

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

NPI

Nakasone Yasuhiro
Peace Institute

JIIA

The Japan Institute of
International Affairs
(Secretariat)

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

No. 296

31 August 2022

THE LESSONS OF THE UKRAINE WAR FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION: A PREVIEW OF, RATHER THAN A CHANGE IN, WHAT WE WILL FACE IN 10-15 YEARS

Masafumi Ishii

- The Ukraine war has not changed the fundamental geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. We need to realize that in 10 to 15 years, 1) interactions among the G3, the US, China and India will decide the basic direction of international politics and 2) the positioning of India and Indonesia will decide the global majority.
- The war in Ukraine, however, has had the effect of reminding us of the urgent need to tackle the challenges we have been facing and, above all, the importance of strengthening deterrence.
- With that in mind, Japan should strengthen its own defense capabilities through cooperation with allies, friends and like-minded countries in the region, and start doing everything possible to avoid Ukraine's failure and make deterrence work in the Indo-Pacific region.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

In recent months, there has been a plethora of articles arguing that the Ukraine war has brought about significant changes to the security landscape in the Indo-Pacific region. My argument here is quite the contrary. In short, the Ukraine war has not changed the fundamental geopolitical dynamics in the region. Rather, the Ukraine war is a kind of preview or test run of what we are going to face within 10 to 15 years in the Indo-Pacific. The good news is, thanks to the Ukraine war, the need to adopt the prevailing geopolitical dynamics is more clearly understood now and support for that position is higher than ever, accelerating the push to adapt.

Now, what are the geopolitical dynamics we need to realize?

First, the G3 will emerge in 10 to 15 years. Though the US is still the only superpower for now, its relative supremacy has been steadily in decline and, within 10 to 15 years, both the GDP and the defense spending of the US and China will reach the same level. Though this sounds like a G2, India will also be joining the Superpower Club soon. The UN recently predicted that India's population will exceed China's next year and, more importantly, it will keep on rising even as China's population declines, and the aging situation there in 10 to 15 years could be as serious as that of Japan now. By that time, India's GDP will be the world's third largest. Hence, the positioning of and interaction among these G3 countries will decide the basic direction of international relations.

Second, where India and Indonesia stand will be decisive for creating a global majority. If you were trying to create a new G7 in 2040, who would you pick? The G3 of the US, China and India would be in, as would Japan and Indonesia, by then the world's fourth- and fifth-largest economies regardless of which is which, then the EU if it stays united and, whether for better or worse, Russia. We need to realize Russia will not disappear even after the Ukraine war. Though the decline in its economic power will further accelerate, it will hold on tightly to its nuclear arsenal and never give up its veto power in the UN Security Council. Russia may become more difficult to deal with but it cannot be ignored.

It is likely the US, Japan and the EU will stick together, as will China and Russia, analogous to the present situation. Who will be left in between? India and Indonesia. Where they stand will be decisive, as it is now to a certain extent.

What should Japan start doing now to adopt these dynamics with the lessons we are learning from the Ukraine war in mind? In short, we should do everything possible to make sure that deterrence will not fail in the Indo-Pacific region, as it did in Ukraine.

First, Japan should strengthen its own defense capability. The US could not deter Russia, which made us more aware that the decline of the US' relative supremacy has become reality. Under these circumstances, one should not be surprised if the US prioritizes engagement with those who try to help themselves. Japan will be coming up with new strategic documents by the end of this year and, like in Germany, a substantial increase in the defense budget is under discussion, with even a NATO standard of 2% of GDP in sight. Public support is stronger than ever partly because of the Ukraine war.

Second, Japan should use its influence to get the US to stay engaged in the Indo-Pacific. The Ukraine war should mean that a physical US pivot to the Indo-Pacific is postponed for now. However, there are things we can do to create reasons for stronger engagement by the US.

For that purpose, treaty allies of the US like Japan should enhance their planning efforts. If the division of labor and roles and missions in crises become more clearly defined and suitable preparations are made, the US will feel more responsibility to do its own part. One of the big questions after the Ukraine war is whether the US would become militarily engaged in a Taiwan crisis, having refrained from doing so in Ukraine. I believe the US would engage simply because what the US does will decide the basic direction of its strategic competition with China and the US cannot afford to stay away. Still, Japan should try to make sure that a war would be deterred rather than fought.

From a different perspective, the best way to secure US engagement is for East Asia to stay economically vibrant so that the US cannot stay away from this source of prosperity. The IPEF is a good start but we should keep pressing the US to reestablish market access arrangements with the Indo-Pacific region.

Third, we should create closer cooperation among like-minded countries to fill the gap created by the US' relative decline. The first two actions mentioned above may not be enough, so this is more important and urgent than ever.

As Prime Minister Kishida made clear in his Shangri La speech, Japan will support the capacity building of maritime security organizations in those countries in the region that share the strategic objective of maintaining safe and free navigation. There will be more cooperation in cybersecurity with those who are ready to take part. Japan can even conclude agreements to provide defense systems to countries that already have the necessary framework with Japan, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and soon Singapore.

Europe has both the interest and the capability to make substantial contributions to these endeavors. The new NATO Strategic Concept identified China as a “systemic challenge” for NATO while pointing out that “(T)he Indo-Pacific is important for NATO, given that developments in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security.” As Russia remains understandably the absolute top priority for NATO, the Ukraine war has also made NATO realize that, in order to deal with Russia, it needs to deal with China as well.

It also makes more sense to improve our relations, especially in the area of security, with the Republic of Korea. The recent trilateral summit meeting in Singapore gave us something to work on in a bilateral context.

Fourth, we should engage India more closely because the impact of its positioning will become more and more crucial as the years go by. Therefore, it is essential to understand why India is taking its present position on the Ukraine war. We should have quiet but extensive discussions with India to find out how we can do a better job next time.

Indonesia is another country that requires closer focus. I would just like to point out here that, in recent years, Indonesia has been getting closer to India because it has become more apparent that they face a common challenge, namely China. We are happy to work closely together with them.

Last but not least, with all the aforementioned in mind, we should enhance strategic communication to compete and coexist with our biggest neighbor China. This is the time to make diplomacy play its role.

We have every intention of enjoying prosperity with China. As neighbors for more than 2000 years, Japan knows ways to compete and coexist with China. At the same time, we do not want to see coercion or the use of force undermining the rule-based international order. It is always good to have direct and frank lines of communication so that the chance of misunderstanding and miscalculation is minimized.

We know China can never give up its hope for unification with Taiwan because this is crucial for creating legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party but, for the same reason, China cannot afford to fail. This means that there is a better chance for deterrence efforts to work than in the case of Russia, and strategic communication is key to that purpose.

Our challenge is not to lose sight and, without taking anything for granted, never stop our efforts to make deterrence work. The lessons of the Ukraine war, however devastating it turns out, should not be allowed to go to waste. 

Masafumi Ishii is a special adjunct professor in the Faculty of Law at Gakushuin University and former Ambassador of Japan to Indonesia.