



SANSEITŌ, MORAL EDUCATION, AND THE FUTURE OF JAPAN'S CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

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Abstract

This policy brief analyses the rise of Sanseitō and the implications of its agenda for Japan's civil-military relations. It argues that the party's push to elevate moral education, revise the constitution, and centralize the military command directly threatens the civil–military balance. The convergence of generational change, worsening security perceptions, and rising nationalist sentiment has made large segments of the Japanese public, especially youth, more receptive to Sanseitō's message. This trajectory risks undermining civil–military relations by eroding civilian control and enabling the militarization of education. The brief concludes by outlining policy recommendations to reinforce civilian supremacy over the military, support civil society's watchdog role, and mitigate political polarization.

Introduction

Japan's 2025 upper house elections confirmed a trend that has been building for years: the steady decline of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Once the dominant force of postwar politics, the LDP has struggled to maintain its traditional base. Voters, burdened by stagnant wages, rising living costs, and frustration over migration policy, turned in part to the populist right.

The rise of the Sanseitō party from its founding in 2020 and its success in the upper house elections, winning no less than 14 seats, is emblematic of this realignment. Founded on a mix of nationalist revivalism, anti-globalism, and cultural conservatism, the party successfully framed migration and taxation as existential threats to Japanese identity and sovereignty.

Yet, beyond its socio-economic grievances, Sanseitō's platform contains a profound reimagining of Japan's security order. Its call for a formal 'Self-Defense Military', coupled with provisions for military tribunals and the centralization of command, marks a direct challenge to the mostly pacifist norms that have governed Japan's civil–military relations for 70 years.

This change speaks to a larger shift in civil–military relations. Over the past three decades, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have moved from the margins of politics to play a greater role in decision-making. Once tightly constrained by bureaucratic oversight and public ambivalence, they now enjoy high trust and visible roles in disaster relief, peacekeeping, and regional security. By 2022, over 90 percent of the Japanese had a positive or somewhat positive view of the JSDF.

Into this new landscape steps Sanseitō, determined to accelerate and deepen this evolution, notably through promoting moral education, using it to reshape how Japanese understand the boundary between military and civilian oversight.

The civil–military relations transformation occurring in Japan

To understand how Sanseitō's military agenda can gain traction today, it is essential to examine the structural changes that have already reshaped the foundations of civil–military relations in Japan.

The civil–military relations transformation has not been the consequence of a single reform but is the cumulative result of three decades of incremental changes. Beginning with Japan's participation in UN peacekeeping in the early 1990s, successive laws and institutional reforms steadily expanded the scope of the JSDF activity. The creation of the National Security Council in 2013, the reinterpretation of Article 9 in 2014, and the 2022 National Security Strategy all consolidated this trajectory, elevating the military's role in national security decision-making and increasing its visibility in public life. The JSDF today enjoys high trust, defined advisory roles, and growing authority over strategy and resources—marking a sharp departure from the containment model of the Cold War era.

This reconfiguration provides fertile ground for Sanseitō. The normalization of the JSDF lowers the political and institutional barriers to advancing a stronger defence posture. Rising budgets, centralized decision-making, and greater public acceptance of military activity create an opening for the party's agenda to redefine Japan's civil-military relations.

Sanseitō's program combines constitutional reform with ideological transformation. It calls for converting the Self-Defense Forces into a formal 'Self-Defense Military', restoring military tribunals, and centralizing command in the prime minister's hands.

Sanseitō seeks to reshape security policy and to reconnect national identity around the military by coupling these institutional changes with the promotion of moral education—a move that was, for a long time, regarded as unacceptable.

From taboo to instrument

During the Meiji era, classrooms taught loyalty and obedience, and the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku Chokugo*) promoted national defence as a moral duty. Policymakers in the Meiji era expected schools to cultivate citizens who would readily and actively support national policies. This prewar fusion tied education to militarism, leaving a lasting stigma around military themes in education.

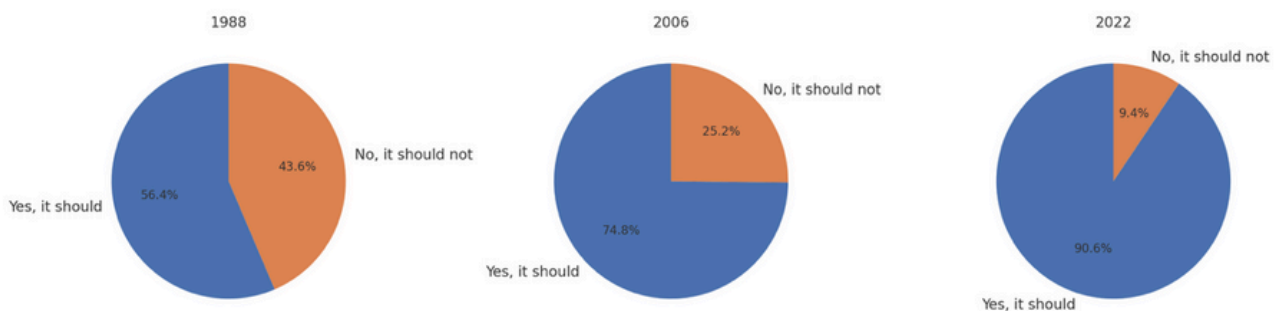
Hence, for much of the postwar period, the teaching of national defence and patriotism in schools was taboo. Any attempt to bring the military into the classroom carried the stigma of prewar indoctrination and the abuses of militarism. Patriotism and national defence were linked in the public mind to the dangers of authoritarianism.

Conservative critics have long labelled postwar civic instruction a *jigyaku shikan*—a 'masochistic' and self-denigrating view of history that undermines national confidence, blaming it for sapping national pride and weakening support for national defence. Moral education is framed as the remedy—a way to replace self-abnegation with civic pride anchored in national defence.

To address this, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pursued the promotion of patriotic education through the 2006 revision of the Fundamental Law of Education. In addition, the 2014–2015 educational reforms under Abe deepened government oversight and conservative influence on secondary school textbook content. Moral education was elevated to a formal subject in 2018 and 2019, further normalizing patriotic themes and linking civic identity back to national defence. The securitization of education has been used as a tool to advance Japan’s military transformation.

These reforms have succeeded in making historical suspicions fade. Data show near-unanimous support for teaching the importance of national defence in national education. What was once a line that could not be crossed is now broadly accepted.

Public opinion on teaching national defense in education (1988-2022)



Trends in public opinion on whether education should emphasize the importance of national defence (1988 - 2022). Data has been retrieved, and merged after proceeding to a Chi-square test, from the Government of Japan “Public Opinion Survey on Defense Issues” 1988/2006/2022.

Sanseitō seeks to connect national pride directly to national security, presenting discipline and reverence for tradition as the path out of Japan’s malaise. In practice, this means framing the military and national defence as moral pillars of society.

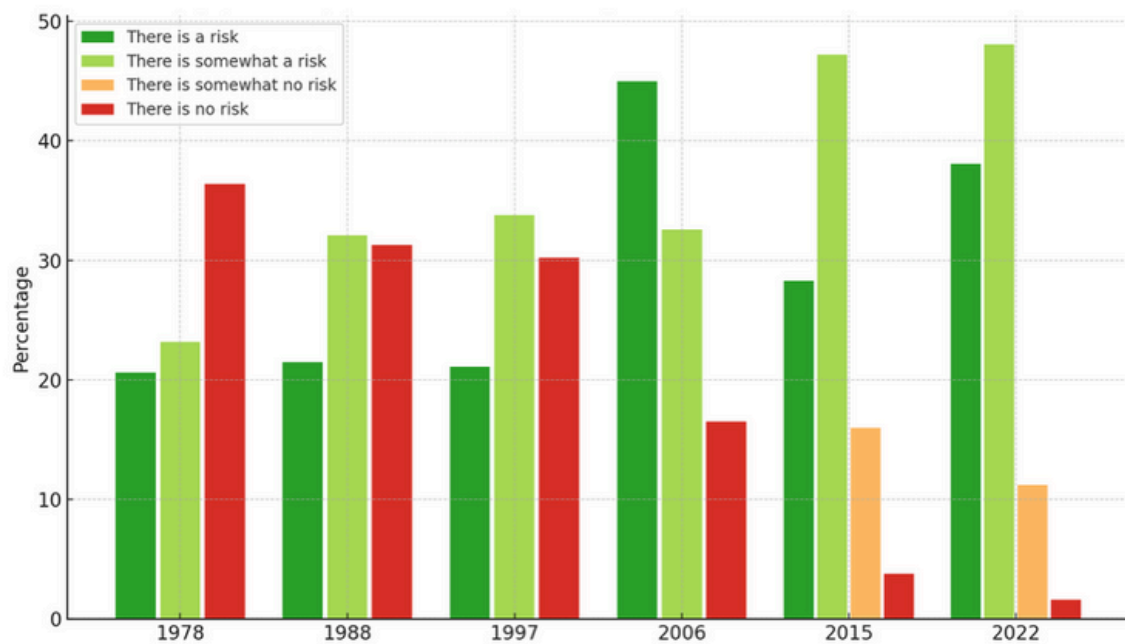
With support for defence education rising, Sanseitō is well positioned to press its goal of reviving the Imperial Rescript on Education—a move that finds growing resonance among segments of the LDP’s right wing who advocate for a stronger emphasis on patriotic and moral education.

This trajectory risks reshaping how civilian oversight is understood. Studies show gaps in Japanese recognition that civilians must control the military. Expanding moral education on this basis could blur that line and degrade civilian control. Moral education promotes loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice, and the idea that citizens should serve the state. Emphasising these values may lower Japanese citizens’ propensity to exercise civilian control over the military and could ease future defence reforms that could further reduce civilian oversight.

A worsening security environment acts as a catalyst

Additionally, Sanseitō has also capitalized on another salient issue for Japanese—their security environment. Indeed, Japanese are increasingly worried about being attacked or involved in a war, and as Japan’s security environment has grown more uncertain, public support for reinforcing the JSDF has increased.

Japanese perceived risk of being attacked or involved in a war

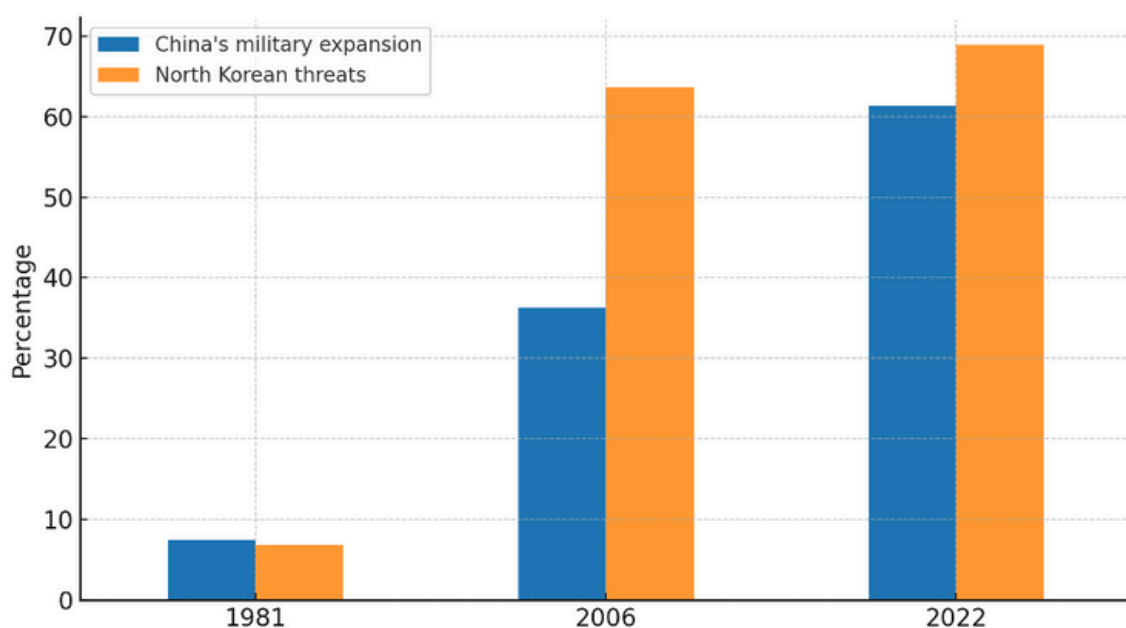


Perceived risk of Japan being attacked or involved in a war (1978 - 2022).

Data retrieved from the Government of Japan "Public Opinion Survey on Defense Issues".

These concerns are closely linked with Japanese growing fears regarding North Korea and the People's Republic of China. China's military developments and tensions on the Korean Peninsula have become central security concerns since 1981, escalating into the most prominent perceived threats in recent decades. This trend is notably the result of growing tensions over the Senkaku Islands and North Korea's expanding missile capabilities.

Most concerning issues for Japan's peace and security



Main security issues in Japan (1981 - 2022).

Data retrieved from the Government of Japan "Public Opinion Survey on Defense Issues" 1981/2006/2022.

Sanseitō has built on this sentiment by promoting the idea of autonomous defence and calling for a stronger assertion of national sovereignty. Younger Japanese appear particularly receptive to Sanseitō's message. For a generation shaped more by economic stagnation and external threats than by memories of wartime destruction, Sanseitō's call resonates.

This convergence of institutional reform, generational change, and security anxiety has made the Japanese public more receptive to messages linking national pride, military strength, and civic duty.

Japanese renewed attraction to moral education tied to defence could entrench a new consensus in which the JSDF is not just respected but celebrated as the embodiment of national renewal. By advocating for a 'strong Japan' through expanding the JSDF's capabilities, Sanseitō has tapped into nationalist sentiment, which could be reinforced by the promotion of moral education.

As respect for the JSDF increases, promoting defence education in schools becomes easier; as defence education expands, respect for the JSDF deepens. This reinforcing feedback loop creates space for Sanseitō to push its vision—national defence is a moral duty.

Perceptions today will shape institutions tomorrow. If the military comes to symbolize identity and sovereignty rather than remaining a politically neutral force, civilian oversight risks being weakened.

The risks and the safeguards

Sanseitō's approach carries real risks for Japan's civil–military balance. Concentrating command authority in the executive, reintroducing military courts, and relying on retroactive legislative approval for emergencies all shift power away from civilian authorities.

Moreover, politicizing the military through education could transform the JSDF into a partisan symbol rather than a professional force. That would undermine the very basis of what has made it increasingly trusted.

More importantly, Sanseitō's view on moral education carries the risk of disrupting civilian oversight. In democracies, civil–military relations are described as a principal–agent relationship: civilians act as principals, setting policy and direction, while the military serves as their agent, responsible for carrying out those orders. Sanseitō's position on moral education is particularly dangerous, as it not only seeks to shape civilian preferences via education, but also risks disrupting the principal–agent relationship by loosening the military's subordination to civil authority.

Yet Sanseitō does not operate without constraints. Amending the constitution requires two-thirds majorities in both houses and a national referendum. Moreover, public opinion, while supportive of defence education, remains cautious on Article 9. These guardrails make wholesale change difficult. But within them, Sanseitō can still reframe public attitudes and institutional discourse.

The challenge for Japan, then, is not to halt defence reforms but to embed them in stronger democratic safeguards. Japan's militarization should continue to be subject to open public debate, ensuring effective civilian oversight. At the same time, the government must avoid reinforcing political polarization and instead engage with the voices of dissatisfied citizens, addressing underlying concerns to prevent the spread of more extreme views. Most importantly, moral education itself must be framed in a balanced way: while it can promote civic pride, it should also instil respect for civilian supremacy, democratic governance, and awareness of the risks of politicized militarism.

The road ahead

Moral education is no longer the taboo it once was. The Japanese public now supports teaching national defence in education, a profound break with postwar traditions. Sanseitō seeks to exploit this shift to entrench a military-centred vision of national renewal. That path risks weakening civilian oversight and politicizing the armed forces.

Beyond national borders, such shift would certainly have repercussions in the East Asia region. The establishment of an official ‘Self-Defense Military’ would undoubtedly be met with strong condemnations from China and South Korea. Moreover, Sanseitō’s scepticism toward the Japan–US Security Treaty and its advocacy to defend itself independently could undermine the relationship between Tokyo and Washington. Sanseitō’s stance on the Yasukuni Shrine, highlighted by the recent visit by all its Diet members, also risks fuelling tensions in the region and could weaken prospects for cooperation with Seoul.

Japan’s future civil-military balance will not be decided only in constitutional debates or defence budgets—it will be influenced by events taking place in classrooms. If moral education becomes a tool of militarization rather than a balanced civic project, the Japan Self-Defense Forces could become a symbol of the nation itself. Preserving democratic oversight will require political cooperation, transparency, and an education system that fosters both pride and civilian control.

The debate over Japan’s civil–military relations evolution is no longer just about Article 9. It is about the next generation, and what they are taught to believe about the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

Policy recommendations

Promote the principle of civilian supremacy over the military in civic education

The growing emphasis on moral education in Japan’s national education can have long term impact on how civilian control is being understood by Japanese. To counter the risks of eroding civilian oversight, it is necessary to actively promote and safeguard the principle of civilian supremacy over the military.

The LDP’s long-standing dominance has enabled the government to tighten its control over the Ministry of Education and the educational content, often at the expense of critical discussion and civic education.

Teachers remain one of the few actors able to challenge official narratives by engaging students with controversial aspects of Japan’s military history and the importance of civil-military relations.

Strengthening the space for teachers to foster critical thinking and civic values is essential for cultivating respect for civilian oversight and clarifying the boundaries of military power in a democracy. This would not only serve Japan’s civilian oversight future but also benefit the current LDP government by supporting a more open and balanced classroom environment. This could help reduce the opposition’s effective use of education as a political tool and reduce the risk of further polarization.

Reassure regional neighbours through education

Education openness could address one of the most critical issues in the East Asia region: historical grievances. To effectively reassure regional neighbours and strengthen Japan's international standing as a mature democracy, the government should demonstrate a genuine commitment to open civic and historical education. By supporting a more balanced classroom environment—one that encourages critical discussion and transparent engagement with Japan's past—Japan can counter persistent criticisms of nationalism and historical revisionism.

These efforts should be complemented by proactive track 1.5 and track 2 diplomatic engagement specifically aimed at reassuring regional neighbours. Together, domestic educational openness and sustained dialogue can send a clear signal that, even as Japan undergoes military transformation, it remains firmly committed to civilian oversight.

Guard against populist securitization

Civil society organizations play a crucial role in maintaining democratic oversight of defence policy. Groups such as the Article 9 Association and the Japan Lawyers Association for Freedom act as essential counterweights to conservatist securitization. Japan teachers' union, in particular, is central in promoting critical civic education and supporting the importance of civilian-military to youth—especially as students are the primary target of moral education reforms. By increasing public awareness, mobilizing grassroots support, and participating actively in policy debates, civil society organizations can help safeguard constitutional norms and maintain robust civilian oversight of defence policy.

Mitigate political polarization and fostering inclusive dialogue

The government must reduce political polarization and engage with the voices of dissatisfied citizens, addressing underlying concerns to prevent the spread of more extreme views. Special attention should be given to youth, who are both the primary target of moral education and currently highly supportive of populist positions. Prioritizing inclusive dialogue with younger generations is essential to curbing polarization and sustaining democratic resilience. This can take the form of expanding opportunities for meaningful participation in public debate, actively encouraging youth engagement in the policymaking process, and supporting national programs that foster civic knowledge and critical thinking.

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