

## JAPAN/US: Kishida's state visit strengthens alliance to new peak

- During a successful state visit, Prime Minister Kishida skillfully made the case to Congress that Japan is an indispensable partner for the US, willing to share its burden in support of the liberal international order.
- Kishida and President Biden have surely achieved their aim of deepening and strengthening the alliance to an all-time high point, but the shadow of November's US presidential election continues to loom.
- Among over 70 agreements finalized at the summit on 10 April, those relating to alliance command and control and defense-industrial cooperation may prove to be the most consequential.

### Skillful speech

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's address to a joint sitting of Congress on 11 April was a fine example of set-piece diplomacy. After sharing remembrances of his early childhood spent in New York City, Kishida praised US achievements and sacrifices in upholding the liberal international order and emphasized Japan's defense upshift and substantial investments in the US economy. He also gently exhorted the lawmakers to do more in relation to Ukraine and gave a firm guarantee that a reinvigorated Japan would be a true 'global partner' that would share the US's burden, "to assure the survival of liberty".

Tokyo sees a maximally invigorated and wide-ranging US-Japan alliance as the single best way to help secure Japan's national interests in an increasingly challenging region—although the rapid development of security ties with other partners like Australia, the UK, and most recently the Philippines implies that Japanese policymakers see the US as a necessary but not sufficient partner. Tokyo also understands that its geographic location and economic profile make it uniquely positioned to help Washington secure the US's own national interests, in the Indo-Pacific region and more broadly. That bilateral relations have risen to a [historic high-water mark](#) in the last three years is because the Biden administration fully shares Tokyo's strategic analysis and has made Japan a cornerstone of its own strategies for the region.

Kishida's essential task in his speech—indeed, the entire reason that a visit with state honors was held at this juncture—was to make that same case publicly and in a compelling way to those who might take US foreign policy on a different path if Donald Trump wins the US presidency this November. In his Congressional address the prime minister could scarcely have made a better effort in portraying Japan as the US's best and most indispensable ally.

### Fruitful summit

The joint statement released after the Biden-Kishida summit at the White House on 10 April referenced the "unprecedented heights" the alliance had reached, cooperation "across all domains and at all levels," and emphasized the idea of a "global" partnership between Washington and Tokyo to help uphold the "free and open international order." The list of deliverables in the Fact Sheet that followed ran to 18 pages and over 70 different cooperative projects and undertakings, about four times as long as the equivalent document released after South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's summit with President Joe Biden during his April 2023 state visit. Categories covered included defense and security cooperation; space cooperation; economic, technology, and climate cooperation; and diplomacy, development, and humanitarian assistance.

Perhaps the most consequential announcements were in the security and defense sphere. One was command and control (C2) reform. With Tokyo already in the process of modernizing and integrating the C2 structures of the three branches of the Self Defense Forces, Washington agreed to do the same for US Forces Japan. In practice, this will enable smoother joint planning and training, and ultimately make the allies better prepared to respond promptly to any contingency that might emerge in relation to China or North Korea. That this need to improve C2 has arisen now speaks to the greater role that Japan is assuming in delivering regional security alongside the US—as evidenced just this week in Japan's joint naval patrols (with the US and Australia) in support of the Philippines in the South China Sea.

Another key set of announcements concerned defense-industrial cooperation. The two sides committed to start working towards “co-development, co-production, and co-sustainment.” In the initial stages, this means that Japanese firms could soon help produce munitions and missiles with and for the US; develop jets and simulators together for training F-35 pilots; and conduct maintenance and repairs on US navy warships in private shipyards in Japan (aircraft engine maintenance may follow). The US’s own defense industry has been stretched by an increase in demand, including from providing nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and munitions to Israel and Ukraine. Washington views Japan’s highly advanced defense industry as an untapped resource that could help offset many of those pressures, by integrating Japanese firms more deeply in the industrial networks that sustain the US military’s global reach.

### Unfinished business

One area that under-delivered relative to pre-summit speculation was in relation to Aukus. US officials were reportedly eager to add Japan as a member of the pact’s Pillar 2, which concerns the joint development of advanced defense technologies. However, Australia and the UK seem to have objected, on the grounds that the pact is not yet fully operational.

This was not the rejection that it may have seemed. Tokyo’s security relations with Canberra and London are second only to its ties with Washington and could be described as ‘quasi-alliances.’ Security cooperation is only set to deepen, and Japan already engages in joint defense technology development with each of the three countries—notably, the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) next-generation fighter jet program with the UK (and Italy). The path to ‘Jaukus’ remains open in the medium term, though Tokyo may have to first strengthen cybersecurity and data security laws to meet the partners’ higher standards.

Another outstanding issue is the proposed Nippon Steel takeover of US Steel, seen as a rare friction point in bilateral ties. Prime Minister Kishida stated that Japan believed that the US government was implementing “appropriate procedures based on law” in its regulatory review of the matter, noted that Japanese firms had created around one million jobs in the US, and said that Japan wished to “cement this win-win relationship”.

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