



# Japan: Deciphering Prime Minister Ishiba's Strategic Vision Toward an Asian version of NATO?

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## ▶ Key Takeaways

- On October 1, Shigeru Ishiba was sworn in as Prime Minister of Japan. An expert in strategic and defense issues, his proposal to revise the security alliance with the United States and create an Asian version of NATO has sparked heated debate.
- Continuing the defense reforms initiated by Shinzo Abe and Fumio Kishida, Ishiba also aims to strengthen Japan's strategic autonomy by revising Article 9 of the Constitution, rebalancing roles within the Japan-US alliance, diversifying its strategic partners and adopting confidence-building measures with China.
- For the time being, the idea of an Asian NATO seems unrealistic; the regional security architecture in the Indo Pacific appears to be moving less toward a collective defense pact than a system of integrated deterrence, structured around alliances and security pacts. Japan and the Japan-US alliance play a central role in this.

## Introduction

On Tuesday, October 1, Shigeru Ishiba was sworn in as Prime Minister of Japan after being elected President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has a majority in the Diet. Appreciated by public opinion for his outspoken, honest personality and commitment to the rural world, he is not necessarily popular within his own party, whose traditional mechanisms he has criticized. It was only after four attempts that Ishiba (67), Abe's eternal rival, succeeded in imposing himself at the head of his party and the country in a period of crisis: the crisis of the LDP, disorganized after a series of financial scandals,<sup>1</sup> an economic crisis marked by persistent inflation, and a security crisis as Chinese and Russian military incursions multiplied in Japanese air and sea space.<sup>2</sup>

Having served twice as Minister of Defense, Ishiba describes himself as a “geek” or “*otaku*” when it comes to military and strategic affairs. In his administration, he has surrounded himself with experienced personalities: the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Takeshi Iwaya, and the Minister of Defense, Gen Nakatani, have already served as ministers of Defense. Akihisa Nagashima, former Minister of State for Defense and expert on relations with the United States, has been appointed Special Advisor to the Prime Minister. Finally, Akihiro Tsuchimichi, former Deputy Defense Minister for International Affairs, has been appointed Executive Secretary to the Prime Minister.

Ishiba's proposal to revise the security alliance with the United States (US) and create an Asian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), therefore, attracted attention and sparked lively debate.<sup>3</sup> While the new Prime Minister will be putting forward more consensual measures in the immediate future, with a view to the early elections on October 27,<sup>4</sup> his strategic vision deserves to be deciphered. It reflects the magnitude of developments in Japan and the Indo-Pacific region in terms of threat perception, the credibility of deterrence, and the need to rethink the regional security architecture.

## Ishiba's strategic vision for Japan and the Indo-Pacific region

In his essay published on September 25 by the Hudson Institute, the prime minister candidate Shigeru Ishiba proposed the creation of an Asian version of NATO, an idea that

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1. C. Pajon, “Le Japon sous tension. Tourmente interne et activisme international”, in T. de Montbrial and D. David Dir, *RAMSES 2025*, Dunod, September 2024, pp. 246-249.

2. J. Johnson, “Moscow and Beijing unlikely to stop testing Tokyo's limits”, *The Japan Times*, September 24, 2024, [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp).

3. “Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy”, *Commentary*, Hudson Institute, September 25, 2024, [www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org).

4. G. Ninivaggi, “Ishiba omits divisive proposals in first policy speech as PM”, *The Japan Times*, October 4, 2024, [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp).

provoked astonishment. Quickly rejected by the US administration as a “fantasy”,<sup>5</sup> the suggestion sparked endless discussion and speculation within Japan’s strategic community,<sup>6</sup> to the point of propelling the keyword NATO to the top trend on the Japanese-language X network.<sup>7</sup> In the face of controversy, Japan’s newly appointed heads of diplomacy and defense have expressed reservations about an Asian NATO, regarding it as an “idea for the future” to be considered carefully in the medium to long term.<sup>8</sup>

In his essay, Ishiba presents his strategic vision through three key ideas:

- ▀ Noting the failure of the United Nations (UN) collective security architecture (paralysis of the Security Council, non-use or misuse of Article 51 of the Charter) and drawing a parallel between Ukraine, attacked by Russia, and Taiwan, threatened by China, he argues that a mutual defense treaty similar to that of NATO, including its nuclear sharing dimension, is the best option for effectively deterring Beijing.
- ▀ This multilateral mechanism could be organized around the core of the Japan-US alliance through vertical and horizontal integration with Japan’s other partners and “quasi-allies”, including South Korea, Canada, Australia, the Philippines, India, France, and the United Kingdom (UK). A collective defense mechanism should coexist with an inclusive collective security system involving confidence-building measures (CBMs) aimed at reducing threats.
- ▀ In Ishiba’s view, this implies a thorough rebalancing of the Japan-US security alliance along the lines of the partnership between Washington and London. This would involve renegotiating the terms of the security treaty to address its asymmetrical aspects, particularly regarding the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Ultimately, this rebalancing of roles would be enabled by a complete “normalization”<sup>9</sup> of Japan’s defense posture, including a revision of Article 9 of the Constitution, which still prohibits Japan from maintaining regular armed forces.

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5. K. Moriyasu, “Asian NATO Proposal by Japan’s Ishiba Seen as ‘Fantasy’ in U.S.”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 17, 2024, [www.asia.nikkei.com](http://www.asia.nikkei.com).

6. See the tweeter feeds (in Japanese) of Japan’s leading academics on diplomacy, security and defense issues, all three professors at Keio University: Ken Jimbo, September 28: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com) and September 29: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com); Yuichi Hosoya, September 29: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com); Michito Tsuruoka, September 28: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com), and the exchanges between Michito Tsuruoka and Yuichi Hosoya, September 29: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com).

7. Tweet from Yuichi Hosoya, September 29: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com).

8. K. Benzo, “Japan’s New Top Diplomat Calls ‘Asian NATO’ an Idea for the Future”, *The Japan Times*, October 3, 2024, [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp).

9. A. L. Oros, *Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity, and the Evolution of Security Practice*, Studies in Asian Security, Stanford University Press, April 2008.

## Elements of continuity and rupture with the legacy of Abe and Kishida

Ishiba's thinking and proposals, which he also develops in a recent book,<sup>10</sup> are largely in line with the military normalization reforms introduced by Shinzo Abe in 2015, enabling Japan to participate in collective self-defense under certain strictly defined conditions.<sup>11</sup> They also pursue Kishida's policy of doubling the defense budget (to reach 2% of GDP by 2027, or more than 76 billion euros) and equipping the country with an unprecedented counter-attack capability.<sup>12</sup>

Ishiba now wants to focus on Japan's defense readiness, particularly in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. In August, he visited Taiwan and met with President Lai Ching-te to discuss the situation in the Taiwan Strait and bilateral relations. Ishiba also

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advocates greater firmness in the face of increasing Chinese and Russian incursions, proposing to adapt the rules of engagement of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), which have until now acted mainly as a law enforcement agency on Japanese territory.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, Ishiba aims to pursue a policy of diversifying Japan's security partnerships, with the aim of anchoring the United States in Asia on a long-term basis by

integrating the alliance into a network of partners while maintaining a certain degree of autonomy.<sup>14</sup> The set of bilateral agreements (Japan's security treaties with South Korea, Australia, India, and the Philippines), minilateral frameworks (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or "QUAD", between Washington, Tokyo, Delhi and Canberra) and trilaterals (Japan-US-South Korea/Japan-US-Australia/Japan-US-Philippines) are in many ways reminiscent of the beginnings of a defense community similar to NATO.<sup>15</sup>

In several respects, however, the proposals of the new Prime Minister differ from the legacy of Abe and Kishida.

Unlike Abe, who largely imposed his 2015 defense reforms on the Diet, Ishiba wishes to anchor strategic normalization in democratic practices.<sup>16</sup> This would include the adoption of a Basic Law on National Security and a revision of Article 9 of the Constitution

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10. Shigeru Ishiba, *Hoshuseijika wagaseisaku wagatenmei* [Conservative Politician: My Policies, My Destiny], Kodansha, August 2024.

11. C. Hughes, "Japan's Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense: Essential Continuity or Radical Shift?", *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Winter 2017, pp. 93-126.

12. C. Pajon, "Nouvelle stratégie de sécurité et de défense au Japon. Comment dit-on Zeitenwende en japonais?", *Lettre du Centre Asie*, Ifri, December 19, 2024, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

13. S. Smith, "The LDP Leadership Race: Ishiba Shigeru Wins", *Asia Unbound*, CFR, September 27, 2024, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

14. C. Pajon, "The Diversification of Japanese Security Partnerships: Legitimate and Effective Cooperation?", *Les Champs de Mars*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2019, pp. 77-101, [www.shs.cairn.info](http://www.shs.cairn.info).

15. D. Santoro and B. Glosserman, "A Heavy Lift: Making Collective Deterrence and Defense Work in the Indo-Pacific", *Issues and Insights*, Vol. 24, WP2, Pacific Forum, April 2024, [www.pacforum.org](http://www.pacforum.org).

16. T. Harris, "The Idealist: Ishiba Shigeru and the Deep Roots of Conflict in Japanese Politics", *Observing Japan*, September 24, 2024, [www.observingjapan.substack.com](http://www.observingjapan.substack.com).

rather than a political reinterpretation of the article, which has been practiced so far. This implies an effort to raise public awareness, as any constitutional revision must be endorsed by a popular referendum. As it happens, Japanese public opinion is increasingly in favor of this.<sup>17</sup> However, the conditions for implementing such a revision remain drastic (a qualified majority in the Diet and popular referendum), which explains why the Basic Law has never been amended since 1947.

A supporter of the alliance with the United States, like Abe, Ishiba nevertheless regularly denounces its fundamental asymmetry. Washington commits to protect Tokyo in the event of an attack (but not vice versa). In return, Japan hosts American soldiers on its territory (still close to 50,000 at present) and contributes to the operating costs of the bases. For Ishiba, this is a cession of a part of Japan's independence and sovereignty that needs to be reassessed.<sup>18</sup> His sensitivity to local issues has prompted him to call for joint management of US military bases on Japanese soil and for a revision of the SOFA, which he considers too favorable to the American side. Crimes,<sup>19</sup> accidents and pollution around bases in Okinawa<sup>20</sup> regularly provoke controversy and could severely limit the willingness to deepen defense cooperation.<sup>21</sup> According to Ishiba, a renegotiation of the SOFA could also allow for the possible deployment of an SDF contingent on US soil for training purposes, particularly in Guam, where the SDF has already tested its amphibious capabilities on several occasions.<sup>22</sup> These proposals have raised fears of serious tensions within the alliance.<sup>23</sup> Ishiba himself made it clear that these issues would not be discussed with Washington until the arrival of the new administration in January 2025.<sup>24</sup>

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According to Ishiba, another condition for strengthening Japan's strategic autonomy is not only to maintain the necessary functional cooperation with China but also

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17. Two recent polls point in this direction: "Poll: 63% Support Constitutional Revision Amid Japan's Changing Security Environment; 93% Cite National Security Risk from China", *Yomiuri Shimbun*, May 3, 2024, [www.japannews.yomiuri.co.jp](http://www.japannews.yomiuri.co.jp) and "Survey: 53% in favor of revising Constitution, 39% against", May 6, 2024, [www.asahi.com](http://www.asahi.com).

18. K. Morioka and N. Matsuyama, "Ishiba Continues on Quest to Revise Japan-U.S. Security Treaty", *The Asahi Shimbun*, September 30, 2024, [www.asahi.com](http://www.asahi.com).

19. T. Ono and S. Tanahashi, "Okinawa Insists on Revisions of SOFA after Rash of U.S. Sex Crimes", *The Asahi Shimbun*, July 11, 2024, [www.asahi.com](http://www.asahi.com).

20. C. Pajon, "Understanding the Issue of U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa", *Asie.Visions*, No. 29, Ifri, June 2010, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

21. J. Hornung, "Not Always Easy: Lessons Learned on Introducing New Defense Capabilities in Japan", *Research Report*, RAND Corporation, September 24, 2024, [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

22. Amphibious Force 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet Public Affairs, "U.S.-Japan Self-Defense Forces to Conduct Combined Amphibious Operations Off Guam, Tinian", November 2, 2016, [www.pacom.mil](http://www.pacom.mil).

23. "Security Policy: Ishiba's Remarks Could Disrupt the Japan-U.S. Alliance", *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 1, 2024, [www.japannews.yomiuri.co.jp](http://www.japannews.yomiuri.co.jp).

24. Japan-U.S. Summit Telephone Talk, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, October 2, 2024, [www.mofa.go.jp](http://www.mofa.go.jp).

to work on confidence-building.<sup>25</sup> This requires a conciliatory approach to historical issues – unlike Shinzo Abe, Ishiba will not be visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine – which will also have the virtue of strengthening political relations with South Korea and facilitating security cooperation. Ishiba is also keen to promote regional cooperation in the field of natural disaster management, including the creation of a Japanese ministry specifically dedicated to this mission.

## The creation of an Asian NATO: an unrealistic proposal

The proposal for an Asian version of NATO has provoked controversy, with many pointing to its unrealistic nature. The diversity of actors and geographical elongations in Asia indeed make it difficult to establish a common perception of threats.<sup>26</sup> The use of force to protect Taiwan is not the subject of consensus among the US close allies in Asia, even if it can be assumed that they will support their American partner for political reasons.<sup>27</sup> There is also a lack of appetite for this type of formal mechanism among many Asian countries, starting with India<sup>28</sup> and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the idea of “nuclear sharing”, involving the deployment of US nuclear weapons in the region, seems premature and ineffective and would entail an exorbitant political cost.

In Japan, such an initiative would require a revision of the three non-nuclear principles, which stipulate that the country will not possess, produce or allow the entry of nuclear weapons into its territory.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, public opinion remains strongly opposed to the introduction and stationing of nuclear weapons on Japanese soil.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the archipelago does not have sufficient strategic depth to ensure that hosting nuclear weapons would have a significant impact on deterrence.<sup>32</sup>

In calling for the creation of an Asian NATO, Ishiba seemed to confuse the notions of collective defense and collective security, as well as the principle of self-defense.<sup>33</sup> His

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25. “The Future of East Asian Security”, Speech by H. E. Mr. Shigeru Ishiba, Minister of Defense at the 7th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, May 31, 2008, [www.mod.go.jp](http://www.mod.go.jp).

26. Y. Hosoya, “Kennanga hiteishita [AsiabanNATO] no jiseikannosei” [The feasibility of an ‘Asian NATO’ dismissed by Kennan], *Comemo*, Nikkei, September 29, 2024, [www.comemo.nikkei.com](http://www.comemo.nikkei.com).

27. R. Hanada, “Ishiba’s Asian NATO: A Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow”, *The Strategist*, ASPI, October 2, 2024, [www.aspistrategist.org.au](http://www.aspistrategist.org.au).

28. “India Rejects Japan’s Call for ‘Asian Nato’, Despite Growing Tensions with China”, *South China Morning Post*, October 2, 2024, [www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com).

29. B. Ho, “Commentary: No One Wants an Asian NATO, Except Japan’s New PM Ishiba”, *South China Morning Post*, October 3, 2024, [www.channelnewsasia.com](http://www.channelnewsasia.com); “No to Asia’s NATO”, *The Jakarta Post*, October 5, 2024, [www.thejakartapost.com](http://www.thejakartapost.com).

30. A. Nobumasa, “Kishida’s Realism Diplomacy: Nuclear Disarmament”, *Report*, Japan Chair, CSIS, June 8, 2023, [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org).

31. 57% of respondents to a recent poll oppose the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Japan. See T. Goroku, T. Iida, *et al.*, “UTokyo ROLES Survey SAFER (Security, Alliance, and Foreign Engagement Research project)”, October 2024, [www.roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp](http://www.roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp).

32. D. Kawai, “Japan’s New Security: Balancing Tradition with Reality”, *Commentary*, RUSI, October 4, 2024, [www.rusi.org](http://www.rusi.org).

33. Tweets by Ken Jimbo, Professor at Keio University, September 28, 2024, [www.x.com](http://www.x.com).

proposal may also seem to contradict his rather open stance on dialogue and cooperation with China at a time when Beijing regularly denounces moves to create an Asian NATO or extend the Atlantic alliance into Asia.

## Toward an integrated deterrent system in Asia?

Considering these latest developments, the regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific seems to be moving less toward a collective defense pact than a system of integrated deterrence, structured in a “latticework”<sup>34</sup> around alliances and security pacts that are not necessarily based on mutual defense commitments.<sup>35</sup>

The concept of *integrated deterrence* is central to the 2022 US National Defense Strategy (NDS),<sup>36</sup> and emphasizes enhanced cooperation with US allies and partners at strategic, institutional and tactical levels.<sup>37</sup>

Japan plays a leading role in this organic integration of affinity countries.<sup>38</sup> As early as 2012, Prime Minister Abe pioneered the vision of a “democratic security diamond,”<sup>39</sup> bringing together Japan, the United States, India and Australia, anticipating the establishment of the QUAD in 2007 and playing a key role in its revival in 2017.

At the same time, integration within the Japan-US alliance has accelerated in recent years, thanks to the easing of legal and political norms in Japan. Tokyo has been able to adopt strategic documents (National Security Strategies 2012 and 2022) and set up security and defense governance (the National Security Secretariat in 2013, Permanent Joint Headquarters for the Self-Defense Forces from 2025) similar to that of its ally to facilitate bilateral coordination.<sup>40</sup> Integration also continues in the defense industry, from the joint development of equipment to the establishment of more resilient value chains.<sup>41</sup> The

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34. W. Gallo, “Under Biden, US Reimagines Asian Alliances as ‘Lattice’ Fence”, *Voice of America*, April 16, 2024, [www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com).

35. M. Siow, “As Japan’s ‘Asian Nato’ Push to Counter China Hits a Brick Wall, Will a Rebrand Revive It?”, *The South China Morning Post*, October 6, 2024, [www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com).

36. US Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, October 2022, [www.media.defense.gov](http://www.media.defense.gov).

37. S. L. Pettyjohn and B. Wasser, “No I in Team, Integrated Deterrence with Allies and Partners”, CNAS, December 2022, [www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org).

38. N. Katagiri, “Japanese Concepts of Deterrence”, in F. Osinga and T. Sweijjs (eds.), *Deterrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Insights from Theory and Practice*, Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020, Asser Press, Springer, 2021, pp. 202-213.

39. S. Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond”, *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, [www.project-syndicate.org](http://www.project-syndicate.org).

40. Z. Cooper and E. Sayers, “Japan Shifts to War Footing”, *War on the Rocks*, January 12, 2023, [www.warontherocks.com](http://www.warontherocks.com).

41. J. Hornung and Z. Cooper, “Shifting the U.S.-Japan Alliance from Coordination to Integration”, *War on The Rocks*, August 2, 2024, [www.warontherocks.com](http://www.warontherocks.com).

announced doubling of the defense budget, as well as the controlled use of collective self-defense and counter-offensive capabilities, strengthened Japan's capabilities and supported the projection of American power in Asia.

This integration of the US-Japan alliance is accompanied by increased cooperation between Japan and several key partners in the region. Recent examples include a landmark trilateral declaration with South Korea and the USA, reciprocal access agreements signed with Australia and under negotiation with the Philippines,<sup>42</sup> and an expansion of multilateral exercises, including a recent training exercise with the US, Australian, New Zealand and Philippine navies in the South China Sea.<sup>43</sup> These rapprochements pave the way for greater strategic intimacy and an embryonic defense community in the region.

## Conclusion

By proposing to reform the Japan-US alliance and build an Asian NATO, Ishiba has stimulated debate on the reorganization of regional security in the Indo-Pacific. This suggestion sends a double message to Beijing: the prospect of a coalition against a more assertive China, but also that of Japan reinforcing its strategic autonomy *vis-à-vis* the US.

As a first step, Ishiba is expected to tackle the challenges of implementing the new defense posture, as defined in the December 2022 strategic documents. These include the serious recruitment crisis facing the SDF and the complex issue of funding to double the defense budget.

The Prime Minister's political room for maneuver will soon be defined by two major events: first, the general elections on October 27, which will reveal the democratic basis of his mandate and his ability to remain in power;<sup>44</sup> second, the presidential election in the United States, the outcome of which will determine the regional geostrategic context and Japan's future role in this balance.

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42. A. P. Liff, "Japan: America's Indispensable Ally", *Commentary*, Brookings, September 16, 2024, [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu).

43. "Japan, U.S. Hold Joint Drill with Philippines, Others in South China Sea", *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 28, 2024, [www.asia.nikkei.com](http://www.asia.nikkei.com).

44. T. Harris, "New Japan PM Ishiba Needs Public Support to Fend Off Abe Loyalists", *Nikkei Asian Review*, October 1, 2024, [www.asia.nikkei.com](http://www.asia.nikkei.com).



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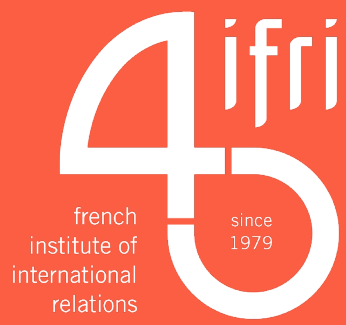
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