

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Japan's New National
Security Strategy:
Reactions from
Domestic Constituencies*

REPORT

Speaker :

Shamshad Ahmad Khan

18 October 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker: Dr. Shamshad Ahmad Khan, Assistant Professor, International Relations, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani, Dubai; and, Visiting Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Prof. Srabani Roy Choudhury, Professor, Japanese Studies, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar examined Japan’s National Security Strategy (NSS) released by Kishida administration in December 2022 and domestic reactions to it, drawing inferences from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to argue that large-scale conflict in the Asia-Pacific, especially over Taiwan, cannot be ruled out, which poses significant implications for Japan’s security.
- The speaker, Dr. Shamshad Ahmad Khan, highlighted the major shifts introduced by the NSS: adoption of a counter-strike policy, a commitment to raise defence spending to two percent of GDP, and the development of a Self-Defence Force capable of taking primary responsibility for national defence by 2027.
- Situating the NSS in a longer historical pattern of “threat framing” seen during the Korean War, the speaker, noted its similarities with the 1990 Gulf War and the North Korean nuclear crisis, arguing that Ukraine now serves a similar role. He noted that some commentators in Japan have speculated about a Taiwan contingency by 2026.
- Domestic responses to the NSS remain divided: researchers in government-linked institutions broadly welcome the NSS and higher defence outlays, while opposition from academia, peace groups and war veterans emphasise risks to social security spending and warn against exaggerating the China threat.

- Among critics, the Asia Future Research Group offers detailed alternatives: prioritising deterrence by denial over counter-strike, encouraging reconciliation across the Taiwan Strait, acknowledging and pursuing dialogue over the Senkaku Island issue and reopening channels with North Korea including a liaison office, normalisation talks, and calibrated sanctions relief.
- On implementation the speaker highlighted several challenges including strong public resistance to defence-related tax hikes (around 80% opposing), coalition reservations and low approval ratings for the Kishida government. The tax plan has been deferred to 2025; in the interim, export-surplus resources are being used to advance limited defence arrangements.
- In her concluding remarks, the Chair, Prof. Srabani Roy Choudhury observed that implementing the NSS will be difficult given Prime Minister Kishida's declining domestic standing amid unpopular tax hike proposals; she noted that any economic stimulus strategy is likely to face public scepticism in light of persistent inflation.

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The seminar explored Japan's post-Ukraine strategic doctrine and domestic responses to the Kishida administration's 2022 strategic documents. The speaker noted that Japanese strategic planners view the Ukraine war as a cautionary precedent for East Asia, particularly with respect to Taiwan and that this interpretation has informed the National Security Strategy (NSS). The key takeaway he identified was Japan's counter-strike policy. Japan had revised its earlier position on striking enemy bases, lifted the 1% cap and committed to defence spending of 2% of GDP. The country also aims to build a force capable of taking primary responsibility for national defence by 2027.

Explaining the premise of the strategy, the speaker situated it within a familiar arc of external-threat framing seen at earlier junctures (the Korean War, the 1990 Gulf War and the North Korean nuclear crisis) which historically expanded the role of Japan's defence forces. While the NSS does not name an adversary, Japanese analysts have speculated about the possibility of Chinese military action against Taiwan by 2026; the strategy, he argued, is designed to prepare for such contingencies. In his view, Japan intends to equip the Self-Defence Forces to detect, disrupt and defeat threats while securing allied support, with the 2027 timeline underscored.

On domestic reactions, the speaker observed that researchers and experts in government-linked institutions broadly welcome the NSS and support increased defence spendings. Opposition has however, emerged from academia, peace groups and war veterans. He highlighted three strands of critique in particular. First, Okinawa war veterans argue that the China threat is being amplified in ways reflective of the pre-war period. Second, Haiwa Kōsō Teigen Kaigi, a council on peace initiative contends that increased defence spending will come at the expense of social security, a concern sharpened by the post-COVID inflationary environment and pressures on basic livelihoods. Third, the Asia Future Research Group questions applying the “Ukraine lesson” to Asia and advocates deterrence by denial rather than counter-strike; it urges reconciliation rather than militarisation over Taiwan; it recommends acknowledging the existence of a dispute and entering dialogue on the Senkaku islands; and proposes opening a liaison office, resuming normalisation talks and easing some sanctions on North Korea.

On implementation, the speaker underlined three major challenges. First, public opposition to funding defence through tax hikes is strong, around 80% oppose such measures, prompting the government to push the tax plan to 2025; this delay is widely read as a post-election calculation. Second, political dynamics including Komeito’s stance and expert reservations complicate sequencing. Third, low approval ratings for the Kishida government increase leadership risk, thus translating the NSS into full policy outcomes will be difficult. In the interim, the speaker noted, Japan’s export surplus is being used to underpin limited defence understandings, particularly with the United States.

The chair flagged two questions from the presentation for clarification: whether the groups opposing the NSS had put forward concrete alternatives, and how the opposition parties were positioning themselves. In response, the speaker stated that most peace and veterans’ groups have not offered detailed alternatives beyond warning that social sectors would be crowded out; the Asia Future Research Group was identified as the exception with a structured counter-proposal. On party politics, he noted that most opposition parties broadly support the overall direction of the NSS; reservations exist (for example, cautioning that over-reach could aggravate neighbours), but are not uniformly severe.

Selected questions from the discussion were integrated into the proceedings. On Komeito’s resistance to tax hikes and defence expansion, the speaker clarified that this does not indicate a pro-China position; rather, it reflects the party’s pacifist base among lay Buddhists and its need to maintain a distinct political identity. On whether counter-strike abilities imply abandoning pacifism, he recalled that similar debates on counter and pre-emptive strike date back to 2006–07 when North Korean missiles overflow Japan; at that time, peace groups blocked change, whereas now, he said, support for counter-strike exceeds 60%, reflecting a shift in public mood. On soft power, he remarked that Japan’s diplomatic image is in flux

amid militarisation, making its “soft power” harder to read. Nuclearisation, he assessed, remains unlikely: external threats have driven armament, but domestic pacifist norms remain a moral constraint. Finally, drawing on comments from the floor, he acknowledged that while opinion toward China is at a historic low, dense economic interdependence and people-to-people ties persist; as the chair observed, the boundary between economic and political diplomacy is increasingly blurred.

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