

Japan and the Hardening of U.S. Strategic Initiatives in the Indo-Pacific

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Shinzo Abe has left a strong diplomatic legacy in Japan. The resignation of his successor after one year in office and the arrival of Fumio Kishida, a consensus builder, raise fears that the country has weakened, while it must show clear-sighted leadership in the face of U.S. strategies to counter China. After Joe Biden renewed the commitment to the QUAD format, Tokyo must adapt to the creation of a resolutely offensive AUKUS partnership.

Last September, the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga as head of government has reignited factional struggles within the LDP. This ended with the appointment of Fumio Kishida, a Prime Minister with a lacklustre image, which caused the LDP's popularity rating to fall in the October legislative elections. Now the government majority must get into fighting order to face the upper house elections in July 2022. **Confronted with the bellicose nationalism of Xi Jinping's China and the intransigence of the Biden administration's Chinese policy, the archipelago needs more than ever a stable and recognized leadership both internally and diplomatically.**

Having left office because of his inability to deal with a strong wave of coronavirus epidemics in the archipelago at the time of the Olympic Games, Yoshihide Suga was considered a pale successor to Shinzo Abe. During his eight years in office – an exceptional length of time for a Japanese prime minister – Abe had renewed the international image of the archipelago by successfully sharing his vision of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific with many partners, including his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi.

Yoshihide Suga has followed the ambitious line of a grand strategy for Japan elaborated by Shinzo Abe around the concept of the Indo-Pacific (Free and Open Indo-Pacific, FOIP). His first trip abroad in October 2020 was to Vietnam and Indonesia, countries that are relays of this Japanese approach where ASEAN countries occupy a central place. That same month, he organized in

Tokyo the second ministerial meeting of QUAD, a forum for dialogue on security created in 2007 and bringing together, in addition to Japan, three other major powers which have adopted the Indo-Pacific concept: the United States, India and Australia. Japan's insistence on strengthening the QUAD has resonated with President Biden, who wants to make it a more active mechanism within the framework of an expanded Indo-Pacific policy to address new security issues that could attract more partners (the production of Covid-19 vaccines, climate change, or the independence of strategic supply chains).

In terms of national security, the Suga government has surprised many with its incisive analysis of Chinese coercive strategies in the regional environment of the archipelago and its explicit consideration of the Taiwan issue. The White Paper 2021 on Japan's Defense, published in July, stresses that stability in the Taiwan Strait is an element closely tied to Tokyo's security. The strengthening Chinese demonstrations of force around Taiwan, observed since the re-election of President Tsai Ing-wei in 2020, including repeated incursions into the island's airspace, worry Japan. Taiwan is located about a hundred kilometers from the Senkaku islands that are administered by Tokyo but aggressively claimed by Beijing – whose fishing fleets or coast guard units do not hesitate to enter Japanese territorial waters. Japanese political-military circles have repeatedly denounced the ambiguity of China's Maritime Police Law, enacted in early 2021, authorizing its coast guard to use military power to defend Beijing's “maritime rights.” **As a victim**

of the same harassment techniques used by China with regard to Taiwan, Japan believes that it would be directly involved in the event of a crisis around the Strait and that it must be prepared. In addition to its geographical proximity, its alliance with the United States, whose forces and air assets permanently deployed in Japan are located in the Okinawa archipelago, not far from the Taiwan Strait, can only lead to action by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF). The first summit meeting between the U.S. president and the Japanese prime minister in April 2021 had already emphasized their shared concern for “peace and stability” around the Strait. In addition, the Suga government has striven to internationalize the Taiwan situation, to the growing irritation of China. For instance, Tokyo succeeded in adding the “importance of the stability of the Taiwan Strait” in the communiqué issued at the end of the G7 meeting in Scotland in June 2021.

The 2021 edition of the Japanese White Paper also elaborates on **three other major issues at the heart of the archipelago’s diplomatic-military thinking: strategic competition between the United States and China,** the expansion of Tokyo’s defense partnerships and the need to strengthen the country’s R&D capabilities in advanced technologies. **Finding its place between the United States and China has always been a delicate exercise for Japan, which has long believed that it could manage its trade and economic relations with Beijing and its security alliance with Washington. This will hardly be possible with the Biden administration. The latter is not willing to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership,** which is of interest to China and which has already been signed by all of ASEAN countries, Australia, and Japan. But it also expects Tokyo to put its resources at the service of QUAD development projects. Similarly, Washington intends to rely on Tokyo’s expertise in **the high-tech sector to counter Chinese advances in telecommunications and 5G.**

On the military side, questions remain about Japan’s ability to assume the regional responsibilities it aspires to because of capability and constitutional limitations on its military. For all that, the maritime JSDF is becoming increasingly active and has multiplied its training exercises with partners other than the United States. Since 2015, the QUAD format has provided them with opportunities for regular exercises at sea with the U.S., Australian, and Indian navies through Exercise Malabar. However, the supply of nuclear-powered submarines by the United States to Australia within the framework of **the new AUKUS strategic partnership between Washington, Canberra and London, suggests a desire for a resolute American naval commitment against China and the choice of a containment policy that could push Tokyo into unprecedented repositioning.** After

the brutal sidelining of France, a significant Indo-Pacific power and major ally of the United States, in the constitution of this front, the archipelago may fear being relegated on the grounds of its pusillanimity.

This could undermine the cooperative and inclusive vision that Japan has so far promoted through its Indo-Pacific policy and its insistence on respecting a law-based maritime order. Tokyo has consistently sought to promote strategies to counterbalance Chinese expansionism by participating in **informal multilateral coalitions** to complement the ever-vital **Japan-US alliance.**

In 2021, Tokyo welcomed the numerous deployments of European navies in the Indo-Pacific region as an opportunity to expand its partnerships. France, which is a coastal nation and regularly sends units from the mainland on missions, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands have sent significant combat units to the area, including two nuclear submarines and two French and British aircraft carriers. In April, the maritime JSDF joined the French multinational exercise Lapérouse in the Bay of Bengal, alongside their American, Australian and Indian counterparts. They also conducted a first-of-its-kind amphibious exercise with French elements on Japanese territory in May, as part of the ARC21 maritime exercises with the U.S. and Australian navies. One of the adopted scenarios involved a possible enemy attack on a Japanese island. **Will these multilateral cooperation efforts, so beneficial to Japan, be maintained in the context created by AUKUS?** Australia’s strategic alignment with the U.S. deterrence posture is viewed favorably by Tokyo, which sees it as a rebalancing of the balance of power with China. But while Japan supports AUKUS, it remains concerned about preserving the coherence of an “Indo-Pacific community” that it believes it has largely inspired. It incidentally intends to pursue its relations with India, France, and the European Union, whose recently published strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific lists Tokyo as an “essential partner.” ■

Translation by Maxime Chervaux

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