

Japan's Strategic Challenges: Historical Lessons and the Imperative for Comprehensive War Understanding

Description

Editor's Note: *This article was submitted as part of the Irregular Warfare Initiative's [2025 Writing Contest](#), in which authors were invited to explore how the United States and its partners can use irregular warfare to strengthen security cooperation, build trust, and enhance resilience among Indo-Pacific nations. This article stood out for its nuanced examination of Japan's evolving relationship with war—linking historical narratives, societal attitudes, and academic reform to the nation's ability to confront modern irregular challenges.*

Japan stands at a strategic crossroads. Eighty years after World War II, the country still orients its security identity around pacifism and emotional memory—an inheritance that once stabilized the nation but now risks constraining it. Japan ranks among the world's top five economies and is the United States' most important ally in the region—an indispensable pillar in maintaining a free and open international order. Geographically, it sits in close proximity to China, the Korean Peninsula, and Russia, and hosts over 55,000 US troops, making it central to regional deterrence and rapid response capabilities. In an Indo-Pacific defined by intensifying great-power rivalry, which plays out beneath the threshold of conflict, Japan can no longer afford to treat war as a taboo subject or assume that abstention from strategic inquiry equates to safety. Whether it wishes to or not, Japan is a significant player on the board.

Japan's hesitancy around major conflict is rooted in the country's postwar narrative, where war is treated as a [moral taboo rather than a subject of strategic inquiry](#). Public discourse emphasizes [victimhood](#) and [emotional memory](#) in order to avoid repeating the same missteps again, while academic institutions have distanced themselves from future-oriented war studies due to their responsibility to the legacy of the past war. As a result, Japan struggles to develop a coherent understanding of war's political function in contemporary security environments.

The following analysis examines how Japan's nationwide stance on war has developed across three key periods in its history: (1) its World War II origins, (2) the post-World War II era, and (3) the

current era of great-power competition. Understanding this trajectory is essential to explaining Japan's current approach to irregular warfare; only by grappling with its past can Japan chart a clearer course for its future. The analysis concludes by outlining several key reforms to help Japan develop a more effective way of thinking about war and better position itself for the challenges ahead.

1: World War II Origins: The Absence of a Strategic Goal

During World War II, Japan [lacked a unified national war plan](#). Instead, the Imperial Army and Navy pursued separate operational campaigns against presumed adversaries, absent an overarching strategic framework or clearly defined national objectives. While modern warfare typically follows a hierarchy, with strategy guiding operations and tactics to achieve political goals, Japan's approach placed disproportionate emphasis on operational success. That mindset became ingrained in Japan's military leaders and ultimately undermined Japan's ability to wage coherent war.

This mindset stemmed from prior successful military campaigns, particularly the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. In that conflict, Japan achieved decisive battlefield success through bayonet charges and naval firepower, which [encouraged a short-term orientation toward victory](#) and a doctrine emphasizing that wars should be won by decisive engagements on land and sea. That doctrine dominated the military and fostered the belief that tactical and operational excellence alone could secure national objectives, even though those objectives were not clearly defined.

[As this doctrinal bias](#) became institutionalized, it shaped Japan's later strategic choices and left the country ill-prepared for multi-front warfare against the Allied powers, Russia, and China during World War II. During the conflict, national resources, manpower, and logistics were stretched thin, yet military leaders continued to assume that operational victories alone could force adversaries into submission—a presumption that overshadowed broader strategic and political considerations.

As World War II raged on and the prospects of a prolonged war became evident, Japan intensified its efforts toward total mobilization. In 1938, the Imperial government enacted [the National Mobilization Law](#) to centralize control over the human and material resources deemed essential for sustaining the war effort. [National propaganda](#) accompanied this law, portraying the war as just and service to the nation as a noble duty. Men were conscripted into the military, while women and youth were mobilized for labor service, and even students were dispatched to the front lines. Scientific research was redirected toward military needs, including tropical medicine, jet propulsion, acoustic and radio wave weaponry, and emergency food supplies.

Civilians, in turn, became targets of widespread aerial bombardment, including the devastating attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and ground combat in Okinawa. Families saw loved ones sent to distant

battlefields, many never to return. The personal loss of friends, relatives, and neighbors, woven into daily life under wartime conditions, became a defining experience for the postwar generation, embedding a deep emotional scar in the national psyche.

The absence of a strategic goal during the war, combined with the widespread human cost resulting from entrenched military norms and uncritical operational thinking, shaped a postwar narrative that avoided political or military analysis. Instead, war became a subject of emotional reflection and moral condemnation. This legacy contributed to Japan's reluctance to engage with war as a political instrument, leaving a conceptual void in its contemporary strategic discourse.

2: Post-World War II era: War as a Taboo in Postwar Japan

Following its defeat in World War II, Japanese society underwent a profound reckoning. Survivors of the conflict, many of whom had lost loved ones or witnessed the devastation firsthand, internalized a moral imperative: [war must never be repeated, and therefore, must be narrated](#). This sentiment became a foundational norm in postwar public discourse.

The absence of surviving wartime leaders further reinforced this silence. Many of those who had directed Japan's war effort perished in battle, died by suicide, or were executed as war criminals. Without authoritative figures to articulate the rationale behind Japan's wartime decisions, the public narrative defaulted to one of victimhood. Rather than confronting the nation's role in initiating or escalating the conflict, citizens came to see themselves as passive victims, swept into a war started by distant elites.

This framing was not only cultural, but institutional. For example, the Japan Science Council, the country's leading academic advisory body, formally [prohibited research](#) that could contribute to military development or war-related applications. This policy, rooted in postwar reflection and a desire to prevent future militarization, effectively excluded strategic studies from mainstream academic inquiry. Universities avoided military-related research outside of historical analysis, and disciplines such as political science and international relations often sidestepped the subject of war altogether.

As a result, Japan's strategic literacy remains underdeveloped. War is treated not as a political instrument or subject of analysis, but as a moral failure to be mourned. This taboo has constrained Japan's ability to engage with contemporary security challenges, particularly those requiring a nuanced understanding of war's political and strategic dimensions.

3: The Current Era of Great-Power Competition: A Vulnerable Partner Nation

Still, Japan's approach has not remained static. Recent developments show meaningful movement. In response to the realities of great power competition, Japan has undertaken several significant measures. For instance, Tokyo passed [the Economic Security Law](#), aimed at protecting critical supply chains, infrastructure, and emerging technologies. Japan has also expanded its [military cooperation and exercises](#) with allied partners and broadened its focus to include [strategic domains](#) such as space, cyber, electromagnetic, and cognitive warfare. Japan has also [increased the defense budget](#) to strengthen its defense capacity and initiated a comprehensive review of its defense and security policies to adapt to an evolving security environment.

Despite these initiatives, the absence of robust war theory in public discourse and policymaking leaves Japan reactive rather than proactive in shaping its security environment. Modern conflict has become multidimensional, blending political, cultural, social, and informational domains. The boundaries between peace and war have blurred, with influence and legitimacy now central to [hybrid](#) and [irregular warfare](#). This shift demands a [conceptual approach that goes beyond tactical coordination](#) and embraces strategic understanding.

Japan remains strategically vulnerable within this landscape. Its postwar victimhood narrative, while historically significant, emphasizes emotional and operational aspects of war, limiting engagement with its strategic dimension. Public discourse avoids war as a political instrument, and academic institutions have distanced themselves from future-oriented war studies due to historical sensitivities. As a result, Japan's strategic literacy remains underdeveloped.

To navigate great power competition effectively, Japan must move beyond tactical and operational adaptation. It must embrace war as a total phenomenon, as theorized by Clausewitz, and recognize irregular warfare as a central strategic concern. This requires not only policy reform but also a cultural and intellectual shift. Strategic inquiry must be reclaimed as a legitimate and necessary part of national resilience.

Recommended Key Reforms

To address the complex realities of modern conflict, as well as the unique challenges Japan faces in that context, the nation must enhance its academic and public understanding of war as a political phenomenon that encompasses the entire society. [The National Institute for Defense Studies](#), Japan's largest government institute for security and strategic warfare research, has only 90 scholars. Compared to institutions in the US or UK, this pool remains relatively small, partly because many researchers are oriented toward supporting Japan's pacifist ideology or current policy frameworks. At present, [university research in Japan](#) tends to focus on dual-use technologies rather than conceptual studies of war itself.

Therefore, establishing robust academic environments to study war beyond military dimensions is crucial for bridging existing gaps and reinforcing Japan's role as a global security partner. To translate this vision into action, Japan can pursue two mutually reinforcing reforms that enhance both the international exchange of ideas and the domestic academic foundation for studying war in all its dimensions:

1. International Exchanges

Expanding programs to enable Japanese researchers to collaborate with leading war theory institutions, particularly in countries with significant war experiences, would open avenues to both theoretical and applied frameworks. Enhanced scholarship, funding, and exchange programs are vital for building sustainable capacity in war research and analysis while addressing domestic constraints.

2. Development of Academic Ecosystems

Creating interdisciplinary academic environments to study war, including irregular warfare, enables scholars to explore its complexities through diverse fields. Communication studies, emphasizing cognition and bias, shed light on how narratives shape perceptions and decision-making, influencing conflict dynamics. History and cultural anthropology uncover how accumulated histories impact societal and international responses. Revisiting historical expertise, such as the Nakano School, alongside interdisciplinary research, offers crucial insights for enhancing Japan's ability to tackle hybrid threats and strengthen global partnerships.

Conclusion

Japan's future security depends not on distancing itself from war as a concept, but on understanding war as a political phenomenon that demands foresight rather than fear. Building the intellectual infrastructure to study conflict in all its dimensions is not a return to militarism but an act of national responsibility. By confronting the full spectrum of modern warfare: irregular, hybrid, cognitive, and informational, Japan positions itself not as a reluctant participant, but as a thoughtful and capable shaper of the Indo-Pacific order.

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Date Created

2025/12/16