

# Japan's Enhanced Military Capabilities Will Support U.S. Strategic Interests

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

In late 2022, Tokyo directed sweeping reforms of its defense posture—Japan's assumption of a broader security role is a welcome development.

Yet, to a far greater degree than other nations, Japan is bound by legal restrictions that hinder its involvement and effectiveness in international coalitions.

Washington should encourage Japan and work closely with Tokyo to help it to succeed in expanding its security responsibilities.

To counter China's growing military threat and coercive tactics, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has increased Japan's diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives as well as expanded its coordination with regional partners. Japan has been increasingly direct in its criticism of Beijing's sovereignty transgressions, human rights violations, and efforts to intimidate its neighbors while more directly linking its security to that of Taiwan. Kishida recently articulated his multi-faceted Indo-Pacific strategy and pledged large-scale regional infrastructure investments to offset Chinese coercive strategy.

After decades of sluggish decision-making and resistance to expanding its military missions, Japan announced unprecedented transformative changes to its national security strategy. In mid-December

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2022, Tokyo released three national security documents that direct sweeping reforms of its defense posture. The scope of the proposed changes is stunning and is consistent with long-standing U.S. requests and security objectives.

The new Japanese national security structure is both revolutionary in its expanse and evolutionary in fulfilling years-long endeavors by previous Prime Minister Abe Shinzo for Japan to become a “normal nation” by reducing post-war restrictions on its military. Many of the initiatives have been discussed for years or even decades.

Japan’s pursuit of counterstrike capabilities to attack enemy missile targets and a doubling of the defense budget have been the most headline-catching initiatives. However, the security documents also delineate other wide-ranging changes that would enhance Japan’s ability to conduct joint operations, increase cooperation between the military and coast guard, and improve sustainability of combat operations by augmenting ammunition stocks.

The biggest catalyst for the sea change in defense policy was Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, which led the Japanese public to abandon its long-standing pacifist resistance to expanding the role of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces. Now realizing that the world does not exist in a post-war era and that similar Chinese action against Taiwan was far more tenable, Japanese public opinion has surged in favor of a stronger defense posture.

Prime Minister Kishida now has running room to carry out his national security initiatives but is struggling with how he will pay for the expanded defense budget. He faces resistance from within his own party, the business community, and the Japanese populace on various funding options.

The United States has long urged its allies to assume more responsibility for their defense and for common security threats, to increase their defense expenditures, accept new missions, and develop new military capabilities. After years of minimalist actions, Japan has now taken bold steps toward expanding its military role.

## Japan Stakes Its Role in the Indo-Pacific

During a March 2023 speech in India, Kishida sought to put his own mark on predecessor Shinzo Abe’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which Abe had unveiled in India in 2016. Kishida warned that the international community is at a “historical turning point” due to shifts in the balance of power and challenges to the “free, open, and stable international order.”<sup>1</sup>

Kishida defined four pillars of his holistic Indo–Pacific strategy: (1) upholding the rule of law, respect for territorial integrity, and opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo through force and economic coercion; (2) coordinating regional responses to environmental, health, and cyber challenges; (3) multilayered connectivity for mutual economic growth; and (4) expanding security cooperation from maritime to the aerial domain.

Kishida consistently emphasizes a values-based diplomatic approach and the necessity for like-minded democracies to defend themselves against threats to the international order, particularly from China and Russia.

As a manifestation of his strategy, Kishida pledged \$75 billion of infrastructure investment and security assistance for the Indo–Pacific. Japan’s initiative will aid economies in the Indo–Pacific region to counter China’s efforts to use major infrastructure investment under its Belt and Road Initiative to expand its influence.

As another step in enhancing Japanese–Indian relations, Kishida conferred with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on cooperation on defense equipment, trade, and creating supply chains for semiconductors and other technology sectors. Last year, Kishida pledged a \$38 billion five-year investment in India.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, Japan has expanded its overall involvement in regional security relationships, military exercises, and capacity-building initiatives throughout the Indo–Pacific.

## Japan’s Dramatic Defense Reformation

To be able to play a more robust role in the region, Japan had to offset years of restrictions on its military and underfunding of its defense budget. In December 2022, the Kishida administration released three new security policy documents that directed a transformation of Japan’s military. The changes were startling in their expanse and some policy initiatives would have been unexpected just a year earlier. That the defense expansion had been initiated by Kishida, who had once described himself as a “dove” in contrast to Prime Minister Abe’s hawk,<sup>3</sup> was even more astonishing.

The National Security Strategy (NSS), revised for the first time since its inception in 2013, defines Japan’s overall national security interests and strategic objectives. The National Defense Strategy (NDS), previously called the National Defense Program Guidelines, establishes the roles, missions, and necessary capabilities for the Self-Defense Forces to implement the NSS. The document was first created in 1976 and last updated in 2018. The Defense Buildup Plan, previously called the Medium-Term Defense

Program, provides the procurement plan and spending priorities for requisite military capabilities to carry out the two strategies. The document was first created in 1986 and updated every five years.

**Escalating Threats Drive Unprecedented Japanese Response.** Japan perceives its regional security environment as having deteriorated precipitously. Tokyo is increasingly alarmed by the growing Chinese and North Korean threats as well as the epiphany that the Russian invasion of Ukraine could be replicated in Asia. The Kishida administration concluded that the United Nations was unable to deter aggressive actions, and the administration is increasingly worried about the viability of the U.S. as an ally and the prospect that future U.S. presidents could diminish America’s commitment to the alliance.

The Kishida administration describes its security situation in dire, even dystopian, terms. It determined the Indo–Pacific environment to be as “severe and complex as it has ever been since the end of World War II,” with the international community “facing the greatest post-war trial yet and has entered a new era of crisis.” Tokyo sees the world divided into warring democratic and authoritarian camps and warns that “we are now standing at the crossroads of ushering in either a world of hope or a world of adversity and distrust [with] the free, open, and stable international order [now] at stake with serious challenges [to] freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights, and the rule of law.”<sup>4</sup>

**China Threat Rises to the Top.** The Kishida administration characterizes China as an “unprecedented security challenge,” surpassing the North Korean and Russian threats. In previous national security documents, Japan had listed North Korea as its prominent military threat due to its growing nuclear and missile arsenals.

In its 2013 NSS, Tokyo had described China’s rapidly advancing military capabilities, lack of transparency in its security policy, and attempts to change the status quo through coercion merely as “an issue of concern.” Despite those apprehensions, Japan still sought a “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests in all areas, including politics, economy, finance, security, culture and personal exchanges.”<sup>5</sup>

But in the intervening years, Japan witnessed an increasingly belligerent China seeking to dominate the region and threaten the status quo through a rapid massive military buildup and a strategy of intimidation in the East and South China Seas. Chinese foreign policy assumed a more assertive and nationalist character, and Beijing wielded its growing economic leverage as a punitive extension of its foreign policy.

The Kishida administration wanted to classify China as a “serious security threat” instead of “unprecedented security challenge,” but its pacifist Komeito coalition partner was resistant, arguing that doing so might have a

negative impact on bilateral relations. Komeito is supported by the Buddhist Soka Gakkai organization, has strong ties with Beijing, and has frequently sent delegations to China.<sup>6</sup>

Japan is increasingly concerned about the growing potential for a Chinese attack on Taiwan, which could spill over to nearby Japanese islands. At their closest point, Japan's southwest islands and Taiwan are only 70 miles apart. Japan fears that it could be drawn into a Taiwan conflict either indirectly, given its proximity, or directly if China were to attack U.S. bases in Japan being used as staging points to defend Taiwan.

Tokyo believes that China seeks to create a *fait accompli* where the Chinese military is continuously operating near Taiwan. Beijing's launch of nine missiles in August 2022, five of which landed within Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), was seen as a threat to local Japanese residents.

**North Korea's Rising Nuclear and Missile Threat.** Japan assesses North Korea as a "graver, more imminent threat than before" due to the continued development and deployment of a diverse, more capable missile force and progress toward creating a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons. Tokyo declared that North Korea's actions "significantly undermine the peace, stability and security of the region and the international community."<sup>7</sup>

After the collapse of U.S.–North Korean summitry in 2019, Pyongyang resumed ballistic missile launches, with a record 26 launches in 2019, surpassed by 69 ballistic missile launches in 2022. In 2022, North Korea resumed intercontinental-ballistic-missile launches and fired a missile over Japan, both for the first time since 2017.

North Korea is producing a new generation of advanced mobile missiles that, in addition to being more accurate, more mobile, and more difficult to detect and target, have an enhanced ability to evade allied missile defenses. The regime conducted missile launches under wartime conditions by firing multiple missiles from numerous locations throughout the country, simulated nuclear airburst attacks over South Korea and Japan, and conducted salvo launches of several missiles simultaneously.

In 2022, Pyongyang passed a new law codifying a nuclear doctrine that lowers the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, including for pre-emptive attack if it even perceives preparations by a U.S. or allied nuclear or conventional attack on the regime leadership or key military targets. Kim Jong-un has directed the military to exponentially increase the size of the nuclear arsenal and Western experts assess that the regime could have 200 nuclear weapons by 2027, including smaller nuclear warheads for battlefield use.

**The Russian Shadow Over Asia.** Though furthest from Japan and ranked third as a threat, Russian actions were the biggest driver of Japanese fears of conflict in the Indo-Pacific. The Kishida administration classified Russia as a “grave security concern.”

In the 2013 NSS, Russia had received only a passing mention and was seen as a potential partner for peace in Asia. Tokyo had expressed interest in advancing “cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security and energy” to enhance bilateral relations.<sup>8</sup>

In the current NSS, Japan highlights Russia’s deployment of newer-model equipment and large-scale military exercises near Japan. Japanese Air Self-Defense Force fighters have had to intercept Russian aircraft more than 200 times per year since 2008.<sup>9</sup> Tokyo is also nervous about Russia’s growing military coordination with China, including joint exercises and drills, joint navigation by their naval vessels, and joint flights of their strategic bombers in the vicinity of Japan.

However, it was Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that was most disturbing to Japan. Prime Minister Kishida warned that “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow,”<sup>10</sup> highlighting concern that China may attempt to similarly attack Taiwan. Kishida characterized Russia’s aggression as “undermin[ing] the very foundation of not Europe alone, but rather the entire international order, including Asia.”<sup>11</sup>

It cannot be overemphasized how much of a catalytic event the invasion of Ukraine had on the Japanese public perception of the country’s threat environment. The Japanese public had long been aware of the growing Chinese and North Korean threats, but Putin’s invasion made clear that their perception of a “post-war world” was an illusion and large-scale military conflicts between major powers remained a realistic threat. The Russian invasion of Ukraine crystallized fears of a possible Chinese conflict in Taiwan and was a wake-up call for the need to boost Japan’s military.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, the Japanese populace had been extremely wary of loosening restrictions on Japan’s military as risking an inexorable return to the country’s militaristic past. But the war in Ukraine caused a significant shift in Japanese thinking on augmenting defense forces. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, 55 percent of those surveyed favored a defense spending hike, while 29 percent were opposed. That is a reversal from a 2018 poll which showed only 19 percent of the public supported an increase in defense spending with 58 percent opposed.<sup>12</sup> More than 60 percent of Japanese respondents now support Japan acquiring counterstrike capability, while 35 percent are opposed.<sup>13</sup>



By contrast, Prime Minister Abe's 2015 adoption of a less restrictive interpretation of the constitution to allow Japan to exercise collective self-defense<sup>14</sup> led to fierce debates in the national legislature and large public protests. But the bold security steps announced by the Kishida administration in December 2022 elicited strong public support *without* any protests.

**Concerns Over Viability of U.S. Commitment.** Senior Japanese officials, like their Korean counterparts, privately express great concern about the outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential election on the reliability of the U.S. as an ally. They fear the election of an isolationist candidate that could threaten to remove U.S. forces from Japan over cost disputes or abandon America's commitment to defend its allies.<sup>15</sup> The trepidation of having to stand alone in a dangerous neighborhood was a catalyst for Japan augmenting its security posture to dispel depictions as a "free-riding ally." A similar fear of abandonment in South Korea was a factor in the recent surge in advocacy for an indigenous nuclear weapons program.<sup>16</sup>

Several Japanese officials privately cited President Joe Biden's 2021 statement on the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan as affecting Japan's perception that it needs to do more to defend itself in order to keep the U.S. invested in the alliance. President Biden had stated that "American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves."<sup>17</sup> Japan also saw the Ukrainian resolve to defend itself as a critical aspect in securing Western military aid. Japan concluded that it must improve its military posture to not only deter a Chinese attack but also to keep the U.S. in the alliance.

**Startling Change and Long-Term Continuity.** In response to the deteriorating Indo-Pacific security environment, Japan vowed to significantly augment its defense capabilities, strengthen defense cooperation with the United States, and expand defense collaboration with like-minded democracies in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

The Kishida administration prioritized seven key fields for enhancing its defense posture: (1) stand-off defense (long-range counterstrike capability); (2) integrated air and missile defense; (3) unmanned defense (drones); (4) cross-domain operations including cyber, space, and electro-magnetic spectrums; (5) integration of command, control, and intelligence; (6) mobility; and (7) sustainability and resilience.

Of these seven priorities, the most surprising was how quickly Japan's development of counterstrike capabilities had shifted from being an issue long advocated only by fringe elements to mainstream debate to government policy. Kishida's vow to double Japanese defense spending to 2

percent of gross domestic product (GDP) within five years was another groundbreaking change from the past.

**Developing Counterstrike Capabilities.** In a stunning break from decades of self-imposed restrictions, the Kishida administration declared that it would pursue long-range missile counterstrike capabilities. Debate about the constitutionality of such a capability has raged since 1956 when then-Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama declared that attacking enemy bases could be justified in terms of the right of self-defense.<sup>18</sup> Since then, subsequent Japanese administrations consistently asserted that Japan had the authority to conduct attacks on enemy targets though choosing not to develop the means to do so.

Japan's legal interpretation of what is allowed under its peace constitution has not been static. Instead, it evolved in response to increasing regional threats, Japan's improving military capabilities, and Tokyo's perception of the strength of its alliance with Washington. Japan gradually adopted missions and deployed weapons that were originally deemed to be unconstitutional.

The Ministry of Defense's 2020 white paper hinted at potential Japanese attacks on foreign nations: "The use of the minimum necessary force to defend Japan under the right of self-defense is not necessarily confined to the geographic boundaries of Japanese territory, territorial waters, and airspace."<sup>19</sup> In recent years, debate on Japanese counterstrike capabilities had evolved from whether it was constitutional to whether it was necessary and, after the invasion of Ukraine, to how it should be implemented.

Citing the "palpable threat" from the growing Chinese and North Korean missile arsenals and "dramatic advances" in missile-related technologies, the Kishida administration explained that it had become increasingly untenable to defend itself against missile threats by relying solely on Japanese missile defenses or U.S. strike capabilities. Instead, Japan must augment its missile defenses by adding counterstrike capabilities to deter and defeat invading forces over long distances as well as to enable Japan to mount effective counterstrikes against the opponent on its territory to prevent further attacks.

Given the long-standing resistance to developing a counterstrike capability, the Kishida administration took great pains to explain its constitutionality, compliance with the Japanese concept of an exclusively defense-oriented policy, and adherence with Japan's Three New Conditions for Use of Force.<sup>20</sup> Tokyo emphasized that pre-emptive strikes before an armed attack against Japan remain impermissible. In a sign of the tectonic shift in the Japanese security landscape, the ruling party's pacifist Komeito coalition partner agreed to Japan developing counterstrike capabilities.<sup>21</sup>



Japan previously announced plans to procure several medium-range cruise missiles to be mounted on F-15 and F-35 aircraft and Aegis-equipped ships for attacking enemy ground and ship targets. Tokyo would purchase the 500-kilometer (km)-range Joint Strike Missile, the 900-km-range AGM-158B Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile Extended-Range, and the 900-km-range AGM-158C Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles. Japan is also developing 1,000-km-range hypersonic guided missiles that can fly at five times the speed of sound.

In April 2023, Tokyo awarded a contract to Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to develop a submarine-launched missile with a range of 1,000 kilometers by 2027. Mitsubishi will also mass-produce upgraded Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles with an extended range to 900 km and eventually to 1,500 km. The two contracts are estimated at \$2.83 billion.<sup>22</sup> The improved Type 12 missiles will be able to target an opponent's ground targets, as well as ships, and to be launched from Japanese ground-based launchers, ships, and potentially F-15J fighters.<sup>23</sup>

As an interim step, Japan will purchase 400 of the latest Tomahawk Block-5 cruise missiles from the United States. The missiles, with a range of 1,600 kilometers, will begin deployment by 2026.<sup>24</sup> Tokyo plans to refurbish the vertical-launch systems on all eight of its Aegis destroyers to enable them to launch Tomahawk missiles. Japan will commission two ships by 2028 as an alternative to the cancelled Aegis Ashore program and two additional Aegis ships by 2032.<sup>25</sup>

Tokyo also plans to produce hypersonic glide vehicles with a maximum range of 3,000 km in the future.<sup>26</sup> Overall, Japan will spend approximately \$37 billion on standoff capabilities during the next five years.<sup>27</sup>

Developing counterstrike capabilities would extend the range which the Self-Defense Forces can defend Japan, protect U.S. forces in Japan, and protect the approach routes to Taiwan. Being able to hold enemy targets at risk increases the price of any attack on Japan, thereby enhancing deterrence and regional stability while degrading an opponent's attempts at coercion. A Japanese ability to "shoot the archer," rather than intercepting all incoming arrows, would enhance allied capabilities to disrupt an opponent's ability to conduct follow-on attacks and thereby reduce additional casualties and destruction.

However, Japan still needs to define the missions and parameters for counterstrike forces. Tokyo has yet to articulate a strike policy, strategy, doctrine of employment, deployment, or how offensive systems would train in Japan. Nor has Tokyo articulated whether it is contemplating attacks only on Chinese or North Korean missile launchers and units or a more

extensive attack plan against a broader array of targets, such as airfields, bases, ports, and command structures.

Japan does not currently have sufficient intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to detect and monitor mobile missile targets nor the requisite systems to rapidly convert incoming intelligence data into targeting information for dynamic tasking by strike forces.

Tokyo will either need to purchase its own extensive systems for independent strike capabilities or rely on U.S. resources. The former course would be extremely expensive, while the latter risks diverting or overwhelming American assets. To be most effective, Japanese forces and missions would need to be part of a comprehensive allied attack plan integrated into a combined alliance command-and-control structure, which, to date, Japan has resisted, opting instead for parallel command structures. Last year, U.S., Japanese, and South Korean leaders pledged to share real-time information on North Korean missile threats.

**Breaking the Ceiling on Japan's Defense Budget.** The Kishida administration emphasized that substantiating Japan's rapid and extensive defense buildup could not be achieved by a temporary increase in spending, but rather a sustained level of expenditures. Japan pledged that by 2027 it will have increased its defense budget to 2 percent of current GDP, a doubling of the self-imposed limit of 1 percent that Tokyo has followed for decades. Regional counterparts India, South Korea, and Taiwan had each averaged about 2.5 percent of GDP per year over this same period.<sup>28</sup>

Japanese defense spending will be increased to a five-year total of \$323 billion from 2023 to 2027.<sup>29</sup> Japan's annual defense budget will be \$75 billion, making Japan the world's third-biggest military spender after the United States and China.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the defense spending increase will artificially come from incorporating existing capabilities not currently included in the defense budget, such as the Coast Guard (currently in the budget for the Land and Transport Ministry), costs of military facility infrastructure development, military pensions, and peacekeeping operations (now in the Foreign Ministry budget). Incorporating existing capabilities would increase current Japanese defense spending to 1.24 percent of GDP.<sup>31</sup>

However, notable increases in the five-year defense spending plan include \$112 billion for augmenting ammunition and fuel reserves; \$37 billion to buy Tomahawk cruise missiles from the United States, expand the range of the Type 12 missile, and develop hypersonic weapons; \$22 billion for enhancing integrated air and missile defense; and \$15 billion to strengthen cyber defenses.<sup>32</sup>

**Improving Command-and-Control and Jointness.** Another positive development in Japan’s national security documents was its commitment to establish a permanent joint headquarters to unify command of the ground, naval, and air forces. The Self-Defense Forces are currently stove-piped with insufficient ability to communicate, plan, or operate across services. This has led to less effective battlefield awareness, targeting, and combined arms operations, and less-close air support, as well as an increased potential for friendly fire casualties.

Creating a Japanese joint operational command will enhance Japanese military readiness and ability to fight as a cohesive force. This is particularly important for implementing cross-domain operations across the military services as well as the space and cyber domains.

Japan’s inability to conduct joint operations across its own military services, in turn, inhibits its capacity for combined operations with U.S. forces. By designating a single joint commanding general, Japan will now be able to coordinate more effectively with the U.S. Indo–Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) combatant commander counterpart.

However, U.S.–Japan military coordination will remain constrained by maintaining separate and parallel command structures. Each country conducts joint operations of its own services within each chain of command. This structure is inherently weaker than the integrated command structure of the U.S.–South Korea Combined Forces Command. A further hindrance is that U.S. Forces Japan does not have operational control of military units in Japan during wartime, nor is it an operational or warfighting command.

Creating an integrated U.S.–Japan command structure might be deemed unconstitutional, but Japan exercising collective self-defense and having a counterstrike capability were similarly seen as unconstitutional—until they were not. Tokyo exceeding its informal 1 percent of GDP cap on defense spending was politically sacrosanct—until it was not.

Given the growing realization of the China threat and the Japanese public’s shift to supporting a stronger defense posture, Washington and Tokyo should discuss how to enhance combined command of their forces. An initial step could be a combined task force of units defending Japan’s southwest islands, which are closest to Taiwan.

It appears that there have been increased behind-the-scenes bilateral discussions of combined operations for possible conflicts in the region, such as a Chinese attack on Taiwan. Lieutenant General James Bierman, the commander of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force based in Okinawa, commented that there have been “exponential increases” over the past year in bilateral operations planning.<sup>33</sup>

Japan's development of counterstrike capabilities, acquisition of U.S. Tomahawk missiles, and reliance on U.S. reconnaissance assets for target detection and targeting may be a catalyst for greater integration of operations and command.

**Sustainability, Survivability, and Mobility.** Japan's Self-Defense Forces, like other militaries, have often focused on procuring new weapons systems while neglecting logistics requirements, airlift and sealift to get forces to a fight, and hardening facilities against enemy attack. Military operations in Ukraine made clear the high expenditure of ammunition in modern warfare, underscoring Japan's severe shortage particularly of high technology missiles. The Ministry of Defense stated that Japan has only 60 percent of interceptor missiles needed to ward off ballistic missile attacks.<sup>34</sup>

Japanese officials note that extensive cannibalization of parts had occurred, seriously degrading weapon and vehicle availability. Due to the lack of spare parts, Japan's military forces are operating at just over 50 percent of capacity, far below the 70 percent to 80 percent considered necessary to fully execute their duties.<sup>35</sup>

The new NSS and NDS, however, prioritize initiatives to enhance the readiness and survivability of forces. Tokyo will procure increased stockpiles of ammunition, fuel, and spare parts for Japanese forces, ensure that all equipment except those under planned maintenance are operationally available, and construct additional ammunition storage sites.

Japan plans to build underground command headquarters, harden military structures, and disperse forces to improve survivability of forces. Currently, only 80 percent of facilities are assessed to be sufficiently fortified against enemy attacks, and there is an inadequate number of shelters for fighter jets.<sup>36</sup>

Tokyo declared it would coordinate with local authorities to upgrade civilian airports and seaports for use by military forces, particularly those in the southwestern region closest to Taiwan. The central government will lengthen runways at airports in Okinawa to accommodate F-35 fighter jets and deepen a port on Yonaguni Island to enable large military vessels to dock.<sup>37</sup>

Japan will also introduce legislation to enable its military forces to use civilian airfields and ports, even during peacetime. Currently, the military must obtain permission from local authorities even for training exercises.<sup>38</sup>

The Self-Defense Forces do not have requisite airlift and sealift for its forces, particularly for transporting troops and munitions to contingencies in the southwest islands. The existing fleet of *Izumo*-class multi-function ship, *Hyuga*-class helicopter carrier, and *Osumi*-class tank landing ship appear insufficient.

The amphibious rapid-deployment brigade lacks organic land, air, and naval assets and relies on Japan's maritime and air Self-Defense Forces, which do not have the equipment to rapidly transport the brigade to the remote southwest islands. Unlike the U.S. Marines, the brigade cannot conduct close-in air support. If the brigade relies on already strained U.S. Marine and Navy lift, it will constrain U.S. forces during a crisis.

The NDS seeks to remedy shortfalls by securing transport vessels and transport aircraft to rapidly deploy units to remote islands when an invasion against Japan is predicted. To augment military forces, Japan will make maximum use of civilian transportations and expand the use of civilian vessels and aircraft for the Self-Defense Forces' maneuver and deployment.<sup>39</sup>

**Augmenting Defense of the Southwest Islands.** A predominant theme in consecutive Japanese defense documents since the 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines has been a shift toward more rapidly deployable Japanese forces to deter Chinese attacks on the southwest islands. Doing so required a transition from regionally deployed units with heavy equipment, such as tanks, to lighter units that were more easily transported.

The Self-Defense Forces built new facilities, augmented existing units, created the amphibious rapid-deployment brigade, enhanced rapid-response capabilities, and changed its strategy to better monitor and deter Chinese incursions and, if necessary, retake islands.

Japan deployed new radar sites, surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missile units, and intelligence-gathering and security units on Yonaguni, Amami Oshima, Miyako, and Ishigaki Islands. These units will bolster ISR as well as rapid-response capabilities to protect key maritime chokepoints in the Miyako and Tokara Straits.

The Defense Ministry plans to augment the number of infantry regiments under the Okinawa-based 15th brigade, effectively transforming the unit into the equivalent of a division.<sup>40</sup> The 2022 Defense Buildup Program indicated that 14 ground force divisions and brigades of the Self-Defense Forces based outside Okinawa will be reorganized into mobile units that can be deployed to the southwest islands.<sup>41</sup>

During the January 2023 U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") meeting, Washington stated that it would augment alliance deterrence and response capabilities against Chinese actions against Taiwan by positioning more versatile, resilient, and mobile forces with increased ISR, anti-ship, and transportation capabilities. The U.S. 3rd Marine Division Headquarters and the 12th Marine Regiment will remain in Okinawa. The 12th Marine Regiment will be reorganized into the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment by 2025.<sup>42</sup> The 2,200 Marine

regiment will consist of an infantry battalion and a long-range weapons unit equipped with the new Navy/Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) anti-ship missile and MQ-9A Reapers for unmanned extended-range ISR.<sup>43</sup>

The Marine Littoral Regiment is a component of Marine Commandant David Berger's Force Design 2030 strategy which has the Marine Corps deployed as lighter, more mobile forces that operate close to enemy forces. The Marine Corps announced it plans to rotate units to some of the more remote islands southwest of Okinawa to train in order to develop the ability to rapidly deploy should China attack Taiwan.<sup>44</sup>

## A Major Upgrade to Japanese Military Capabilities

Prime Minister Kishida correctly assessed that Japan's new security strategy "marks a major transformation of our postwar security policy." Indeed, the sweeping changes outlined by Tokyo are monumental and unprecedented in scope, reflecting a significant inflection point in Japanese security policy as well as a seismic shift in public support for an expanded security role. The ambitious and comprehensive expansion of Japan's security role, its largest military buildup since World War II, would have been unthinkable before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

To experts accustomed to decades of Japanese handwringing and glacially paced decision-making over even the slight relaxations of restrictions on the Self-Defense Forces, the new security strategy announced in December is stunning in its expanse and depth. The new policy is a bold departure from Japan's minimalist, defense-oriented posture. Endless debates over whether a security initiative was constitutionally allowed are now in the past, swept aside by rising fears of the Chinese and North Korean threats and heightened potential for conflict in the region.

The new security policies are a revolutionary implementation of the evolutionary expansion of Japan's security posture envisioned by previous Prime Minister Abe. Many of the defense decisions in the new Japanese strategy have been discussed for years or even decades.

By shedding several constraints on its military, Japan shows it is more comfortable with accepting greater responsibilities for its defense and a less passive, more internationalist approach to regional security with like-minded democracies. Although Japan will remain primarily focused on its own defense, over the years Tokyo has moved the defensive bubble further from its shores.



## Can Tokyo Pay for Its Increased Security Role?

Tokyo's declared intention to upgrade and expand its security role is a long overdue response to the deteriorating security environment. Prime Minister Kishida has provided the strategic vision and made dramatic decisions, quite a feat in the habitually slow Japanese decision-making process. But a major question will be whether Japan can quickly begin to offset Chinese and North Korean military advances as well as sustain the long-term commitment of resources necessary to ensure implementation.

Years of underfunding military requirements have left the Self-Defense Forces with massive logistical deficiencies, inadequate sealift and airlift for rapid deployment of forces, and a lack of sufficient hardening of facilities. The enormity of the shortfalls will require unyielding commitment to ameliorate their effects as well as a strong strategic messaging program to generate and maintain public support for increased defense spending.

While Japan extolled record defense spending under Prime Minister Abe, Tokyo's defense expenditures rose only slightly in real terms. Japan articulated numerous new domains, initiatives, and procurement decisions, but its static defense budget hindered the country's ability to fulfill its ambitious security plans.

Although there is now a consensus on the necessity for Japan to increase defense spending to counter growing security threats, there is sharp disagreement within the government on how to fund it. Public opinion in Japan is supportive of the defense buildup but is divided on how to finance it. A Japanese poll showed that 65 percent of respondents oppose tax hikes to cover the new spending.<sup>45</sup>

The Kishida administration is struggling to find a combination of spending cuts, tax increases, creating a defense enhancement fund, or issuing government bonds. Various options have been floated only to be quickly shot down. The increased defense budget also conflicts with other Kishida administration spending priorities, such as increasing childcare support and social spending on Japan's aging population.

Prime Minister Kishida favors a combination of tax increases to fund defense spending. These include a 4 percent corporate tax surcharge that would exempt small and medium businesses, a tobacco tax, and diverting funds from a reconstruction tax levied after the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Half of the reconstruction tax would be designated for defense spending and the tax extended by 13 years to 2037.<sup>46</sup>

However, a number of legislators, including the large faction previously headed by former Prime Minister Abe, pushed back on proposed tax increases,

perceiving them as unpalatable to voters and hindering economic recovery. They instead proposed issuing government bonds in lieu of raising taxes.

Kishida rejected issuing new bonds since it would increase public debt which the Finance Ministry assessed would already be 260 percent of GDP, the highest amongst the Group of Seven leading industrialized nations.<sup>47</sup> The prime minister indicated he would defer any tax increases until 2024.<sup>48</sup>

## Recommendations for Japan and the U.S.

Having defined an expansive and ambitious strategy to expand its military role and capabilities, Japan must now implement its plan. The publication of the three national security documents now enables more extensive bilateral discussion and military planning with U.S. policymakers and alliance managers.

Tokyo should:

- **Operationalize the new security strategies** for Japan to augment its defense capabilities and assume greater international security responsibilities. Developing politically viable and fiscally viable funding over a multi-year period to fully implement all aspects of the defense planning guide will be critical. It is unclear to which degree Kishida can deliver on his announced plans and whether subsequent administrations will maintain those commitments.
- **Prioritize readiness requirements.** Although Japan has impressive military capabilities on paper, cannibalization of weapons and equipment for spare parts and critical shortages of ammunition have created a far less capable force than would appear.
- **Procure sufficient airlift and sealift.** Lack of transport assets would hinder Japanese defense of its southwest islands, deterrence of Chinese aggression against Taiwan, and protection of U.S. forces in Taiwan contingencies.
- **Enhance cooperation between the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces and Japanese Coast Guard.** Japan should delineate responsibilities and reduce legal constraints on coordination during gray zone operations. It should also expand Coast Guard communication, information-sharing, and coordination to maritime incursions with regional counterparts, including Taiwan.

- **Augment realistic military training.** Tokyo must work with local constituencies to reduce overly restrictive constraints on the Self-Defense Forces' large-scale unit training and long-range live-fire training. Training at sea can be restricted in scope, location, and duration by navigation of fishing vessels and merchant ships. Aircraft training areas are too small to allow full-scale training or are restricted due to noise limits or local government regulations. The lack of sufficient suitable training facilities combined with extensive training restrictions has led U.S. as well as Self-Defense Forces to travel outside the country to conduct training in Alaska, Australia, Guam, and Hawaii.
- **Improve Japanese capabilities for joint operations.** Establishing a joint headquarters could reduce long-standing shortfalls in the Self-Defense Forces' ability to conduct truly joint operations. But Tokyo must ensure that the new headquarters and its commander have sufficient authorities to integrate the doctrine, procurement, planning, training, operations, and command structure for the three Self-Defense Forces.

Washington and Tokyo should:

- **Integrate their air and missile defenses.** Japan should carry out plans to restructure its missile defense system into an Integrated Air and Missile Defense to combine separate air and missile defense units and systems across three Self-Defense Forces services into an integrated command-and-control system. This organization should then be combined with its U.S. counterpart to create a combined integrated air and missile defense network that includes counterstrike operations against enemy missile-launch sites.
- **Improve alliance military coordination.** The lack of a unified U.S.–Japan command constrains the conduct of combined operations. A U.S.–Japan Combined Forces Command, like that of the United States and South Korea, is unlikely, but Washington and Tokyo should upgrade the current ad hoc Alliance Coordination Mechanism to a permanent organization that is capable of joint and combined planning, crisis management, and command structure.
- **Establish a U.S.–Japan Combined Joint Task Force for the Southwest Islands.** The task force commander could report to

the U.S. Commander of INDOPACOM and the Japanese commander of the new combined headquarters in the same manner that the Commander of Combined Forces Command in South Korea concurrently reports to both countries' national command authorities.

- **Create a U.S. joint operational command in Japan.** Currently, each U.S. service in Japan reports separately to its respective component under INDOPACOM in Hawaii. U.S. Forces Japan and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces should establish greater connectivity and coordination with Combined Forces Command in South Korea.
- **Integrate Japanese strike capabilities into an alliance framework.** Tokyo should incorporate any strike missions into the overall alliance structure for real-time target identification, tracking, strike operation, and damage assessment. Combined operational planning and command-and-control would augment alliance capabilities, reduce redundancy, and enable more effective implementation. This requires significantly greater coordination, if not integration, of command-and-control with U.S. forces.
- **Revise alliance defense guidelines to update roles, missions, and capabilities.** Much has changed since the alliance guidelines were last issued in 2015. The security environment has deteriorated precipitously, the U.S. has implemented new strategies for each of its military services, and Japan has vowed to fundamentally realign its defense forces and adopt new missions. These collective changes necessitate overhauling the old Guidelines for Japan–U.S. Defense Cooperation.<sup>49</sup> Japan's acquisition of counterstrike capabilities could modify the long-standing role-sharing under the bilateral alliance, in which the U.S. served as an offensive “spear” and Japan as a “shield” to fend off attacks.
- **Coordinate with local authorities for expanding Self-Defense Forces and U.S. access** to ports, airfields, and training facilities during peacetime. Japan should prepare civilian facilities for military use by lengthening runways and hardening fuel storage. Then, it should exercise (with the U.S.) contingency plans using a wider range of Japanese civilian airfields and ports.

## Conclusion

The United States finds its strategic interests in Asia challenged to a far greater degree than ever before. Washington cannot achieve its objectives alone but must rely on its indispensable allies and partners in the region, including Japan, to protect its interests and the existing international order. Japan's new security policy will make it a more effective security partner to the United States, augment allied deterrence and defense against the Chinese and North Korean threats, and enhance regional and international peace and stability.

Japan is to be commended for defining a bold new vision for augmenting its defenses and enhancing allied deterrence against the growing Chinese threat to the Indo-Pacific region. However, there is some skepticism that Kishida's grand plan will come to fruition since Japan has made security promises in the past that it did not fulfill. Japan's security enhancements will take time and may again be far outpaced by China's rapidly growing military capabilities.

Japan will develop impressive new military capabilities while continuing to operate within old constraints. To a far greater degree than other nations, Japan is bound by legal restrictions that hinder its involvement and effectiveness in international coalitions. Despite recent strong declarations of the importance of Taiwan's security to that of Japan, there are doubts as to how far Tokyo will go in both actions and distance from its shores in defending Indo-Pacific democracies.

Japan's assumption of a broader security role is a welcome development. Washington should encourage and work closely with Tokyo to help it to succeed in expanding its security responsibilities.

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