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Not What to Have, but How to Have It: Japan's Debate on Acquiring Counterstrike Capabilities 2016–2023

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ABSTRACT

As part of its historic defense buildup, Japan is incorporating counterstrike capabilities in its defense posture. While previous administrations were reluctant to pursue such capabilities, during the second Abe administration (2012–2020) the Liberal Democratic Party–Kōmeitō coalition eventually deemed them necessary for Japan's self-defense. However, the belief that conducting counterstrikes is within the boundaries of Japan's constitution and exclusively defense-oriented policy is contested. In this article, we study the parliamentary debate on acquiring counterstrike capabilities and examine how Japanese politicians discuss the parameters of the use of this controversial military instrument. Based on a content analysis of parliamentary transcripts, we find that three topics in particular are central to the debate on counterstrike capabilities: (1) the defense of Taiwan, (2) the role of the US in Japan's defense and interoperability, and (3) the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although the opposition and ruling parties differ in their positions on the parameters for conducting counterstrikes, such an acquisition is no longer politically unsustainable. As such, the parliamentary debate is increasingly about the use and implementation of counterstrikes rather than their existence at all.

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Introduction

In response to an increasingly severe regional security environment, in recent years Japan has made historic strides towards a more active defense posture in terms of its legislature, budgets, diplomacy and programming. These strides, however, have been highly contested, not only internationally by neighboring states, such as China, but also domestically by Japan's own policymakers and public. The ongoing debate about where to draw the line in the implementation of Japan's updated security policy, and how to fund upgrades, continues to echo through Japan's political chambers, including the Japanese parliament. An integral part of the debate on Japan's defense buildup concerns the development of 'counterstrike capabilities' – the ability to launch retaliatory strikes in enemy territory through, for instance, the acquisition of land attack cruise missiles (that is, Tomahawk missiles). From 2025, Japan is scheduled to deploy 400 Tomahawk missiles acquired from the US with the understanding that they may be used to conduct counterstrikes for self-defense (MOD, 2024b). In addition, Japan has fast-tracked the deployment of its Type-12 surface-to-ship extended-range missiles as part of its counterstrike capabilities, to be

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deployed to military bases in Kumamoto and Shizuoka Prefectures from 2026 and 2027 (Johnson, 2025; Ogata, 2025). Although legally possible within the boundaries of Japan's constitutionally defined self-defense policy, previous administrations have consistently and explicitly not pursued such offensive weapons due to their controversial nature. Now, however, this is changing. Although the opposition and ruling parties differ in their positions on the parameters for conducting counterstrikes, the acquisition is no longer politically untenable.

Debates about Japan's exclusively defense-oriented policy extend beyond just the possession or non-possession of certain capabilities as they also involve the conditions deemed appropriate for the deployment of military instruments (Inoue, 2024; Liff, 2023; Murano, 2024; Wallace, 2021). As Wallace (2021) has suggested, the implementation of counterstrike capabilities and the boundaries for their use could still face political barriers that undermine their credibility and effectiveness. Extant scholarship has also demonstrated that, although the positions of opposition parties and the LDP-Kōmeitō coalition largely converge on national security issues, the domestic political context remains crucial for debating the details (Catalinac, 2016; Chijiwa, 2022). It is in this context that central questions about, for instance, the defensive framing of counterstrike capabilities or the limits of Japan's exclusively defense-oriented policy, are discussed. Moreover, the details concerning how the LDP-Kōmeitō coalition negotiated with opposition parties over the conditions and boundaries for implementing new military instruments, such as counterstrikes, are deliberated on in debates that take place at the domestic level within the Japanese parliament. Here, we address an important aspect of these domestic debates and ask: what are the main security issues that Japanese politicians engage with in the parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities?

A major platform for Japan's ongoing debate about how to best defend itself in an increasingly precarious security environment while also tending to the limitations posed by its self-defense is the Japanese Diet (Hikotani, 2018; Takenaka, 2021). In Japan's parliamentary debates on counterstrike capabilities and more broadly on the use of offensive weapons, the limits proposed by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are contested by the opposition parties, including junior coalition partner Kōmeitō.¹ The main point of contestation for the opposition is not the introduction of offensive capabilities in themselves but how the debate about them is evolving. Claiming that the government is 'expanding the scope of what is allowed under the exclusively defensive posture without limits' (Kihara, 2023), the opposition has voiced dissatisfaction with the debate about the parameters of what is permissible. As Japan has yet to shed its three central postwar defense principles – to not possess traditional armed forces, to limit the use of force to self-defense only, and to abstain from participating in foreign wars (Oros, 2008, p. 9, 2015) – it faces a major challenge in determining the scope for its counterstrike

¹Kōmeitō holds a special role as it simultaneously acts as a governmental and opposition player. The resulting security policy that emerges from intra-coalition negotiations is thus often a compromise between the LDP's push for military expansion and Kōmeitō's moderation of these defense ambitions. Given this, we have at some points categorized politicians within Kōmeitō as part of the opposition in the analysis based on their policy stances on counterstrike capabilities (see footnote 5). Other significant opposition parties include the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), the Democratic Party (DP), the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai), Free Education for All, Reiwa Shinsengumi, Party of Hope (Kibō no Tō), the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), and the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

capabilities as it is a sensitive topic for Japanese politicians (Glosserman, 2024; Izumikawa, 2010; Johnstone, 2024).

In our analysis, we examine how the opposition debates the controversial limitations of counterstrike capabilities through a content analysis of transcripts of Japanese parliamentary debates from 2016 to 2023.² Several other studies have considered how domestic politics and Japanese parliamentary dynamics in particular influence Japanese security policy (Asano, 2024; Catalinac, 2016; Chijiwa, 2022; Hikotani, 2018; Takenaka, 2021). The studies have found that, although the Diet plays a more limited role in security policymaking, its authority in defining the scope of Japan's defense within the constitution remains an important characteristic.

Given the established importance of the Japanese parliament in debating the parameters for the use of military instruments, understanding how these debates take form and what topics they address is crucial. Here, we propose that the Japanese parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities is best understood in the context of broader security issues since arguments in the debate are often embedded in such topics. Although the parliamentary debate on counterstrikes in Japan can be traced all the way back to the 1950s, it has only in recent years evolved to reflect the contemporary security reality that Japan faces. While there is no sole motivation for why Japan has acquired counterstrike capabilities, previous literature has pointed to the early threats from North Korea's missile program (Schoff et al., 2022) and the increasing need to close the missile gap against China (Hatoyama, 2021; Ward, 2025) as motivating factors. Some of the overarching security issues in the debate on counterstrikes, namely the threat from North Korea, the use of force, revision of the Japanese constitution, and the US-Japan alliance, are well-studied while a number of other influential factors have yet to be analyzed in empirical detail. Based on a content analysis of the parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities, we identify and discuss three central themes in the debate on counterstrike capabilities – namely, (1) China and the defense of Taiwan, (2) the implementation of counterstrikes in the US-Japan alliance and US commitments, and (3) Japan's contextualization of this debate in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We find that the political opposition now discusses counterstrike capabilities as a feasible option when debating within these topics, whereas previously counterstrikes were considered a taboo subject.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the relevance of using Diet deliberations as data material and briefly explain our process for data delimitation. Next, our discussion turns to the domestic political context and the broader security issues that contextualize the debate on counterstrike capabilities. We then turn to the parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities and highlight three overarching but interconnected themes, namely: China and the defense of Taiwan, the role of the US, and the impact of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for broader Japanese security policy.

²Transcripts were retrieved from the National Diet Library's web archive system and are available at <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/>.

Method

We base our analysis on the idea that Japanese security discourses are constructed through arguments by Japanese policymakers and one of the main mediums for this construction is the Japanese Diet. Discourses help identify, through the study of language, how practices have been produced and/or contested within certain identities (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). In broader International Relations (IR), domestic parliamentary debates serve as sites of security discourses that shape the interpretation of threats and guide national security policy (Hansen, 2006; see also Yennie Lindgren, 2021). Given this, different discourses are comprised of varying ideas, some of which are more prominent than others. Examining parliamentary debates in democracies helps researchers distinguish the dominant discursive depiction of an issue and the differences between depictions (Wæver, 2002, cited in Oren, 2023, p. 33; see also Mason, 2019). Diet deliberations in Japan are also a medium that quickly reach the public.

As has been studied elsewhere, in Japan, there is a dominant security discourse that presents Japan in a more precarious regional and global security environment where new military instruments, such as counterstrikes and missiles, strengthen Japan's security (Catalinac, 2025; Hanssen, 2019; Lindgren, 2025; Lindgren & Yennie Lindgren, 2019; Oren, 2020, 2023). In this context, the Diet is an important forum for discussion about the boundaries of the use of acquired military instruments. As argued by Director-General of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau Masaharu Kondō at the Security Committee hearing in July 2020, Japan's use of specific capabilities such as counterstrikes needs to be conditioned in the Diet:

The specific limits on the minimum level of capabilities necessary for self-defense are fundamentally relative, influenced by various conditions such as the international situation and science and technology at the time, and therefore, ultimately, we have believed that this can only be decided by the Diet, which represents the people, through deliberations. (Kondō, 2020)

In the Japanese context, the role of the opposition is not only to hold the government accountable, but also to put forth alternative policy proposals that rival the ruling government to stimulate evaluation of different policy proposals (Stockwin, 2022, p. 13). Negotiations within the Diet's committees, despite often lacking direct policy-making power, have an important function in influencing LDP policymaking indirectly through the degree of policy consensus between the parties (Masuyama, 2020; Nemoto & Krauss, 2021). However, as noted in prior research, the LDP's role as responder gives it greater answering than questioning authority, naturally allowing it to drive the discourse. The LDP administration's preferred strategy in terms of developing policy on missile capabilities, however, has been to reach a broad consensus (Reed, 1983).

According to Schoff et al. (2022), debates on counterstrike capabilities are often instigated by developments and milestones in North Korean missile and nuclear tests. Specifically, 2016 stands out as a critical juncture as it was when former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō acknowledged in a parliamentary speech that his administration had initiated a policy study on counterstrike capabilities from the LDP Policy Research Council's committee on Ballistic Missile Defense. Moreover, the dissolution of the Democratic

Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2016 led to a greater convergence of defense policy views.³ It is from this notable juncture that the debate about counterstrike capabilities gained momentum in the Diet and therefore where we delimit our research.

To test this assumption, we compared the number of keyword mentions of counterstrike capabilities and synonymous terms in the National Diet Web Archives to the amount of North Korean missile launches from 1992–2024. Figure 1 indicates a trend in the number of mentions of counterstrike capabilities and the number of North Korean missile launches from 2016 onwards (Missile Defense Project, 2023; NTI Database [NTI], 2024). As we find in the analysis, although these correlate, there are in fact other topics that also drive the parliamentary discussion on counterstrike capabilities.

In our analysis, we focus on the debate in four lower House of Representatives committees that are relevant to understanding both sides of the debates on counterstrike capabilities. The House of Representatives is widely recognized as an academic source in the study of discourses. This is because it is believed to reflect the full range of political perceptions as both a medium that directly influences Japanese security policies and as a stage for non-traditional policy to be presented to the public (Hanssen, 2019, pp. 23–24; Oren, 2023, p. 33). The four studied committees engage in the debate on counterstrikes from different purviews that are based on their mandates. First, the National Security Committee (hereby the Security Committee), addresses the integration of counterstrike capabilities into Japan's missile defense architecture. Second, the Foreign Affairs Committee examines how these capabilities align with foreign policy. Third, the

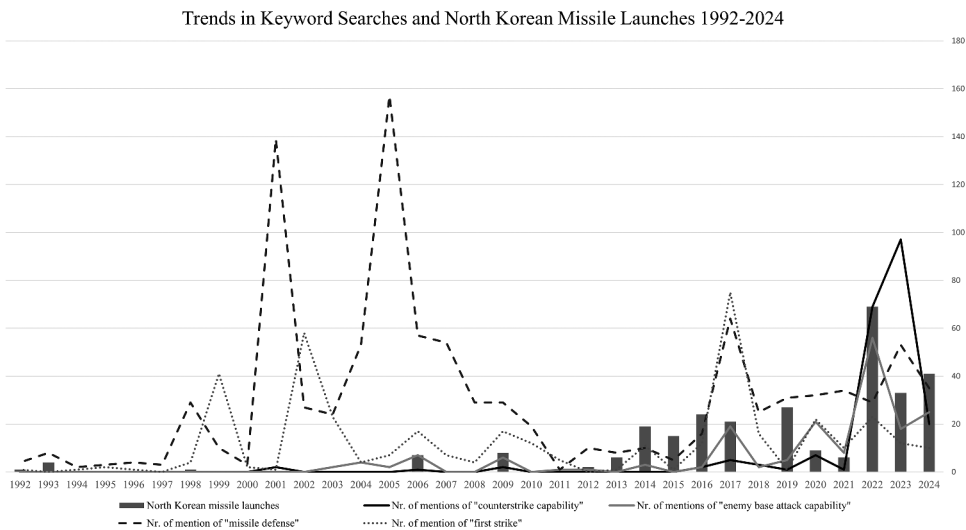


Figure 1. Trend in the number of mentions of counterstrike capabilities and the number of North Korean missile launches.

³Disagreements in security and defense policy has contributed to splitting up Japan's major opposition parties into several smaller parties (Kubo et al., 2022). As new opposition parties spring out from established party lines, they will often not starkly deviate in ideological standpoints despite being formed based on conflicting policy preferences from previous party leadership (Smith, 2021). As a result, the long-standing asymmetry in strength between the parties has brought the opposition and the majority closer together, incrementally converging the parties' opinions of national defense issues.

Budget Committee handles the financial aspects of Japan's military capabilities. Lastly, the Plenary Session (本会議 *honkaigi*; also referred to as the Cabinet Committee), with more opposition input, serves as the main platform for overarching debates between the government and the opposition on counterstrike capabilities (Back et al., 2021; Smith, 2021).

In order to capture the most relevant empirical data, we took a multi-stage approach. First, we identified the relevant Diet session transcripts with specific keyword searches in each Committee that included: 'counterstrike capability' (反撃能力 *hangeki nōryoku*), 'enemy base attack capability' (敵基地攻撃能力 *teki kichi kōgeki nōryoku*), 'Tomahawk' (トマホーク), 'missile defense' (ミサイル防衛 *misairu bōei*), and 'first strike' (先制 *sensei*). We then conducted a quality check of the transcripts and made sure their substance was relevant before comprising the final corpus. The corpus was then categorized into relevant thematic issues which was then recategorized a second time and ultimately led to identifying three interconnected topics in which counterstrike capabilities is discussed: 1) the defense of Taiwan, 2) the role of the US, and 3) the implications of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In total, the analysis consisted of 289 relevant transcripts. To analyze our empirical data, we conducted a content analysis, which is described as a 'research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text to the context of their use' (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 24). Further, to make sense of the body of texts and focusing on the textual features in which they have been categorized, we used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Version 14).

This method of systemizing the data was chosen due to the format of negotiations in the Japanese Diet. Speakers are allocated a certain time frame and since the nature of the Japanese language often is indirect, speakers will try to incorporate as many themes as possible into their allocated time frame and often not refer to certain debates explicitly, using different terms, or through linkages (Azuma, 2019; Maynard, 1994). In other words, keyword frequencies by themselves are a poor indication of the substantial importance of a theme. Therefore, it is imperative to study the actual substantiation and arguments the speaker is trying to make through a content analysis. This is especially true when decoding and translating vague language and terms used in the Diet, and thus particularly relevant for studying the debate on counterstrike capabilities (Makino, 2018; see also Hughes, 2022, p. 38).

Counterstrike Capabilities and the Boundaries of Japan's Security

In the debates, the studied LDP-Kōmeitō government asserts that counterstrike capabilities comply with Japan's exclusive defense policy and constitutional limits and that their primary purpose is deterrence. Despite this assurance of non-offensive use, the Tomahawk's long-range capabilities still raise concerns as they challenge the three principles underpinning Japan's security identity and thus fuel political debate about the precise boundaries of their use. For Japanese politicians, this debatable classification is a major instigator of political debate about counterstrikes and the topic of where to draw the line dominates discussion.

Interestingly, today few Japanese politicians actually contest the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities themselves and the debate on counterstrike capabilities is not about whether or not to have them, but *how* to have them. This debate and the reasoning

behind *how* Japan should exercise counterstrike capabilities is embedded in broader security and defense issues at the core of Japanese security discourses. As Taniguchi (2020, p. 105) explains, a large rightward shift has been observed under the LDP-Kōmeitō rule in recent years on issues concerning strengthening defense capabilities. Japanese politicians can now broadly be separated in two camps: a right-leaning pro-revisionist camp advocating for higher defense spending and closer ties to the US, and a left-leaning camp against constitutional revision, the use of force for military means, and integration in the US-Japan alliance (Maeda, 2023; Scheiner & Thies, 2020). Nuances of the debate are often monopolized by discussion of pro or con positions on certain acquisitions or military instruments. Therefore, in order to better comprehend the parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities, there is a need to contextualize the debate within broader issues and probe its nuances.

Japan's move to adopt counterstrike capabilities has been motivated by an increasing imbalance in missile power between itself and its regional rivals, China and North Korea (Ward, 2025). Other broader security issues in Japanese security discourses, in particular the use of force, Japan's postwar constitution, and the degree the US is involved in these processes have also been central in the debate on counterstrike capabilities. A key theme in the debate, extending from the 2015 legislation on collective self-defense, is whether or not using counterstrike capabilities to target foreign countries aligns with Japan's constitutional commitment to exclusive defense (Chijiwa, 2022). Part of this discussion stems from disagreement about what stipulates an armed attack – whether Japan's response under an exclusively defense-oriented policy is dependent on an actual enemy strike on Japanese or allied territory, or if an attack that is imminent beyond reasonable doubt but has not yet been executed suffices. The 2022 release of the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and Defense Buildup Program stands as a key juncture in the development of Japan's counterstrike capabilities. These documents highlight a substantial development in Japanese security discourses, namely emphasizing the acquisition of offensive capabilities while preserving its image as a peace state. The possibility of counterstrike capabilities being used to conduct preemptive strikes, although the LDP-Kōmeitō government explicitly denied this intention, remains a significant concern for parties adhering to a restrictive security policy (Heginbotham et al., 2023; Nagayoshi, 2022; Nakamura, 2023).⁴ Liff (2023) also points out the special role that Kōmeitō occupies in constraining the boundaries of policy and legislation on counterstrike capabilities such as the hardline statement on preemptive strikes (see also Hughes, 2024; Liff & Maeda, 2018; Lindgren, 2016; Sohn, 2024).

The revision of Japan's postwar constitution, especially the 'peace clause' of Article 9 prohibiting the use of force and renouncing the right to maintain a military, has been a highly contentious issue in Japanese politics in the postwar period (Hatakeyama, 2021; Ryu, 2018; Sohn, 2020). For Japanese politicians, the issue of the use of force under the constitution is also related to the role of the US and concerns the conditions for counterstrikes based on how integrated the decision to

⁴Restrictions on the use of force is particularly important for Kōmeitō's role as both a government actor and an opposition player. Similar to the 2014 negotiations on the reinterpretation of the right to exercise collective defense, in negotiations on the scope of counterstrike capabilities for the 2022 NSS and NDS, Kōmeitō pushed for the three conditions of the use of force to serve as a constraint on the use of counterstrikes although sacrificing specifications on the scope of attacks (Hughes, 2024).

attack would be with United States Forces Japan (USFJ) (Klingner, 2023). Although the LDP-Kōmeitō government reiterated that Japan's counterstrike capabilities do not alter the division of roles in its alliance with the US, the degree the US would be involved in conducting counterstrikes, and what part of the decision-making processes on targeting and to what extent the scope of attacks are autonomous defense decisions made by Japan, are major themes in the discussion of the scope of the use of counterstrike capabilities (Inoue, 2024).

Since Japan will continue to depend on US command, control and systems, it makes the role of the US a challenging topic for the debate on Japan's counterstrike capabilities (Wallace, 2021). Not surprisingly, the majority of Japanese politicians' opinions on counterstrike capabilities are determined by their policy stance on how integrated the decision to attack would be with the US. This position is formed not from an opposition to the US-Japan alliance itself (Oros, 2017), but rather from a desire to strengthen Japan's autonomy in defense and security issues and safeguard transparent and democratic policymaking. Interoperability within the US-Japan alliance on counterstrikes also involves another dynamic, namely the fear of entrapment. Fear of entrapment is related not only to the decision process around counterstrike capabilities and the operational structure – that is, who will make the call to strike, at what stage consultations with USFJ will begin, and the potential inability to refuse a US request to attack – but also to the fear of being dragged into a Taiwan contingency (Hughes, 2024; Ward, 2025).

Debating Counterstrike Capabilities: Defending Taiwan, the US-Japan Alliance, and Ukraine

The topic of acquiring counterstrike capabilities is contentious in Japan because of its linkages to offensive defense and the broader debates on the future of Japan's self-defense amid regional and global developments. Over the past two decades, Japanese security policy developments have largely focused on the threats posed by the international environment, such as the rise of China and North Korean proliferation (Akiyama, 2024), and what Japan's security apparatus, in particular relating to the US-Japan alliance, is prepared to counter. Given this, it is not surprising that the Japanese parliamentary debate about acquiring counterstrike capabilities touches on broader ongoing debates concerning Japan's preparedness and planning for potential conflict. In our study of the parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities, we found three overarching, reoccurring and interconnected topics closely related to conflict scenarios, namely: 1) China and the defense of Taiwan, 2) the role of the US, and 3) the implications of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

We find that, while counterstrike capabilities contest all three central postwar principles, Japanese politicians now openly discuss counterstrikes as a feasible option on the premise that they would be within the limits of Japan's constitution, its exclusively-defense oriented policy and international law. As discussions about Japan's preparedness to respond to contingencies unfold, Japanese politicians actively negotiate the means to deter China and Russia, as well as how to promote Japanese defense autonomy. We demonstrate that, despite differing views between the opposition and ruling leadership,

Japan's ability to conduct counterattacks in enemy territory is now a viable option, particularly impacting its role in the defense of Taiwan.

China and the Defense of Taiwan

China holds a central position in the overarching debate about the direction of Japanese security policy, particularly in the maritime domain, and what it instigates in response (Dell'era, 2022; Mochizuki, 2022; Ward, 2021). The introduction of counterstrike capabilities is frequently cited as a measure to address the missile gap between the United States and China (Akiyama, 2024; Ward, 2025). An important underlying factor that has been examined elsewhere is the implicit role of China in shaping this policy shift. While China is central to the rationale behind these capabilities, it is often not explicitly named in official discourse and thus only implied. Accordingly, in our analysis based on the textual debates, we treat China as a background factor. Our analysis emphasizes how counterstrike capabilities are being engaged with in broader security issues and in the studied debates, while the discussion on the missile gap with China is mentioned, the issue of the defense of Taiwan is more central and prominent.

The perception of China as a threat in response to counterstrike capabilities has divided Japanese politicians between positions advocating for Japan to take a tougher stance on China and for a more dovish and engaging approach to Beijing. Opposition parties such as the JCP have pushed a policy standpoint promoting better and more integrated diplomatic relations with China as an important regional and economic actor. Japanese security policy has also historically sought to balance between security and economic considerations in relation to China. Because of differences in understanding China as a threat, Japanese politicians contest the need to implement capabilities that could be seen as threatening to China (Security Committee, 2021). However, as tensions escalated around Taiwan after the US Congressional delegation led by Nancy Pelosi visited in 2022, this view changed.

Before 2022, politicians argued that the LDP-Kōmeitō government's position on China did not align with proposals for upgrading Japan's defense and that Japan needed a clearer formulation of China as a security threat (*anzen hoshōjō keikai*) (Watanabe, 2022). Following this logic, one could expect the LDP-Kōmeitō government to toughen their rhetoric on China. In the studied debates, however, the LDP-Kōmeitō government emphasize in particular two points concerning the acquisition of counterstrikes and the threat from China. First, that there is no intention to use the capabilities against any specific countries and that Japan's defense policy and defense development are not based on the idea of viewing specific countries or regions as threats and countering them militarily. Second, that Japanese defense policy will focus on the deployment and use of standoff missiles (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023b).

Moreover, as detailed in the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) (MOD, 2022, 2023) Defense White Paper (MOD, 2023), the former Kishida administration was in fact not actively promoting the possibility of countering China with Tomahawks, but instead consistently arguing for deterrence through standoff capabilities without specifying the role of counterstrikes in this deterrence capability. The unclear distinction between the Chinese threat and the intention of acquiring counterstrike capabilities to deter China has led to confusion regarding the need for Tomahawks as a deterrent. Even politicians

not directly opposed to counterstrike capabilities themselves question why the LDP-Kōmeitō government ambiguously formulate counterstrike capabilities as a deterrent when one of the reasons why counterstrike capabilities are necessary in the first place is to close the medium-range missile gap in response to China and North Korea (Security Committee, 2023d). The LDP-Kōmeitō government may have consolidated the pro-China part of the opposition by implementing counterstrike capabilities in a non-country specific formulation, but this formulation itself did not necessarily decrease domestic backlash.

In the studied debates, the LDP did not manage to successfully sell counterstrike capabilities as a minimum measure of self-defense against China. Politicians instead argued that counterstrikes could heighten fears of entrapment, reinforcing a ‘cold war’ mindset driven by US-China rivalry. Such a situation would put Japan in a precarious position where it would have to balance between two blocks with the US on one side and China on the other, and in which the potential unification of Taiwan would be difficult for Japan to bridge (*kakehashi ni naru*) (Security Committee, 2019).

Much of the debate around counterstrike capabilities centers on how to address China as a threat where a US-China contingency would play out, namely in the Taiwan Strait. While a Taiwan contingency is a concern for all parties, the debate varies depending on the different parties’ descriptions of China.⁵ In Japan’s debate on the boundaries of counterstrike capabilities, how to classify Taiwan is at the core of discussion. If Taiwan, based on the Taiwan Relations Act with the US, is considered a country that Japan is in a close relationship with, then it would satisfy Japan’s conditions for the use of force as a national security threat (MOD, 2024a, pp. 209–212). For certain politicians, their positions on the defense of Taiwan reflects former PM Kishida’s analogy that Taiwan could be East Asia’s Ukraine, arguing that it is ‘easy to imagine that Taiwan would request some kind of assistance from Japan’, hinting towards a Tomahawk-equipped Maritime Self-Defense Force’s greater role in the defense of Taiwan (Miki, 2022).

Although the development of Chinese missile technology and China’s arsenal is a considerably large security concern that Japan closely monitors in cooperation with the US, in the studied Diet sessions, the imminent threat of a Taiwan contingency is in focus in the discussions on counterstrike capabilities. Consequently, Japan’s role in the defense of Taiwan is a topic that will continue to be debated in the Diet as politicians diverge on how Japan should employ new capabilities to respond to China.

The Role of the US in Japan’s Defense and Interoperability

The US plays a central role in Japan’s defense as its main security ally and patron. It is therefore not surprising that the US is also expected to have a say in the construction of Japanese counterstrike capabilities as both a security provider and business partner. A major part of the Japanese parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities concerns what role the US will play in this process, as well as how integrated Japanese counterstrike capabilities will be with USFJ in light of Japan’s own defense autonomy.

⁵As Katsumata and Shibuichi (2023) argue, Japan’s response to uncertainties resulting from US-China rivalry and hesitancy in positioning China as a threat is influenced by the authority of pro-Chinese political actors within the LDP-Kōmeitō government.

However, while the fear of entrapment impacts Japan's security policy vis-à-vis China, fear of abandonment seemingly drives Japanese security policy vis-à-vis the US. In the studied debates, we find that the LDP-Kōmeitō government's goal in introducing counterstrike capabilities is to create a second deterrent against armed attacks. While the primary deterrent and the US role as a spear in the defense of Japan remains, according to the Kishida administration, counterstrike capabilities act both as a means to improve cohesion in the US-Japan alliance and as a back-up deterrent in case US commitment in Asia falls through. Pro-revisionist voices within the LDP use this argument to garner support for constitutional revision aimed at bolstering Japan's defense capabilities and expanding its role within the alliance. Notably, they argue for a renegotiation of the defense burden – like the opposition argues for – in the sense that counterstrike capabilities are regarded as a fallback plan in case US deterrence fails:

Japan must do what it can within the framework of its constitution to deal with this spear, and that is why constitutional revision is so important . . . Possessing the ability to attack enemy bases will help strengthen Japan's own deterrence capabilities, and in the unlikely event that US deterrence is shaken, having this capability will ensure a solid deterrent. We need to seriously explore not only financial cooperation but also practical cooperation, to what extent Japan can survive, and to what extent it can contribute to the US-Japan alliance. I think that doing so can also be used as a basis for negotiation to reduce the burden (Nakasone, 2021).

However, the role of the US is contested among Japanese parliamentarians. Some agree on the need to acknowledge that a Japan equipped with counterstrike capabilities is no longer just a shield and that there has been a significant shift in the division of roles in the US-Japan alliance. For the opposition, this is – and has historically been – connected to the unfair financial burden Japan pays to keep US commitments. This role is particularly complicated since the US is also a provider of the missiles and thus arguably profits one-sidedly from the transaction. For certain politicians, while the concepts of the alliance and Japan's exclusively defense-oriented policy are two sides of the same coin (*hyōriittai*), the financial burden on Japan should in turn be renegotiated as it is deemed far too imbalanced in response to recent changes (Shinohara, 2021). There is a general understanding that the decision to acquire counterstrike capabilities was made in consideration of the alliance and Japan's constitutional limitations, but that Japan can and should use the introduction of counterstrike capabilities to renegotiate both the division of roles and the financial burden in the US-Japan alliance.

As the details regarding how these capabilities will be implemented materialize in the Diet debates, a fundamental concern emerges. A security policy that deviates too much from what the opposition is willing to accept in terms of conducting strikes for self-defense would backfire and in turn unify the fragmented opposition in common cause against the LDP-Kōmeitō's expansive policies. Consequently, the division of roles, and Japan's financial burden in light of this, is a central issue which the LDP-Kōmeitō government has yet to fully address. A major obstacle for the LDP-Kōmeitō government has been to find a way to incorporate the decision to purchase Tomahawks from the US without infringing on Japan's exclusive defense policy. The LDP-Kōmeitō government has thus focused on the deterrence aspect of counterstrike capabilities to avoid the potential ambiguity of first strikes or pre-emptive strikes. The development of missile

capabilities in cooperation with the US is problematic considering its previous history of carrying out preemptive strikes (Security Committee, 2017).

Counterstrike capabilities are thus very much an alliance integration issue, sparking debates concerning the consequences of implementing counterstrikes in a cohesive alliance infrastructure that comes at the expense of Japan's autonomous strike decisions (Plenary Session, 2023a, 2023b). In light of recent developments in the US, inconsistency across US administrations for appropriate burden sharing and previous history of carrying out preemptive strikes is reoccurring in the debates (Budget Committee, 2018; Foreign Affairs Committee, 2017; Security Committee, 2023c, 2023e).

The LDP-Kōmeitō government argues that counterstrike capabilities should be understood as essential means to prevent security crises like Ukraine and Taiwan from occurring in the broader Indo-Pacific region (Security Committee, 2023b). The role of the US acts as a divisive factor, with some politicians primarily concerned over entrapment, and others over abandonment and particularly over the fear that the US will not respond appropriately to nuclear threats, as exemplified by Ukraine (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022, 2023a; Security Committee, 2022b, 2023b, 2023d). However, most politicians agree that Japan should seek closer multilateral relations, although with varying degrees of US intervention.

While the Japanese debate on counterstrike capabilities is deeply embedded in security with the US, there is variation on the level of embeddedness due to different degrees of engagement with the fear of abandonment. The takeaway for Japanese politicians is centered on protecting Japanese defense autonomy, in particular in strike and targeting decisions, while maintaining credible alliance deterrence. As a long-standing issue in Japanese defense policy, the degree to which Japanese counterstrike capabilities should be integrated with the US divides the political opposition. Yet the role of the US also bridges opinions on the need for counterstrike capabilities as military instruments regarding Japan's preparedness in potential conflicts in the Indo-Pacific, particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Impact of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a pivotal moment for Japan's security policy (O'Shea & Maslow, 2024; Ward & Koshino, 2023). In the studied debates, Ukraine is referenced as a precedent for why Japan should or should not acquire counterstrike capabilities. On the one hand, it is argued that Japan needs to have weapons such as counterstrike capabilities to be able to respond to a potential attack. Some politicians see Ukraine's resistance being successful due to this capability. On the other hand, Ukraine also serves as an example for why it is important to diversify its security arrangements due to the fear that counterstrike capabilities would not be enough to deter a Russian nuclear attack, and that the US would not want to risk nuclear war to defend Japan. This argument is mainly driven by Russia's nuclear threat due to the centrality of nuclear disarmament in Japan's dominant security discourse, but is also contextualized by Japan's closer relationship to NATO, and the Northern Territories issue (Security Committee, 2023a). Moreover, there are security concerns about the 'no-limits' relationship between Russia and China in the backdrop of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

That Russia's war in Ukraine is a central theme in the Japanese debate on counterstrikes is not surprising considering how many times it is referenced in the series of historical Japanese defense documents that were unveiled in 2022. Further, it is not a stretch to consider the war as formative for Japan's defense as, according to the Japan government, it represents a significant shift in threat perception that 'shakes the very foundation of the international order' (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022, p. 10). In the studied debates, Russia's invasion of Ukraine not only serves as an example of why it is important to have counterstrike capabilities, but also as a reason to question the US' commitments to challenging Russia and its nuclear threat. Some politicians argue that if Russia were to invade Japan in a similar way as they did in Ukraine, the US would not respond appropriately to a potential nuclear threat and Japan's defense options would be greatly limited (Aoyagi, 2022a). Such an argument is explicitly linked to the US' response outside of the alliance:

I think it's only natural that the Japan-US alliance has the ability to respond and deter. If it didn't have that, there would be no need to do it in the first place . . . even in such a situation, looking at the current situation in Ukraine, when a nuclear threat is made, I am saying that many people are worried that the United States will not respond appropriately. (Aoyagi, 2022b)

In their arguments, politicians express concern about the lack of focus on diplomatic policy in the discussions about a Russian invasion since Japan, like Ukraine, shares disputed territories with Russia and could face a similar situation. Some politicians also express doubt about the logic of implementing counterstrike capabilities to deter Russia considering the clear military advantage Russia would have over Japan if it were to invade Japan as they did Ukraine. They argued that deterrence through counterstrikes is not the preferred policy in this situation (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023a).

Not surprisingly, politicians to the left provide the strongest arguments against counterstrike capabilities to deter Russia in light of their opposition to NATO as a security partner for Japan. They argue that Putin's legitimization of the invasion of Ukraine centers on the right to individual and collective self-defense. Therefore, they believe that Japan's counterstrike capabilities would not be able to deter threats from Russia (while referencing Ukraine as an example). This is particularly the case, according to the Japanese Communist Party, when considering the circumstances Russia had to face due to NATO's 'eastward expansion' and rivalry with the US leading up to the invasion (Security Committee, 2022a). Japan's diversification efforts, which include a closer relationship to NATO, is therefore a recurring topic in discussions on the boundaries for Japan's defense needs, including for counterstrike capabilities (Brummer & Yennie Lindgren, 2023).

Within Japan's dominant security discourse there are also politicians advocating for the strengthening of other security arrangements, such as with South Korea, in light of the invasion of Ukraine and its impact on the international security environment. Drawing parallels to Ukraine's ability to independently support itself, arguing for the foundation and requirement for support from its 'friendly neighbors' despite not being a NATO member, Kōmeitō makes two implications for Japan's case. First, that deterrence in the Indo-Pacific relies on stability in Japan-South Korea relations. Second, that Japan's ability to defend itself using, among other measures, counterstrike capabilities is

a prerequisite for US support, as well as for cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and the US (Security Committee, 2022b). While the degree that counterstrike capabilities can and will play in these new security arrangements is yet to be discussed, Japan's 'back door' defense of the East Asian strait is unmistakably an important factor in regional deterrence (Fatton, 2019, 2024).

Conclusion

The ongoing parliamentary debate about Japan's implementation of counterstrike capabilities is negotiated within the context of Japan's dominant security discourse. Although politicians differ in their positions on the parameters for conducting counterstrikes, such an acquisition is no longer politically untenable. In other words, the question concerning counterstrike capabilities is not about whether or not *to have* them, but *how* to have them. A significant part of the parliamentary debate about these boundaries revolves around security issues and scenarios of relevance for how Japan could potentially deploy counterstrikes. For instance, how will Japan deter China or respond in the event of a Taiwan contingency? How far should Japan exercise interoperability on counterstrikes with its primary alliance partner, the US? Also, in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its ripple effects for the international security environment, how should Japan navigate its regional and global security role in particular with allies such as the US, South Korea and NATO on scenarios that involve counterstrikes?

Building on previous research, this article has examined three interconnected and reoccurring topics in the Japanese parliamentary debate on counterstrike capabilities: the defense of Taiwan, the role of the US in Japan's defense, and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. We illustrate that there are important continuities in parliamentary debates on the boundaries of counterstrike capabilities that are rooted in broader security issues within Japan's exclusively defense-oriented policy. In addition to preexisting concerns over China and North Korea, these include: conditions for the use of force and the limits of necessary self-defense measures; whether the use of counterstrike capabilities to strike missile bases in foreign countries adheres to the restrictive understanding of exclusive defense under the current formulation of the constitution; and the integration of counterstrike capabilities with USFJ at the cost of Japan's defense autonomy and autonomous counterstrike decision-making processes. In addition, key junctures, such as the release of the 2022 security documents, have provided momentum for the debate. We find that the debate on Japan's counterstrike capabilities is centered around these focal issues as a means to negotiate the boundaries of these capabilities and is thus less about whether Japan should have counterstrikes or not. Our argument reinforces extant literature on Japan's security identity which finds that although the boundaries of negotiations on defense issues have changed, policymakers still must operate within these limitations (Asano, 2024; Inoue, 2024; Lindgren & Yennie Lindgren, 2019; Wallace, 2021).

We further underscore the nuances of the debate about how Japan will use counterstrike capabilities. Considerations for the political acceptance of such missiles in Japan – and possibly the use of counterstrike missiles in a joint allied response in the Indo-Pacific – relies on the LDP-Kōmeitō government's ability to legitimize the use of counterstrike

capabilities within political barriers in topics which are and will be crucial to Japan's defense (that is, the defense of Taiwan, the role of the US, and the impact of Japan's defense capabilities in the international security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine).

We illustrate that studying the debates taking place in the Japanese Diet provides important insight into Japanese policymaking on military instruments, such as counter-strike capabilities. Another important feature of the Diet is the recurrence of parliamentarians as political actors in other defense institutions and networks. The interaction of these actors within and outside of the Diet structure generates broader support for, and preferential agenda-setting for, the issues elsewhere and in coordination with other topics, such as the new joint command headquarters for the SDF. This article thus contributes to existing scholarship by further examining how external security challenges influence Japanese political actors and parliamentary debates within Japanese security discourses.

Counterstrikes are part of a broader debate about Japan's security trajectory and what should be prioritized in the defense sector in the coming years. This discussion is particularly relevant when considering how new LDP-led administrations confront key challenges – such as budgetary pressures – that contributed to the downfall of the Kishida administration, with ripple effects that persisted into the subsequent Ishiba administration (Catalinac, 2025). While counterstrike capabilities have passed the initial threshold of approval and Japan has acquired Tomahawk missiles, the debate about the limits on the use of counterstrike missiles is by no means over. Several factors will be instrumental in deciding the future limits of Japan's counterstrike capabilities both politically and militarily. These include, for instance: the political consensus surrounding the use of these capabilities in line with Article Nine and the constitution, the political involvement of the Diet in armed attack responses, and the degree of interoperability between SDF and USFJ and integration of command-and-control functions with USFJ in kill chain architecture (Cooper & Sayers, 2023; Ross, 2024). The debated limits on counterstrikes in Japan are also relevant in discussions about how to co-develop new and critical defense capabilities, such as hypersonic missile defense capabilities with the US (Judson, 2024). At the same time, issues involving Japan's closer alignment with allied networks such as increased trilateral defense ties between the US, South Korea, and Japan will be important in the study of Japan's new defense capabilities moving forward. The studied debate is a living one that will continue to evolve and parallel several other central debates about Japan's security trajectory, the acquisition of new military instruments, and defense policy priorities in a time of global unrest.

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Appendix

Table A1. Summary of parties' positions on counterstrike capabilities.

Party	Years active	Prominent parliamentarians in the debate	Position on counterstrike capabilities
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	1955–	Motegi Toshimitsu Nakasone Yasutaka Nakatani Gen Onodera Itsunori	Supports counterstrike capabilities, for constitutional revision, and for further integration with the US.
Kōmeitō	1998–	Kasai Kōichi Nakagawa Hiromasa Satō Shigeki	Supports counterstrike capabilities as long as three conditions for use of force are met. For further integration with the US.
Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP)	2017–2020; 2020–*	Gemba Kōichirō Matsubara Jin Shigetoku Kazuhiko Shinohara Gō Watanabe Shu	Supports the need and constitutionality of counterstrike capabilities, but dependent on conditions for recognizing armed attack situations and the US role in attacks. For more democratic decision-making on attacks.
Democratic Party (DP)	2016–2018**	Yokomichi Takahiro	Supports the need for counterstrike capabilities, but dependent on conditions for recognizing armed attack situations and the US role in attacks.
Democratic Party for the People (DPFP)	2018–2020	Maehara Seiji Midorikawa Takashi Saitō Alex	Supports the need for counterstrike capabilities, but dependent on conditions for recognizing armed attack situations and the US role in attacks.
Free Education for All	2023–	Maehara Seiji**** Saitō Alex Suzuki Atsushi	Supports the need for counterstrike capabilities, but against further integration with the US.
Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Innovation Party)	2015–	Adachi Yasushi Aoyagi Hitoshi Wada Yuichiro Miki Kee	Supports the need for counterstrike capabilities, but for Japanese autonomy in defense issues. Supports the US-Japan alliance for deterrence capabilities, but against further integration. For constitutional revision.
Japanese Communist Party	1922–	Akamine Seiken Kasai Akira Kokuta Keiji Miyamoto Tōru	Opposes counterstrike capabilities as it goes beyond exclusive defense.
Party of Hope (Kibō no Tō)	2017–2018; 2018–2021	Inoue Kazunori Goto Yuichi (–2018) Watanabe Shu (–2018)	Supports the need for counterstrike capabilities, pro-revisionist.
Reiwa Shinsengumi	2019–	Kushibuchi Mari	No clear position, but for measures leading to denuclearization.
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	1996–***	Teruya Kantoku (–2021)	Opposes counterstrike capabilities as it goes beyond exclusive defense.

*Refounded after merging with DPFP and SDP and independents in 2020.

**Formed through merger of Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the previous Japan Innovation Party (Ishin no Tō), many party members split into Party of Hope or CDP in 2017, merged with Party of Hope to form the DPFP in 2018.

***Formed from the old Japan Socialist Party, most members merged with CDP in 2020.

****Previous leader of DPJ, previous leader of DP, member of Party of Hope (2017–2018), DPFP (2018–2020), and Free Education for All (2023–).