
Enabling Japanese Support for Ukraine: the general security trajectory, domestic politics, and the economy

Well into the fourth year of the war in Ukraine, international support for the country continues, albeit with the US under Trump constituting a wild card. Since the start of the Russian invasion, measures in Ukraine's defense have ranged from verbal censure to economic sanctions on Russia, to providing Ukraine with economic assistance, military supplies and weapons, and training of its armed forces. Many – including, it has been argued, the Russian leadership – were taken aback by the unity of the international response. It is of little doubt that Ukraine would not have been able to defend itself to the extent that it so far has, had Western support not been there.

Nevertheless, the fear among Ukraine's defenders – and the hope held out in the Russian leadership – has long been that this support might dwindle with the passage of time, and with Western publics increasingly worn out by a dragged-out war and worsening economy. Indeed, since Trump's return to the presidency signals from the US have been mixed, with repeated freezing and unfreezing of aid. In terms of material support, a shift toward sales instead of donations has been discerned.

Japan has provided Ukraine with very little military aid owing to domestic constraints, but rhetorically as well as in terms of non-military assistance, it has placed itself squarely in the pro-Ukraine camp. Its total bilateral commitments until June 2025 amount to 18,75 billion euros, or 0.31% of its 2021 GDP, in sheer numbers ranking above European countries like Belgium (3,55 billion), France (9,87 billion), and Italy (2,61 billion), and other states like Australia (1,02 billion) and Canada (13,72 billion) (Bomprezzi, Bushnell, Frank et al., 2025). Given the fears of dwindling support, what is the likelihood that the calculus of the Japanese government regarding support for Ukraine would change? Below, two factors are lifted: first, one regarding the fundamental direction of Japanese foreign policy: the imperative to be aligned with US partners and allies and to strengthen Japan's defense capabilities. Second, one that influences Ukraine policy specifically: the economic situation and public opinion. Both are viewed against the backdrop of Japanese domestic politics, which as of early October 2025 are going through a particularly fluid phase.

Japan's security trajectory

The first thing to consider is the role of support for Ukraine in broader Japanese foreign and security policy. Japanese support for Ukraine stems from concern regarding its own material security, both through the perceived threat to Taiwan from China and the fear that a collapsed rules-based order facilitating international trade would jeopardize a famously resource-poor Japan. These are factors that have grown in importance to Japanese security policy over the past 15-20 years and that have become supercharged since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The latter has also underscored another long-term trend, namely Japanese alignment with the US and US partners and allies. That alignment has been a fact in Japanese security policy since 1952, when the first security treaty between the US and Japan came into force, but there

is arguably greater political consensus around it today than what used to be the case. Since the end of the Cold War, the left and center-left in Japanese politics have abandoned any ideas of a neutral Japan (old Japan Socialist Party) or geopolitical alignment with another hegemon (namely the USSR, in the case of the Japanese Communist Party).

In 2009-2012, there was a window of foreign policy contestation when the center-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), particularly under its first prime minister Hatoyama Yukio, pursued a policy aimed at greater parity in the US-Japan alliance and sought engagement with Asian countries, including China. After failing to deliver on key election promises – primarily moving U.S. Air Station Futenma out of Okinawa prefecture – and being booted out of government in 2012, the DPJ and Hatoyama’s alternative foreign policy line became largely discredited among both the political class and public opinion. Since then, the government of Abe Shinzo returned Japan to emphasizing the importance of the US-Japan Alliance, while also steadily expanding Japan’s military capabilities, a track on which his successors have continued. In the words of one Japanese academic critical of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in a private conversation with this author, the type of debate and the type of alternative Japanese foreign policy that existed for a time during the DPJ government does no longer exist.

In this way, the broader imperative of aligning with the US and with other US allies and partners conditions Japan to continue supporting Ukraine. At the same time – and complicating the picture – the protectionist, mercantilist and unilateral power-projection tendency in US foreign policy that has grown powerful under Trump provides an interesting test of the notion that Japan “always” follows the US. The conclusion of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) under Japanese leadership after the US had left the earlier TPP negotiations was an early hint at a Japan that stays the course in the face of the US choosing another path.

Fluctuating domestic politics

Looking at domestic politics – a possible source of foreign policy contestation – the debate in the run-up to the early October leadership elections for the presidency of the LDP did not suggest much daylight between the party’s five candidates on foreign policy issues, and as such, not much contestation within the mainstream of the party as a whole. All, including front runners Takaichi Sanae and Koizumi Shinjiro, expressed a need to strengthen the US-Japan alliance and increase defense spending (Jiji Tsushin seijibu 2025). On February 24, 2025, eventual winner Takaichi – considered the most right-wing of all candidates – posted on X that depending on the specific conditions, US efforts toward a ceasefire in Ukraine meant growing risks for Japan because of Russia’s relations with North Korea and the bad precedent of changing international borders by force. Her take-home message was to avoid “overreliance on others for defense” and that “our own country’s defensive capabilities must be strengthened”, highlighting the connection drawn between the war in Ukraine and Japan’s own defensive capabilities (Takaichi 2025).

At the time of writing in early October 2025, Japanese politics have entered a very volatile phase. On October 10, the LDP's small, pacifist-oriented coalition partner since 1999, Komeito, communicated that it is not going to sign another coalition agreement with newly elected LDP leader Takaichi, citing dissatisfaction with the larger party's handling of a political funds scandal that started brewing already in November 2023. The LDP and Komeito have always constituted a difficult partnership due to their diametrically opposed views on security policy, but they have been vital for each other's candidates' ability to win elections in contested seats. Over the long term, Komeito's share of the national vote has plummeted, however. At the Upper House elections this year, the party gained 5.4 percent of the vote; that share was 13 percent at the 2019 election (Harris 2025). It is for this reason likely that the decision to leave the coalition has been in the making for some time. The election of Takaichi – representing the conservative parts of the LDP that are as far away from Komeito as possible – and crucially her decision on October 7 to elevate strongly anti-Komeito LDP power broker Aso Taro on the one hand and Hagiuda Koichi, one of the most implicated lawmakers in the political funds scandal on the other, to her party leadership team was seen by Komeito as the last straw (Asahi Shimbun 2025).

The opposition is now scrambling to use the window of opportunity to field a united candidate at the parliamentary vote for a new prime minister scheduled for October 20, a schedule that seems likely to be pushed back further (Yomiuri Shimbun 2025). Tamaki Yuichiro, leader of the center-right Democratic Party for the People (DPP) which became the third largest party at the July elections to the Upper House is talked about as a possible compromise (Nikkei 2025). Tamaki himself wants the largest opposition party, the center-left Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), to first commit to the DPP's positive view of the security legislation that was passed in 2015 and legalized Japan's participation in collective self-defense, which the CDP sees as "partly" unconstitutional (Tamaki 2025). Komeito's decision to leave the coalition can be said to have caused a critical juncture in Japanese politics, where longstanding institutional constraints have been thrown up in the air, allowing actors space to put in place a new institutional trajectory. As during the LDP leadership election, Ukraine policy has not been thematized in the short period that this critical juncture has existed. It is perhaps likely that if the opposition unifies and elects a new prime minister, the CDP would further soften its opposition to the by now 10 years old security legislation in exchange for influence on other key issues in domestic politics like reform of the political funds system. Given how the Ukraine issue is often connected to Japan's capability to defend itself, that would be likely to further strengthen the foundation for Japanese support for Ukraine.

Economic vulnerability and public opinion

The second factor to consider is the level of economic vulnerability stemming from taking Ukraine's side against its aggressor, and the sensitivity of public opinion in the face of such vulnerability. While Japan is famously lacking in natural resources and heavily dependent on imports, its level of direct reliance on Russian energy imports has been limited. In 2023,

Japan imported 9.3 percent of its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), 2.1 percent of its coal, and none of its oil (a two-year import hiatus was broken in June 2025) from Russia (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2024), much lower levels than, say, some Central European countries. Even if direct imports from Russia are at a comparatively low level, however, economic impact of the war can be felt broader. Particularly LNG is a problem: while price levels have fallen since the soaring mid-2022 levels, they are still volatile and at a much higher level than before the invasion, trickling down to energy consumers in Japan (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2024; Jiji 2025).

Nevertheless, public support for the government's assistance to Ukraine remains high. In a Nikkei Shimbun poll from spring 2024, 63 % of respondents supported the policy (Nikkei Shimbun 2024). A contributing factor for the lack of public opposition in the face of economic hardship is likely a relatively low level of politicization of the Ukraine war. That is likely buoyed by the fact that Japan does not provide lethal military assistance, the type of assistance that can most easily be construed as prolonging the war and thus the economic hardship. With changing political winds in Japan, however, this low level of politicization might change too. The far-right Sanseito, one of the big winners in the summer's election for the House of Councilors, operates squarely in a Trumpist mold. The party has expressed frustration with Japan "only supporting Ukraine" in the past and would be likely to keep to that line as it grows (Kamiya 2025). During her candidacy as leader, Takaichi voiced her view that Sanseito and another fringe party, the Conservative Party of Japan (CPJ), should not be excluded from policy discussions, a statement that has to be seen as an expression of the mainstream discourse on the more conservative side of the LDP (Morioka 2025).

The current political volatility of course makes it unclear if the LDP will even form the next government, and Sanseito and the CPJ are way too small to make a numerical difference in the Lower House by themselves. It is imaginable that an LDP consigned to the opposition radicalizes and/or goes through some sort of split, especially if both current center-right opposition parties, the Japan Restoration Party and the DPP – which are close to the reformist wing of the LDP that supported Koizumi in the leadership election – become part of a non-LDP government. That would leave the party the lone outsider together with Sanseito, the CPJ, and most likely the Communist Party and the left-populist Reiwa, an arrangement that, given Takaichi's inclinations, could produce an alignment between the LDP and the former.

In sum, security trends that have conditioned Japanese foreign policy for a long time have been accentuated by the war in Ukraine, making continued support likely. At the same time, economic hardship combined with possible increased politicization of Ukraine support bears the risk that support might dissipate. As Russia specialist Koizumi Yu at one point stated, the Japanese public does not have as big of an interest in the Ukraine issue as European publics do, largely owing to Japan's distance from the conflict (Ninivaggi 2023). In this way – perhaps paradoxically – fatigue from ongoing efforts does not set in as easily since the issue was not top of mind to begin with. This relative disinterest gives the Japanese government a level of flexibility and wiggle room in conducting its Ukraine policy as it sees fit. Less

domestic pressure allows the broader pursuit of security and alignment with US allies and partners – the pursuit of which a broad swath of the foreign policy establishment in Japan agree on – to play a more decisive role. How the domestic discourse on Ukraine develops – a “how” that is contingent on the future makeup of the Japanese government and opposition – is likely to influence the future of Japanese support for Ukraine.

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