

Chapter 2: A World in Turmoil and the Future of Security

Section 1: Security Implications of the War in Ukraine

The US and European countries stepped up their military support for Ukraine, as Ukraine launched a counteroffensive. The tactical situation, however, became more of a stalemate, and diplomatic moves aimed at ending the war and focusing on reconstruction gained momentum. Finland's entry into NATO was realized and Sweden's membership became all but certain. Tensions on NATO's northeastern front increased following Russia's deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus and the relocation of the Russian private military company Wagner to Belarus. China continued to strengthen ties with Russia, calling for a ceasefire through dialogue and expressing a willingness to arbitrate between Russia and Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Hamas-Israeli conflict that erupted in October undeniably put the war in Ukraine on the back burner, and the US Congress has been unable to debate the Biden administration's request for \$61 billion in military assistance to Ukraine. If support for Ukraine from the US and other major Western powers is further delayed, the absence of a decisive move by either of the warring sides will inevitably prolong the conflict.

The situation surrounding the invasion of Ukraine

The war of attrition in eastern Bakhmut, which had been ongoing since the war began in February 2022, came to an end in May when Russian forces occupied the city, but the Ukrainian military continued operations to retake Bakhmut thereafter. Meanwhile, Russia, which is reportedly running out of precision-guided missiles, stepped up drone attacks on civilian facilities, while Ukraine increased the frequency of



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its drone attacks on the Crimean Bridge and Russian territory. Wary of a Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russia sought to fortify the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, and the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, which the prevailing view holds was carried out by Russia in June, caused extensive damage to the lower Dnipro River.

A counteroffensive by Ukrainian forces to retake territory that began in mid-June was thwarted by

multiple layers of Russian minefields, trenches, and air attacks, and the results were not encouraging for the Ukrainian side. Yet the Ukrainian military has stepped up missile and drone attacks on the Crimean Peninsula, and since August it has been gradually advancing toward Tokmak, a strategic point in Zaporizhzhia Oblast, with the aim of cutting the land bridge connecting Crimea and mainland Russia. The US



A field near the front line town of Bakhmut, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Donetsk region, Ukraine (June 2023, Photo: Reuters/Aflo)

began providing the Ukrainian military with ATACMS short-range ballistic missiles in September, enabling immediate attacks on Russian air bases that are expected to improve the security of Ukrainian ground troops. In addition, since the Ukrainian military has gradually begun crossing operations to the east bank of the Dnipro River in October, the Russian military has been forced to move some of its units deployed around Tokmok to Kherson Oblast. Meanwhile, Russian forces have been intensifying their offensive in the east since October, particularly in Donetsk Oblast, where they are believed to be aiming to capture Avdiivka, near the oblast capital Donetsk, despite heavy losses. Overall, the situation is a tactical stalemate, but Ukrainian forces have increased their area of control in the south and Russian forces have done so in the east.

It was amid these circumstances that an unprecedented situation occurred in June when Evgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Russian private military company Wagner, and some Wagner troops launched a rebellion against Russian President Vladimir Putin and marched toward the capital city of Moscow (the “Prigozhin Rebellion”). Although the mutiny itself petered out after only one day without Wagner reaching Moscow and came to a conclusive end with Prigozhin’s death in a plane crash in August, Prigozhin’s turn against President Putin – an uprising led by a man who had risen politically through Putin’s personal trust – shocked the Russian public and is believed to have dealt a blow to the image of a “strong president and nation” held by the Russian people.

Against this backdrop, President Putin’s declaration in May of the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus and his reference to the use of nuclear weapons drew international condemnation of Russia for resorting to a “nuclear threat” as a nuclear-weapon state. As Russia had already deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad, this announcement did not add any new threat to Europe from a military perspective. Rather, the goal appears to have been to deter European countries from supporting Ukraine politically.

Following a decision in January 2023 to provide Ukraine with tanks, the US and European countries, which have been progressively expanding their level of military support for Ukraine, decided at the July

2023 NATO summit to provide Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets by coordinating training and supplying aircraft. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy personally attended the May G7 Hiroshima Summit, which issued a “G7 Leaders’ Statement on Ukraine”, while the NATO summit released a “Joint Declaration on Support for Ukraine” promising a medium- to long-term commitment to arms support. The EU has also pledged to establish a military assistance fund for Ukraine (20 billion euros over the next four years), and the Western countries emphasized their position of supporting Ukraine over the medium to long term. On the other hand, the fact that these announcements by the G7 and the EU were made ahead of any by NATO also reflects the subtle differences in the degrees of commitment to Ukraine among NATO members. Furthermore, the Ukrainian military faces a shortage of ammunition, and Western defense industries have not been able to keep up with Ukrainian demand. Within the United States, Ukraine’s largest donor, Congress has been dysfunctional: the position of Speaker of the House of Representatives remained vacant for three weeks in October, and the Biden administration’s request for \$61 billion in military assistance to Ukraine has not been discussed. The financial resources already provided may have been used up by the end of 2023, and it is extremely uncertain whether the US will be able to continue providing military assistance on the same scale it has been.

As the war in Ukraine stalemated, diplomatic activity intensified in anticipation of a ceasefire or an end to the war and the start of reconstruction in 2023. The G7 Hiroshima Summit confirmed continued support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and expressed a commitment to supporting rehabilitation and reconstruction, while Ukraine and other invitees, among them emerging and developing countries from the “Global South”, agreed on four principles, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. In June, the UK and Ukraine co-hosted the “Ukraine Reconstruction Conference” in London, at which Japan announced that it would host a Japan-Ukraine Conference for the Promotion of Economic Reconstruction in Tokyo on February 19, 2024. Talks among national security advisors on the key principles of peace in Ukraine were hosted by Denmark in June, Saudi Arabia in August, and Malta in October, with the meeting in Saudi Arabia being particularly noteworthy for China’s participation.

On the other hand, the Hamas-Israeli conflict, which began in October with an attack by Hamas on Israeli territory, has undeniably pushed the war in Ukraine into the background. Although President Zelenskyy has energetically continued his diplomatic activities, the “catch” yielded by his efforts is on the decline. For instance, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates did not participate in the aforementioned Malta talks because of the Ukrainian president’s pro-Israeli statements in response to Hamas’ attack on Israel. Although Ukraine has Holocaust sites on its territory (e.g. Babi Yar) and the president himself is Jewish, the government has found it necessary to give due consideration to Muslim countries when conducting diplomatic activities even while seeking to highlight the horrors of the war and the inhumanity of the Russian attacks. In December, President Zelenskyy visited Washington, DC, with a view to appealing directly for support from the US Congress, where budget deliberations were not making any headway. His efforts to garner support were unsuccessful, though, as he was asked to come up with a specific scenario

for winning the war.

NATO

Finland and Sweden have abandoned their policy of neutrality in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and steered toward NATO membership; Sweden's membership in NATO became an issue after Finland joined the alliance in April. The July NATO summit meeting in Lithuania saw Turkey, one of the two countries that had not ratified Sweden's accession, drop its opposition. The other country, Hungary, had made clear that it would not be the last to ratify, making Sweden's NATO membership a more

realistic prospect, but the final decisions lie with the ratification procedures of both countries' parliaments.

The NATO summit also included a "Partner Session" for extraregional states that was attended, as it was in 2022, by the leaders of Japan, the ROK, Australia, and New Zealand. At the meeting between Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, a new plan for Japan-NATO cooperation – the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) – was announced that promised cooperation in information sharing and training on new security issues such as cyber defense. In line with these moves to strengthen cooperation between Japan and NATO, it was announced in May that the establishment of a NATO Tokyo Liaison Office was being considered, but France expressed opposition to the idea on the grounds that Japan lies outside the North Atlantic area covered by NATO, and no conclusion was reached at the July summit meeting. In April, when French President Emmanuel Macron visited China, he gave an interview to the media and stated regarding the situation in Taiwan that "the worst thing would be to think that we Europeans must become followers on this topic and adapt to the American rhythm and a Chinese overreaction", and he has since argued that Europe should remain outside with regard to regional affairs in Asia.

Finland's accession to NATO has doubled Russia's land border with NATO members to 2,600 km, and the possibility of the Baltic Sea being surrounded by NATO members as a result of Sweden's accession has made Russia's security environment more vulnerable. In June, the Baltic states and Poland strengthened their defenses in response to information that Wagner, a private military company that Belarus had announced it would take in, was deployed near the Polish border, and tensions along NATO's northeastern front increased, with reports of NATO member countries scrambling warplanes

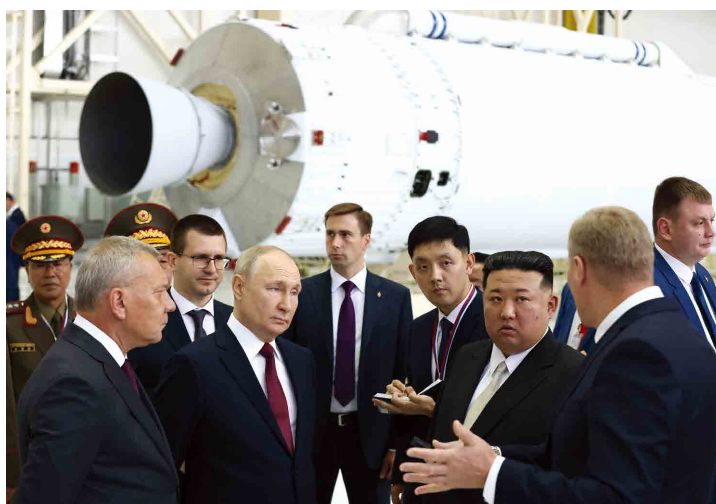


Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida speaks during an event with G-7 leaders on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, to announce a joint declaration of support for Ukraine. (July 2023, Photo: AP/Aflo)

against Russian aircraft. In light of these tensions, European countries continued to increase their military expenditures, and a higher number of member countries achieved NATO's target of 2% of GDP for defense spending.

Russia

Russia's international isolation continued because of the protracted war in Ukraine and economic sanctions against Russia by major countries. President Putin rebuked the West, emphasized the continuation of the "special military operation," and called for national unity in his presidential address in February, the first since the war began. At the same time, frequent direct attacks on Russian soil, including drone strikes on the Kremlin and central Moscow in May, brought the Russian people closer to the effects of the current invasion.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un visit the Vostochny Cosmodrome in the far eastern Amur region, Russia. (September 2023, Photo: Pool/Reuters/Aflo)

President Putin, who is seeking reelection in the March 2024 presidential election, has been bearing in mind domestic reactions to the "Prigozhin Rebellion". He has been designating liberal intellectuals and organizations, such as Dmitry Muratov, editor of the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, and former Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kunadze, who has criticized Putin's regime in the independent media, "foreign agents" or *de facto* spies. At the same time, the government has sought to quell domestic unrest and firm up its power base and support by strengthening patriotic education, including the introduction of state-approved history textbooks justifying the invasion of Ukraine into school institutions. As a result, the ruling party United Russia won a landslide victory in most regions where unified local elections were held on September 10 in a prelude to the presidential election, and it is working to build up an advantage as the presidential election approaches.

Wartime Russia has been strengthening its ties with former Eastern Bloc countries and other countries/regions to create circumstances favorable to the conduct of the war in the diplomatic arena as well. President Putin's visit to China in October to attend the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation could be said to be one such effort. On the other hand, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for President Putin in March on multiple war crime charges, which means that visits to ICC member states could lead to his detention. This has placed certain restrictions on his conduct; for example, President Putin's participation in the BRICS summit held in August in South

Africa, an ICC member state, was limited to online participation.

The countries of Central Asia maintain good relations with Russia, but they have kept a certain distance from the invasion of Ukraine without expressing clear approval or disapproval of it. Anticipating a decline in Russia's influence in the Central Asian region due to its international isolation and prolonged aggression against Ukraine, these countries are developing exchanges with countries other than Russia, including Western nations and China. Among the former Soviet republics, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova have distanced themselves from Russia since the start of the invasion and have sought to approach the West. Armenia above all has long complained openly and strongly about the lack of Russian support under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in response to repeated clashes with neighboring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan invaded Nagorno-Karabakh in September and, with Russia effectively refusing to intervene to support Armenia, the Armenian side was defeated and Azerbaijan retook Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was consequently absent from the CSTO summit on November 14 and, on the following day, November 15, he announced in the National Assembly that he would be seeking out new security partners and concluding agreements with, above all, the United States, with which Armenia had been conducting joint exercises since the beginning of 2023. Thus, a situation has arisen in which Russia is unable to stop the “centrifugal forces” within the former Soviet Union, which Russia considers to be inside its own sphere of influence.

Meanwhile, the Putin administration has rapidly developed relations with North Korea. In July, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited North Korea to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and attend a military parade, and on September 13, Kim Jong-un traveled to Russia and took part in a summit meeting at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in the Russian Far East. Rather than inviting the North Korean leader to Moscow, President Putin took the unusual step of leaving Moscow and going to the location of the meeting. The two reportedly discussed the supply of arms, ammunition, and labor from North Korea to Russia, and the provision of technology for the development of missiles, satellites, and nuclear submarines from the Russian side in return. This suggests that Russia has strong hopes of support from North Korea, which has adopted weapons systems made in the former Soviet Union, bearing in mind Russia's weapons shortage stemming from the prolonged invasion of Ukraine. In October, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited North Korea, and it is believed that discussions were held on further strengthening Russo-North Korean relations and preparing for President Putin's visit to North Korea. Putin's visit may lead to the development of relations across a wide range of fields, including the dispatch of laborers and economic exchange as well as military cooperation.

China-Russia relations

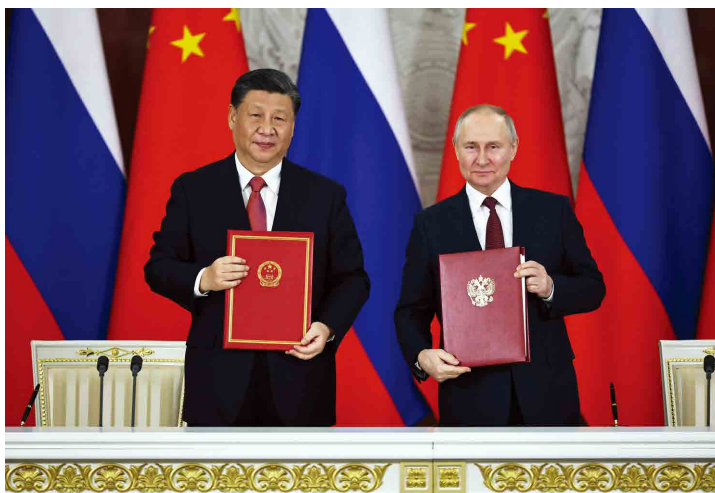
Following Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Russia in March, there were a series of high-level exchanges between China and Russia throughout the year. April and August saw visits to Russia by Chinese National Defense Minister Li Shangfu, while Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and

Commander-in-Chief of the Navy Nikolai Yevmenov visited China in May and July, respectively. In October, coinciding with the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, President Putin and Defense Minister Shoigu traveled to China and Prime Minister Mishustin visited China again in December.

Seemingly in response to the strengthening of G7 and Japan-US-ROK ties, China intensified its military collaboration with Russia. This included conducting joint military exercises and “joint patrols” around Japan. Although not officially providing military support to Russia, China is believed to be a key exporter of drones and semiconductors, supplies essential for Russia’s needs. Furthermore, China continued to increase its imports of Russian crude oil, thereby supporting the Russian economy.

While China had previously refrained from making in-depth statements about the situation in Ukraine, in February, a year after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, it published “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis.” This marked China’s call for a ceasefire through dialogue and showed its willingness to mediate. In April, President Xi held his first phone call with President Zelenskyy since Russia’s invasion, following which Li Hui, the Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs, was dispatched to Ukraine, several European countries, the EU headquarters, and Russia to discuss a ceasefire. In August, Special Representative Li participated in the second meeting of the national security advisors’ consultation on the key principles of peace in Ukraine hosted by Saudi Arabia (China was absent from the first meeting in June and the third in October).

When President Putin visited China in October for the Belt and Road Forum, China accorded him special treatment and provided a platform for his diplomatic activities. Although Russian media reported that Putin explained the Ukraine war during the meeting, China’s official release did not mention the war. The two leaders are said to have also agreed to take a common stance on the situation in Israel.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping attend a signing ceremony following their talks at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia. (March 2023, Photo: Pool/Reuters/Aflo)

Prospects and recommendations

NATO members are expected to provide F-16s to Ukraine in the spring or summer of 2024 at the earliest, so Ukraine’s counteroffensive will be a protracted one. For Ukraine to put up a good fight or at least maintain a stalemate, it is essential to steadily implement the long-term support for Ukraine that NATO, the G7, and the EU have expressed, but there is no guarantee that the long-term support Ukraine needs

will continue in the future.

Japan has joined Western sanctions against Russia and has condemned Moscow. It is necessary that Japan maintain this stance and stand together against Russia as a member of the G7. On the other hand, the outbreak of the Hamas-Israel conflict in the Middle East following Russia's aggression in Ukraine may raise doubts about the ability of the United States to allocate resources and withstand conflict and tension on multiple fronts. It must also be borne in mind that neighboring countries, seeing this situation as an opportunity, could accelerate their unilateral moves to change the status quo. Thus, it should be noted that the war in Ukraine is linked to Japan's own security via US strategic resource allocation. As moves to end the war may start to take shape in 2024, Japan, as the only Asian member of the G7, should participate in the discussions, possibly in a G7 format, on the features of a "post-Ukraine war" settlement that would also be acceptable to Ukraine itself. Japan should be proactively involved to ensure that an international order guaranteeing territorial integrity and the rule of law is put in place.

With the international situation changing drastically, the three principles of defense equipment exports should be relaxed by, for example, reviewing the existing five categories of exports and lifting the ban on exports in a manner that ensures that such equipment is not transferred to countries other than like-minded countries. It should also be made possible to transfer equipment to parties to a conflict such as Ukraine that have been invaded in violation of international law. This would also strengthen Japan's defense industry and bolster Japan's own defense capabilities as well as win more support from allies and friends when it becomes necessary.

Looking at Russia's domestic politics, the Putin administration's power base has not been shaken by the "Prigozhin Rebellion," and it is almost certain that President Putin will be reelected in the 2024 presidential election. However, the former Soviet republics are increasingly turning away from Russia, and Russia's inability to control this trend may cast a certain shadow over President Putin's image as an advocate of a "strong Russia". Against this backdrop, it remains to be seen what voter turnout will be for the 2024 presidential election and what percentage of the vote President Putin will receive in the likely event that the war in Ukraine is still ongoing as voters go to the polls. Putin's government anticipates winning the election with a record-high turnout, surpassing the turnout in the previous presidential election in 2018 (about 77%). If this happens, the government may claim that it has won the trust of the people despite the invasion of Ukraine and its relations with former Soviet states and may deploy more troops and fully mobilize the country, something it has avoided in the past for fear of a decline in its approval rating.

If Vladimir Putin is reelected, he will be 71 years old at the start of his next term, exceeding the average life expectancy of men in Russia (64 years; World Bank, 2021) and the age of former President Boris Yeltsin (69) – not to mention President Dmitry Medvedev (46) – when he stepped down from office. A Putin presidency extending beyond 2024 is likely to attract even more attention than ever as aging and health concerns arise. In addition to the *siloviki* who have been frequently mentioned as Putin's likely

successor, the names of non-*siloviki* such as Prime Minister Mishustin, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko, and Minister of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev (son of Putin's close ally, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council) have also been raised frequently. Of course, it is also possible that Putin himself will remain in office without naming a successor. The results of the election and the developments that derive therefrom must be carefully observed in considering the features of a post-Putin era.

Japan-Russia relations remain virtually frozen and, with Russia continuing its aggression in Ukraine, there is no prospect of an amelioration of these relations in the immediate future. However, it is possible for Japan-Russia relations to “defreeze” due to certain triggering factors, e.g., the nomination of new ambassadors in both countries. While this is only possible in cooperation with other G7 members, Japan must not neglect attempts to convey its own messages to Russia by selecting the appropriate levels and channels for such communication.

China and Russia, as forces seeking to alter the current status quo, are challenging the international order led by the West. They aim to expand their influence by engaging emerging and developing countries in a loose coalition. In light of these moves by China and Russia, Japan needs to not only strengthen ties with friendly countries with which it shares fundamental values, but also intensify collaborations with countries outside any specific sphere of influence, such as those in the Global South, to proactively create a security environment favorable to Japan. Recognizing the diversity and varying degrees of pro-China and pro-Russia sentiments within the Global South, Japan should engage in multifaceted security and economic dialogues. It should also effectively utilize tools such as Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the newly-established Overseas Security Assistance (OSA) to bolster relationships. From this perspective, it is commendable that Vietnam, which relies on Russia for military equipment, is being considered as a candidate for OSA support. Currently, OSA support has been confirmed for the Philippines, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Fiji, and Vietnam and Djibouti are new candidates for the fiscal year 2024. The strategic selection of other recipient countries for future support is anticipated.

Strengthening relations with Central Asian countries will become increasingly important in the future. In 2004, Japan initiated the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue with five Central Asian countries prior to any such effort by Western countries. In 2023, the first ministerial Economic and Energy Dialogue of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue was held in September. More active use should be made of this framework to strengthen relations with Central Asian countries and drive a wedge into the problem of exports being diverted from Central Asia to Russia, one of the factors sustaining the prolonged aggression against Ukraine. Authority in each of the Central Asian countries is concentrated in the hands of the president, so Japan should enhance its position in Central Asia through summit meetings with these countries.

Russia-North Korea relations are progressing rapidly, and the threat to Japan from North Korea's improved missile-related technology is likely to increase still further with support from Moscow. Russia

and North Korea are less tied to the global economy than China, and there is less likelihood that Western economic sanctions, alternate supply chains, or other measures will lead to policy changes in Moscow and Pyongyang. Japan has been concerned about stronger China-North Korea collaboration and has paid close attention to their bilateral relations. The cooperation between Russia and North Korea, two globally isolated entities, is strong, and there is no way to separate the two at this point in time. However, the recent progress in Russia-North Korea relations has seemingly been driven by Russia seeking closer ties out of a desire to resolve the serious shortage of arms and ammunition resulting from its prolonged aggression in Ukraine. With no firm bonds between Pyongyang and Moscow, North Korea sees Russia more as a counterweight to the United States than a partner. Nonetheless, it should be noted over the medium to long term that, if confrontation escalates on the US-China front in addition to the US-Russia front, there will probably be moves among China, Russia, and North Korea to formulate a collaborative tripartite axis of authoritarian states.

To monitor the development of Russo-North Korean relations more closely with the above in mind, and to prevent still more regular and intensive trade in arms, ammunition, and missile-related technology between Russia and North Korea after the war in Ukraine ends, a cooperative framework for collecting and sharing necessary information among like-minded countries in the region – with Japan, the Republic of Korea and the US at the core – should be established through further coordination. On the other hand, care must be taken to ensure that such a framework does not become a factor that unites China, Russia and North Korea. ■

Section 2: US-China Competition and the Political and Security Situation in the Indo-Pacific Region

The United States continues to regard China as its most important strategic competitor, but is also stepping up diplomatic efforts to manage the bilateral relationship. China itself does not want relations with the US to further deteriorate and the two countries have resumed high-level dialogues, but crisis management between them remains a challenge. The US-China summit meeting in November resulted in an agreement to resume communication between their militaries, which had been the biggest focus of the meeting, but the effectiveness of the management of competition between the US and China, especially in reducing the risk of military conflict, will be tested in future.

While North Korea continues to pursue its missile development program and its relations with China and Russia grow even closer, the Japan-US-Republic of Korea (ROK) Summit, held at Camp David at the US's initiative, agreed to regularize summit meetings and expand the scope of trilateral cooperation, ushering in a new era in the trilateral relationship. In the Indo-Pacific region, the US and China continued to expand their respective influence, strengthen relations with friendly countries, and keep their rivals in check, while Australia, India, and the Philippines moved to improve relations with the US.

US-China competition

There is a shared consensus in the US policy community that the strategic competition between the United States and China is structural and long-term, and Congress is leaning hard against China across party lines. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has accelerated its search for opportunities for US-China dialogue on the grounds that further tension between the two major powers would undermine the stability of the international community, and this led to the US-China summit meeting during the APEC summit meeting in November.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden take a walk after their talks in the Filoli Estate in the US state of California. (November 2023, Photo: Xinhua/Aflo)

In February, just before US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Beijing, a Chinese surveillance balloon was sighted over the US mainland and shot down by the US military, which increased tensions and led to the postponement of the secretary of state's visit to China. China has been increasing its high-altitude surveillance activities using balloons to supplement satellite surveillance on a global scale over the past few years, and the unidentified balloons that flew over Japan and Taiwan were also found being

used for Chinese surveillance. Since China had unilaterally suspended its crisis management mechanism with the United States in reaction to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, Chinese National Defense Minister Li Shangfu did not respond to a communication from US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin regarding the handling of the balloon. China also rejected a meeting between Secretary Austin and Minister Li at the Shangri-La meeting in Singapore in June.

Secretary Blinken visited China in June and met with Chinese President Xi Jinping. During the meeting, they agreed to stabilize the strained bilateral relationship, and Secretary Blinken also conveyed the US's position that it is seeking not to decouple from but rather to de-risk China on the economic front. This meeting was followed by a visit to China by US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen and US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry in July and by US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo in August, as well as a two-day meeting in Malta in September between US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. In addition, President Joe Biden met in October with Foreign Minister Wang, who was visiting the United States, confirming the importance of maintaining dialogue between the US and China and the need for both sides to work to manage competition in security and economic affairs.

The November US-China summit held after these preparations reaffirmed the significance of the two countries managing competition in a responsible manner so that it does not lead to conflict between the two great powers. Specifically, the two leaders agreed on the resumption of defense ministerial meetings, which had not been held since November 2022, and the implementation of talks on artificial intelligence (AI) safety as well as on cooperation in combating the production and cross-border trafficking of illicit drugs. It is important to note that the agreement to resume communication between the US and Chinese militaries, which had been the focus of the talks and which China had long rejected, was reached amid the growing risk of an accidental military conflict in the East and South China seas. However, the differences between the two countries over the Taiwan issue that underlies the risk of military conflict were not resolved, as President Xi strongly opposed US military support for Taiwan. In view of this outcome, the feasibility of "competition management" to reduce the risk of military confrontation between the two powers, particularly with respect to Taiwan, will come into question in future, while the weakness of crisis management systems between the two nations remained an issue.

Mindful of the prolonged US-China strategic competition, the US actively strived to bolster relations with allies and friendly countries that play an important role in the stability of the Indo-Pacific region. At the initiative of President Biden, ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met at Camp David near Washington, DC, in August for the first trilateral summit meeting not held on the margins of multilateral meetings and agreed to establish a trilateral hotline. Beyond the traditional scope of dealing with the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the range of their trilateral cooperation was extended to closer coordination in their relations with China and their Indo-Pacific policies, and to more vigorous diplomacy with India, a key member of the Non-Aligned Movement, as

well as with Pacific Island countries where China has been conspicuously active.

Turning to China's domestic situation, the National People's Congress was held in March, confirming among other appointments Xi Jinping as President for a third term and Li Qiang as Premier. However, less than a year after their appointments, Foreign Minister Qin Gang and National Defense Minister Li were dismissed from their posts; Politburo member Wang Yi was subsequently named Minister of Foreign Affairs, leaving the position of Minister of National Defense vacant for nearly two months. Diplomatic affairs thus became centered on Foreign Minister Wang, and this is believed to have affected various aspects of Chinese diplomacy, such as the failure to coordinate a Japan-China foreign ministers' meeting after newly appointed Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa's arrival at the UN General Assembly in September. China's long-running zero-COVID policy has also had major socioeconomic impacts domestically. Publication of the youth unemployment rate, which had been reaching consecutive all-time highs, has been suspended, and there is a growing sense of economic slowdown, including a real estate slump. Although rebuilding the economy to ensure stable governance should be deemed urgent, no drastic measures have been put in place. It is important to bear in mind that the sluggish Chinese economy could become a drag on external relations.

With so many domestic issues piling up, President Xi's official travel in 2023 can be deemed restrained. His overseas trips included visits to Russia in March, South Africa in August (for the BRICS summit), San Francisco in November (for the APEC summit), and Vietnam in December. These trips marked a significant reduction from pre-COVID times. He has also been absent from G20 summit meetings, which he



The BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa (August 2023, Photo: Pool/Reuters/Aflo)

had been regularly attending, probably because India, with which China has a border dispute, held the G20 chairmanship. Nevertheless, China continues to expand its international influence with an eye on the US and is leading moves to expand the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS. In the Middle East, where US involvement had been declining, China is said to have mediated the restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March, and from April onwards it has sometimes expressed a willingness to mediate on the Israeli-Palestinian issue; since the outbreak of clashes between Israel and Hamas in October, however, it has taken a pro-Palestinian stance in line with Russia and in sympathy with Arab countries.

The year 2023 marks the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi's major foreign strategy, and the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing in

October. Yet, contrary to initial expectations, fewer heads of state attended this summit than the previous one, so few that the Chinese side avoided officially announcing the number of participating leaders.

In cross-strait relations, China conducted military exercises around Taiwan after President Tsai Ing-wen's visit to the US in April and, although these were more restrained than those carried out in the wake of Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the aircraft carrier *Shandong* did deploy in the waters east of Taiwan and approach Guam for a short time. The military exercises conducted by China when Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te stopped by the US in August were limited, perhaps due in part to Taiwan's restraint. However, the normalization of operations by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) across the Taiwan Strait median line has raised tensions in the region higher than ever.

Japan-China relations

April saw a visit to China by Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and the rollout of a hotline under the sea-air liaison mechanism between defense authorities in May, indicating progress towards a "constructive and stable relationship." However, China strongly opposed the adoption of the Leaders' Declaration at the G7 Hiroshima Summit in May for its inclusion of many references to China. On the military front, the Chinese and Russian navies conducted "joint patrols" in July and August after joint exercises in the Sea of Japan, entering the Sea of Okhotsk through the Soya Strait, sailing off the coast of Alaska, and entering the East China Sea through the Miyako Strait. In June and December, the Chinese and Russian air forces conducted joint flights over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. It is expected that joint patrols around Japan by Chinese and Russian bombers and fleets will continue to expand in both scope and frequency. Despite claiming that Japan-China relations are at a crucial stage of improvement and development, the Chinese government took actions such as detaining Japanese nationals on unclear espionage charges and criticizing Japan over the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant treated water release issue, hindering the stabilization of bilateral relations. In response to the discharge of treated water into the sea, China has implemented a total ban on Japanese seafood imports, with Russia and others following China's lead.

Against this backdrop, there were signs of a turnaround in bilateral relations at the Japan-China summit meeting held in November. Prime Minister Kishida reiterated his call for the immediate elimination of restrictions on imports of Japanese food products while President Xi urged Japan to take a responsible approach, and both sides agreed to find an appropriate way of resolving the treated water issue in a constructive manner through discussions and negotiations. In light of the interest expressed by the Chinese side, the two sides reaffirmed their commitment to comprehensively pursuing a "mutually beneficial strategic relationship," a phrase that was included in the 2008 Japan-China Joint Statement but had not been used in recent years.

Korean Peninsula

In September 2023, North Korea made clear that it would be expanding its nuclear weapons production exponentially and diversifying its nuclear-strike means by realizing and deploying these weapons among various types of military forces. The scope of this diversification encompasses launch and operational testing of solid-fuel ICBMs and nuclear torpedoes for aircraft carrier attacks, the deployment of attack submarines armed with tactical nuclear weapons, the use of unmanned



A video grab taken from footage released on September 16, 2023 by Russian Defence Ministry: North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visit Knevichi aerodrome near Vladivostok, Russia. (September 2023, Provided by RUSSIAN DEFENCE MINISTRY/AFP/Aflo)

aerial surveillance aircraft, and the testing of solid-fuel rocket engines for intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Efforts were also made on the operational side: the unveiling of the Missile General Bureau, the organization overseeing nuclear forces, and organizational restructuring centered on establishing a new tactical nuclear operations unit as well as running quick-response drills.

Following the adoption of a decree in 2022 that stipulated the preemptive use of nuclear weapons, a constitutional amendment was added in September 2023 to make the development and advancement of nuclear weapons a “principle of state activities” “as a responsible nuclear-weapon state”. North Korea’s Kim Jong-un described this as his “greatest success” of that year, indicating the military bias in state administration. In addition, the sudden public announcement in September of a “second revolution in strengthening the naval forces” that calls for an overall increase in naval power may indicate that further all-round military expansion is being attempted. Although the authorities may have gained some confidence in their ability to govern and control the economy through their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the contradiction inherent in reconciling the military buildup, which is being pushed based on the logic that security is the top priority, with the pressure to improve people’s lives that could increase as a reaction is expected to grow more serious in future.

Kim Jong-un’s first visit to Russia in four years and the Russo-North Korean summit in September gave a strong impression that military ties had deepened between the two countries, given that he was accompanied by personnel responsible for the nuclear development targeted by UN Security Council sanctions and that he visited Russia’s key sensitive space and military facilities. In addition, the border blockade between China and North Korea was eased in September, following the resumption of train and truck cargo traffic in 2022. Trade between China and North Korea, which had recovered to approximately \$1.027 billion in 2022 (3.2 times the level of the previous year and 40% the level of 2019), is expected

to further increase and recover to pre-COVID pandemic levels. Although neither China nor Russia have officially abandoned their stance on complying with sanctions based on UNSC resolutions, they have taken a more defensive stance toward North Korea, as evidenced by their criticism of the West at emergency meetings of the Security Council held in response to new North Korean missile and satellite launches and by their calls for sanctions relief. The effectiveness of the Security Council sanctions will inevitably decline further, especially with the growing closeness between Russia and North Korea. There is particular concern that North Korea may take advantage of the Security Council's dysfunctional status to launch more military surveillance satellites necessary to enhance its nuclear capabilities, and conduct additional nuclear tests.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration came to office in the ROK in May 2022. The administration's commitment to universal values, the improvement of relations with Japan through a future-oriented approach, and the strengthening of cooperation among Japan, the US, and the ROK were put into action. Following the Japan-US-ROK Phnom Penh Joint Statement and the resumption of Japan-ROK summit meetings in 2022, Japan-ROK shuttle diplomacy was revived. After the US-ROK and Japan-ROK summit meetings (Washington Declaration) and a trilateral exchange of views at the G7 Hiroshima Summit, the leaders of Japan, the US and the ROK met at Camp David in August and agreed to hold regular summit and ministerial meetings and set up hotlines among the three countries. They also agreed to expand cooperation in a wide range of fields, including economic security and supply chain building, AI, cybersecurity and energy, with a view to not only dealing with North Korea but also addressing relations with China and the Indo-Pacific, thereby opening a new era of cooperation among the three countries. The ROK announced its own "Indo-Pacific Strategy" in November 2022 emphasizing the importance of maritime security in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. Japan also positioned the ROK as a partner country in its Indo-Pacific strategy. After North Korea responded to this Japan-US-ROK coordination by engaging in a series of provocations that demonstrated its capability to attack the ROK and US military bases therein, the two countries aspired to further strengthen their extended deterrence. The establishment of a system for securing trust and providing deterrence that does not rely on NATO-style "nuclear sharing" began in earnest with the startup of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) agreed to in the Washington Declaration and the first port call by a US strategic nuclear submarine to the ROK in 42 years (July). Cooperation among Japan, the US, and the ROK vis-à-vis North Korea was thus off to a solid start, with the first Japan-US-ROK joint aerial drills featuring the participation of B-52 bombers being conducted in October.

The Indo-Pacific

In 2023, the US and China amplified their diplomatic activities to expand influence and strengthen ties with friendly nations in the Indo-Pacific region. Against this backdrop, Australia, India, the Philippines, and Vietnam made significant strides in bolstering relations with the US.

Australia, despite a change of leadership, has maintained a firm position on security while improving its economic ties with China. The Australian government's Defence Strategic Review released in April called for a review of the country's defense posture and force structure with the aim of deterring threats from afar and improving its deterrence and response capabilities with allies and other countries. Going forward, nuclear



Japan–Philippines Summit Meeting in Manila, Philippines (November 2023, Photo: Pool/Reuters/Aflo)

attack submarines to be built in cooperation with the US, the UK, and Australia under AUKUS will play a central role in reinforcing Australia's national defense capabilities, although US and UK attack submarines are scheduled to be deployed to Australia first. In November, the Australian and Chinese leaders held a summit meeting in China, where Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese insisted that the lifting of China's trade sanctions against Australia would benefit both countries, and agreed to improve economic relations between the two. In that same month, however, a sound wave emitted by a Chinese navy destroyer injured a Royal Australian Navy sailor who was diving in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone, prompting the Australian Department of Defence to issue a statement of protest. Although both Australia and China have taken restrained approaches since the incident occurred, it highlighted the fact that the pathway to easing tensions with China will be a difficult one.

As for the US-Australia relationship, decisions were made to jointly produce rockets and ammunition, to upgrade bases in northern Australia, and to step up patrolling by, and stationing of, US forces in Australia. Regarding Japan-US-Australia cooperation, plans to conduct F-35 training in Australia will be concretized. Joint military training exercises such as Talisman Sabre and Malabar have also been conducted, as well as training in resupply activities that help sustain warfighting capabilities. These efforts are aimed at improving interoperability, forward force dispersal, and rearward maintenance and resupply capabilities, and they are being undertaken to complement the declining weapons-related inventories faced by the US defense industry. Australia is expected through such moves to build up integrated deterrence with the US, pursue closer cooperation with friendly countries, and make a greater commitment to force projection in the South China Sea. AUKUS is considering expanding the number of countries participating in cooperative efforts pertaining to hypersonic weapons, cybersecurity, and undersea capabilities, with participation by Japan and NATO in mind.

India, which was projected to have overtaken China in terms of population in 2023, hosted the Global South Summit online in January to give developing countries a voice in the G20 under its chairmanship.

A total of 125 countries participated in the summit, demonstrating India's strong desire to lead developing countries as an advocate and consequently a leader. Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in June found him exceptionally treated as a state guest. The joint statement from the summit meeting touched on (1) joint production of engines for Indian-made jet fighters, (2) procurement by India of unmanned US maritime surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, (3) acceptance of port calls by US Navy vessels to Indian shipyards for repair, maintenance, and supply purposes, and (4) investment for semiconductor production in India, and the US-India relationship was seen to be growing closer.

It is noteworthy that India, which maintains a policy of non-alignment, has agreed to joint development of fighter jet engines with the US, which represents a substantial transfer of sensitive military technology. The role of Russia, a traditional arms supplier, remains important for India, which has a border dispute with China. With Russia's weapons supply capacity constrained by the war in Ukraine, however, India needs a diverse range of military cooperation partners. Against this background, the US has adopted a policy of reducing India's dependence on Russia that happens to fall in line with Prime Minister Modi's policy of promoting the country's military industry by focusing on domestic production of weapons and diversification of procurement sources. At the US-India Foreign Affairs and Defense Ministers' Meeting (2+2) held in November, it was also agreed that armored vehicles would be jointly produced in India.

The Philippines is actively building up its relations with Japan, the US, and Australia, but its relations with China remain strained. In accordance with the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed with the US in 2014, a decision was made in February to expand the number of bases in the Philippines available for US military use. In April, the first US-Philippines Foreign Affairs and Defense Ministerial (2+2) Meeting in seven years was held, during which a roadmap for future military assistance to the Philippines was drawn up and a policy announced of concluding a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) by the end of the year. Since the newly announced bases are in locations that could be relevant to contingencies in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, they are perceived to be intended to deter Chinese military activities, thereby contributing to the integrated deterrence that the US advocates as well as improving interoperability.

As agreed upon during Prime Minister Kishida's visit in November, the Philippines is now a recipient of Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA), an approach endorsed in Japan's new National Security Strategy. The Philippines will be provided coastal surveillance radars under this framework and negotiations on a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) will begin. It was also announced that Japan will fund the provision of an additional five large patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard and that one of the four air defense radars to be exported under contract to the Philippines will be delivered, thus promoting security cooperation between the two countries. June saw not only the first-ever Japan-US-Philippines joint coast guard drill but also the first meeting of senior security officials and the first quadripartite defense talks among Japan, the US, Australia, and the Philippines to discuss closer security cooperation.

China has expressed “serious concern and intense dissatisfaction” with these developments. During Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos’ visit to China in January, it was agreed to resume talks on oil and natural gas exploration in the South China Sea and to engage in friendly dialogue on differing opinions over maritime issues. However, the China Coast Guard’s radar targeting of a Philippine patrol vessel in February and repeated incidents from August onwards where China obstructed the navigation of Filipino vessels, used water cannons, caused collisions, placed floating obstacles, and moored approximately 135 vessels believed to be part of China’s maritime militia near the Spratly Islands have underscored the strained relations between the Philippines and China.

Vietnam has also actively been enhancing its cooperative relations with the US and Japan. During President Biden’s visit to Vietnam in September, the US and Vietnam agreed to upgrade their diplomatic relations to a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” a two-tier upgrade to the highest level, and to enhance collaboration across a wide range of economic, security and other issues, including cooperation in maritime domain awareness (MDA), measures to combat illegal fishing, and coordination on semiconductor supply chains, thereby demonstrating the US’s responsiveness to Vietnamese concerns vis-à-vis China’s economic coercion and maritime expansion. As Japan and Vietnam celebrated the 50th anniversary of their establishment of diplomatic relations in November, their bilateral relationship was similarly upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership and discussions on applying OSA to Vietnam are scheduled to get underway in the not-too-distant future. Wary of Japan’s and the United States’s closer ties with Vietnam, China successfully arranged a visit to Vietnam by President Xi Jinping in December and is seeking to steal a march on the US by deepening its existing comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam, which has been the most successful among ASEAN countries in practicing balanced diplomacy, steadily advancing its national interests within the context of US-China competition.

On the military front, Indonesia hosted the first joint naval exercise conducted solely within the ASEAN framework in September. It had been decided to conduct the exercise in the North Natuna Sea at the southern end of the South China Sea but, due to opposition from Cambodia, the exercise was instead conducted in the South Natuna Sea outside the area claimed by China. It remains difficult for ASEAN to take a firm response to China’s maritime expansion. In the diplomatic arena, the Japan-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, celebrating fifty years of friendship and cooperation, was held in December, where a Joint Vision Statement outlining 130 specific cooperation items was adopted. This statement, anchored in the rule of law, highlighted closer cooperation in areas such as cybersecurity and maritime security. Regarding the latter, it envisaged the enhancement of defense equipment and technology cooperation, MDA collaboration, and capacity development of coast guards. Amid intensifying US-China competition, security cooperation with Japan is becoming increasingly vital for ASEAN, which seeks to avoid a binary choice between the United States and China.

In the Pacific Island nations, there has been a significant increase in diplomatic activities by China. After reaching a security agreement in 2022, the Solomon Islands concluded a police cooperation

agreement with China in July. In response, President Biden was scheduled to visit Papua New Guinea in May, but his trip was cancelled due to the escalating conflict between Republicans and Democrats in the US Congress over raising the government debt ceiling. Consequently, Secretary of State Blinken visited Papua New Guinea instead, leading to the signing of a bilateral defense cooperation agreement and an accord for the US military's 15-year joint use of six naval bases and ports in Papua New Guinea. In September, the US hosted the second Pacific Island Forum Summit, demonstrating its ongoing commitment to the Oceania region by planning another summit for the following year. Moreover, in December, Japan announced plans to provide Fiji with small patrol boats and rescue boats through the OSA program. These vessels are scheduled to be used in training exercises conducted by the Australian military for Fijian forces, highlighting this cooperation as a significant example of collaborative support through OSA with other countries.

Prospects and recommendations

Although both the US and China have expressed their willingness to improve relations, there has been no fundamental change in the structure of their confrontation, and the possibility of another negative spiral due to unforeseen events cannot be ruled out. Above all, the outcome of the Taiwan presidential election in January 2024 could prompt China to ramp up its pressure on Taiwan and deepen the US-China confrontation. In addition, the outcome of the US presidential election scheduled for November could cause the US-China relationship to go further adrift, and the US's anti-China inward-looking stance could intensify. If the US Congress continues to be divided, it will also be necessary to pay attention to whether the US will be able to devote sufficient financial resources to the Indo-Pacific.

Meanwhile, as China's hardline stance in the region continues, the Philippines and the ROK have been taking more active roles in regional security, a trend that is likely to continue for some time. As it becomes increasingly difficult to predict developments in the US, the expansion of bilateral and minilateral security cooperation among countries in the region will be important for regional security, and this could be the way forward.

Although Japan-ROK relations have shown fundamental improvement, the question is whether the universal value-oriented diplomacy that began under President Yoon can be sustained. Most experts agree that there will be no change in course, at least not during Yoon's term but, with his current approval rating already exceptionally low in the mid-30% range heading into the mid-term parliamentary elections this coming April, the political outlook in the second half of his administration is by no means bright. It is thus essential to steadily push to materialize important security agreements and frameworks with the current administration. Quietly pursuing broad dialogue on a nonpartisan basis would be important, too, given that a progressive administration may emerge after the Yoon administration. It would also be beneficial to integrate the ROK into multilateral frameworks to promote regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Specifically, Japan, the US, and the ROK should deepen cooperation in command and control to make the results of the Camp David talks more effective in the immediate future. The fact that the SDF's counterpart is the US Indo-Pacific Command while the ROK's counterpart is the United States Forces Korea is an obstacle to trilateral defense cooperation. A start on rectifying this should be made by dispatching liaisons from the SDF to the ROK/US Combined Forces Command and the UN Command. It is also important to conclude a Japan-ROK acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA) and establish two-plus-two arrangements.

To reinforce the defense capabilities of Southeast Asian countries and to overcome the difficulty of supplying lethal weapons via Japan's OSA, Japan should not only utilize OSA but also coordinate with India and the ROK, which are active in arms sales, with the aim of providing balanced capacity-building support to Southeast Asian countries.

Deepening cooperation in defense-related industries among regional allies and friends, securing sufficient ammunition stockpiles and maintaining and expanding production capacity are urgent issues from the perspective of sustaining warfighting capability, shortfalls in which have been exposed by the war in Ukraine. The Japanese government needs to urgently draft legislation that would relax the Three Principles on Defense Equipment Transfer and allow the export and provision of ammunition.

The gap in strike capability between Japan and China is widening, and the Japanese government needs to quickly develop its own strike capability by such means as accelerating the introduction of standoff missiles. In doing so, it should also begin discussing the option of deploying US medium- to long-range missiles. Persuading local communities of the importance of deploying these missiles may prove a problem, so it is imperative that this be tackled as soon as possible.

While issues concerning the import restrictions imposed on Japanese food products continue to plague Japan-China relations, the cessation of China's dissemination of disinformation about the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant's treated water could be interpreted as a reflection of China's intent to improve relations with Japan. However, challenges such as the incursions of China Coast Guard vessels into the waters around the Senkaku Islands, the detention of Japanese nationals in China, and economic security concerns remain unresolved. The narrative of a "mutually beneficial strategic relationship" does not mean respecting each other's core interests *per se*. Both Japan and China need to work diligently to invigorate dialogue and exchange between defense authorities and those of a more general nature. ■

Section 3: The Middle East Situation: The Outbreak of the Hamas-Israel Conflict and Its Aftermath

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced countries to rethink their food and energy supply chains, resulting in a reflexive increase in the importance of the Middle East region where major suppliers of energy resources are located. Under such circumstances, the attack on Israel by Hamas in October 2023 is expected to prompt intensification of political bargaining not only between the Israelis and Palestinians but also between Western countries on the one



Smoke rises from Gaza following an explosion, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas, as seen from southern Israel. (November 2023, Photo: Reuters/Aflo)

hand and Russia, China, Iran, and Arab countries on the other. The issues on the table would include whether a ceasefire can be achieved and how Gaza should be governed and reconstructed. A close watch needs to be kept on the global impact of developments in the Middle East in this post-post-Cold War era.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine increases the importance of the Middle East

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also forced countries to rethink their diplomatic strategies. In particular, the outbreak of the war has compelled the Biden administration, which has advocated a "shift away from the Middle East" and a "pivot to Asia" since its inception, to place more emphasis on the Russia-Europe front. At the same time, the war reaffirmed for the US the importance of the Middle East, especially the Gulf oil-producing countries with their abundant oil resources, from the perspective of energy security due to soaring oil prices. The fact that President Biden dared in July 2022 to visit Saudi Arabia, with which relations had not necessarily been favorable over the handling of the murder of a Saudi journalist, was proof of this.

Indeed, the Middle East in recent years has seen relations between the US and the Gulf oil-producing countries cool over the Biden administration's human rights-oriented foreign policy as well as various geopolitical risk factors, including differences of opinions over restructuring the Iranian nuclear agreement (also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) and the "war on terror" in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen. On the other hand, new developments on the economic front have also been accelerating, as seen in the expansion of the Middle East economic zone based on the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as well as Bahrain (the Abraham Accords) in August 2020, the March 10, 2023 agreement mediated by China to normalize

diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the acceleration of “decarbonization” efforts in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries (e.g., Saudi Vision 2030), and the holding of the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in the UAE in November.

For both the West and those seeking to challenge the status quo, the appeal of maintaining cooperative relations with Middle Eastern countries has grown in terms of geopolitics and energy security, and the strategic importance of the Middle East has heightened as the result of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. This is especially the case for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey (President Erdogan, reelected on May 28, 2023, has offered to broker a peace in Ukraine). It is no exaggeration to say that the Middle East will also be key to the future of the international order and the global economy.

China’s growing influence in the Middle East

From a geopolitical perspective, China’s mediation of an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to normalize diplomatic relations in March 2023 was proof that China has gained not only economic influence but also a certain amount of political influence in the Middle East through its promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative. For the Biden administration, allowing China’s political rise in the Middle East, where the US has had overwhelming military and political influence, would create new challenges for the US’s Middle East policy and, by extension, for its foreign policy overall. However, this is also a consequence of the negative legacy the US has created in the Middle East through the wars it launched in Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003, as well as its diminished military and political involvement in the Middle East amid a growing mood of national disenchantment.

Because of this, Arab countries have been seriously searching in recent years for a security strategy that does not depend on the United States. While Israel and certain Arab nations have been moving to form a network to encircle Iran, Saudi Arabia has been hoping to stabilize the region, including winding down the civil war in Yemen, and to strengthen its own security by easing tensions with its bitter enemy Iran, which has been moving ahead with its nuclear development. This policy decision to place the highest priority on not creating “enemies” in the region led to an agreement on normalizing diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Around the same time, the US’s Republican Party, which opposes the Iranian nuclear agreement, gained control of the House of Representatives as a result of the 2022 US midterm elections. Seeing this, Iran, which reckoned the prospects of reviving the JCPOA and having sanctions lifted to be remote, moved closer to Saudi Arabia and let China take the credit rather than seek to improve relations with the United States by re-establishing the nuclear agreement, choosing to revive its own economy by strengthening relations with China. Iran was also likely aiming to avoid isolation through a series of diplomatic maneuvers amid accusations from Western and other countries of providing drones to Russia for its war in Ukraine and of suppressing domestic demonstrators calling for the abolition of mandatory hijab wearing.

Hamas's attacks on Israel collapsed the mood for reconciliation in the Middle East

As described above, the Middle East was moving from confrontation to reconciliation and from politics to economics as of September 2023, but the situation changed drastically with Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7. This unprecedented incident, in which more than 1,200 Israelis were killed and more than 200 taken hostage in a sudden attack by Hamas, combined with subsequent operations by the Israeli military to destroy Hamas that resulted in the deaths of many innocent Gazans, had a strong impact on the international community. This is because the Palestinian issue has been neglected in recent years, not only by the international community and the US but also by fellow Arab nations. The August 2020 Israel-UAE Abraham Accords were reached without any progress on the Palestinian issue, and moves to establish diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, a leader of the Arab and Muslim worlds, had been accelerating from the beginning of 2023. In fact, a senior Hamas official issued a statement after the attack on Israel discouraging normalization of relations between the two countries.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2023, "[W]e are at the cusp of an even more dramatic breakthrough: an historic peace with Saudi Arabia". When asked about normalizing relations with Israel in an interview with the US media, Saudi Arabia's prime minister Crown Prince Mohammed replied: "We are getting closer every day." John Kirby, Coordinator for Strategic Communications on the Biden administration's National Security Council (NSC), also expressed confidence at the end of September 2023, stating, "All sides have hammered out, I think, a basic framework (for the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia)". Saudi Arabia had ostensibly made resolution of the Palestinian issue a precondition for establishing diplomatic relations with Israel (the Arab Peace Initiative announced by the Arab states in 2002 stated that they would not normalize diplomatic relations with Israel without resolving the Palestinian issue), but it became impossible to resolve the issue in the way the Palestinians wanted after the December 2022 inauguration of the Netanyahu government, regarded as the country's most right-leaning administration ever in its commitment to a continued hardline policy against Palestine.

It was the Palestinian side, including Hamas, that was concerned that the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Gulf states and Israel would be realized without a resolution of the Palestinian issue. In late September 2023, Saudi Arabia dispatched a negotiating team led by its ambassador to Palestine to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, a move seen as a complete sham by Hamas, an Islamist militant group in Gaza that seeks the destruction of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Although the US had been the mediator of the Oslo Accords, the Biden administration was heading into the 2024 presidential election having not made any significant achievements in the Middle East over the past three years (Biden's campaign pledge of returning to the JCPOA has yet to be fulfilled). Conversely, diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were normalized in March 2023 through

China's mediation, and it is fair to say that the US has focused on building a legacy to secure its influence in the Middle East. Some see Biden's quest for a historic accomplishment through establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia as likely due in part to a sense of rivalry with former President Trump, who had achieved the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE in August 2020 (the Abraham Accords). On the other hand, it cannot be said that the US was paying adequate attention to resolving the Palestinian issue, which had already proven a thorny one. In fact, President Biden during his July 2022 visit to Palestine disappointed the Palestinian side by labeling the resumption of direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine on a two-state solution premature. It was amid such circumstances that Hamas found itself under pressure from the Palestinian residents of Gaza due to the worsening economic situation and in need of some kind of triumph.

Needless to say, this in no way justifies the preemptive strike by Hamas, but it should be recognized that these circumstances constitute remote causes of the outbreak of the current conflict.

Prospects and recommendations

Hamas and Israel will undoubtedly continue alternating between fighting and negotiating, both using the release of hostages and ceasefires as cards to be played. Hamas will use the hostage negotiations to build up its fighting capability as much as possible and prepare for further battles. Israel's policy is to thoroughly destroy Hamas as a militant organization, while Hamas is believed to be prepared to fight to the limits of its capabilities.

The current situation is considered a cardinal mistake for Prime Minister Netanyahu, and any compromise with Hamas is now unacceptable to the Israeli public. The war is thus likely to be a protracted one even if there are temporary changes in tactics.

While Iran is unlikely to fully enter the conflict at this stage while lacking sufficient deterrence, it may well be prepared to stir things up for the United States and Israel, in cooperation with Russia and China through proxies such as Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen. If Iran's proxy war grows more extensive through any or all of these means, the conflict could spread to neighboring regions. Japan, which has its own channels for dialogue with Iran, should utilize these to dissuade Tehran.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been active in Middle East diplomacy, inviting the Secretary General of the Arab League and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to Moscow. China, too, has shown a willingness to resume peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine by inviting the Palestinian foreign minister to Beijing and appointing a special envoy for Middle East peace. Ultimately, the outcome of this war could be a struggle for hegemony between the Sino-Russian camp, which has a growing presence in the Middle Eastern region, and the US. There is also a possibility that Russia might attempt to change the status quo in the Middle East by taking advantage of the power vacuum there to divert the world's attention away from the invasion of Ukraine, which could be a nasty blow to the West.

As the result of Hamas's attack on Israel, Gaza will not be able to return to its pre-October 7 *status quo ante*. Various views have already been expressed on how Gaza should be governed in future (the Palestinian Authority should govern the area, Israel should be responsible for security, etc.), but the Palestinians involved in the conflict also have widely divergent opinions on Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (Fatah), offering no clear direction. While more in-depth discussions that respect the will of the Palestinian people are needed, the key point is to create an environment in which the US can establish a partnership with Fatah in order to build a consensus on the Palestinian side (it was regrettable in this regard that a meeting to be held with the Palestinian Authority during President Biden's visit to Israel in October did not take place because of the bombing of al-Ahli Hospital). The road to a two-state solution in which Israel and an independent Palestinian state coexist will not be an easy one, and the international community needs to take an ongoing interest in, and persist in, efforts to have Israel and Palestine resume negotiations and resolve the Palestinian issue.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve this series of conflicts can only be made by the United States, which has been involved in the political, economic, and security affairs of the Middle East region and has a presence there. Although there is no denying that the US's presence is no longer what it used to be, only the US can engage in serious diplomatic negotiations with both Israel and Palestine, as well as with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other major players in the region. It must not be forgotten that it was US efforts that brought about a temporary ceasefire, the release of hostages, and humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Stability in the Middle East is also essential for Japan, which has become even more dependent on the Middle East for oil following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In some future phase of reconstruction in Gaza, Japan should be actively and independently involved in cooperation (in the areas of water supply, waste disposal, and electricity as well as in the creation of sustainable economic resources), drawing on its experience. Japan is one of the few countries that has established good relations with Israel, Palestine, and Iran, so it could play a complementary and bridge-building role in the mediation efforts the US is attempting in the Middle East. In cooperation with the G7, Arab nations, and the United Nations, Japan should support US-led efforts to reach an agreement on Israeli-Palestinian coexistence and advocate a roadmap for achieving a two-state solution. ■

Section 4: Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament

As strategic competition intensifies and nuclear-armed states as well as their allies become increasingly aware of the importance of nuclear weapons for deterrence and/or coercion, two opposing vectors of nuclear arms control and disarmament are at work. On the one hand, there is a strong need to reinvigorate nuclear arms control and disarmament as instruments to institutionalize and establish rules for nuclear weapons-related capabilities and behavior. This must be done in cooperation with adversaries in order to prevent and control further deterioration of the nuclear situation, changes in the status quo by force under the “nuclear shadow,” deliberate and/or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons, expansion of damage in such cases, and further nuclear arms races and proliferation. On the other hand, states that see the need to enhance their nuclear arsenals and operational posture as a force for deterrence or coercion are becoming more cautious and even reluctant to implement or accept existing or new nuclear arms control and disarmament measures that impose restrictions on them. This is because those countries believe such measures may impede their national interests and strategic goals.

Given the strategic competition that has been underway since the mid-2010s, the latter vector is growing in magnitude as the value of nuclear weapons increases globally. This trend has been further enhanced in the light of Russia’s continued aggression in Ukraine with its nuclear saber-rattling. There is a strong concern that those nuclear powers seeking to challenge the status quo may have learned a “lesson” from Russia’s activities and would attempt to follow suit. As the status quo powers have also been compelled to take steps to strengthen nuclear deterrence, the landscape surrounding nuclear arms control and disarmament has become even more challenging in 2023.

China and Russia’s negativity

Under these circumstances, Russia has stepped back from its existing nuclear arms control commitments. Since 2022, Russia has refused to accept on-site inspections under the US-Russia New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) or to hold a bilateral consultative committee (BCC) meeting to resolve the issue. After the US in late January 2023 formally identified Russia’s response as non-compliance with its obligations under the treaty, Russia suspended implementation of the New START in February, declaring that it would comply with the treaty’s numerical limits on its strategic nuclear forces but would not permit on-site inspections or exchange data that would form the basis for such inspections. In October, it revoked its ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), claiming that it would not conduct nuclear test explosions unless the US does. It also withdrew from the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in May. Furthermore, Russia announced that it would deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, and in June it revealed that the first batch of such weapons had been deployed.

At the August meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the NPT Review Conference, the US called on Russia to re-adhere to New START and to engage in dialogue on a nuclear arms control framework

after 2026, when the treaty expires. While Russia stated that it is ready for dialogue, it also repeated its insistence that it would be difficult to resume implementation of New START and further dialogue on nuclear arms control unless there is a change in the US's hostile posture exacerbating the ongoing deterioration in US-Russia relations.

The annual report on China's military power published by the US Department of Defense in October explicitly estimated that China, which is accelerating the qualitative and quantitative improvement of its nuclear arsenals, possesses 500 nuclear weapons (400 in the previous year's report) and that the number of operational nuclear warheads will reach 1000 by 2030. The report also called for China's substantial engagement on strategic nuclear issues to avoid the risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding. China, however, has reiterated its assertion that the US and Russia, which possess the largest nuclear forces, should first drastically reduce their own arsenals.

China has refused to implement or accept many substantive nuclear arms control measures, and it is far less transparent about its capabilities than other nuclear-weapon states. It has not provided an annual report on its civilian plutonium stockpile since 2017, and it has been suggested that China's soon-to-be operational civilian fast breeder reactor and reprocessing facility could be used to produce weapons-grade fissile material as part of the civil-military integration China has advocated. In addition, at the August 2023 Preparatory Committee following the 2022 NPT Review Conference, China brought up – and at times distorted the facts concerning – such issues as the discharge of ALPS treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the sea; Australia's acquisition of nuclear submarines under the AUKUS agreement among the US, the United Kingdom and Australia; and the possibility of nuclear sharing by the US and its allies in Northeast Asia. It has otherwise repeatedly made offensive statements and criticisms about the US and its allies, including Japan, while disregarding the norms and rules of the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

In addition, China and Russia have repeatedly issued statements or taken actions supporting North Korea, which has conducted a number of launch tests/exercises employing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and other missiles in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. In particular, the two permanent members vetoed a Security Council resolution in 2022 condemning nuclear and missile activities by North Korea, and opposed the issuance of a statement by the President of the Security Council in 2023, arguing that the problem is the US's posture toward North Korea and that sanctions against North Korea should be eased. At a Russo-North Korean summit meeting in September, there were strong indications that Russia might provide North Korea with missile/rocket and other military technology in return for North Korean support and military assistance in the war in Ukraine. All these actions, if carried out, would be in violation of existing Security Council resolutions. China and Russia have continued to take positions that imply acquiescence to Iran's steady increase in its uranium enrichment level and enriched uranium stockpiles in violation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Needless to say, the five nuclear-weapon states are authorized to possess nuclear weapons under

the NPT. They therefore have the moral obligation to assume greater responsibilities and roles in the nuclear arms control and nonproliferation regime. The above-mentioned words and deeds by China and Russia in defiance of international rules have undermined the credibility of the nuclear arms control and nonproliferation regime. Sovereign states do generally tend to give priority to preserving and promoting their respective national interests over maintaining international institutions (and cooperating under such institutions) that are not in line with their national interests. On the other hand, fierce strategic competition in the face of disregard for order and rules concerning nuclear weapons may result in undermining the very national interests that the competing states seek to protect.

G7 Hiroshima Summit

Amidst a major upheaval in nuclear arms control and disarmament, the G7 Summit in Hiroshima in May adopted the “G7 Leaders’ Hiroshima Vision for Nuclear Disarmament” (“Hiroshima Vision”), which was the first G7 Leaders’ document with a particular focus on nuclear disarmament. The Hiroshima Vision proposed nuclear arms control and disarmament measures to be taken by the international community, with due consideration given to developments



A group photo at the Peace Memorial Park as part of the G7 Summit in Hiroshima, Japan. (May 2023, Photo: Abaca/Aflo)

in China and Russia. The G7 leaders also visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, spoke with atomic bomb victims, and laid flowers at the Cenotaph for the Atomic Bomb Victims.

As the Hiroshima Vision suggests, a realistic approach is to pursue nuclear arms control and disarmament progressively, focusing on both realism (concrete responses to security situations) and idealism (the desire to eliminate nuclear weapons) in all time frames leading to a world without nuclear weapons. Some have criticized the inclusion of a sentence reaffirming nuclear deterrence that reads: “Our security policies are based on the understanding that nuclear weapons, for as long as they exist, should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war and coercion.” While some argue that a document for nuclear disarmament formulated in Hiroshima should not include such a statement, nuclear order can only be maintained in a world where nuclear weapons exist through both arms control and deterrence. The nuclear deterrence of the Western countries is fundamentally different in character from the nuclear “intimidation” used for coercion and compellence as a means of changing the status quo by force. In this sense, it is significant that the leaders of the G7, which consists of three nuclear-weapon states and four allied countries (under US extended nuclear deterrence), reaffirmed their “commitment

to achieving a world without nuclear weapons with undiminished safety for all” and directly experienced the reality of the atomic bombings.

Prospects and recommendations

Unless China and Russia change their positions on nuclear arms control and disarmament, it will be difficult to revitalize nuclear arms control and disarmament, at least for the time being. Nevertheless, there remains the possibility of a sudden change in the circumstances and perceptions surrounding nuclear weapons and security as well as a rapid increase in the momentum for implementing concrete measures, as in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis or immediately after the end of the Cold War. Therefore, continuous deliberation on concrete measures and their implementation is needed. In the meantime, efforts to continue the non-use of nuclear weapons, including the reduction of nuclear risks, are important as a means of containing any deterioration of the nuclear situation during the transitional period.

To this end, it is first necessary for the nuclear-weapon states to properly implement the existing treaties and their commitments regarding nuclear arms control and disarmament. In addition, close consultations and strategic dialogues are essential to bring about a convergence of views among the countries concerned on measures and areas in which they should or can cooperate in the face of competition and confrontation. The five nuclear-weapon states’ meetings on nuclear arms control and nonproliferation, which had not convened after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, were held in the forms of a working group meeting in February 2023 and an expert meeting in June. Such consultations should be actively promoted at various levels among nuclear-weapon states as well as between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states. In addition, the US and China held their first arms control dialogue at the director-general/assistant secretary level since the Obama administration. Furthermore, during their bilateral summit meeting on November 15, both countries agreed to resume dialogue among defense and military officials aimed at preventing accidental military conflict. Persisting with these efforts is crucial, especially during periods of escalating tensions. It is essential to broaden crisis management and confidence-building measures to maintain stability.

It is also necessary to consciously engage in building a narrative that promotes the reinvigoration of nuclear arms control and disarmament. The nuclear arms control and nonproliferation regime, including US-Russia nuclear arms control and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), was established and has been maintained based on a Cold War-era narrative: mutual assured destruction (MAD) between the United States and the Soviet Union ensured strategic stability, and such a relationship therefore needed to be institutionalized. However, as the US-led international order has been eroding and the balance of power has been shifting, an increasing number of challenges have emerged that cannot be adequately addressed by the traditional nuclear arms control and nonproliferation regime. It is, therefore, incumbent on all parties concerned to deliberate on an appropriate narrative that appropriately interweaves power,

interests and norms to reflect the complicated new circumstances, including the trilateral nuclear relationship among the US, China and Russia, the possibility of nuclear escalation at the regional level, and the entanglement of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities, along with new domains and emerging technologies.

The Japanese government, which has enshrined the pursuit of eliminating nuclear weapons as a national principle, should take a leadership role in creating such a narrative. It would also be meaningful for Japan to strive to create a unifying force that catalyzes international discussions on issues such as the CTBT, the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), improvements to transparency, nuclear risk reductions, and the military use of artificial intelligence (AI). As Japan bolsters its deterrence capabilities, including the development of a counterstrike capability as stated in its National Security Strategy, it would also be conceivable to envision a game plan that engages China in arms control and disarmament. ■