Scholars of Japanese security have pondered the nature or indeed the very existence of Japanese strategy. During the Gulf War, the implicit strategic approach of the Japanese government was challenged by external allied demands to such an extent as to make continuation of the status quo appear untenable. Previous strategy had been determined by the Yoshida Doctrine, emphasizing minimal defence expenditure, close military alliance with the United States, adherence to United Nations-centric pacific internationalism, and concentration upon economic development. From 1991, Japan experienced two decades of strategic drift, the Yoshida Doctrine not abandoned but appearing less relevant, particularly when facing the increasing security challenges in East Asia. Attempts to gain international influence by extensive overseas development assistance (ODA) projects, and limited overseas dispatch operations (ODO) by the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), seemed fitful and lacking in strategic direction.

The challenge of a rising China, the rightward drift of Japanese politics, and the paucity of alternatives have coincided with a more united Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) resulting in the emergence of a new Japanese strategic approach combining global ODA and ODO efforts, and an increasingly prominent military presence in East Asia. It remains to be seen whether this new approach is cogent, let alone if a national strategic consensus can be established and sustained. This presentation will examine the two-decade strategic drift and nascent Japanese strategy, assessing the prospects for a complete displacement of previous strategic norms, and the likelihood for success of the new strategic approach.

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