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Japan's Rising Strategic Value and the Potential
Restructuring of the Asia-Pacific Order

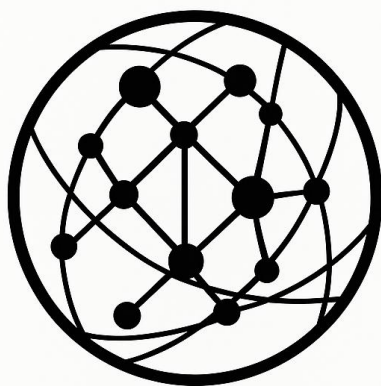
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Key Judgments

- **Japan's strategic value is rising as its geographic position is increasingly reinforced by greater indigenous military capability, U.S. forward presence, advanced industry, technology, logistics, and expanding regional security ties.** The Takaichi government's accelerated security transformation is reinforcing Japan's systemic importance while also generating stronger reactions from China, Russia, and North Korea.
- **For the United States, Japan functions as a strategic distance compressor and regional power-conversion platform.** A major reduction in access to Japan would not eliminate U.S. global military capability, but it would increase the distance, cost, and operational burden of sustaining comparable regional presence and influence in Northeast Asia.
- **For China and Russia, a major change in Japan's alignment could generate substantial denial value and, under more demanding conditions, potential transfer value.** A Japan less integrated into the U.S.-led architecture would increase the effective strategic distance of American power; a Japan that shifted into another strategic arrangement while remaining functionally intact could produce broader systemic effects, but such an outcome would be substantially more difficult to achieve and sustain.
- **A Japan-system shock would reprice strategic value across the Asia-Pacific.** Its effects would extend beyond Japan, altering the relative importance of surrounding nodes and changing the geography, connectivity, and cost of regional power projection.

Executive Summary

Japan's strategic role is entering a new phase. The Takaichi government's accelerated security transformation is combining higher defense investment with expanded stand-off capabilities, unmanned systems, cross-domain operations, defense-industrial development, and deeper regional security cooperation. These changes have also generated stronger reactions from China, Russia, and North Korea, suggesting that Japan's evolving posture is increasingly being interpreted as a change in the regional strategic environment rather than solely as an adjustment in national defense policy.



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Japan occupies an unusually concentrated position within the Asia-Pacific security architecture. It combines U.S. forward presence with advanced industrial and technological capacity, logistics, intelligence infrastructure, maritime access, and a geographic position linking Northeast Asia to the wider First Island Chain. Together, these functions allow U.S. global capabilities to be converted more efficiently into sustained regional presence. A substantial reduction in Japan's current role would not remove U.S. power from the Pacific, but it would increase reliance on more distant positions and long-range force projection.

Japan's strategic value is therefore relational and systemic as well as national. For the United States, Japan reduces the distance and friction associated with sustaining power in Northeast Asia. For China and Russia, a major reduction in Japan's integration with the U.S.-led architecture would alter the forward position of American power and the maritime geometry of the region. Such a change would also affect the strategic calculations and relative importance of South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, and other regional actors.

This brief distinguishes between denial and system transfer. Japan could cease to perform its present role within the U.S.-led architecture without becoming a strategic asset for another power. A Japan System Transfer refers to the more demanding scenario in which Japan undergoes a fundamental strategic realignment while retaining sufficient geographic, industrial, technological, infrastructural, and institutional functionality to generate meaningful value within another regional system.

Why This Matters

East Asian strategic debate is commonly organized around visible flashpoints such as Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea. Yet the location most likely to experience confrontation is not necessarily the node whose transformation would produce the largest systemic effects. Japan is distinctive because it connects military, logistical, industrial, technological, and alliance networks across Northeast Asia and the wider Pacific.

This distinction becomes more important as regional military capabilities expand, security relationships deepen, and major powers face increasingly distributed commitments. Under these conditions, strategic influence depends not only on aggregate military capability, but also on the ability to position, sustain, connect, and convert that capability into regional effect. Japan occupies an unusually important position in that process.

A fundamental change in Japan's strategic role would therefore extend well beyond Japan itself. It could alter the effective distance of U.S. power, change Chinese and Russian strategic calculations, revalue surrounding regional nodes, and reshape the architecture through which power is projected and balanced across the Asia-Pacific.

Analytical Note

This brief applies a network-centered strategic framework that separates three dimensions of Japan's value. Intrinsic value refers to Japan's own military, economic, industrial, technological, and geographic capabilities. Network value arises from bases, logistics, alliances, interoperability, and other connections that allow those capabilities to interact with wider regional systems. Systemic value refers to the extent to which a change in Japan's position alters the capabilities, costs, or strategic choices of other actors.

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A Japan-system shock denotes a fundamental disruption of Japan's current role within the U.S.-led regional architecture. Such a disruption could result from alliance erosion, loss of U.S. basing access, strategic neutrality, severe military incapacitation, or durable external control. These outcomes would have different consequences and should not be treated as interchangeable.

The analysis therefore distinguishes denial from transfer. Japan could cease to provide its current strategic value to the United States without becoming a usable asset for China, Russia, or another actor. A Japan System Transfer describes the more demanding condition in which Japan undergoes a strategic realignment while retaining sufficient functionality for its geography, infrastructure, industry, technology, and institutions to generate significant value within another system.

1. Japan's Strategic Value Is Rising

Japan has long held substantial strategic value because of its geographic position in Northeast Asia. What is changing in 2026 is the growing concentration of military, industrial, technological, and network capabilities around that geographic advantage.

The Takaichi government's decision to revise Japan's three principal security documents ahead of schedule reflects a judgment that the assumptions underlying the 2022 framework require reassessment. The government has highlighted developments in unmanned warfare, prolonged high-intensity conflict, space, cyber, the electromagnetic spectrum, and defense-industrial resilience as factors driving this review (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2026).

The shift extends beyond military procurement. Japan's FY2026 defense program continues to expand stand-off capabilities, unmanned systems, integrated air and missile defense, and cross-domain operations. At the same time, METI increasingly treats manufacturing capacity, supply-chain resilience, technology, human capital, and maritime logistics as components of national economic security (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2026a; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2026).

Japan is also becoming more deeply embedded in regional security networks. The Reciprocal Access Agreement with the Philippines has entered into force; cooperation with Australia has expanded across operational and defense-industrial areas; and Japan and India have strengthened maritime-domain awareness, logistics, port access, maintenance, and naval cooperation (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d).

Japan's rising strategic value therefore reflects more than higher defense expenditure. It results from the increasing interaction of geography, military capability, advanced industry, technology, alliance integration, and regional connectivity. Japan is consequently moving beyond a role centered primarily on hosting U.S. forward presence toward a broader capacity to generate, sustain, and connect regional power.

2. Japan's New Value to the United States

Japan's growing value to the United States lies not only in its own military capabilities, but in its role in converting U.S. global capabilities into sustained regional power.

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Aggregate capability does not automatically translate into regional effect. Sustaining military presence in Northeast Asia depends on forward access, logistics, maintenance, communications, command integration, personnel rotation, and political access as well as on platforms and weapons themselves. Japan concentrates many of these functions close to the principal strategic theaters of Northeast Asia.

The transformation of U.S. Forces Japan reinforces this role. Its reorganization is intended to strengthen bilateral planning, command coordination, contingency preparation, and integration with Japan's own operational structures (Jost, 2026). Japan can therefore be understood as a strategic distance compressor: it reduces the geographic and operational friction involved in projecting and sustaining U.S. power across the Pacific.

This function becomes more consequential as U.S. commitments are distributed across multiple theaters. The relevant constraint is not simply the size of U.S. aggregate military capability, but the availability of forces, munitions, logistics, political attention, and allied support at a given time. Recent debate in Asia over U.S. policy toward North Korea and competing demands on U.S. military resources illustrates the distinction between aggregate capability and its regional availability (Geddie et al., 2026).

Japan's emerging value to the United States therefore lies increasingly in regional power conversion: reducing the distance, cost, and operational friction required to translate U.S. global capabilities into sustained presence and influence in Northeast Asia.

3. What a Major Reduction in Japan's Role Would Mean for the United States

A Japan-system shock would not remove U.S. military power from the Pacific, but it would make that power more difficult and costly to concentrate and sustain in Northeast Asia.

The effects would extend well beyond the loss of Japan's own military capability. Washington would face reduced access to forward bases, logistics and maintenance infrastructure, intelligence and command facilities, industrial support, and positions close to several major regional contingencies. The approximately 60,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan illustrate the scale of operational investment embedded in this single node (U.S. Forces Japan [USFJ], n.d.).

The United States could compensate by relying more heavily on Guam, the Philippines, Australia, Hawaii, and long-range deployment from North America. Such adaptation would preserve substantial capability, but these alternatives would be unlikely to replicate Japan's combination of proximity, infrastructure, industrial capacity, political access, and operational integration at comparable cost.

The principal effect would therefore be a rebound of strategic distance. Transit requirements, maintenance burdens, force rotation, logistical exposure, and dependence on long-range systems would increase even if aggregate U.S. military capability remained broadly unchanged.

Because Japan is also connected to wider regional security networks, the effects would extend beyond U.S. operations from Japanese territory. A major change in Japan's role would also alter the strategic environment facing South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and other regional actors.

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4. Japan's Strategic Value to China and Russia

The same characteristics that increase Japan's value to the United States also make it strategically significant to China and Russia, although for different reasons.

For China, Japan forms a major part of the maritime security architecture along China's eastern maritime approaches. It hosts substantial U.S. forces, is expanding stand-off and cross-domain capabilities, and links U.S. strategy in Northeast Asia to the wider First Island Chain (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2026a; U.S. Forces Japan, n.d.). Changes in Japan's alignment or military role would therefore affect not only bilateral China-Japan relations, but also the broader geography of U.S. power projection in the Western Pacific.

Russia's calculus is different. Japan lies close to Russia's Far Eastern approaches and has deepened security cooperation with the United States and other regional partners. At the same time, cooperation among China, Russia, and North Korea has expanded, although these relationships remain uneven and should not be treated as a unified trilateral alliance. Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies describes them as “imbalanced partnerships,” underscoring both their growing strategic relevance and their internal asymmetries (Masuda et al., 2025).

Recent China-Russia rhetoric surrounding the historical “Enemy State Clauses” should be understood in this broader context. China's August 19 endorsement of Lavrov's comments does not by itself establish a generally accepted contemporary legal basis for the use of force against Japan. Article 107 refers to actions taken or authorized as a result of World War II, while the UN General Assembly recognized the enemy-state provisions as obsolete in 1995 and expressed its intention to initiate procedures for their deletion from the Charter (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2026; United Nations, 1945; United Nations General Assembly, 1995).

The episode indicates some convergence in Chinese and Russian framing of Japan's military normalization as part of a wider debate over the evolution of the postwar regional order. Within this framework, Japan carries both denial value and potential transfer value for China and Russia.

5. Denial, Neutralization, and Japan System Transfer

A major change in Japan's strategic alignment could affect the regional balance even without external control over Japanese territory.

If Japan became strategically neutral, substantially reduced U.S. basing access, or otherwise ceased to perform its current alliance role, the northern portion of the First Island Chain would be altered and the effective strategic distance of U.S. power from Northeast Asia would increase. The security environment around China's maritime approaches and Russia's Pacific flank would also change, prompting other regional actors to reassess assumptions built on Japan's continued participation in the existing architecture.

This is the logic of denial value: strategic effects can arise when a node ceases to support one network without necessarily joining another.

A **Japan System Transfer** would represent a more consequential but substantially more demanding outcome. In this scenario, Japan would move out of the existing U.S.-led architecture while remaining sufficiently functional for its geography, infrastructure, industrial base, technology, and maritime position to generate meaningful value within a different strategic arrangement.

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The effects would operate in both directions. One network would lose a highly connected node, while another could gain part of that node's surviving strategic value.

For China in particular, such a shift could alter the maritime configuration of the regional balance. The significance would not be that China, Russia, or North Korea lack maritime capabilities, but that a functionally intact Japan would add a geographically distinct, highly developed maritime-industrial node in the Western Pacific. The strategic effect would therefore lie less in territorial control itself than in changes in geography, connectivity, access, and the conversion efficiency of regional power.

6. Regional Repricing

A Japan-system shock would not diminish the strategic relevance of South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, or Australia. It would instead alter the regional environment within which their existing capabilities and geographic positions acquire value.

South Korea would remain a major military and industrial power, but a reduced Japanese role in the broader U.S.-aligned maritime architecture could make the Korean Peninsula relatively more self-contained and increase the importance of Seoul's choices concerning North Korea, China, Russia, and U.S. extended deterrence.

Taiwan would retain substantial political, technological, economic, and geographic significance. Its strategic environment, however, is partly embedded in the wider maritime geography linking Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. A major change in Japan's position would therefore affect assumptions about reinforcement, endurance, and external support without determining Taiwan's own political choices.

The Philippines could gain relative geographic importance as one of the remaining accessible positions along the southern First Island Chain, but it would not replicate Japan's combination of advanced industry, command infrastructure, logistics, maintenance, technology, and proximity to Northeast Asia. Australia could likewise gain relative importance as strategic depth, although the same distance that enhances its resilience also limits its ability to substitute for Japan's forward role.

The likely outcome would therefore be neither automatic network collapse nor simple continuity, but a regional repricing of strategic value and a rewiring of existing security networks under a more geographically dispersed configuration.

7. War, Occupation, and the Limits of Strategic Transfer

Any analysis of a possible **Japan System Transfer** must account for a basic constraint: Japan's strategic value depends heavily on the continued functioning of the systems that produce that value.

That value rests not only on territory, but on ports, transportation and energy networks, industrial capacity, financial institutions, skilled labor, technology, administrative effectiveness, supply-chain integration, and political and social stability. A major conflict could damage precisely the assets that make Japan strategically significant.

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This creates an **Occupation Paradox**. The more destructive the process of gaining control over a highly developed strategic node, the greater the risk that its usable strategic value is reduced in the process. Territorial control therefore cannot be equated with effective control of industrial, technological, or economic capacity.

Long-term external control could impose additional costs through reconstruction, political resistance, sanctions, capital flight, technology restrictions, supply-chain relocation, and administrative disruption. A severely damaged Japan could still alter the regional balance by ceasing to perform its current role, while providing only limited positive value to another strategic system.

The distinction is therefore essential: destruction, denial, neutralization, and strategic transfer are analytically different outcomes. Only a transfer that preserves sufficient functional capacity would generate the full two-sided network effect examined in this brief.

8. Nuclear Deterrence and the Reversal Problem

Japan's systemic importance cannot be separated from the escalation risks embedded in the U.S.-Japan alliance and the wider nuclear environment of Northeast Asia.

Article V of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security provides that an armed attack against either party in territories under Japanese administration would be treated as a common danger and addressed through each country's constitutional processes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1960). A major conflict involving an armed attack in territories under Japanese administration would therefore unfold under conditions of direct U.S.-Japan alliance exposure and within a regional security environment involving four nuclear-armed states—the United States, China, Russia, and North Korea.

This creates an important asymmetry between prevention and reversal. Before a fundamental change in Japan's strategic position occurs, deterrence can operate through forward presence, alliance signaling, diplomacy, military readiness, and escalation risk. Once a new strategic reality has become consolidated, however, reversing it could require substantially greater military, political, economic, and nuclear risk.

The relevant question would therefore extend beyond whether the United States retained sufficient aggregate capability. It would also concern the willingness of Washington and its allies to bear the costs and escalation risks associated with reversing the new strategic situation.

Nuclear deterrence consequently operates in both directions: it raises the cost of attempting a major strategic revision, but it can also raise the cost of reversing an established *fait accompli*.

9. From an East Asian Shock to Wider Systemic Effects

The consequences of a Japan-system shock would extend beyond East Asia because Japan contributes not only to regional military operations, but also to the functioning and perceived credibility of the wider U.S.-led alliance network.

A fundamental change in one of Washington's most institutionalized treaty relationships could prompt allies and partners elsewhere to reassess the conditions under which U.S. capabilities can be translated into sustained security commitments. It could also intensify debates over defense autonomy, alliance dependence, and extended deterrence.

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The economic effects would likewise extend beyond the region. Japan remains deeply integrated into global supply chains spanning automobiles, machinery, electronics, semiconductor materials, precision manufacturing, maritime industries, and advanced technology (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2026). A major disruption to Japan's strategic position could therefore generate significant industrial and supply-chain effects regardless of the political outcome.

At the broader strategic level, such a shock could widen the gap between U.S. global capability and regional effectiveness. The United States could retain its position as a major nuclear, financial, technological, naval, and aerospace power while facing higher costs and greater constraints in sustaining comparable influence in Northeast Asia.

Such an outcome would not necessarily imply a decline in U.S. global power itself. It could instead produce a significant redistribution of regional influence and a restructuring of the postwar security architecture in East Asia.

10. Policy Implications

- **Washington should treat Japan as a high-centrality node within the regional security architecture rather than as an interchangeable alliance asset.** Policy should therefore emphasize political durability, command integration, logistical resilience, industrial cooperation, and network redundancy, while recognizing that alternative locations can mitigate but not fully replicate Japan's present functions.
- **Beijing and Moscow should distinguish between the effects of a reduced Japanese role in the U.S.-led architecture and those of a deeper strategic realignment.** The former could increase U.S. strategic distance; the latter would depend on Japan remaining sufficiently functional to generate durable value within a different regional arrangement and would involve substantially greater political, economic, and security costs.
- **Tokyo should account for the dual effects of greater strategic capability.** Expanded military and industrial capacity can strengthen deterrence and autonomy, while also increasing Japan's centrality in the calculations of other major powers. Capability development should therefore be accompanied by resilience, economic security, and political sustainability.
- **Regional governments should prepare for strategic repricing rather than assume continuity.** The implications for South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, and other actors would vary substantially depending on whether Japan remained closely U.S.-aligned, became more autonomous or neutral, suffered severe disruption, or underwent a deeper strategic realignment.
- **Strategic assessments should distinguish national capability from network and systemic value.** The most visible flashpoint is not necessarily the node whose transformation would produce the largest regional effects. Japan should therefore be evaluated not only by its own capabilities, but also by how changes in its position would alter access, connectivity, strategic depth, and the costs of regional power projection.

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11. Limitations

This brief is a strategic-network analysis based on publicly available information through August 28, 2026. It does not model military campaigns, estimate the probability of conflict involving Japan, or assess the operational feasibility of external control. Classified contingency planning, force readiness, infrastructure resilience, ammunition stocks, nuclear doctrine, and alliance decision-making remain only partially observable in open sources.

These scenarios are analytical stress tests and should not be interpreted as predictions, probability assessments, or judgments about the desirability of particular outcomes.

The concepts of strategic distance compressor, Japan-system shock, and Japan System Transfer are analytical constructs rather than quantitative measures. They are intended to distinguish Japan's intrinsic capabilities from its network and systemic value. High centrality does not imply that a major change in Japan's position would automatically cause regional network collapse; other actors could adapt through force redistribution, rearmament, alternative access arrangements, and new forms of cooperation.

The analysis also treats China-Russia-North Korea cooperation as uneven and contingent rather than as a unified alliance. Likewise, political or military control over Japanese territory would not automatically translate into effective access to Japan's industrial, technological, or economic capabilities. The usable value of any such transition would depend on political legitimacy, institutional continuity, economic conditions, population response, sanctions, reconstruction, and continued access to international markets.

Conclusion

Japan's strategic importance is entering a new phase as geography, indigenous military capability, U.S. forward presence, advanced industry, technology, and regional network integration become more closely connected.

For the United States, Japan helps keep the Pacific strategically short by reducing the distance and friction involved in sustaining power in Northeast Asia. A major reduction in Japan's current role would not eliminate U.S. regional presence, but it would increase the cost of maintaining it and alter the strategic environment facing South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and other regional actors.

For China and Russia, a reduced Japanese role in the U.S.-led architecture would have the opposite effect by increasing the effective distance of American power. A Japan System Transfer, if accompanied by sufficient functional continuity, could have broader consequences by reducing the efficiency of one regional network while increasing the maritime depth and connectivity of another.

Japan's emerging strategic significance therefore lies not simply in its growing national power, but in the extent to which its geographic, military, industrial, technological, and network value shapes the structure and distribution of power across the Asia-Pacific.

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