
- 217 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy*
- 235 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta*
- 259 DIEGO MAIORANO & RAGHAW KHATTRI, *India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension*
- 301 IAN HALL, *India 2023: Tactical wins and strategic setbacks in foreign policy?*
- 323 MATTEO MIELE, *Nepal 2020-2023: From the Institutional Crisis to New Political Paths*
- 339 DIEGO ABENANTE, *Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty*
- 353 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2023: Multiple crises in the lead-up to the general elections*
- 375 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2023: Taliban governance and international isolation*
- 389 GIORGIA PERLETTA, *Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations*
- Special articles*
- 407 ENRICO FARDELLA, *When history rhymes: China's relations with Russia and the war in Ukraine*
- 433 DAVID SCOTT, *The return of the 'Indo-Pacific'*
- 451 *Reviews*
- 479 *Appendix*

JAPAN 2023: STILL WALKING IN ABE SHINZŌ'S FOOTSTEPS*

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On the basis of a wide range of critically assessed and triangulated secondary and primary sources, including elite interviews and official documentation often in the original language, this article suggests that Japan's domestic politics, and also its foreign and security policies, displayed a remarkable degree of continuity with the path set by the late Abe Shinzō, and thus carry his imprint. Notable exceptions are Kishida's initiatives in the energy, economic, and fiscal realms. Amid major scandals and internal readjustments in the majority party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Japan's domestic politics appear to be dominated by a single party maintaining its edge over possible adversaries in a fundamentally non-competitive democratic system. This trend has been further reinforced by growing political disaffection. Public trust in the government in 2023 was at a minimum, while surveys show that more than 40% of the Japanese electorate did not support any specific political party. Against this backdrop, however, the Kishida administration was successful in ending a long-lasting period of deflation in the Japanese economy and coming to terms with the legacy of former PM Abe Shinzō. In fact, the lasting influence of Abe lives on in the LDP's factional balance, influencing Kishida's policy stance.

Especially in the realm of Japan's security policy and international relations, 2023 testified to Abe's legacy. Japan's changes in its military doctrine and its force posture, together with its strategic outreaches to its east Asian neighbours and European and Pacific players, mirror US grand strategy. In fact, Japan also worked in lockstep with US-led multilateral diplomacy aimed at purposeful multi-layered security ententes, often on an ad hoc basis, to balance China militarily, counter the expansion of its regional diplomatic and economic influence and maintain the status quo along the first island chain. The seeds sown by the second Abe administration bore fruit in Japan's security embrace of Taiwan, an embrace which capitalised on Abe's poorly understood 2015 legislative and strategic revolutions.

With a focus on the geopolitics of the first island chain, the article then looks at Ja-

* This article is the end product of a joint research effort, each part of it having been discussed by the two authors before and after being written. The sections on Japanese domestic politics (Sections 2 to 7) were written by Marco Zappa whereas the sections on Japan's foreign and security policy (Sections 8 to 13) were written by Giulio Pugliese. The authors wish to thank two reviewers and John Bradford, Edward Howell, Ian Neary, Hugh Whittaker, Wrenn Yennie Lindgren and Andrea Fischetti for support and helpful comments.

pan's burgeoning security cooperation with South Korea and European states. It does so to argue that while Kishida's Japan is seemingly reactive to US grand strategy, it acts in broad continuity of the course set by the two Abe administrations. After all, under Abe, Japan expanded its strategic partnerships to include European players and NATO. Moreover, while Kishida is not a revisionist nationalist, unlike Abe, Japan's reset of its relations with Seoul is a by-product of the new Yoon administration's ability to compromise rather than a result of the Japanese government's concessions. After analysing the burgeoning Japan-NATO relations, the article concludes with a discussion of Japan's successful G7 presidency, the apex of minilateral diplomacy in 2023.

KEYWORDS Kishida Fumio; new capitalism; first island chain; Japan-Taiwan relations; minilateralism; Japan-South Korea relations; Japan-NATO relations.

1. Introduction

To quote Confucius, «without trust, we cannot stand». Since his rise to power in late 2021, on several occasions Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has referred to this saying, pledging to rebuild national confidence in politics and his administration. As this article will show, however, in 2023, at least as far as Japan's domestic affairs were concerned, the Japanese public's relation with the government in Tokyo deteriorated due to mismanagement, gaffes and scandals involving government officials and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders. In addition to laying bare the dysfunctional character of contemporary Japanese politics, political contingencies in the year affected the government's attempts at reform (e.g. by promoting a transition to the digitalisation of Japanese society and economy) and management of pressing issues, such as the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Fukushima No. 1 wastewater issue. In the face of a declining cabinet approval rate, in the 2023 global and domestic economic conjuncture, businesses amassed huge profits and agreed to push up wages, ending a decade of *de facto* economic stagnation. Nevertheless, Kishida's low popularity in most of 2023 empowered intra-LDP powerbrokers who had been instrumental in his rise to power. These dynamics reinforced Kishida's need to act as a consensus-maker, thus catering to Abe's policy legacy.

In the Confucian view, in addition to trust, a government needs weapons to enhance its legitimacy and security. It might not be a coincidence that a major area of government intervention in 2023 was that of defence and national security. The Japanese government was aiming to leverage «comprehensive national power, including diplomatic, defence, economic, technological, and intelligence/information capabilities». This

policy was spelt out in the 2022 National Security Strategy, with an ill-concealed focus on Japan's security embrace of Taiwan and the need to balance China more forcefully, which was yet another hint of Kishida walking in his predecessors' footsteps. The past year moreover featured various strategic engagements, spanning from Japan's neighbouring East Asian countries to its European counterparts, and its multilateral diplomacy focused on creating purposeful and multi-layered security agreements in close alignment and coordination with the regional initiatives of the US government. Rather than hedging, Japan was moving in concert with the US and like-minded powers with the aim of caging both China and a potentially disruptive and transactional new Trump administration. The deepening of Japan-US-Republic of Korea strategic relations, Japan's military coordination with the US to protect the status quo along the first island chain, first and foremost across the Taiwan Strait, and Japan's ability to foster security relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European security actors, on top of important regional players such as Australia, suggested growing alignment among «like-minded partners». This alignment was also partially conducive to more stable relations with China, although the tenability of this *détente* was openly questioned as 2024 dawned.

2. The Kishida administration struggles with declining public confidence and political apathy

Political trust is a major indicator of several factors such as the basic legitimacy of a government, a nation's political participation and its voting behaviour [Krauss *et al.* 2017]. As will be shown, in 2023 public trust in the government of Japan (GoJ, hereafter) fell to a historic low, sensibly affecting the administration's legitimacy. Dissatisfaction and disaffection with the government are nothing new in Japan and they have been on the rise since the burst of the asset price bubble and political scandals in the late 1980s and early 1990s [Krauss *et al.* 2017, 12]. In 2023, however, in addition to such historically determined discontent, overt political apathy seems to have reached new heights, resulting quite paradoxically in further empowerment of the currently dominant political elite [Kasai 2018]. Against the backdrop of a depoliticised and demobilised society, rather than public support as measured by media polls, divisions within the leadership became a decisive factor hampering the government's decision-making and hold on power.

As Wallace and Pugliese [2023] point out, the second half of 2022 was a political disaster for PM Kishida. In the aftermath of Abe Shinzō's assassination in July 2022, growing frustration with alleged ties between dozens of LDP lawmakers and vice-ministers and the Unification Church

brought the public's confidence in the government and its management of public affairs to a low of 36%. The government's decision to hold an 11 million US dollar state funeral with thousands of international invitees in October that year further reduced the cabinet's already precarious approval ratings [McCurry 2022, 27 September; Wallace and Pugliese 2023; Sakurai 2022].

In addition to these political mishaps, the government's support rate was affected by a «turnover contagion» (*jinin domino*) involving, among others, the Minister of Reconstruction, Akiba Ken'ya. The Minister had ties with the Unification Church and allegedly paid compensation to two of his secretaries involved in his election campaign in violation of Japan's Public Offices Election Law. Against this backdrop, Kishida sacked Akiba and the Parliamentary Secretary for Internal Affairs, Sugita Mio, who had caused controversies with repeated sexist and homophobic comments. The Prime Minister (PM)'s prompt reaction was aimed at speeding up the budget approval process but it did not help the government out of the quagmire of declining public confidence [The Yomiuri Shimbun 2022, 23 December; Satō *et al.* 2022, 27 December].

The negative approval trend continued in January 2023. In particular, the PM's lack of clarity regarding an increase in defence spending in the draft state budget presented in late December contributed to his plummeting support. The government announced a ¥ 114 trillion national budget (about € 716 billion) which included an increase in its defence spending to ¥ 10.1 trillion (89.4% more than 2022), nearly ¥ 37 trillion on social security, ¥ 6 trillion on public works and ¥ 5.4 trillion on education and science [GoJ MOF 2022]. The increase in defence spending was instrumental in adjusting Japan's security strategy to a purportedly changed international security environment. The draft budget detailed that the financial resources for Tokyo's Defence Buildup Programme would mainly come from non-tax revenue (e.g. reforms of public spending, carry-overs from other government funds for special purposes, returns of unused deposits and funds and profits from the sale of government-owned properties, etc.). At the same time, however, it indicated that ¥ 1 trillion would be appropriated through tax measures over the 2023-27 period [GoJ MOF 2022, 6]. This inevitably led to speculation about a possible consumption tax hike, winning Kishida the derogatory nickname of «tax-hike four-eyes» (*zōzei megane*) [Yamazaki 2023, 18 October]. Criticism of the PM's intention was voiced by cabinet members Nishimura Yasutoshi and Takaichi Sanae, both of whom were close to late Abe [Asahi Shinbun Seijibu 2023, 91]. Moreover, according to a May 2023 Kyodo poll, 80% of Japanese opposed the GoJ's plan to increase taxation to finance the increase in the defence budget. These factors eventually led the Kishida administration to indefinitely shelve the tax hike, which was originally scheduled for fiscal year 2024 [Kyodo News 2023, 7 May; Jiji Press 2023, 13 June].

3. Inherited troubles: COVID-19, Okinawa and the Fukushima wastewater issue

3.1 The COVID-19 downgrade

In spite of the above, Kishida's support rate slightly rebounded after the government's decision to move away from the COVID-19 pandemic-era restrictions. Regardless of warnings by members of the Japanese scientific community of the lack of science-based explanations of a «rushed» decision [Otake and Osaki Exum 2023, 27 January], in late January, the Japanese authorities proceeded with a downgrade of the syndrome from a Class-II to a Class-V infectious disease. While, on the one hand, any illness falling in the former category, including for instance novel strains of influenza, requires specific governmental control measures, the response to any Class-V infection, such as seasonal flu, is fundamentally entrusted to the choices and behaviour of individuals.

After the announcement, the government swiftly moved to relaxing rules on attending large events and on mask use in public spaces, lifting the isolation mandate for individuals contracting COVID-19 and curbing the isolation period in the case of infection to five days from the onset of symptoms. The decision to wear a mask was finally left to individual judgements, «respecting individual choices». In addition, the GoJ issued a series of recommendations regarding basic infection control measures (such as avoiding the so-called 3Cs, i.e. closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings) to be implemented on a voluntary basis by individuals or organisations [GoJ MHLW 2023].

3.2 The re-emergence of friction between Tokyo and Okinawa, and the China factor

Another long-standing issue, that of the relocation of the US Marine Corps Futenma air base from its current location in Ginowan to Nago, Okinawa, re-emerged during the first months of 2023. Okinawa Prefecture Governor Tamaki Denny, who was elected in 2018 on a political platform opposed to US base relocation and expansion, has vigorously refused to implement the central government's plan to relocate the military facility ever since. Since 2021, his prefectural government has blocked a design change to the base construction plan allowing for land reclamation works on the Henoko coastline, causing a legal battle with the GoJ. In March 2023, the Naha branch of the Fukuoka High Court ordered the prefectural government to approve the design changes. Tamaki refused to abide by the sentence, appealing to the constitutional right to local autonomy. He then brought the case to the Supreme Court [Endo 2023, 4 September].

In July, the Okinawa governor flew to Beijing for a five-day visit along with a delegation of Japanese politicians and businessmen seeking to promote Japan-China exchanges. He was received by PM Li Qiang. In an inter-

view with the People's Republic of China (PRC) public broadcaster CCTV/CGTN, Tamaki stressed that the Japan-US security system and Japan's defence capabilities needed to be kept «within limits» and reiterated that people in Okinawa were carrying a huge burden given the massive US military presence on the archipelago [CGTN 2023, 7 July]. Tamaki's visit sparked a heated reaction from right-wing conservative commentators, who accused him of surrendering Okinawa to China [e.g. Nakashinjō 2023, 21 September; Sakurai Yoshiko 2023]. In an early June speech reprinted on the front page of the *People's Daily*, China's President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping made oblique references to the Ryukyu Kingdom (the pre-modern name of the Okinawa prefecture) as a node of trade and diplomatic interactions with mainland pre-modern imperial China and specifically with the city of Fuzhou, where he had served as secretary of the local CCP branch. Xi's words created doubts about Beijing's intention toward Okinawa against the backdrop of the PRC-Japan dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and especially of Japan's growing vocal commitment to the security of Taiwan [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2023, 5 July].

Later in September Japan's Supreme Court upheld the Fukuoka High Court decision, but Tamaki staunchly refused to implement it and instead took the issue to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. There, he emphasised that the Japanese government was «imposing» the construction of a new US military base in contempt of the Okinawans' opposition to the construction of new military facilities on the island, and of the island's natural environment [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2023, 20 September]. Nonetheless, in December the Fukuoka High Court issued a ruling requiring the prefectural government to swiftly approve the design changes to the Henoko facility for «public interest» reasons connected to the risks involved in maintaining the notorious Futenma air station. In the light of these facts, the GoJ announced that it would act in administrative subrogation and overrule the prefectural government's refusal and proceed with the application of the Supreme Court Sentence. This was the first such case since the GoJ resorted to execution by proxy to approve the use of local land for US military bases on behalf of the prefectural government in 1996 [Mainichi 2023, 17 December].

3.3 «Succeeding where Abe did not»: the Fukushima N.1 wastewater issue and the reversal of the post-3.11 energy policy

In contrast, the government's decision in August 2023 to allow Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), Japan's largest power utility and operator of the disaster-hit Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, to discharge tritiated water in the Pacific Ocean was met with only marginal opposition. In the year before the decision, the GoJ had contracted Japan's top advertising agency, Dentsū, to set up a € 7 million multimedia campaign to win over popular scepticism about the safety of the operation and its possible effects on public

health [Makiuchi 2023, 18 March]. This was a major part of the Fukushima No. 1 decommissioning process. The treated water discharge plan was originally announced by the GoJ in April 2021 and it was later submitted to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for a technical review. The plan aims to gradually reduce the burden of the nearly 1.3 million tons of radioactive water in tanks installed on the premises of the damaged nuclear power plant by discharging it in the ocean in stages. Before being discharged, the water is treated in a radioactive material removal facility called the Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS), which removes the majority of contaminants (such as caesium and strontium), but not tritium [TEPCO 2015]. In 2021 IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi appointed a Task Force of experts from several countries, including China, South Korea, Russia, France, the US and the UK, to evaluate the Japanese plan, [IAEA 2023]. After a two-year-long review, in July 2023 the IAEA cleared the wastewater discharge plan as having a «negligible radiological impact on people and the environment» [IAEA 2023, iii]. Nevertheless, as IAEA Director General Grossi specified in his preface to the IAEA final report, the agency's positive assessment of the tritiated water discharge plan did not equate to an endorsement of Tokyo's initiative or recommendation to implement it [*ibidem*].

After receiving the green light from the IAEA, on 24 August TEPCO proceeded with a first discharge of treated water, which was followed by a second in October and a third in November [Yamaguchi 2023, 20 November]. In response, the PRC government imposed a formal ban on all seafood imports from Japan [Murakami 2023], which was followed in October by an analogous measure by the Russian government [*Reuters* 2023, 16 October]. In spite of these restrictions, in 2023 Japanese food exports totalled ¥ 1.45 trillion (nearly € 9 billion). In particular, exports of seafood and sea products such as scallops and pearls to Hong Kong, which enjoys relative trade autonomy from the mainland, surged by 86.9% and 92% respectively over the previous year, largely making up for the plunge in PRC sales [*NHK News Web* 2023, 28 October; Kato 2023, 8 November; Kyodo 2024, 30 January]. Domestically, professional associations in Japan (particularly fishermen) were critical of the decision [*NHK News Web* 2023, 22 August], citing among other factors the perception that the GoJ had done little to avoid economic damage resulting from the diffusion of misinformation and foreign government(s)-backed disinformation [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 20 August]. Nonetheless, Japanese media opinion polls showed that by the end of August a majority of the Japanese public had «understood» the government's decision [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 27 August]. TEPCO and the GoJ expect to continue discharging treated water for the next 30 years [Take and Ishikawa 2023, 24 August].

Against this backdrop the GoJ will go ahead with plans to restart idled nuclear power plants and to build new ones in place of those that are de-

commissioned to help achieve its grand decarbonisation strategy (a cut in carbon emissions of 46% by 2030 compared to the 2013 level), reversing a cautious nuclear policy of more than a decade [Koyama 2022: 1-2; Reynolds and Umekawa 2022, 22 December]. Despite his record low popularity, on several longstanding issues, such as Japan's post-3.11 energy policy and defence posture, Kishida has in effect succeeded where his predecessor Abe did not [Asahi Shinbun Seijibu 2023, 121-122].

4. *The digital marshes of Japan's «new capitalism»*

When he emerged as leader of the LDP in autumn 2021, PM Kishida pledged to work to amend the excesses of capitalism with «redistributive» policies aimed at strengthening the middle class, favouring a massive re-skilling of Japan's working population and promoting digitalisation and a green economy by launching his flagship «new capitalism» (*atarashii shihonshugi*) agenda. With hindsight, this pledge can be seen as an attempt to rhetorically break away from late Abe Shinzō's imprint and his «Abenomics» economic strategy. As of today, however, the emergence of new business models, labour relations and social arrangements pivoting around technological innovation remains unlikely due to structural and contingent obstacles. Nonetheless, the Kishida administration has been able to pass a series of redistributive measures such as wage increases, tax reductions and subsidies despite doubts about their economic sustainability. On the other hand, very little progress has been made on another item at the top of the GoJ's agenda: the digital transformation.

Despite Japan's consolidated image as a technological superpower, the country struggles to keep up with its Asian neighbours, in particular the PRC [Suzuki 2021]. In fact, innovation and digitalisation have been top priorities for the GoJ since the launch of the Society 5.0 initiative in 2015. More recently, in the light of the emerging economic and techno-nationalist priorities associated with Japan's alignment with the US in US-China competition [Park 2023], both the Suga and Kishida governments vowed to invest in the semiconductor industry and accelerate the nationwide transition to 5G communication technologies (and importantly to develop new systems that move beyond 5G/6G, such as open radio access networks). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, former PM Suga Yoshihide launched an *ad hoc* government agency, the Digital Agency (DA) [Kyodo News 2021, 1 September]. In fiscal year 2023, the GoJ allocated ¥ 472 billion (€ 2.96 billion) to innovation and digitalisation [Kōno 2023].

Moreover, investment surged in the attempt to revitalise the national semiconductor industry to maintain an edge in the manufacturing sector, with partnerships with key global actors, such as the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) [Tomoshige 2023]. Nonetheless, accord-

ing to Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIAC) data, 5G mobile traffic amounted to a mere 3-4% of total mobile traffic in the archipelago, revealing Japan's relative underdevelopment in comparison with neighbouring South Korea and China [Horikoshi 2023].

However, the cornerstone of Japan's digitalisation strategy was a national digital identity system called My Number, a 12-digit social security and personal identification number. Particularly after the «digital defeat» of 2020 [Yamamoto and Iversen 2024: 10], when the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inadequacy of Japanese e-government, the GoJ made an effort to promote the use of My Number. Starting in 2021 under the Suga administration a series of legal measures were taken aimed, among other things, at digitalising administrative procedures and providing integrated services, such as issuing vaccination certifications, national qualifications and residence permits [GoJ DA 2023; Yamamoto and Iversen 2024]. In autumn 2021, the DA started working on integrating the My Number Card with national health insurance, and a year later Kōno Tarō, the minister in charge of Japan's digital transformation, announced the end of health insurance card issuance, leading to a rapid increase in the number of My Number Card users (amounting in 2023 to 60% of the total national population) [Ninivaggi 2023, 21 August; *Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 7 December].

Despite continual efforts by the Kishida administration to push digitalisation ahead, the results have been below the government's expectations. More specifically, since May 2023 continual glitches in the national digital identity system have been reported, which have prompted the government to issue public excuses for mistaken user registrations and for failing to associate personal data with user profiles. In addition to causing major service disruptions for hundreds of hospital inpatients, the My Number system troubles dashed public confidence in government service digitalisation and in the need – defended by Kōno, among others – to accelerate it [Okada 2023, 20 May]. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that in the 2023 World Digital Competitiveness Ranking compiled by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), Japan ranked 32nd among 64 economies for adoption and use of digital technologies for economic development and modernisation of governance, sliding back three positions from 2022 [IMD 2023].

5. *Kishida's political troubles*

5.1. *The Kihara incident*

Despite the above mishaps, the LDP scored several key electoral victories, induced in part by Kishida's perceived foreign policy successes (a surprise visit to Ukraine, a perceptibly successful G7 summit in Kishida's constituency of Hiroshima and a conciliatory bilateral summit with South Korea's Presi-

dent Yoon Suk-yeol). In particular, the conservatives emerged triumphant in the April 2023 round of local elections, securing absolute majorities of local assembly seats in 41 of the 47 prefectures [*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 10 April] and six of the nine contested prefectural governorships, including that of northernmost Hokkaidō, traditionally a stronghold of opposition parties [McCurry 2023, 10 April]. A few days later, LDP candidates won by-elections for lower and upper house seats in Yamaguchi, Chiba and Oita, capturing a seat from the opposition and increasing LDP representation in the Diet by one member [*Nikkei Asia* 2023, 24 April]. The spring 2023 electoral victories reportedly reinforced Kishida's impression that he had overcome the difficulties of the previous year and he could possibly secure a second term as LDP president in September 2024 [*Asahi Shinbun Seijibu* 2023: 123].

In this context, in the majority party the notion that the PM could use his powers to dissolve the Lower House of the National Diet and capitalise on his political successes gained momentum. A conspicuous LDP victory in a snap election could help Kishida cement his leadership of the executive and his party amidst factional competition. Moreover, according to observers, venting the possibility of a snap election no later than June, at the end of the regular parliamentary session, was a political manoeuvre to avert the opposition's attention from the budget approval [Itō 2023, 8 May; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 17 June]. Only later in June did Kishida deny the possibility of an early dissolution of the Diet [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 15 June]. Nonetheless, the hypothesis that he could dissolve the Lower House and call a snap election later in the autumn still loomed in the majority camp.

However, LDP dominance did not insulate the Kishida administration from gaffes and internal strife. Troubles had already emerged in March, ahead of the April elections, when the MIAC confirmed the authenticity of internal records showing the Prime Minister's Office (*Kantei*) had interfered in the MIAC's oversight of public broadcasting during former PM Abe's tenure. The case caused friction between Takaichi Sanae, Minister of Economic Security and former Interior Minister, and the current MIAC leadership [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2023, 3 March]. It was only in the summer, however, that the cabinet's approval rate fell dramatically to a record negative level; in addition to the abovementioned My Number system glitches, another scandal compounded that fall. In July, the popular tabloid *Shūkan Bunshun* revealed that Kishida's top aide, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Kihara Seiji, had allegedly shielded his wife from police investigation and possibly detention, in connection with the death of Yasuda Taneo, the woman's former husband. Yasuda had died in «mysterious circumstances» in 2006, having suffered injury to the throat caused by a knife-like object. His death had been dismissed as suicide related to Yasuda's drug abuse [*Shūkan Bunshun* 2023, 5 July; Shimizu 2023, 9 July]. Furthermore, a first re-examination of the case initiated in 2018 was abruptly interrupted by the police without providing Yasuda's family with satisfactory motivation [Nishiwaki 2023, 26 December].

According to *Bunshun*, however, Kihara allegedly admitted that without his protection and influence, his wife «would now be detained» [*Shūkan Bunshun* 2023, 5 July].

After the *Bunshun* revelations, the Yasuda family requested the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department (TMPD) to reopen the case on the ground that the man could have been killed by his then wife. In response, Kishida's top aide avoided meeting the press for several weeks and responded to an opposition interrogation by denying in a written letter having had any role in the Yasuda case. Concomitantly, he sued the tabloid for violations of human rights [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 24 July]. In October, in relation to the Yasuda incident, the TMPD confirmed the lack of any evidence of murder, prompting the Yasudas to appeal to the Public Prosecutor's Office [Nishiwaki 2023, 26 December]. Kihara's *modus operandi* inevitably fuelled speculation of the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary or the Prime Minister's Office having interfered in the TMPD investigation [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 2 August].

Kihara, a University of Tokyo graduate and former Ministry of Finance bureaucrat turned politician, was considered to be PM Kishida's right-hand man and an «indispensable» policy advisor [Nemoto 2022, 15 January]. A Diet member since 2005, he had held various positions in the Abe and Kishida governments, as parliamentary secretary and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs (2013-2016) – with Kishida as Foreign Minister (FM) – and, more recently, advisor (*hosakan*) to the PM and Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary (since 2021). Significantly, in 2022, his name had already been associated with the Unification Church (UC) after *Bunshun* revealed that he had received support for re-election as MP from a UC-affiliated organisation [*Shūkan Bunshun* 2022, 29 September].

5.2. *Kishida's weakness exposed: the September 2023 cabinet reshuffle*

Against this backdrop, on 13 September Kishida resorted to a cabinet reshuffle. Of the newly appointed 19 ministers, only six had previously served, Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu, Minister of Finance Suzuki Shun'ichi, Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry Nishimura Yasutoshi, Minister of Economic Security Takaichi Sanae and Ministry for Digital Transformation Kōno Tarō, while 11 others were appointed for the first time. In a show of inclusivity, the new cabinet also featured five women ministers, a record since 2014. One of them, Kamikawa Yōko, a former Justice Minister, took over as FM replacing one of Kishida's key allies, Hayashi Yoshimasa. Hayashi, nonetheless, was a potential contender for the LDP presidency (see below) and therefore the prime ministership. Concomitantly, Kihara Minoru, a former Special Advisor to late PM Abe for national security, vice-secretary general of the LDP national security committee and a senior member of a pro-Taiwan parliamentary association (*Nikka giin kondankai*), was appointed Defence Minister [*NHK News Web* 2023, 13 September].

There are few doubts that the promotion of several «new faces» to cabinet positions was aimed at reversing the government's plummeting approval rate. However, in the Japanese political context cabinet reshuffles usually have deeper implications. Most significantly, they are revealing of the intraparty balance of power and of the influence of LDP factions on the Prime Minister's decisions. In a seminal 2012 essay, Ono pointed out that, in the context of intraparty competition among different factions, since the 1960s LDP leaders, with few exceptions, have tended to be relatively weak and so to allocate more cabinet portfolios to opposing factions as a form of «selective incentive» [Ono 2012: 13]. Mogaki [2023], among others, argues that the PM attempted to solidify his leadership of the party ahead of the 2024 LDP presidential election. In effect, noting the decline in public support, Kishida needed to contain possible internal defections and challenges, but at the same time he hardly succeeded in setting himself free of Abe and LDP Vice-President Asō Tarō's sway in the government's decision-making process. As the Japanese press noted, since the installation of the first Kishida cabinet in October 2021 a power-sharing arrangement has emerged in the party and the Kishida administration, with Asō, LDP Secretary General Motegi Toshimitsu and Kishida forming a sort of «triumvirate» (*santō seiji*) [*Sankei Shinbun* 2022, 23 October]. Therefore, following Ono's abovementioned interpretation, in this power structure the PM would be the weakest link.

The September 2023 cabinet reshuffle seemed to confirm this hypothesis. Four ministers were appointed from each of the LDP's two largest factions at the time, the Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai (Seiwakai), also known as the «Abe faction» given late PM Abe's affiliation with the group, and the Shikōkai. The first of these, with its 98 MPs at the time, was led by a collegial leadership including former Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry and Abe Shinzō's closest aide and friend Hagiuda Kōichi; the second (56 MPs) has been led by LDP Vice-President Asō Tarō since its foundation in 2017. Three more were chosen from Motegi's faction, the Heisei Kenkyūkai (53 MPs), and only two posts were allotted to Kishida's own faction, the Kōchikai (46 MPs). In concomitance with the new cabinet appointments, Kishida moved on to promote former Minister of Agriculture Moriyama Hiroshi and former Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry Obuchi Yūko as chairman of the Election Strategy Committee and chairperson of the Party Organisation and Campaign Headquarters respectively in an attempt to promote intraparty unity [Fujiwara 2023, 18 October]. Against this backdrop, scandal-hit Kihara Seiji, who had not been affected by Kishida's first cabinet reshuffle in August 2022, was eventually sidelined from his role as deputy chief cabinet secretary and «demoted» to a party role – LDP acting senior secretary-general (*kanjichō dairi*) [*NHK News Web* 2023, 13 September; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 13 September].

5.3. The «*purge*» of the Abe faction and the LDP- Kōmeitō frictions

Despite these attempts at rebuilding public confidence, in early December the government and the LDP faced another political storm. In November 2023 after months of speculation incited by an article in *Shinbun Akahata*, the Japanese Communist Party newspaper, Japanese media revealed that the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's Office Special Investigation Department (*tokusōbu*) was investigating possible violations of Japan's Political Funds Control Law. Evidence of financial misreporting by several LDP factions, particularly the Abe and Nikai factions, and even Kishida's, had emerged. According to the prosecutors, in the period 2018-21 dozens of LDP lawmakers had pocketed and distributed to fellow party members several hundreds of millions of yen in kickbacks from the sale of tickets for fundraising parties. Party tickets (*pāti-ken* or *pa-ken*) are a common tool used by LDP lawmakers in all the factions to raise funds from individuals and organisations bypassing the national regulations on political financing. In practice, lawmakers receive from their faction offices a number of tickets to sell to supporters and donors. The price of a banquet ticket is set at ¥ 20,000 (the equivalent of circa € 125). Organisers tend to arrange food and beverages only for a portion of the ticket purchasers, as vouchers are merely surrogate donations. Ticket holders have the chance to take part in banquets in the presence of high-ranking LDP officials and possibly lobby for favourable policies. According to the current regulations, contributions up to ¥ 20,000 are anonymous, while only those above that threshold need to be reported with the donor's name. Each faction establishes a sales target which is proportional to the individual member's party rank. In this scenario, LDP members who sell more tickets than others may see their standing in their faction grow. In principle, surplus profits should be returned to the party. However, as revealed by the Japanese media on the basis of testimonies by former faction affiliates and secretaries, dozens of LDP politicians appropriated funds with the acquiescence of faction accountants and leaders, possibly to use them for campaigning purposes [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 25 November; TBS News DIG 2023].

Fearing direct involvement in the investigation, Kishida claimed that the misreporting was a «clerical» error, but announced his resignation as chairman of the Kōchikai in late November 2023 [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 25 November]. After a series of self-incriminations by cabinet members such as Minister for Regional Revitalisation Jimi Hanako and Minister for Internal Affairs and Communication Suzuki Junji admitting to misreporting donations and transfers of political funds, the LDP's largest faction, the Seiwakai, came under public scrutiny for alleged misconduct. Lawmakers in this faction had reportedly withheld more than ¥ 100 million (approximately € 630,000) in undeclared political funds over five years. The chair of the faction leadership committee, Shionoya Ryū, went as far as to admit that kickbacks had been taken by members of the faction, only to backtrack a few hours later [*'Pāken* «kikkubakku» *ichiji*' 2023].

Among those accused of appropriating political funds illegally were Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno and Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry Nishimura. The scandal rapidly snowballed, leading to the resignation in mid-December of Matsuno and all the cabinet members associated with the Abe faction, including Nishimura, MIAC's Suzuki and Miyashita Ichirō, Minister of Agriculture [*The Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 12 December]. In addition to cabinet members, prominent Abe faction leaders, namely LDP Policy Research Council Chair Hagiuda Kōichi, Diet Affairs Committee Chair Takagi Tsuyoshi and LDP Secretary-General in the House of Councillors Sekō Hiroshige also resigned from their party roles. The news came out only a few days before prosecutors raided the Abe and Nikai factions' offices. Meanwhile, the total sum allegedly pocketed by members of the Abe faction skyrocketed to ¥ 500 million (around € 3.1 million) [*NHK News Web* 2023, 19 December]. Against this backdrop, LDP-Abe faction officials pledged full cooperation with the authorities while opposition lawmakers, who had grilled their majority counterparts on the issue for weeks, urged the government and LDP to provide the public with clear explanations. Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) leader Izumi Kenta publicly requested the PM to «take responsibility» for the scandal, stressing that «public criticism was inevitable». Later in December, the four ousted cabinet members and LDP leaders asked to be heard by the Prosecutor's Office on the matter [*NHK News Web* 2023, 21 December].

At any rate, this wave of resignations led to a fresh cabinet reshuffle, which notably resulted in re-appointment of Hayashi Yoshimasa to the key post of Chief Cabinet Secretary, succeeding Matsuno. A prominent member of the Kishida faction and heir to a political dynasty, Hayashi, 62, enjoys a strong reputation as a bright policymaker and straightforward communicator, the ideal person to favour a reorganisation of the political system after the kickback scandal [*NHK News Web* 2023, 13 December]. Interestingly, Hayashi was not the first choice for the post. In fact, he had been ousted from government in September, reportedly due to an internal power struggle with Kishida [*Hokkaidō Shinbun* 2023, 2 November]. Not surprisingly, the *Asahi Shinbun* revealed that former Defence Minister Hamada Yasukazu, an LDP lawmaker with no ties to any faction, had been approached by the PM's staff before Hayashi, but had declined the offer [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 13 December]. Nonetheless, the most visible result of the kickback scandal was a slide in the cabinet's approval rate to a new historic low, forcing Kishida to further rethink internal party arrangements and possibly prompting fresh intraparty competition.

In addition, the LDP kickback scandal seemed to be increasing the political friction between the LDP and its junior coalition ally, the Kōmeitō (NKP). Following the above-mentioned events, party Vice-President Kitagawa Kazuo expressed criticism of the LDP and demanded a discussion on the role of factions in Japan's largest party and measures to pre-

vent the recurrence of similar scandals [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 13 December]. Difficulties in the LDP-NKP coalition emerged in late May, when the NKP announced its intention to field a candidate in one of the ten new electoral districts created in view of the 2025 Lower House elections. Against a backdrop of disaffection among the electorate and the rise of local opposition by Nippon Ishin in the Osaka and Hyogo constituencies, the NKP identified the newly established Tokyo 28th District (East Nerima) as the key district in their election strategy. LDP officials, however, opposed the plan. In response, NKP Secretary-General Ishii Keiichi declared that the party would not endorse any LDP candidate in single-seat districts in Tokyo [Nobira 2023, 26 May]. Consequently, relations between the two coalition partners froze [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 14 August]. Eventually, the two parties reconsidered their respective veto positions and signed an election cooperation agreement in early September [Kuniyoshi 2023, 4 September].

Later, in mid-November, the third and most influential president of Sōka Gakkai (the NKP's religious parent organisation), Ikeda Daisaku, passed away, leaving an important legacy in Japan's religious and political life. As Sakurai Yoshihide states [2023, 15 December], Ikeda had special influence on the religious group and the NKP, but died at 95 without clearly designating a successor. This factor, combined with changes in the social and age composition of the Sōka Gakkai followers (around 8.3 million people, many of whom were second- or even third-generation believers), will possibly contribute to a continuing shrinking of the NKP's support base, reducing its attractiveness as a coalition partner in the eyes of LDP officials.

6. *Leaving Abenomics behind?*

In the context of the pandemic receding in February 2023, the Kishida administration proceeded with the nomination of a new Bank of Japan (BoJ) Governor who would take over from Kuroda Haruhiko, the longest serving BoJ Chief in Japan's post war history. It did this amidst widespread public preoccupation about the state of Japanese public finances [Nakamura *et al.* 2022], and more broadly the Japanese economy. According to a Nikkei-Tokyo University opinion poll, «restoring a positive business climate» (*keiki kaifuku*) topped the list of policy priorities for the Japanese public [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 26 February].

After Deputy Governor Amamiya Masayoshi refused to take on the role, Kishida's choice fell on the economist Ueda Kazuo. The main challenge facing Ueda was to gradually put an end to the 10-year-old expansionary monetary policy, a major pillar of the GoJ-BoJ Abenomics strategy since 2013 and revive cooperation between the central bank and the government on price stabilisation [Onozawa 2023, 11 February]. In particular, before his installation as BoJ Governor, Ueda signalled his intention to depart from

the Abenomics era policies and review the yield curve control (YCC) (i.e. acquiring an unlimited quantity of long-term government bonds while setting limits to the oscillation of interest rates) and eventually phase it out by the end of 2023 [Hedder 2023, 8 November]. Combined with exogenous factors related to a global recovery in demand and economic activity after the lifting of COVID-19-related restrictions, supply chain disruptions and the economic effects of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the measure put in place by former BoJ Governor Kuroda has resulted in a historic domestic inflation rate increase [Buss *et al.* 2023; Thorbecke 2024; Ueda 2023: 4].

The end of the remaining COVID-19-related restrictions had a positive impact on the public perception of the business climate in the world's third/fourth largest economy (the depreciation of the yen allowed Germany to surpass Japan in nominal GDP terms by the end of the year). According to the Cabinet Office's monthly «Economy Watchers» survey, the average diffusion index (DI)¹ rose to 52.0 in February, two points above the 50-point threshold and 3.5-points more than the previous month [GoJ Cabinet Office 2023a]. Among the factors contributing to this phenomenon was a slight growth in domestic demand following the end of restrictions on events and concerts, an increase of inbound tourism and new investments in the manufacturing sector. In the context of the 2022-23 economic rebound, major listed Japanese companies reported record earnings, encouraged by strong performances by the automotive and service industries [Matsuo 2023, 15 September; *The Japan News* 2023, 27 November].

In this economic conjuncture, in a major shift from the era of prolonged deflation since the mid-1990s, prices also rose. Since June 2022, core inflation in Japan has been on the rise well above the GoJ and BoJ's expectations, reaching a record 3.8% in December 2022 and then stabilising in the 2.8-3.2% range throughout 2023. In response to soaring consumer prices, in early 2022 the GoJ introduced specific measures to control fuel prices and a year later established a subsidy programme to reduce energy and gas bills [*Kyodo News* 2023, 24 October]. In addition, several companies gave in to continuing government lobbying and announced wage increases. Since the first half of 2023, several big companies – such as Fast Retail, owner of the Uniqlo apparel brand, the gaming company Nintendo, the beverage giant Suntory, Canon, and the world's largest carmaker, Toyota, announced considerable pay rises in 2023. Particularly relevant was that by

1. The DI is an aggregative statistical tool measuring the degree of propagation of economic expansion and the proportion of single improving (or receding) component indicators. The DI takes values from 0 to +100. A threshold value is established at 50. Specifically, in this case, the survey's aim is to monitor consumers and business confidence or lack thereof in the local and national economy. A perceived improvement or stability of the economic situation is attributed to values from +0.5 to +1. Decline is instead assessed as 0. The survey participants are household members, workers and business operators.

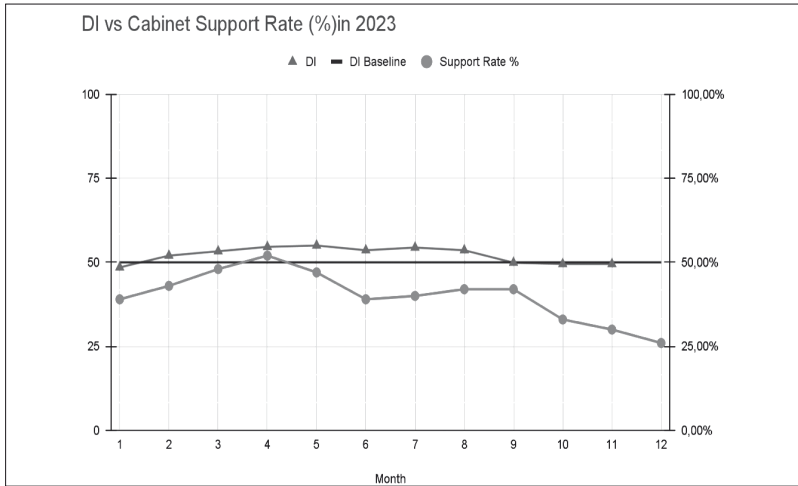
Toyota, which surprisingly decided on the highest wage hike in decades for nearly 70 thousand workers [Inagaki 2023, 28 March]. Furthermore, the traditional spring wage negotiations (*shunto*), which kicked off in February 2023, led to a base pay increase of 2.1% and the headline wage growth was up by 3.58% on the previous year, the highest since the early 1990s [Buss *et al.* 2023]. According to Bloomberg data, nominal wages in fact increased in 2023 by 1.2% over the previous year [Yokoyama 2023, 7 November].

Nonetheless, wage increases have not been on a par with the rise in consumer prices. With food prices up by more than 8.5% on the previous month in September and service prices generally rising due to wage increases, Japanese consumers' purchasing power contracted and, as a result, so did consumer spending [Thorbecke 2024].

Despite relative price stabilisation in the second half of 2023, the BoJ still considered the trend too feeble to proceed with a policy change, given the permanence of economic 'uncertainties' both domestically and abroad (rising import prices and inflation, a weakening yen, rising US and eurozone bond interest rates) [Ueda 2023: 6]. In an address to the Keidanren, Japan's main big business federation, Governor Ueda pledged to continue with monetary easing unless the «virtuous cycle between prices and wages intensifies» favouring price stability at 2% «in a sustainable and stable manner» [Ueda 2023: 6]. Therefore, by December 2023, no significant change in the decade-long BoJ negative interest rate policy had materialised.

Naturally, the economic trends had an impact on government initiatives. In October 2023, the GoJ announced its intention to phase out petrol subsidies and halve its support for utility bills [Kyodo News 2023, 24 October; Nikkei Asia 2023, 29 November]. Later in November, the Diet approved a ¥ 13 trillion supplementary budget to tackle inflation. The package included a ¥ 70,000 (around € 440) allowance for low-income families, energy bill subsidies and a one-year income tax cut (slightly more than € 250 for citizens and permanent residents). Despite political convergences during the vote in both houses of the Diet between the LDP-NKP majority and factions in the opposition, concerns about the long-term effects of Kishida's economic stimulus and its negative impact on Japan's public debt grew. Of the ¥ 13 trillion, 8.8 would in fact be financed with government bonds [Nikkei Asia 2023, 29 November]. This decision had natural consequences on the public's perception of the economy measured by the DI, and on the government's already precarious approval rate. In effect, triangulating Cabinet Office data on the DI trend with major opinion polls monitoring the administration's support rates, it is possible to identify a correlation between the two indicators [GoJ Cabinet Office 2023b; GoJ Cabinet Office 2023c; Nihon Keizai Shinbun 2023, 18 December]. Both peaked between April and May, coinciding with Japan's international exposure during the G7-related ministerial and summit meetings (see *infra*). However, while the DI gradually decreased and stabilised around the 50-point baseline in the second half

of 2023, the cabinet's support rate rapidly fell below 40% in June, to end at 26% in December (see the graph below).



Elaborated by Marco Zappa based on GoJ Cabinet Office 2023b, 2023c and Nikkei 2023.

7. Demography and immigration challenges

In the light of the above, current and future economic policymaking will need to consider structural changes in Japanese society. First, Japan's current demographic trends point to a 30% population decrease by 2070 [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2023b]. According to official figures, in 2023 the number of births fell below the 800,000 threshold, a 5.1% decrease on the previous year. Faced with an increasingly greying population (the proportion of over-65s is 29.1%) ['Oiru Nihon: josei' 2023], the GoJ has launched a series of measures to prevent labour shortages and revert Japan's declining birth rate.

Concerning the first item, in May 2023 the GoJ issued reform guidelines highlighting the need to promote measures aimed at (a) expanding the workforce by integrating different worker demographics, particularly skilled and non-skilled foreign labourers; (b) adjusting the domestic workforce to the emerging demand for new skills in the digital and green sectors; (c) promoting equality among workers, overcoming differences between standard and non-standard employees. In this sense, future labour reforms should be centred around reskilling and upskilling Japanese workers, inter-company mobility and job-based employment [Zou 2023].

In addition, the GoJ pledged to increase its social security spending in the area of childbirth and childcare allowances [GoJ MOF 2022]. To better coordinate the response to the key issue of the nation's demographic crisis, based on a June 2022 act, the Kishida administration introduced a new government agency, the Children and Families Agency (Kodomo Katei Chō, CFA hereafter), and increased the lump sum allocation for childbirth and daily care to help families with children. On the one hand, establishing the CFA was a further addition to the political legacy of the embattled PM Kishida. More specifically, its instalment under the *Kantei's* jurisdiction was a move to streamline planning and decision-making processes related to reversing the country's low birthrate, the fight against child poverty and abuse, and other family-related issues. After Ogura Masanobu's brief tenure as minister in charge of the CFA, since the September 2023 cabinet reshuffle the post has been held by Katō Ayuko, daughter of a former LDP secretary-general, Katō Kōichi (1995-98), and a former secretary to LDP lawmaker Noda Seiko.² On the other hand, the above economic measures were quickly dismissed as ineffective against the hindrances to childcare and other issues related to child welfare [Iwamoto 2023, 3 April]. In addition, they were deemed inadequate against female income precarity and the lack of day care facilities in large urban areas, and neither did they include «non-traditional» couples in their scope [Piser 2023, 23 October].

Related to the previous point are a series of changes to the country's immigration policies. The numbers of foreign residents and workers in Japan climbed up to historic record levels in 2023, with the former at 3.2 million and the latter at slightly more than 2 million [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 13 October; Shinozaki 2024, 26 January]. The end of COVID-19-related restrictions played an important role but steps taken by the GoJ partially contributed to this result. Considering the country's growing workforce demand, in 2023 Tokyo approved expansion of the scope of the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system. The SSW system is a programme launched in 2019 to tackle skilled labour shortages in specific sectors of the Japanese economy ranging from nursing, fisheries and agriculture to construction, building cleaning, car repair and maintenance, and shipbuilding. The system involves two visa types: (a) Type 1: a five-year limit visa with no possibility for the visa holder to bring his/her family, and (b) Type 2: an unlimited visa with the possibility to bring the family for foreign workers with more proficient skills in those specific industries [GoJ MOFA n.d.]. In the light of government data forecasting a need for nearly seven million foreign workers by 2040 to keep up with Japan's current economic output targets,

2. Noda competed against Kishida for the LDP presidency in 2021. She ran on a platform that highlighted the need for urgent measures to tackle the demographic crisis. Between October 2021 and August 2022, she was the Minister in charge of child affairs and was responsible for the CFA Establishment Act, which was passed by the Diet in June 2022.

the SSW has offered thousands of lower skilled foreign workers a pathway to permanent residence in Japan, but several restrictions, such as exams and a Japanese language proficiency requirement, are still in place. As a result, as opposed to the soaring number of type 1 SSW visa holders since its inception in 2019 (more than 173,000 people, with an increase of 40,000 on the previous year), only 12 people (7 from the PRC and 5 from Vietnam) received a type 2 SSW visa, as per data from June 2023 [GoJ Immigration Service Agency 2023; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 13 October; Rehm 2023].

Furthermore, in November 2023, the GoJ announced a halt to the infamous Technical Intern Training Programme (TITP, *Ginō jissshū seido*) and the introduction of the Training and Employment Programme (*Ikusei shūrō seido*, authors' translation) in its place. With the introduction of the new programme, the GoJ pledged to reduce the economic and financial burden on interns in coordination with host firms, to link the new programme with the SSW and to increase the attractiveness of the programme in an economic context characterised by inflation and a weak yen [*NHK News Web* 2023, 24 November]. The TITP has been repeatedly criticised over the years both domestically and internationally for being a smokescreen for human trafficking [U.S. Department of State 2023]. On top of the labour-intensive and sector-specific SSW system, the GoJ continued to look for foreign talent with highly specialized skills, including recent graduates of highly ranked academic institutions, under the J-Skip and J-Find visas, respectively, but with mixed results.

Concomitantly, amendments to the current Law on immigration and refugees introduced new rules authorising deportation for asylum seekers whose application has been turned down twice [Tian 2023]. These pieces of legislation were criticised by opposition parties, academics and activists both in Japan and abroad for heightening the risk that applicants could be returned to their countries of origin in a situation that their livelihoods are threatened, infringing international human rights and the principle of non-refoulement [Kasai 2023]. Given, on the one hand, the political sensitivity of the issue, in particular for the LDP right wing and the conservative part of public opinion and, on the other, growing pressure from the business community aimed at favouring the arrival of needed foreign workers, it is likely that policies in this domain will continue to be low-profile but incremental as they have been for the last decade [Higuchi 2023].

8. Japan's diplomatic and security strategy in 2023: building minilateral ententes to negotiate from a position of strength

Moving on to diplomacy and security, the year under review saw strategic outreaches by the Japanese government, from its immediate East Asian neighbours all the way to European players, along the lines described in

earlier articles [e.g. Wallace and Pugliese 2023]. Minilateral diplomacy aimed at purposeful multi-layered security ententes, often on an *ad hoc* basis, worked in lockstep with the US government's regional efforts. The aim was to balance China militarily, counter its regional and global diplomatic and economic influence, and do so «by taking full advantage of comprehensive national power, including diplomatic, defence, economic, technological, and intelligence/information capabilities» [‘Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku’ 2022, p.4].

Recent scholarship has highlighted the revolutionary quality of Japan's 2022 strategic documents for its security and defence posture, in coordination with Washington [Hughes 2024; Teraoka and Sahashi 2024]. Aside from China balancing, a much less appreciated aim was to cage in the resurfacing of US unilateral and insular instincts, which were evident in the first Trump administration, with a set of deepened, routinised and institutionalised alignments with US allies and partners. More importantly, the Japanese government was clearly prioritising the geopolitics of the first island chain, and first and foremost the preservation of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait.

Specifically, 2023 witnessed three noteworthy developments: a) a bolstered US-Japan alliance and parallel changes in Japan's force posture, suggesting Japan's support for Taiwan's security; b) a resumption of bilateral summit diplomacy with the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the unveiling of an ambitious US-Japan-ROK minilateral with security implications that go beyond the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's nuclear and, especially, missile stance and extend to the first island chain (with Taiwan front and centre); and c) a set of multi-layered security ententes between Japan and «like-minded» European players, starting with NATO and its biggest member states, one that allowed a joint response to China and deepening security and defence technology partnerships, with potential implications for a Taiwan contingency scenario. Therefore, apart from Japan's rearmament and a bolstered US-Japan alliance, 2023 saw successful US-led efforts to deepen networked modular security ententes, not just in the Asia-Pacific hub-and-spokes alliance system [Dian & Meijer 2020] but also through active contributions by US allies in Europe.

The Japanese and US governments acted in the conviction that Chinese policymakers respected strength, and diplomacy was necessary to avoid conflict. In 2023 the Japanese government resumed dialogue with the PRC, by promoting confidence-building measures such as a hotline between their defence authorities [Ministry of Defense 2023]. This ran in parallel with the US-China diplomatic activism witnessed in the course of the same year. The year under review also witnessed economic competition, and techno-economic containment, walking hand-in-hand with a degree of engagement, specifically economic measures aimed at stifling China's technological catch-up and competing with its regional influence. In short, the Japanese

and especially the US governments were able to gradually change the security and economic environment around China to influence its behaviour. Given space limitations, this article concentrates on developments in traditional security with a focus on Japan's immediate neighbourhood and active cajoling, by both the US and Japan, of Europe's security engagement. The next section explores these dynamics, and it does so by highlighting the relational and contextual factors behind Japan's foreign and security policy. No country is an island, after all, not even an island country.

9. Caging China with US-blessed diplomatic resets and deepening security ententes

Prima facie, Sino-Japanese relations in 2023 continued to register acrimony and tension, arguably also in the light of Japan's moves on Taiwan. After all, the Japanese government coupled its security embrace of Taiwan with diplomatic rhetoric – as was recounted in last year's review [Wallace and Pugliese 2023, p.88] – that suggested ambiguity over its previously strongly stated «One China» policy. Multiple foreign diplomats suggested to one of the authors that Japanese government officials insisted that Japan never spelt out its «One China» policy, hence their insistence on specific ambiguous wording in recent G7 documents [Foreign diplomats, interviews, 2022 & 2023]. This narrative is, however, a simplification, as the section devoted to Taiwan will show (see Section 10). In this context, then, it is best to understand China's ambiguous signalling concerning Okinawa during 2023.

Moreover, the Chinese government's decision to ban imports of all fishery products because of the release of treated wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant, which started in August 2023, went hand in hand with a spread of misinformation and disinformation seemingly backed by, if not the Central Propaganda Department, portions of the Chinese party-state apparatus [*The New York Times* 2023, 31 August; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 14 July]. While ultimate evidence is hard to garner, some Chinese agencies might have targeted both domestic *and* foreign audiences, including Japanese ones, to sow doubt, a notable evolution in Chinese propaganda aims and means. However, the messages from Beijing were mixed and evolving, suggesting a potential split in the government and hinting at a potential resolution in the near future. Chinese government officials brought up the dumping of treated nuclear wastewater in multilateral bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency [*Xinhua* 2023, 15 September; The State Council Information Office 2023]. Chinese representatives, nonetheless, avoided criticising Japan at the end of the year, especially at the bilateral or trilateral level with South Korea [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 26 November]. Moreover, on 15 August, the day associated with the end of Japan's war of aggression and empire, a lack of

victimisation narratives in authoritative Chinese legacy media, such as the People's Daily, suggested the Chinese government was willing to gradually rebuild its relationship with its neighbour. In short, the road was being paved for a timid tactical détente that would parallel the stabilisation of US-China relations at the summit level. In terms of diplomatic visits and summit diplomacy, however, policymakers in Beijing clearly prioritised the stabilisation of US-China relations over those with Japan and South Korea.

Aside from power politics, the resumption of diplomatic engagement in 2023 was for a variety of reasons. US-China diplomacy – already set in motion at the end of 2022 with the Xi-Biden bilateral on the fringes of the G20 summit in Indonesia – was held ransom by bilateral politicisation, spirals of mistrust and especially intra-US polarisation, all of which were evident in the February 2023 spy balloon brouhaha [Heer 2023]. Willingness on both sides of the Pacific Ocean to stabilise relations was probably connected with tense cross-strait relations and the looming January 2024 presidential and legislative elections on the self-governed island. Still, China's grappling with political and economic headaches throughout the year probably hastened momentum towards the stabilisation of US-China and, to a lesser extent, Japan-China relations. The rapid (and opaque) dismissal of the newly appointed Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of Defence, and a series of purges of past and current top brass of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force, testified that not all was politically stable in Xi's China. Economy-wise, the worsening geopolitical environment compounded the malfunctioning of two of the three Chinese engines of growth: investments and domestic consumption (the other engine being exports). Diminishing investments, especially foreign direct investment (FDI), were a by-product of US-China strategic rivalry, along with Xi's policies that prized «security», regime stability and therefore Communist Party of China-led «control» over economic performance. These policies were exemplified by the revised Counter-Espionage Law of April 2023 [Menegazzi 2024] and arbitrary enforcement of domestic legislation, including the imposition of exit bans on local and potentially foreign businessmen [*Financial Times* 2023, 25 September].

Certainly, China still attracted capital inflows in its high-tech sector, especially its electric automobile industry, and retained substantial investment stocks thanks to its market scale and demonstrated ability to climb up international value chains notwithstanding US-led tech curbs [*Financial Times* 2023, 6 February]. Nevertheless, FDI inflows into China in 2023 slumped to US\$ 33 billion, a roughly 80% decrease relative to the previous year [*Bloomberg* 2024, 18 February]. More poignantly, this was the lowest figure since 1993, when economic globalisation re-embraced China, and following Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour that confirmed and reinforced China's «Reform and Opening Up» economic policies. Moreover, patterns of new foreign investment in China suggested that it aimed at the Chinese market rather than (re-)exporting. Earlier economics-led globali-

sation had given way to (geo)political «de-risking» and widening economic balkanisation. According to official statistics, Japanese companies «added the least amount of net new money in 2023 in at least a decade, with only 2.2% of new Japanese overseas investment going to China. That was less than what was channelled into Vietnam or India, and only about a quarter of the investment into Australia» [*Bloomberg* 2024, 18 February]. Poor returns on capital, given low interest rates in China, were just one part of the reason behind the plunge in FDI inflows in the People's Republic. At the same time, the imposition of barriers and domestic controls suggested that profits made in the Mainland were reinvested there – hinting at a progressive insulation of foreign business activities in China from global ones.

Moreover, the prolonged real estate crisis and slack labour market sapped the second engine of growth, consumer confidence. Nonetheless, current account surpluses, pre-existent investment stocks and mid-year budget expansion suggested China's GDP grew in 2023 by roughly 5.2%, although these official figures were disputed by economists, with projections as low as 1.8% growth [*Financial Times* 2024, 6 February]. In fact, authoritative China watchers suggested as low as no growth altogether, a factor that might even lead to substantial political instability in the People's Republic.

Apart from Chinese policymakers' willingness to soothe the country's economic woes and to buttress regime stability, the most salient driver behind a degree of stabilisation was the Biden administration's successful revival of a multi-layered network of *ad hoc* coalitions of variable and modular geometry. While retaining some of the Trump administration's unilateralism, notably in economic policy, its successor more actively cajoled and leveraged allies and partners for «integrated deterrence», with specific emphasis on regional counterparts. Security-focused minilaterals thus functioned as «force multipliers» and aimed at balancing and containing China, to negotiate with Beijing «from a position/situation of strength», as per the thinking of the Biden's National Security Council [The White House 2022]. This policy was not unlike Japan's tested logic in dealing with China, at least since the advent of Abe Shinzō, and one that was publicly appropriated by Kishida [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023a]. In fact, the key strategist behind much of Biden's «China» (or, rather, Asia) policy, Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific at the National Security Council Kurt Campbell, who had crafted the Obama administration's «Pivot to Asia» and who was nominated as Deputy Secretary of State in the Autumn of 2023, embodied the logic of power politics-based diplomatic stabilization. At any rate, important portions of such policies qualified as a consensus matured over years by the deeply networked US-Japan security policy community [Bochorodycz 2023].

Thus, military exercises at the bilateral and minilateral levels went hand in hand with deepening strategic partnerships with Asian (and extra-regional) actors and the pursuit of greater intelligence sharing, co-man-

agement, interoperability, access to respective military bases (and logistical support) and modernisation of armed forces. Against this backdrop, the US-Japan alliance defined US power projection, which emerged as the main instrument of deterrence in the Asia-Pacific. This process – which had been set in motion ahead of Obama’s «Pivot», already by 2005-06 under the George W. Bush administration [Silove 2016] – now acquired more distinctive power political qualities. The marked geopolitical turn of these partnerships was a byproduct of a shift in favour of a «Strategy of Denial», as per the thinking of then US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development Elbridge Colby, a key Trump administration policymaker. According to the penholder of the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, the US had to double its efforts at balancing China, enlist US allies and partners across the first island chain to buttress deterrence capabilities towards the People’s Republic – including in Taiwan and Southeast Asia – and avoid a potentially domino-like process of subordination to Beijing [Colby 2021].

For instance, in 2023 the force posture and military doctrine changes in Japan, specific to Taiwan (see below), proceeded along with increases of US basing rights in the Philippines and trilateral military cooperation with Manila, with a Japan-Philippines reciprocal access agreement on the horizon. Moreover, the US government was providing Taiwan with weapons, training and ways to bolster resilience along with its new-found emphasis on asymmetric deterrence along the first island chain, while eliciting coalition-building with and among third parties there. Direct testimonies from the US Department of Defense suggested active US cajoling for European security contributions to Taiwan, notably with training in cyber defence, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR, where preparedness for natural disasters is fungible for «man-made» disasters too), civil defence, arms and/or components sales and deployments across the Taiwan Strait. Also advocated was a revival of the local defence industrial base to provide logistical support and ammunition – even just indirectly so, via triangulation – in the event of a contingency [US Department of Defense officials, Interviews, Washington DC, 6 February 2024]. Growing European political and security engagement in the region in 2023 and 2024 testified to this logic and to a successful US-led push [Pugliese 2024], as the rest of the review will suggest. But the most consequential development was in the US-Japan-Taiwan link.

10. *Drivers behind Japan’s embrace of Taiwan*

As was recounted in reviews in previous years, the Japanese government has stepped up its game on Taiwan in recent years. It has worked in lock-step with the United States and «like-minded» players to enlarge the self-governing island’s international space through initiatives such as the

Global Cooperation and Training Framework, and likely favoured Diet members' diplomacy there, with as many as 120 Diet members visiting the island in 2023, while less than ten visited China [*Taipei Times* 2024, 4 March]. Moreover, the GoJ provided public goods such as vaccines and highlighted the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, for example during the 2023 G7 summit in Hiroshima. Apart from deep historical ties [Pelaggi 2022, Ch.3], shared democratic values and sustained people-to-people contacts, Taiwan is Japan's third largest trading partner for both exports and imports (after China and the US), and is Japan's most important semiconductor supplier by a wide margin [*Taipei Times* 2023, 10 April]. Therefore, also in the light of the deterioration in Sino-Japanese and cross-strait relations, the Japanese government has raised its engagement with Taiwan [Zakowski 2023].

From a geopolitical standpoint, Japan and the US benefit from the preservation of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait because it bottles up China's advance into the seas around the first island chain and facilitates tracking of Chinese military assets venturing beyond it, including inter-continental ballistic missiles, ships and submarines [Morimoto and Ohara 2022, i-vi]. In fact, Japan has been discreetly overhauling its security regime and force posture to preserve a certain balance of military power, even just asymmetrically, to deter Chinese aggression. Japanese December 2022 strategic documents and joint statements by Japan and the US in 2023 suggest that the transpacific allies were working in lockstep in the security domain.

There is broad continuity and a modicum of consistency behind Japan's moves, but this review emphasises a change in Japan's posture – a change that is often under-appreciated, with limited exceptions [Fatton 2024]. Tokyo's ambiguous «One China» framework «recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1972], but some scholars argue that the Japanese government has *de facto* followed a «Two Chinas» policy with its sustained informal relations with the Republic of China, Taiwan [Liff 2022; Matsuda 2023]. This is also the version quietly stated by Japanese diplomats in recent years. It has been especially salient since the late 2010s. In the authors' opinion, however, this stance is a more recent political construct aimed at opening up space for the self-governed island, and one that feeds Chinese insecurity. Certainly, according to the 1972 joint communique that was signed when Japan established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, Tokyo «fully understands and respects [Beijing's] stand» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1972]. This language is typical of the ambiguity embedded in many countries' «One China» policies.

However, Tokyo wanted to reassure Beijing back in 1972. Chinese policymakers proposed a gentlemen's agreement during negotiations to normalize relations with Japan. According to Beijing's suggestions, the Japanese government would have acknowledged that «Taiwan is the territory

of the People's Republic of China and the liberation of Taiwan is a domestic issue for China», so much so that Tokyo would have expected China's «due consideration» of Japanese economic interests there «when Taiwan is liberated» [Tacit Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of Japan 1972].³ Instead, Tokyo refused to craft such a secret document, but conceded to an oral statement concerning «Japan-Taiwan relations in the context of the normalization of Japan-China relations», according to which the Japanese government refutes the existence of «Two Chinas» and has no intention of supporting «Taiwan's independence movement» [Inoue 2011, 535]. This statement was made right ahead of the signature of the aforementioned joint communique by then Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi, the key political negotiator and one of Japan's most elaborate and visionary politicians, especially on foreign policy matters [Zappa 2022].

In short, «the issue of confrontation between the government of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan is *basically* (italics added) a China domestic matter»,⁴ as per Ōhira's response (*tōben*) to a Diet interpellation, a *de facto* policy.

This basic principle, however, ceases to exist when force is used on Japan's doorstep. This was mentioned in testimony by one of the key diplomats behind the Japan-China diplomatic negotiations in 1972 [Kuriyama 1999]. Certainly, the importance of peace and security in Japan's immediate neighbourhood was spelt out, among other documents, in the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the US and Japan – specifically Art. VI – and reinforced in the 1969 Nixon-Satō joint communique. Moreover, international lawyers have argued that «attempts to solve the problem of Taiwan otherwise than by peaceful means must now constitute a situation 'likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security' under Article 33 of the [UN] Charter. Although the PRC denies that there is a 'juridical boundary' between the parties, [the] suppression by force of 23 million people cannot be consistent with the Charter» [Crawford 2007, 220-1].⁵ The reiteration of the «importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait» in bilateral and multilateral statements by «like-minded partners», and in private bilateral meetings with Chinese government officials is buttressed by this logic and reinforces the point [High-ranking Australian

3. N.B. The title of the document is a misnomer because it was a Chinese suggestion during negotiations, one that was reportedly not agreed upon. Act on Access to Information Held by Administrative Organs. Also available in the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Obtained by Yutaka Kanda and translated by Ryo C. Kato. Giulio Pugliese is indebted to Jeffrey Hornung for this source.

4. Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi's Response to Diet Interpellation (*tōben*) 8 November 1972, cited in [Matsuda 2023, 182-3].

5. Giulio Pugliese is indebted to Aurelio Insisa for this authoritative point.

policymaker, testimony, Washington DC, 7 February 2024]. Therefore, from a legal standpoint, a kinetic attack or a blockade of Taiwan, one that either endangers Japanese security and suppresses by force (or starvation) Taiwanese citizens, would overrule the earlier promises made in 1972 by the government of Japan. However, it is worth stressing the evolution of Japan's policy stance to better grasp the action-reaction dynamics across the Taiwan Strait, as evidenced by the Japanese government's current reticence to publicly acknowledge it has a «One China» policy.

The rapidly shifting military balance – one that may tilt in China's favour vis-à-vis Taiwan – has been translated into more assertive PRC actions across the strait, sometimes reactively so. Similarly, the important strategic changes and previously unthinkable vocal stance from Tokyo's end, one that is at times in tension with Japan's previous pledges, has sometimes preceded and sometimes reacted to Chinese actions. This relational logic is key to understanding the negative spiral in cross-strait tensions. Along with the upgrading of Taiwan's description as «an extremely crucial partner and an important friend» in Japan's official diplomatic bluebook, influential politicians, retired officers and the top brass of the military have concomitantly raised awareness of the sense of crisis across the strait to drive the political agenda and legitimise major moves in Japan's security regime [Iwata *et al.* 2023]. Notably, in 2021 then Deputy Prime Minister Asō Tarō signalled that if Taiwan were invaded, Japan would come to its defence along with the US, while the late Abe Shinzō quipped in his new-found capacity as a Diet member that a «Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency» [*Kyodo News* 2021, 6 July; *Kyodo News* 2021, 1 December]. In 2023 former Defence Minister Onodera Itsunori argued that Japan would fight alongside the US, which was echoed by serving Vice-Minister of Defence Ino Toshiro [*NHK* 2023, 15 May; *The Telegraph* 2023, 23 July].

Top bureaucrats and uniformed officials who had served under the Abe administration, in particular, were especially vocal and prolific on this front, specifically in TV interviews, a growing number of publications and public and heavily mediated tabletop exercises organised by a number of think tanks. These statements and the broader public discourse on a Taiwan contingency are notable and, this analysis suggests, they portend to a clearer Japanese commitment to protect Taiwan and an expansive interpretation of Japan's security interests, something that is not fully appreciated in the policy and academic literature. The year under review thus provides a window on the Japanese government's recent and planned contributions to the defence of Taiwan; one that emphasises deterrence, sometimes at the expense of reassurances.

As the Wall Street Journal revealed in 2023, «American and Japanese military officials have been working on a plan for a conflict over Taiwan for more than a year [and] Washington has nudged Tokyo to consider roles for the Japanese military such as hunting for Chinese submarines around Tai-

wan» [*The Wall Street Journal* 2023, 15 July]. Until the 2020s Japan and the United States only had an operational plan (OPLAN 55) to deal with a military crisis in the Korean peninsula, but, as the afore-mentioned Art. VI in the US-Japan alliance treaty and the Nixon-Satō communique suggest, the alliance was also aimed at the «Far East» writ-large. At any rate, the ability of the Japanese executive to initiate a new joint operational plan without new US-Japan defence guidelines is worthy of note.

Moreover, when Japan's three landmark strategic documents were announced in December 2022, commentators suggested that the narrow timeline for a fully functional unified command of the Japan Self-Defense Forces was due to an anticipated Taiwan contingency [Iwata *et al.* 2023; Iwata 2023, 176-90]. In short, this was not a bureaucratic timeline but a strategic one centred on Taiwan as the main risk requiring attention, not unlike US Department of Defense (DoD) thinking dating back to at least 2019-20 [Esper 2022, 513]. The US DoD was already coordinating with Japanese counterparts back then, in fact [*Ibidem*, 540]. In 2023, this «timeline» was compressed [*The Japan News* 2023, 6 September]. Japan's new joint command structure – with a commanding officer in charge of overseeing and guiding the operational integration of the three services during emergencies, also by leveraging new domains such as cyber and space – would further buttress coordination with the US. In short, seamless integration allowed better «integrated deterrence» across domains and in closer cooperation with its traditional ally. The new joint command structure was planned for 2024.

Successive US governments were the leading engines of change behind the networked geopolitics of the first island chain, starting with the Trump administration [Esper 2022, 511-6, 535-41]. In fact, a senior Taiwanese diplomat told one of the authors that «Japan has not been a pioneer [on this matter]» [High-ranking Taiwanese government official, 24 February 2023]. In conjunction with this, the Biden administration successfully interlocked its alliances to enlist, among others, the cooperation of the South Korean government in coordinating with the US and Japan, as well as NATO countries. The joint Japan-US preparation for a Taiwan contingency – i.e. a set of combined operational plans for a Taiwan conflict – and the promise of a standing bilateral joint military planning and coordination office in Japan to work in tandem with the aforementioned JSDF unified command were destined to become key undertakings and an important step in alliance integration. The US-Japan alliance was front and centre of the new geopolitics of the first island chain. As the above preliminary (and necessarily incomplete) historical sketch shows, the changes evident by 2023 were set in motion *ahead* of China's worrisome cross-strait sabre-rattling, such as that witnessed in 2022, thus feeding Chinese assertiveness and suggesting that the action-reaction dynamics were in full swing.

Finally, and in line with this article's main narrative, it was the Abe government that planted the seeds for Japan's greater contribution to the US-Japan alliance and potential security intervention in a Taiwan contingency scenario. The next section will detail this issue.

11. *Linking Taiwan with Japan's security: legal and strategic revolutions come to fruition*

Japan's 2023 decision to post a serving Japan Ministry of Defense (MOD) official and a retired JSDF officer to Japan's representation office in Taipei (the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association) suggested more preparation for contingency planning, including liaising with Taiwanese and US counterparts [*Reuters* 2023, 13 September]. Along with the appointment of a proper Defence Attaché, reporting also suggested Japanese (and South Korean) intelligence assistance to the self-governing island [*Financial Times* 2023, 8 June].

The consensus among scholars and practitioners is that Japan has over-prioritised its immediate political concerns, for instance by preparing for a potential evacuation of its citizens, ahead of bigger strategic imperatives. This review instead finds that Japanese policymakers have linked the security of Taiwan with Japanese security, and especially in 2023. This is evidenced by the above statements by heavyweight politicians and the little-understood legal framework allowing these statements (although one of the authors indicated the *revolutionary* quality of the 2015 legislation back then. See Pugliese 2016) and recent strategic moves in the US-Japan alliance. It is worth going over these legal factors one more time and doing so through the lens of a cross-strait contingency.

In 2014, the Abe government achieved constitutional reinterpretation through executive fiat, one that allowed for the right to collective self-defence (CSD). That is, military responses in defence and support of «a foreign country that is in a close relationship to Japan» that comes under attack. This definition allows CSD of its treaty ally, the United States of America, *and* other like-minded states, such as Australia and European countries, with which Japan has no formal alliance treaties. It is worth stressing that, according to Kishida's own Diet testimony in 2015 when he served as Foreign Minister, this may even apply to semi-sovereign states, such as Taiwan [Kutsunegi 2015: 36-7]. The recent language in Japan's diplomatic bluebook on Taiwan, describing it as «an extremely crucial partner and an important friend» of Japan, thus acquires an important meaning in the context of the above changes in favour of CSD.

At the same time, and poorly understood at the time, the 2014 Cabinet Decision and subsequent security legislation linked the Japanese Constitution's war-renouncing Article 9 with Article 13, which is concerned with

the rights to individual dignity and public welfare.⁶ It did so to expand what constitutes «Japan's survival», meaning self-defence, by stating: «self-defence measures are only intended to deal with the urgent and unjust situation in which people's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness will be/may be completely overthrown by an armed attack by a foreign country, and to protect these rights of the people» [Cabinet Office of Japan 2014]. Similar considerations would also apply in the event that «friendly country/ies» come under attack and the attack would impact «Japan's survival», defined along the above broad lines. Key bureaucrats working for the Abe government and National Security Secretariat later introduced such language in the Peace and Security Legislation drafts, which were passed by the Diet in 2015. Scrutiny by the opposition parties created little to no effect as the LDP did not change the wording despite months of deliberations.

In fact, the Japanese government's preference for rhetorical understatement and lack of vigorous, clearer Diet debates has obfuscated the degree of policy change. Indeed, if US forces were to intervene in a Taiwan scenario and were attacked by China, Japanese decision-makers may now invoke a «survival threatening situation» to dispatch military assets in defence of US forces and, unless the attacker desists by sparing Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), enter a conflict with China. Under this same piece of legislation, in less dire situations, defined as those «situations that have an important influence» on Japan's peace and security, the JSDF may instead provide rear area support – including the provision of weapons, ammunition and fuel – and possibly engage in search and rescue. At the same time, given substantial US forward deployment in Japan and the importance of access to US and/or Japanese military facilities, if not civilian ones, the difference between the two scenarios in a kinetic military crisis involving US-China confrontation is likely to be irrelevant. Japan – and especially Okinawa – would almost certainly become a target, and hence a belligerent, either way. Tokyo may altogether deny support for US forces, but that would end the US-Japan alliance, favour Chinese irredentism and, in all likelihood, a domino-like effect of subordination to Beijing by regional players. Therefore, for Tokyo this is a highly unlikely call, especially in the short-to-medium term. In fact, a well-attended tabletop exercise organised by a Japanese think tank suggested that the government would, despite

6. It did so by referencing an obscure document produced in 1972 by the same Cabinet Legislative Bureau (CLB) that then denied the government of Japan the right of collective self-defence (CSD) up until 2014. The government-led constitutional reinterpretation was also made possible thanks to an advisory body to the Prime Minister made up of almost exactly the same members that had pushed for CSD back in 2006-08, with the blessing of the ephemeral first Abe administration, and thanks to the appointment of a like-minded diplomat, a first, to head the CLB. Strong *Kantei* coordination allowed a swift passage of the re-interpretation. On conventional interpretations of Article 13, see Hook and McCormack [eds.] [2001: 165-6].

some hesitancy, invoke a «survival threatening scenario» because «Japan's survival is threatened by an armed attack on another country with which it has close relations» [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2022, 9 September; Iwata *et al.* 2023]. This demonstrates why the Abe administration's legacy in Japan's security policy ought to be considered transformational. Without the constitutional reinterpretation and accompanying legislation, Japan would have lacked the legal capability to use its weight – military and otherwise – in the US-led deterrence mix in a Taiwan contingency.

Kishida's government has built on the legacy of his predecessors. Recent major developments in force posture and military doctrine confirm the interlinkage between Japan's and Taiwan's security. Ever since the 2010 National Defence Policy Guidelines, Japan has revamped its military force posture on its southwestern islands, the Ryukyus/Nansei Islands (constituting Okinawa Prefecture), by establishing an amphibious rapid deployment brigade, deploying radar, short- and mid-range missile units and ballistic missile defence (BMD) at sea, along with anti-submarine weapons. Given the proximity of the Okinawan islands to Taiwan and the inability of Japan's BMD system to cope with China's missile capabilities, the government is bolstering these remote islands with stand-off defence capabilities. Tokyo is improving the surface-to-ship guided missiles already deployed in Okinawa by expanding their reach fivefold to 620 miles, introducing medium- to long-range cruise missiles and developing hypersonic glide missiles [*CNN* 2023, 12 April]. These moves were spelt out in the Kishida government's three strategic documents, which were unveiled after a long gestation in December 2022, and which aimed at deterrence by denial *and* by punishment [Wallace and Pugliese 2023].⁷ Japan signalled its ability to indirectly support Taiwan with anti-mine and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, to beef up Taiwan's civil defence through cooperation in the cyber, geo-economic and cognitive warfare domains, and to respond to Chinese missiles tipped with tactical nuclear warheads, which would aim at keeping Japan at bay in a potential Taiwan contingency. The introduction of these offensive strike capabilities, the acquisition of which Japan hastened by a year in late 2023 [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 5 October], and the major increase in Japan's military budget was prepared on the ground laid by the Abe government's earlier security reforms, and was high on the agenda of late Abe himself [Pugliese and Maslow 2020].

Endowing Japan with strike capabilities is premised on the assumption that having the option to go on the offensive «will complicate the opponent's tactical and strategic calculations» according to a statement by then Minister of Defence Hamada [Defense Minister Hamada 2022]. Put simply, Japan will have enhanced its options to engage in retaliatory operations

7. The author of this section is indebted to Corey Wallace for many thoughtful insights.

against the territory of another nation and target enemy bases, including command and control centres. While the focus is on undermining the PLA's operational capacity, these capabilities could be both punishment- and denial-focused, and weapons such as the extended-range Type-12 can be valuable for both offensive operations in foreign territory and «defending in depth» by threatening from a variety of launch points Chinese ships operating around Okinawa or Taiwan – or even forces landing on smaller islands in the East China Sea, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Therefore, Japan's strategy in some way resembles China's own Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD),⁸ and while its emerging capabilities are chiefly aimed at homeland defence, it should be clear that Japan's stand-off capabilities will be useful in a Taiwan contingency to support the United States and (even just indirectly) Taiwan, as in the above scenarios, while Japan and the US keep a potential Chinese retaliation at bay.

Finally, Japan's interlinkage of its own security with Taiwan's is evident in specific US-Japan alliance developments in 2023. On 11 January 2023 a Japan-US «2+2» meeting of foreign and defence ministers was held in Washington DC and both governments announced that «the 12th Marine Regiment would be reorganised into the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment by 2025» a move aimed at «strengthen[ing] Alliance deterrence and response capabilities by positioning more versatile, resilient, and mobile forces with increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, anti-ship, and transportation capabilities» [U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Japan 2023]. This initiative dovetailed with expansion of the US-Philippines Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement to allow four new US bases in key places along the first island chain, with more possibly in store to allow rotational deployments [*Naval News* 2023, 9 April]. Effectively, the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR), made up of circa 1800-2000 servicemen, will split into smaller teams of 50-100 soldiers to allow intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) of Chinese activities in the East and South China Seas by deploying unmanned surface, underwater and aerial vehicles [Iwata *et al.* 2023: 89-91]. Hence, in a contingency these US amphibious teams in Japanese and Philippines territory may distribute maritime operations (i.e. disperse lethal forces) with anti-ship missiles and low-altitude defence systems, all while theoretically hopping from island to island every 48 to 72 hours to avoid Chinese attacks, while continuing to conduct ISR and fight [Iwata *et al.* 2023: 89-91]. These so-called «stand-in forces» (i.e. within the first island chain), which will have to rely on Japanese military and/or civilian facilities, may well disrupt an eventual Chinese blockade or amphibious landing on Taiwan. In addition, Japan would finance the dispersion of US Marines across the first and second island chains, including the long-promised pro-

8. But with the appropriate caveats: China has short- to long-range ballistic missiles along with a growing number of nuclear warheads (although Beijing has a «no first use» policy). Japan has neither ballistic missiles nor nuclear warheads.

vision of roughly 35% of 8 billion USD for the construction and revamp of a US military base on Guam [Toropin 2023]. Although recent scholarship claims otherwise [O’Shea 2024], the above suggests that the contribution of US Marines to deterrence might become more relevant in the near future.

In effect, these capabilities work in tandem with allies and other US military forces that will have to operate beyond the first and second island chains due to threats posed by China’s aircraft carriers and «Guam killer» ballistic missiles. In fact, Japan was reportedly preparing for military exercises involving its aircraft carriers all the way to northern Australia [Japanese participant, Japan-US-Europe Trilateral Dialogue, Brussels, 7 November 2023]. This further demonstrates that the Japanese government has gone to great lengths to integrate its own security with deterring a kinetic attack across the Taiwan Strait. This is under-appreciated in the literature on Japan’s recent moves. Likewise, earlier analyses that insisted on a *longue durée* view of post-Cold War Japan’s security trajectory are misplaced because they fail to appreciate the quiet yet transformational expansion of Japan’s security architecture that took place around 2014-15. The most fruitful seeds, those allowing the deployment of strike capabilities and military intervention in a Taiwan contingency, were planted by the Abe administration. Kishida was walking in Abe’s footsteps, due to the worsening security environment, his low popularity, his lack of policy vision(s), and the enduring influence of nationalist factions in the LDP.

In short, Japanese policymakers have signalled that the government of Japan would intervene in a Taiwan contingency in support of the United States. During a noteworthy visit to the self-governed island on 8 August, the powerful LDP Vice-President and former Prime Minister, Asō Tarō, best expressed this reasoning. He argued that the preparedness to fight of Japan, the US and other like-minded partners would elicit deterrence effects on China [*Sankei Shinbun* 2023, 8 August]. Nevertheless, the ultimate decision to intervene will be a political one that will also take into account Chinese retaliation on Japanese soil and citizens. Moreover, while it is true that circa 18 thousand long-term Japanese residents in Taiwan (plus businessmen and tourists) and economic interests will need to be shielded in a potential contingency scenario, the People’s Republic hosts a markedly larger number of Japanese citizens, with circa 104,000 long-term residents [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2023a], not to mention assets and business interests. This factor will necessarily complicate the Japanese government’s calculations.

Finally, and as is evident from the above, Japanese citizens have never fully understood or partaken in the deliberations leading to the aforementioned legislative and strategic revolutions. They were introduced by stealth. Early understatements by policymakers were deliberate because the Japanese public still retains a strong anti-militarist ethos. While a sense of insecurity rose sharply following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, especially among

Japanese decision-makers [O’ Shea and Maslow 2024], Japanese public support for heightened defence procurement dwindled in 2023, and overwhelmingly prioritised welfare over warfare [NHK 2023, 13 February]. Only a deadly crisis, one with a substantial number of Japanese casualties and clear Chinese responsibility, may fully mobilise the Japanese population at large and bring about effective determination capable of withstanding the painful consequences, including economic ones, brought by China’s likely counterstrategies of attrition and exhaustion of its rival’s will to fight. For instance, in a Taiwan blockade scenario Japan’s military action may not be taken for granted.

China’s more assertive foreign and security policy is aimed at securing its territorial and maritime claims, sometimes reactively so. Its gradual regional revisionism notwithstanding [Termine and Natalizia, 2020], a former very high-ranking Japanese policymaker acknowledged to the author of this section that the foreign policy posture of the People’s Republic has been relatively risk averse [Former high-ranking Japanese policymaker, interview, 20 December 2023]. In the authors’ assessment, the Japanese government, among other actors, benefited from publicising China’s activities. As was recounted in last year’s review [Wallace and Pugliese 2023], the government of Japan (especially the defence establishment, which was behind the formulation of the new strategic documents) insisted on the linkage between Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine and China’s irredentism across the Taiwan Strait. It did so to legitimise Japan’s new-found changes in force posture and military doctrine – echoing strategic narratives by the US and Taiwanese governments – and to mobilise and coalesce domestic and international support, especially by Europe. But Japan’s landmark strategic changes and documents which focused on Taiwan and the first island chain, were a long time in the making. Had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic and Abe’s sudden resignation, we would have probably seen some of these developments already by 2020 [Pugliese and Maslow 2020].

By mid-2023, the quest for a degree of stability in Sino-Japanese relations translated into notched down publicity accorded to Chinese activities across the strait. The actual activities, however, did not considerably abate. For instance, aerial incursions across the symbolic median line, which spiked following US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, persisted in 2023. Japan’s information policy reflected that in Washington DC, where the national security establishment engaged in message discipline in early 2023 [Reuters 2023, 12 January] and Biden put an end to his earlier frequent and – in all likelihood – well-planned [Rogin 2022, 13 October; Sanger 2024, pp.284-5] «lapsus linguae» that reaffirmed his commitment to Taiwanese security, a less than ambiguous «strategic ambiguity» that reinforced action-reaction cycles across the strait [Insisia 2023; Sciorati 2023]. Finally (and notably), earlier US government messaging which suggested direct access to Xi Jinping’s aggressive thinking on Taiwan

[*Bloomberg* 2023, 17 October] gave way in 2023 to nuance, to the point that in 2024 a State Department official told the author of this section that «we don't know what is in Xi Jinping's mind» [US State Department official responsible for the Asia-Pacific, Interview, 6 February 2024]. In the US too, earlier stark messaging about a narrowing window for a Chinese invasion was probably propagated to allies and domestic public opinion to elicit support, legitimise landmark security changes and rally coordination over a Taiwan contingency.

As a result, diplomatic exchanges and the (re-)establishment of avenues for dialogue and confidence building, including between Japan and China [*AP* 2023, 16 May], marked not only an evolution in the Chinese government's thinking in 2023 but also a change in the US and Japanese governments' thinking. Given the ongoing arms race and the all-encompassing rivalry, however, the timid tactical détente was a means to avoid US-China strategic rivalry derailing into hot confrontation. Given these premises, and the domestic political dynamics in the US and China, it looked like wobbly stability.

12. *Japan-South Korea cooperation through the prism of US-led minilateralism*

Apart from the US-Japan alliance's preparations for a Taiwan contingency, minilateral diplomacy branched out to the Republic of Korea (ROK), also known as South Korea. The ascent of the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol presidency translated into a stronger ROK alignment with the US and its aims. In fact, an ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy was announced in December 2022. Yoon Suk-yeol specifically assigned its development to the North America Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggesting a desire to align with Washington [High-ranking European diplomat, interview, South Korea, 7 November 2022]. Aided by his forceful character as a former prosecutor, Yoon abandoned Moon Jae-in's engagement policy with the DPRK and aligned more fully with the United States on the China and Russia dossiers, so much so that South Korea «indirectly» supplied more artillery shells to Ukraine than all the European countries combined [*Yonhap* 2023, 5 December]. South Korea was, along with Japan [Wallace and Pugliese 2023], one of the first East Asian countries to side with the US and NATO after Russia's invasion of Ukraine; but Yoon has notably shied away from pledging direct military assistance to Ukraine, in favour of reinforcing non-lethal and humanitarian aid, whilst continuing to supply military assistance via third parties, such as Poland and the United States. Yoon's decision to tilt to one side was not a foregone policy choice given the influence and leverage that Russia and China may exert over their neighbour, North Korea. Given that China is also the ROK's most important economic market, this move cemented the idea of a progressive

rift among competing blocs following Russia's 2022 war of aggression in Ukraine [Brands 2023, 4 June; Gates 2023].

More importantly, and with active US intercession under the Biden administration, the South Korean government took the initiative in perhaps its hardest foreign policy call: reprising dialogue with Japan. This had soured in a negative spiral of disputes over the legacy of the Japanese Empire and colonisation of Korea, which was compounded by Japan's economic retaliation, especially in 2019 [Pugliese and Maslow 2020, 145-6]. Kishida's mellow public persona and more conciliatory political background compared to his immediate predecessors in the *Kantei*, not least the late Abe Shinzō, partly smoothed the road. However, there were no meaningful concessions on the Japanese government's side, because of Kishida's unpopularity in most of 2023 and, crucially, the weight of nationalists in the LDP.

Therefore, on 6 March 2023, the South Korean government unilaterally relinquished reparations from Japanese firms implicated in forced labour during Japan's colonisation of the peninsula, and instead set up a foundation voluntarily supported by Korean businesses that benefitted from Japanese grants and soft loans awarded on the occasion of the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea [*Yonhap* 2023, 6 March; *Korea Times* 2015, 21 June]. The Japanese government simply reiterated the language of contrition dating back to the 1998 joint declaration by the heads of the two executives. While ten of fifteen claimants accepted the alternative compensation plan, the unilateral concessions and decision to cement Japan-South Korea relations by Yoon – one that was reportedly also informed by his father's experience and wishes – were deeply unpopular back home, with mass protests in Seoul led by the opposition party. These concessions further reduced the president's popularity and questioned their tenability [*NHK* 2023, 18 May; *Reuters* 2023, 13 April].

These conciliatory moves paved the way for substantial Japan-ROK cooperation. First and foremost, they prompted Japan to remove its 2019 export controls on three essential components to produce semiconductors and displays. This, in turn, allowed Seoul to end its own retaliatory curbs and a WTO dispute complaint against Japan. Second, Yoon visited Tokyo, and a bilateral summit, qualified by successive informal talks, reactivated and deepened diplomatic engagement between the two countries. This was the first official summit between the leaders of the ROK and Japan in 12 years. Third, the South Korean government declared that it «normalised» the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which it had previously frozen because of Japan's economic coercion back in 2019 [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 22 March]. Last and more importantly, the stabilisation of Japan-ROK relations – two major US allies – ushered the way for landmark trilateral US-Japan-ROK cooperation, as was evidenced by a Camp David summit on 18 August. There, too, minilateral cooperation expanded horizontally to include cooperation in diplomatic, educational, and technological fields, but the key

«integrated deterrence» outcomes were in security, through expanded intelligence sharing, missile defence and strengthened cybersecurity coordination. Importantly, the three documents released at the summit aimed at regularising security consultations, at routinising trilateral meetings, both at the summit and working levels, at routinising trilateral military exercises, and at diversifying and expanding their remit beyond North Korea to include food security, economic security and, importantly, China [The White House 2023a; The White House 2023b; The White House 2023c].

What transpires from these three documents is as follows. First and foremost, the US government aimed at an institutionalisation of US-ROK-Japan cooperation, thus interlocking the region's most powerful, prosperous, and technologically advanced US allies. It did so with an eye to binding South Korea and Japan in cooperation in the future, as successive governments in either country may not be as sympathetic to their counterparts as the current ones (especially Yoon's). The routinisation and institutionalisation of trilateral cooperation and coordination also aimed at damage limitation in the event of a potential Trump comeback, which might prioritise his own interests at the expense of trilateral coordination. The Japanese government was especially fearful of a reprise of US concessions to North Korea and US summit diplomacy with it [Howell, 2023]. Second, regularised avenues for dialogue were deepened at multiple levels: from Director-General level up to summit meetings, which will be held at least once a year. Third, and relatedly, the scope of trilateral cooperation expanded notably across agencies, given the multi-layered nature of the challenges and opportunities faced by the three countries. The inauguration of a Japan-US-ROK Indo-Pacific Dialogue and of a trilateral framework for scientific cooperation, including defence technology, testified to this logic [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024; National Nuclear Security Administration 2023]. Cooperation, however, promised to go deeper with new dialogues and plans for cooperative and coordinative frameworks aimed at combating North Korea's cyber activities – a major source of income for the North Korean nuclear programme [Howell 2023] – stifling disinformation, and promoting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), government financing across the Indo-Pacific (starting with the Pacific islands) and maritime, space and economic security, including the establishment of an early warning system of potential disruptions to supply chains. Fourth, the most publicised development was a strengthening of intelligence sharing, notably by allowing a trilateral real-time system that linked the three countries' radar tracking of missiles flying from North Korea, with potential implications also in a Taiwan contingency scenario [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 19 December]. Given Yoon's willingness to tilt to one side, the interlocking of the US hub and spokes system along the first island chain would therefore have implications for coercive diplomacy and deterrence towards China as well as the DPRK.

While the momentum was clear, some of these mechanisms would be put to the test – especially the pledge to consult – as North Korea’s bellicose behaviour toward its southern neighbour was accompanied by Kim Jong-un making overtures to Japan [Voice of America 2024, 18 January]. At the end of the year the South Korean Supreme Court upheld decisions by lower courts to order compensation by the Japanese industries responsible for wartime labour [Nikkei Asia 2023, 28 December]. Moreover, it was clear that the Japanese government was still watchful about domestic political developments in South Korea [Koga 2023]. Also for this reason, Tokyo was unlikely to allow South Korea in the G7 framework on a more regular basis. At the same time, renewed emphasis on trilateral exercises, although some of these were signals with few deterrence implications, and Japan-South Korea cooperation on evacuation of their citizens from Gaza and the Middle East symbolised a reset of the testy bilateral relationship [Wright and Guarini 2023, 8 November].

13. *The Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic alignment: the blossoming of Japan-NATO relations*

Although with different scope, emphasis and working levels – similar multi-layered, bilateral or unilateral cooperation among «like-minded partners» gained traction in 2023 in the «G7 Plus» and between the EU and/or NATO and Asia-Pacific counterparts, first and foremost Japan, the ROK and Australia. Similarly to the ROK-Japan-US trilateral cooperative framework, the Biden administration facilitated (or more simply allowed) a deepening of such ententes, some of which had or would acquire a life of their own. The NATO-Japan partnership was but one example of these dynamics. Given space limitations, this review only fleshes out some of these notable developments, while citing analysis of the growing momentum at the EU-Japan level elsewhere [Pugliese 2024]. Starting with the Trump administration, the US government included China as part of NATO’s remit to socialise, co-opt and enlist its European allies in the strategic competition it prioritised. Apart from providing regular avenues for sharing US intelligence on, for example, China’s growing nuclear stockpiles and sabre-rattling across the Taiwan Strait, the US government elicited intelligence sharing from regional allies and cooperation on traditional security items that would not contravene NATO’s geographical mandate because of their transnational nature. These include cybersecurity, disinformation, space security, cooperation on defence technology, the military industrial base and risks associated with dual-use technology in strategic sectors, such as telecommunications and surveillance. Under the Biden administration and following Russia’s war in Ukraine, momentum for an alignment became evident as European views on China soured, US leverage grew and

reciprocity between European and Asia-Pacific «like-minded partners» blossomed, as these states supported Ukraine financially, diplomatically and militarily [Pugliese 2024].

Therefore, the language on China in the July 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué was particularly forceful: «The People's Republic of China's stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values. [China's policy] strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains» [NATO 2023a]. NATO also started to look at Taiwan contingency scenarios with the aim of «strongly discouraging China from taking any actions that will change the status quo» [*Nikkei Asia* 2023, 13 November], perhaps also through indirect assistance/triangulation and small steps towards creating a global defence supply chain. According to a US defence practitioner, war games considered NATO countries' contributions in contingency scenarios concerning Taiwan, with a preference accorded to light contributions, such as sanctions, the provision of military assistance via triangulation or the ability to fill the military vacuum left by the deployment of Europe-based US forces to East Asia [US defence practitioner, interview, track 1.5 dialogue, 7 November 2023]. G7 countries constituted the marrow of these contributions and Japan's successful presidency of this minilateral grouping testified to stronger alignment on the China dossier. These were all noteworthy developments for NATO, a trans-Atlantic alliance.

The Japanese government has shown interest in buttressing the NATO-Japan security bridge, at least since the mid-2000s. However, it was the Biden administration, the worsening security environment in Europe and East Asia and the interlinkage of the two theatres that hastened the construction of the bridge [Brummer and Yennie Lindgren 2023]. For instance, feisty US Ambassador Rahm Emanuel hosted regular meetings with NATO ambassadors in Tokyo and was seen accompanying eight NATO allies' ambassadors posted in Brussels to a courtesy call on Foreign Minister Kamikawa during their visit to Japan [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023b]. The eight governments they represented were probably the keenest to enhance Japan-NATO relations, starting with NATO's most important member, the United States. In fact, the NATO summit in Vilnius, in which Prime Minister Kishida participated along with leaders from the other Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific «like-minded» countries (aka the «Asia Pacific 4», or «Indo Pacific 4», namely Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea), was the second in which invitations were extended to these players following the historic first time in Madrid in 2022. In Vilnius, Japan and NATO unveiled an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme, which vowed cooperation in 16 areas [NATO 2023c]. There, NATO's Secretary General reaffirmed the alignment of the Indo-Pacific with the Euro-Atlantic and Japan's importance by stressing that «security is not regional, but global» and that no partner is closer than Japan to NATO [NATO 2023b].

While the entente on China grew within Europe, diverging priorities persisted. Major Western European players, first and foremost Macron's France, snubbed Tokyo's and the United States' efforts to have a NATO liaison office in Japan [Matsumura 2023, 19 December]. This office, reportedly to be manned by one officer, was probably going to add little of substance [Moller 2023, 12 June] but its symbolism might have poked a finger in China's eye. In fact, the decision to do without the liaison office allowed NATO countries such as France to present themselves as honest brokers to Beijing, take advantage of profitable trade deals with China (especially in France as its President travelled to Beijing in April 2023, and the two countries would celebrate 60 years of diplomatic relations in 2024) and even suggest a «third way»-approach that, while not equidistant between the US and China, was not fully aligned with the US-led competitive strategy [Barré 2023, 9 April].

Apart from political sloganeering that catered to domestic audiences, this «third way» stance might have reassured South and Southeast Asian countries and other third parties about the merits of seeing these European players as responsible multilateral actors. First-hand evidence suggested that Europe's alignment with the US and NATO's gaze eastward worried some Southeast Asian players fearful of the crystallisation of blocs, with potential implications for lucrative military procurement contracts [European diplomat, interview, Da Nang, Vietnam, 16 November 2022]. Contemporary arms deals are often buttressed by political alignment, especially in the light of the need to keep servicing and spare parts flowing. Therefore, growing European security engagement in the region – one that was undergoing economic growth as a whole – reassured local actors willing to resist Chinese assertiveness, but which were concomitantly fearful of provoking a reaction by Beijing or being dragged into a confrontation between blocs. At the same time, authoritative testimonies from European diplomatic quarters, including French ones, suggested a strong institution-wide alignment with the US diagnosis on Xi's China [High-ranking French diplomat, interview, 27 January 2023; EU officials in charge of security, interview, 24 October 2022; EU official, interview, 9 March 2023]. China's «sitting on the fence» over Russia's war in Ukraine, often misperceived as a steady alignment (if not an alliance), and US leverage compounded these dynamics. Representative of a seemingly growing Euro-Atlantic alignment on China, in 2023 Germany produced a hard-nosed China strategy and the Italian government quietly pulled out of a moribund 2019 Belt and Road framework MoU [Boni 2024; Andornino 2023]. In late 2023, the Italian government also announced the deployment of an aircraft carrier battlegroup to the region in 2024. A more fine-grained analysis of some of these Western European players' policies on China, however, suggested that pragmatism was alive and well in Rome [Dell'Era and Pugliese 2024].

According to expectations set up in the 2022 US National Security Strategy, according to which «US interests are best served when our Euro-

pean allies and partners play an active role in the Indo-Pacific», and earlier testimonies, European member states, including Italy, showed growing engagement in the region. Direct testimonies suggested that while the US was the most pressing behind this presence, especially since the advent of the Biden administration, Japan was welcoming but less insistent [Italian diplomat, interview, 30 January 2024]. The two transpacific allies effectively swapped sides, perhaps also because states such as Italy were chiefly interested in the region's rich procurement market, and thus were in competition with Japan's defence exports. Indonesia is one such case [*Defense News*, 2023, 27 October]. A continued focus on the so-called «Enlarged Mediterranean» notwithstanding [Coticchia and Mazziotti di Celso, 2024], the Italian government signed a strategic partnership with Japan in 2023 and extended its 21st century naval diplomacy all the way to East Asia, which was arguably already in the making under the Draghi government. This also served as a political tool to emphasise the principles of free trade, freedom of navigation and overflight among allied nations, to buttress Italy's credentials as a «like-minded» country and to showcase (and export) Italian military platforms and components to regional players [Abbondanza 2023]. Thus, this endeavour aimed to enhance cooperation in both Italian and international security realms, showcasing Italy's capabilities and soft power projection. Nevertheless, the aim was distinctively techno-economically orientated. It facilitated the political groundwork for advancing new platforms, technologies and systems, such as in the Italy-Japan-UK Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) framework, which aimed to develop a sixth-generation combat aircraft endowed with the potential to positively impact the broader economy. In December 2023, the three countries agreed to establish an intergovernmental organisation to manage the GCAP. Looking ahead, the partnership between Italy and Japan in aerospace investment and research and development appears promising, with potential benefits extending to defence, land observation, climate change mitigation and disaster response, areas where the two nations share common interests.

In any case, the interlinkage between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic was more evident in 2023. Cooperation on cyber-defence, for instance, gained momentum. Japan cemented its late 2022 membership in the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia with participation in a signature NATO cybersecurity exercise, one that entailed coordination with NATO countries to «respond to attack scenarios on virtual national critical infrastructure as well as targets and structures of a military nature» [C4ISRNET 2023]. Hinting at Japan's deepening entente in the cyber and hybrid threats domain, and its engagement with Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, Estonia's premier think tank, the International Centre for Defence and Security, launched the newest Japan Chair in 2023 with funding from the Government of Japan [ICDS 2023].

More importantly, and after a prolonged tug of war, at the end of the year the LDP and the Kōmeitō reached an agreement to relax the self-imposed arms exports rules to allow exports of foreign licensed but Japan-produced defence products, including PAC-3 missiles, to replenish US stocks. This was a notable development that suggested support for Ukraine (and, less noted, Israel) via US triangulation, and an expectation of reciprocity from European counterparts in future contingency scenarios closer to Japan's shores. The potential further relaxation of Japan's export rules went hand-in-hand with enmeshment in techno-economic cooperative frameworks with «like-minded» counterparts, for both economic and strategic gains. The standardisation of defence products, such as ammunition, and the need to foster a global defence industrial base with steady supply and demand for them were also high on the NATO agenda along with counterparts in the so-called Asia-Pacific 4 (or Indo-Pacific 4) grouping, first and foremost Japan and South Korea. Nevertheless, competitive dynamics in the arms industry probably hindered substantial cooperation on that specific agenda item.

14. *Conclusions*

As was clarified above, in the realms of security and diplomacy the Kishida administration has by and large followed the policy pathway established by late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō a decade ago. Domestically, however, Kishida has endeavoured to establish his own political legacy while coping with that left by his cumbersome predecessor. The effort has produced scant results. For instance, since July 2023 the BoJ under new governor Ueda has refrained from ending the decade-old expansionary monetary policy set by former governor Kuroda and Abe. In addition to this, Kishida's main policy goal, the establishment of a new form of capitalism, risks being yet another empty slogan in the face of largely demobilised and historically sceptical public opinion. The establishment of the CFA to tackle children and family-related issues, and proposals for future labour reforms are the most significant additions to Japan's contemporary politics.

In fact, the administration's redistribution targets were far from achieved. By contrast, the government's policies seemed characterised by a lack of a long-term vision and by excessive reliance on «makeshift» economic and political initiatives such as contingent tax reductions and subsidies, and cabinet reshuffles. As a Nikkei editorial pointed out, with such measures «the voters' support will not be restored. The PM should also resolutely tackle difficult issues, deliver results, and thus meet the Japanese people's expectations» [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 23 October]. In this regard, the graph at the end of section 6 is particularly elucidatory of Japanese voters' political disengagement. While it shows that in 2023 the Japanese public

perceived a moderately positive business climate, public expectations of the government fell consistently. Apart from contingent political scandals, structural factors such as the continual depreciation of the yen following the increase in interest rates in Europe and the US, growing consumer prices and a relative loss of purchasing power by large sectors of the Japanese working population contributed to the public's negative attitude to the government [Tahara 2023, 26 October].

While other large liberal democracies will hold elections in 2024, the next Japanese general election need not take place until autumn 2025. Should the Japanese go to the polls as we write this article in early 2024, they will possibly reconfirm the LDP in power, against a backdrop of widespread abstentionism. According to the country's major media outlets, more than 41% of Japanese voters do not support any political party at all. For those who indicate a preference, the scandal-ridden majority party, the LDP, is still perceived as more trustworthy (30-37%) than other minority political organisations. The main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) lags 20 points behind, with a support rate of 9.9%, with other minor parties stuck between zero (the People's Democratic Party and the Collaborative Party – Minna de tsukuru tō, formerly known as the Party to Protect the People from NHK) and 5% (Ishin and Kōmeitō, the LDP's junior coalition partner) [*NHK Senkyo Web* 2024; *Hōdō Station TV Asahi* 2024]. In other words, forecasts about political fragmentation due to the rise of new parties in the last decade have not materialised [Krauss *et al.* 2017]. Instead, the current political situation seems to be that of a non-competitive democratic system with a single dominant party maintaining its edge over other possible competitors in the context of growing political disaffection and overt apathy [Scheiner 2007; Howe & Oh 2015; Kasai 2018]. Hence, the current backsliding of the LDP does not seem likely to lead to a pre-2009 situation and to a noticeable exodus of consensus on an opposition party able to exploit the emerging social and economic disparities in Japanese society [Chiavacci 2010].

If anything, the many failed attempts at rebuilding trust in his administration and legitimacy have undermined Kishida's legitimacy as the incumbent LDP leader and will possibly induce a leadership change in Autumn 2024, when the election of the LDP president is scheduled. As opposed to the late Abe, who enjoyed high approval rates and influence in his party and the governing coalition, PM Kishida has reportedly been the weakest link in the LDP internal balance of power. His inability to dissolve the Diet has been a testimony to his low approval rate and fractures within the majority camp [Shiota 2023]. Nonetheless, he was able to capitalise on his foreign policy successes (e.g. the Hiroshima G7) to make up for the growing popular disaffection. In the light of this, a partial reputation recovery and even a victorious snap election ahead of the LDP party leadership ballot in September 2024, though remote, cannot be completely ruled out [Shiota 2023].

In foreign and security policy, the year under review saw a growing alignment and interlocking of US-led multilaterals, with Japan playing a successful role as an aggregative power. This strategy also walked in the footsteps set by the Abe administrations, especially since Abe's comeback in 2012. Interestingly, the «Indo-Pacific» alignment of Europe and regional players was evident in 2023 in the economic security agenda, now qualified with the new «de-risking» buzzword that gained traction in 2023, especially following a speech in March by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. Whatever the EU's merits in introducing «de-risking», the slogan nonetheless resonated with the oft-referred «resilience», «geo-economics», «strategic autonomy/strategic indispensability», if not «de-coupling», all of which were symptomatic of the sorry geopolitical Zeitgeist further compounded by Russia's full-fledged offensive in Ukraine and the 2023 Israel-Palestine war, among a growing number of conflicts and crises.

In fact, there were nascent cooperative frameworks in the «G7 Plus» countries, for instance, to coordinate against economic coercion or, more clearly, in the sustainable infrastructure agenda to woo the so-called «Global South» a misnomer for a wide range of emerging economies and developing countries and one that kept bubbling up in security and strategic contexts, including the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue. In fact, Japan's attempt at walking the diplomatic tightrope in its response to the 7 October Hamas terrorist attacks and the Israeli government's ensuing punitive vendetta in Gaza aimed at cementing burgeoning strategic engagement in the Middle East, wooing Global South states, Muslim-majority swing states in particular, while *de facto* supporting the US stance. The fear was that China could enlarge its rostrum of partners, for instance through the BRICS forum, which underwent a considerable expansion in 2023.

The Japanese government's decision to follow the October 2022 US expansive China-wide embargo on advanced semiconductors, and on the technology, human capital and know-how necessary to produce them, compounded China's largely home-made economic woes. After all, the United States remained the world's single largest economic market – with a share of global GDP unchanged from 1980 or 1990. It also retained the world's ten most valuable companies, was poised to lead in the digital transformation and had recently turned into the world's largest oil and gas producer [Zakaria 2024]. US structural power in technological nodes and shared aims with Japan in the China balancing and de-risking agenda allowed substantial coordination in cooperative government financing initiatives aimed at denying China a sphere of influence while engaging in shared industrial policies, as in the analyses in reviews of previous years. These initiatives trailed the increasingly regional military role for the US-Japan alliance, within and beyond the first island chain [Bradford 2021; Bradford 2022].

These coordinated alignments, and China's domestic political imbroglios and economic woes, further facilitated the path towards tactical

US-China and Japan-China stabilisation. Space limitations have prevented us from analysing Japan's «new plan» for its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategic narrative (complete with 51 PowerPoint slides, but notably no actual policy document, to allow for diplomatic flexibility), its wooing of the Global South [Hosoya 2023; Takenaka 2023], its revised Development Cooperation Charter and the introduction of Official Security Assistance. Suffice it to say, however, that these were in line with the analysis in this and previous reviews. They were aimed at balancing, containing or competing with China by harnessing all tools of Japanese statecraft to that effect, possibly by preserving stable relations. The Japanese government, nonetheless, tried to recover its agency as an aggregative power that also successfully reconceptualised and renegotiated geographical boundaries, such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and to export it abroad [Tamaki 2024; Pugliese 2024]. In any case, the ongoing arms race – not just in East Asia, but across the Indo-Pacific – and the looming elections in 2024 in the US and much of the world promised that the contextual factors facing Japan's international relations remained in flux and full of incognita.

Nevertheless, as events unfold, security developments within and across the first island chain – such as those highlighted in Japan, the US-Japan alliance, Japan-Taiwan relations and among the ROK, the US and Japan – suggest that Japan is on the front line of the new geopolitics of East Asia, and is the place to watch to understand the direction of travel of US-China strategic rivalry.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS USED IN THIS ARTICLE

The fully anonymised text of these interviews is in the possession of Giulio Pugliese and can be obtained from him

EU official, interview, 9 March 2023

EU officials in charge of security, interview, 24 October 2022

European diplomat, interview, Da Nang, Vietnam, 16 November 2022

Foreign diplomats, interviews, 2022 & 2023

Former high-ranking Japanese policymaker, interview, 20 December 2023

High-ranking European diplomat, interview, South Korea, 7 November 2022

High-ranking French diplomat, interview, 27 January 2023

High-ranking Taiwanese government official, Taipei, 24 February 2023

Italian diplomat, interview, 30 January 2024

US defence practitioner, interview, track 1.5 dialogue, 7 November 2023

US Department of Defense officials, interviews, Washington DC, 6 February 2024

US State Department official responsible for the Asia-Pacific, Interview, 6 February 2024

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