JAPAN / ANALYSIS

Beyond the hub-and-spoke: Japan quietly emerges as a secondary connector

Commander of the Ground Self-Defense Force's Amphibious Rapid Deployment, Maj. Gen. Toshikatsu Musha, and commander of the Maritime Self-Defense Force's Amphibious and Mine Warfare Force, Rear Adm. Ikeuchi Izuru, attend the opening ceremony of the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan joint military exercises, in Quezon City, Metro Manila, on April 20. | REUTERS

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For decades, the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific has resembled a wheel: the United States as the hub, with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines as its primary spokes.

That model is not disappearing, but it is undergoing a quiet upgrade. Tokyo is gradually positioning itself as a secondary connector — a strategic hub for middle-power security diplomacy that reinforces the U.S.-led order while diversifying Japan's own security partnerships.

Two major shifts in Tokyo's recent trajectory are said to be behind this evolution.

First, Japan is increasingly serious about becoming a military balancer in its own right, bolstering its own capabilities while helping others do the same through a new military aid program and recently relaxed arms export controls.

Second, there has been a significant change in the quality of Japan's international partnerships.

From symbolism to tangible impact

Whether Tokyo is modernizing the U.S. alliance or deepening ties with Australia, Canada and European powers, the focus has shifted from symbolic gestures to "tangible impact," said Tom Corben, a research fellow at the University of Sydney's United States Studies Centre.

At the same time, Tokyo is knitting these relationships together by playing a leading role in a range of issue-specific "minilateral" security groupings.

These include the Australia-Japan-U.S. framework focused on deterring rivals, the sixth-generation fighter program with Britain and Italy, the Japan-South Korea-U.S. trilateral relationship and "the Quad" with India, Australia, Japan and the United States.

"While I wouldn't say that Japan is necessarily the outright leader in any of those formats, I think it is playing a more influential role in progressing those relationships than meets the eye," Corben said.

Reinforcing — not replacing — the U.S. alliance

Tokyo's goal, however, is not to supplant or move away from its relationship with Washington or the U.S.-centered security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, but rather to reinforce it.

"By using the U.S.-Japan alliance as a central anchor, Japan is working to connect and network other traditional partners," said Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England. He describes Tokyo's approach as "bilateralism-plus."

"Everything that Japan is fostering — whether trilaterally, quadrilaterally or minilaterally — is designed as a 'plus' relationship to plug into, complement and buttress its alliance with Washington and the U.S. presence in the region," Hughes said.

Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles (second from right) and Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi (right) speak during a press conference in Melbourne on April 18. | AFP-JIJI

This approach aligns with Japan's security strategies, which envision three layers: national defense capabilities, the U.S.-Japan alliance and cooperation with "like-minded partners."

A clear example is Japan's effort to deepen cooperation with NATO partners across multiple areas.

These initiatives reflect Tokyo's ambition to place itself at the center of middle-power diplomacy in Asia by extending security cooperation into the Indo-Pacific, said Sebastian Maslow, an associate professor at the University of Tokyo.

This boosted cooperation also allows Tokyo to ease domestic and international resistance to its more proactive security posture, he added.

External drivers

Tokyo's turn to multilateralism is the product of a decadelong recalibration launched by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. His vision of "proactive pacifism" and a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" laid the groundwork for today's policy landscape.

That shift has since been accelerated by mounting external pressures and evolving threat perceptions. China's expanding military capabilities and increasingly assertive posture remain central concerns.

Compounding these challenges are Russia's invasion of Ukraine and deepening military ties between Moscow and Pyongyang. Together, they have pushed Japanese leaders to call for closer security cooperation to deter unilateral changes to the status quo by force, including in relation to Taiwan.

Then there's the United States.

There have been growing expectations from successive U.S. governments – but most loudly from the administration of President Donald Trump – that capable allies like Japan should do more for their own security and increase their contributions to collective defense.

"Tokyo still sees Washington as the indispensable balancing power in Asia, but it also understands the relative decline in American military dominance and no longer sees U.S. power alone as sufficient to counterbalance China," Corben said.

Japan's emergence as a secondary connector reflects this reality, as Tokyo doubles down on efforts to keep Washington engaged in the region, step in where possible to supplement the U.S. presence and take on a greater role in linking together American allies.

By diversifying its partnerships, Tokyo is hedging against overreliance on the United States while building a more resilient security network.

This also means that in case of a crisis, Japan could seek support from countries besides the U.S.

"While this might not be direct and joint military action, it could result in intelligence-sharing, material support and other nonlethal forms of cooperation," said James Schoff, an expert on the U.S.-Japan alliance at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA.

Growing military exchanges

Operational changes are also underway.

Security legislation passed in 2015 expanded Japan's ability to provide logistical support and exercise collective self-defense under limited conditions. The Self-Defense Forces (SDF) have since increased participation in multinational exercises.

This has resulted in Japanese forces now being more actively involved in multinational regional activities and exercises, a development that has been facilitated by the signing of visiting-forces agreements with countries such as Britain, Australia and the Philippines.

Also, with last year's launch of the Japan Joint Operations Command (JJOC), the SDF is now better positioned to coordinate these activities.

A good example of Tokyo's newfound role can be seen in its deepened security coordination with Canada, which has designated Japan one of its "priority partners" in the region.

The head of the Canadian military's Joint Operations Command, Lt. Gen. J.M.S. Boivin, during an interview in Tokyo on Friday | GABRIEL DOMINGUEZ

Speaking to The Japan Times, the head of Canada's Joint Operations Command, Lt. Gen. J.M.S. Boivin, said that his country's growing military activities in the region, including multilateral exercises across several arenas, have made such coordination necessary.

The commander praised the JJOC for a "tremendous job" in not only integrating Japanese forces across multiple domains, but also facilitating collaboration with partners.

The JJOC provides Canada with "a single point of entry … with which to coordinate and synchronize our operations," he said.

Boivin, who recently visited Tokyo to meet his Japanese counterpart, Tateki Tawara, said personal engagement is vital to sustaining military ties. His talks with Tawara — who took up his post last month — were aimed at "setting the conditions" for continued collaboration and boosting interoperability.

A diplomatic hub, not yet a military one

That said, Japan's operational and tactical coordination with countries other than the U.S. is in its infancy, relying on the U.S.-Japan framework as command systems, communications and planning processes remain rooted in the alliance.

"Recent reforms have aimed to improve flexibility, but they do not fundamentally reorient Japan toward multilateral command," Misato Matsuoka, an associate professor at Teikyo University, said, warning of potential bottlenecks in complex coalition scenarios.

Boivin said Canada's growing security partnership with Tokyo is not intended to rival or replace Japan's alliance with the U.S. Instead, he said, "we're coming in wanting to be complementary."

While acknowledging there may be limits to integration, Boivin suggested these would be worked out through continued cooperation. "We're going to discover them together," he said.

Japan is still limited constitutionally and politically in terms of collective self-defense and the use of force.

"There are some signs that Japan is becoming a diplomatic hub in security policy-related areas — both in terms of traditional and economic security — but I am not convinced yet that it wants to be or is able at the moment to be a military coordination hub in the region," Schoff said.

This means that even though Tokyo has become more proactive, its multilateral actions remain largely defined by both external pressures and the constraints of its alliance with the U.S.

The Indo-Pacific's security wheel is not being reinvented. But Japan is quietly turning itself into a second set of spokes — strong enough to share the load, yet careful not to steer.

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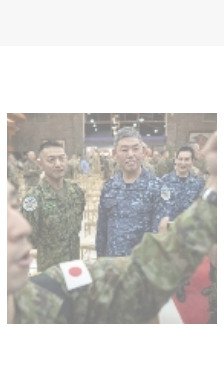

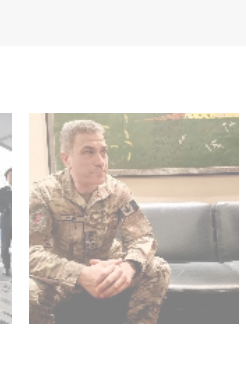

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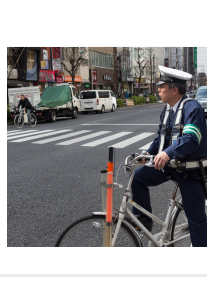

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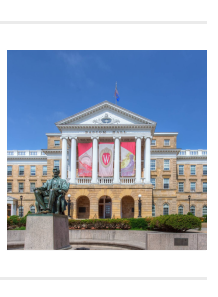

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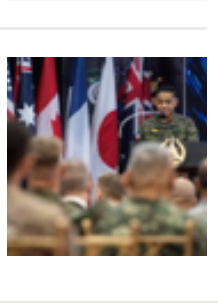

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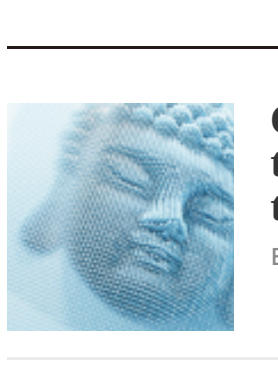

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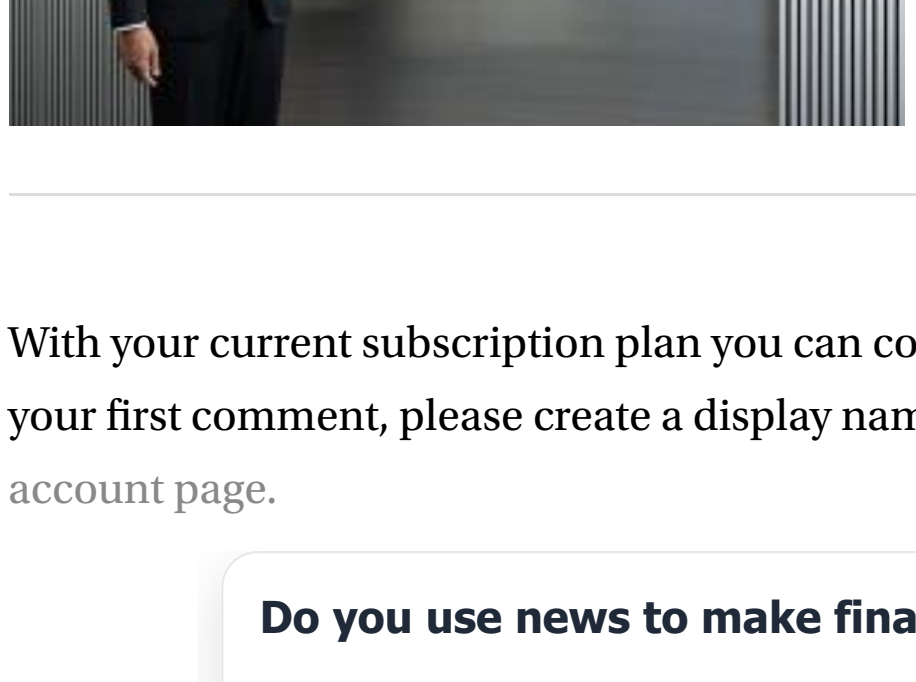

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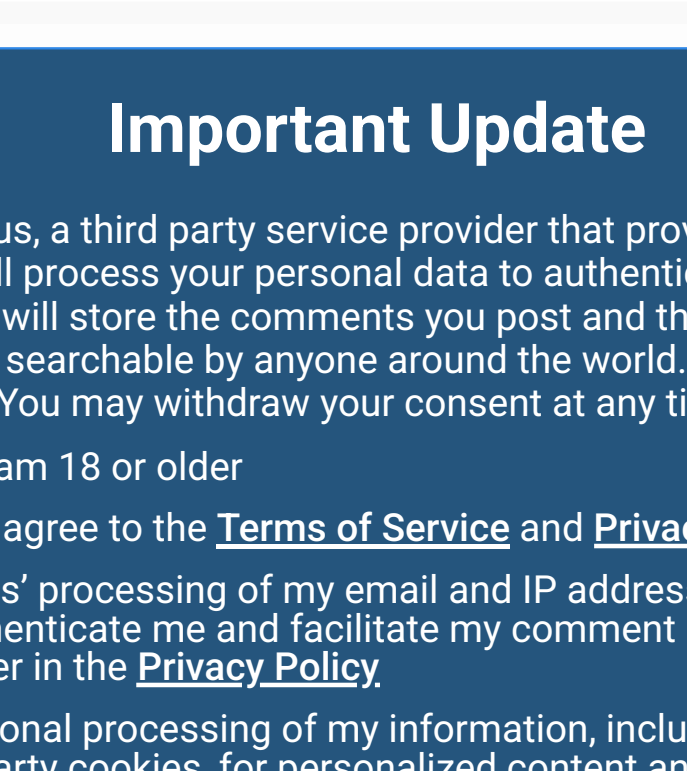

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