



Center for Geopolitical & Strategic  
Maritime Studies

Roma, Lungotevere delle Armi, 24

**Geopolitica-mente**

Thoughts to understand the world  
n. 12 - august 2023

## Japan, the world's third largest economy, looking for a new power?

A careful analysis of the political growth of Japan in the context of the Pacific Ocean area

Japan and the new course of foreign policy

Japan is certainly one of the major international players, but until about a decade ago its power was expressed almost exclusively in the economic sphere.

The Land of the Rising Sun, severely defeated in the Second World War, and for a long time under strict US tutelage, had maintained a "low profile", concentrating on its reconstruction and the development of an economy that guaranteed generalized internal well-being.

The Japanese "choice" to be "only" an economic power will most likely not be able to survive the current geopolitical context. The change in the international balance forces Tokyo to reconsider its role, above all bearing in mind the now acclaimed desire of China to become at least the hegemonic power of Asia and to gain control of large tracts of the Pacific Ocean.



Fig. 1 – (Tradition and innovation, Photo JMSDF)

As reasons for a Japanese repositioning, in addition to Chinese actions, tensions between Beijing and Washington must also be added. Despite the various attempts at mediation, it seems that the friction between the two powers is increasingly destined to grow, which further places Japan in a situation that no longer allows

it to maintain a secluded posture, especially in the light of the requests of United States themselves for a greater activism of their allies precisely in order to maintain the status quo in the Pacific.

Obviously, Tokyo's never easy relations with the two Koreas must also be added to all this.

Shinzo Abe, perhaps the most influential Japanese politician of the last twenty years (Prime Minister between 2006 and 2007 and then from 2012 to 2020), was sure of relaunching the Japanese economy through economic maneuvers (Abecomics), but he had also decided to give a new course to the country's foreign policy.

His diplomatic action has led not only to strengthening relations with allies but has also tried to forge new alliances that can guarantee some form of levee against China. At the same time, it has also tried to be more incisive on an international level, going beyond regional limits and thus giving Japan a more global dimension.

However, a proactive foreign policy must be accompanied by adequate instruments. Certainly Japan, despite having the largest public debt in the world, has important economic capacities; it has a population, which although it is aging, numerically remains relevant and socially cohesive.

What the Rising Sun lacks is a certain military "completeness". Japan, like the other two powers defeated in World War II, wrote in its constitution that it would renounce the use of force to settle national disputes.

In particular, art. 9 of the 1947 constitution states: "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of resolving international disputes. In order to achieve the objective proclaimed in the preceding paragraph, land, sea and air forces will not be maintained, nor will other means of warfare be maintained. The State's right of belligerence will not be recognized".

So unlike Germany and Italy, Japan shouldn't formally even have armed forces. In fact, the Land of the Rising Sun has "only" self-defense forces, which were established as early as the 1950s.

It matters little that these self-defense forces today are made up of highly trained professional military and that they are very technologically advanced. In fact, the air force is equipped, among others, with F-15 air superiority aircrafts and is also acquiring the very recent F-35, while it is developing 6th generation aircrafts. The land forces are equipped with very modern weapons, several of which are domestically produced, such as the Type 10 tank. Without forgetting how the Japanese Navy, more correctly the Maritime Self-Defense Force, is the third largest fleet in the world in terms of size and capacity.

However, precisely in the light of the aforementioned article 9 of the Constitution, these armed forces have a precise mandate, that of defending Japanese territory exclusively from external aggressions. In this setting they cannot be an effective tool for projecting influence and defending Japan's interests.

Consistent with his desire to initiate a new course for Tokyo's foreign policy, Abe's actions towards the Japanese Self-Defense Forces aimed precisely at overcoming these limits. After a long parliamentary battle, in 2014 the Government managed to approve a set of eleven laws that form the so-called "Law on the conservation of security and peace". Despite a strong contrast brought forward by the opposition, the law was confirmed in 2015.

Thanks to these laws, a new interpretation was given to the pacifist vision of the constitution: Japan will now be able to conduct military operations in favor of its allies, should they be attacked, according to the principle of "proactive pacifism".



Fig. 2 – (Relations with Europeans, Photo JMSDF)

Precisely, in the vision of Abe's government, this new interpretation of pacifism will allow greater interventionism at an international level, better protecting Japan's interests, without having to rely exclusively on its major allies, i.e. United States.

#### Threats and responses

As mentioned above, the biggest threats to Japan come from China. In fact, Beijing, in addition to having acquired more and more space in world trade, has also launched the Belt Road Initiative, more prosaically defined as the "New Silk Roads".

The purpose of this vast operation is to further expand Chinese political and economic influence. In support of these operations, China has launched an impressive naval construction race, in order to create a military fleet that in the near future can face United States or at least contend with it for control of vast areas of the Pacific.

To implement and protect this grandiose system of logistic structures, the construction of naval and air bases on various Pacific islands (some of which on disputed territories) has begun, again on the Chinese side. At the same time, atolls are being used which have been transformed into artificial islands, capable of hosting military structures of the Chinese People's Army, such as docks for ships, anti-aircraft missile systems and airstrips.

In this complex situation, China has not interrupted its claims for Senkaku Islands, considered by Japan as part of its national territory, and unauthorized entry operations of Chinese aircraft into Japanese airspace are also frequent.

Considering precisely the threats coming mainly from China, Japan is trying to equip itself, to be able to resist the rise of Beijing as the only Asian power.

The measures taken were different. Not only have the measures of military collaboration with the United States been strengthened, already formalized with the "Treaty of mutual cooperation and security between United States of America and Japan" (1960), but also with the birth in 2004, thanks also to Abe's work, of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which constitutes an informal strategic alliance between Australia, Japan, India and United States.

The purpose of this agreement is clearly to limit Chinese expansion; it is no coincidence that United States are present within the Quad, which are China's main opponents, but also Australia, which fears Chinese expansionism a lot, as well as India, which has an increasingly complex relationship with Beijing, worried about the creation of the new silk roads, which will also have Pakistan, New Delhi's historical rival, as an outlet.



Fig. 3 – (An effective and capable Navy, Photo JMSDF)

Precisely because Japan is an archipelago and the most serious threats to its security come from China, the Navy is the armed force that needs to be most developed. The Japanese fleet, which as mentioned is the third largest in the world, until a few years ago did not have the tools to project its capabilities.

However, the new development plans have allowed the construction of two classes of all-deck units, the Hyuga class, made up of the lead class Hyuga (in service since 2009) and the Ise (in service since 2011), followed by the larger Izumo class, made up of the Izumo (in service 2015) and the Kaga (in service 2017). These units currently have helicopter carrier functions, but programs have already been launched to adapt them to the use of the 5th generation F-35B aircrafts, which

have short-deck take-off and vertical landing capabilities. Alongside the construction and development of these units, there is also the placing on line of a new class of frigates, the Mogami, which will reach the number of no less than twelve vessels.

Given the strong Japanese initiative, the possibility also opens up for Italy to deepen the already good relations with Tokyo.

### Italy and Japan

From a military point of view, Italy can boast an ancient relationship with Japan. In fact, when the Japanese government decided to modernize its armed forces, it also turned to foreign governments, asking them to send instructors to form the nascent new Japanese army. Among these foreigners was the artillery major Pompeo Grillo, who worked in Japan between 1884 and 1888, followed by other Italians.

Today, in the light of the new course undertaken by Japan, which among other things is forging closer relations with NATO countries and which is trying to develop its defense capabilities in the shortest possible time, Italy can and must present itself as a credible partner for the development of the Japanese defense industry.

Japan is already a buyer of some products of Italian industry, for example the Augusta Westland AW-101 helicopters. The Japanese also appreciate pilot training programs: in fact in November 2021 an agreement was signed to allow Japanese military pilots to participate in training courses at the International Flight Training School in Decimomannu.

The development of future projects in the aeronautical field could prove to be a great success, given that the agreement between United Kingdom, Italy and Japan for the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) was recently signed, which made it possible to combine Italian-British projects of the Tempest aircraft with Japan's Mitsubishi F-X program. The GCAP will therefore be the program led by British, Japanese and Italians which will allow the creation of a 6th generation multi-role fighter.

The developments for greater cooperation in the maritime field could also be very interesting. Japan already has a very advanced shipbuilding industry, but

the recent visit of the Italian High Sea Multipurpose Patrol Vessel (Pattugliatore Polivalente d'Altura) Morosini inaugurated a new phase of joint training between the Allied and Italian navies in the Indo-Pacific. Precisely on this occasion, the Navy will have the opportunity to present the PPA to the Japanese, an all-Italian new-concept ship. This event could open the doors for the development of new technological exchanges and new joint programs, as advocated by the Italian Government in the person of Defense Minister Crosetto.

In conclusion, Japan, pressed by the rapid evolution of the international context, is gearing up to better

manage this change, trying to return to being a leading player in Asia and beyond. Italy, which must keep its attention to the Indo-Pacific high, will have the opportunity to deepen its relationship with Japan, signing further agreements useful for the development of its defense industry, maintaining its interest in an area that is proving to be crucial for the international balance.

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Center for Geopolitical and Strategic Maritime Studies «Geopolitica-mente»

Edited by: CeSMar

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