

Japan Self-Defense Force Modernization and Its Implications in the Indo-Pacific

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Source: NATO Allied Maritime Command

Introduction

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point of global strategic interest, marked by dynamic economic growth, evolving geopolitical landscapes, and shifting power dynamics. Central to this complex web of relations is Japan, a nation redefining its pacifistic post-

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World War II stance in the face of these changes in the geopolitical environment. These include an increasingly assertive China, persistent threats from North Korea, and the broader implications of challenges to the rules-based international order. In response, Japan has embarked on a path of significant military modernization and strategic realignment, aiming to bolster its defense capabilities while navigating the delicate balance of international diplomacy and regional security commitments. Given the enormous change in the defensive posture of a major power in the Indo-Pacific, how might this influence the balance of power within the region?

Background

The Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) is an organization that encompasses the entirety of the Japanese Military, including the Japan Ground Self Defense Force (JGSDF), Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), and Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF). The ‘branding’ of Japan’s military forces as oriented to “self-defense” is a factor of Japan’s unconditional surrender at the end of the Second World War and subsequent demilitarization by and incorporation within the American-led Western bloc during the Cold War. Unlike the Germans, who were at the frontlines of the European theatre of the Cold War and allowed to remilitarize extensively, Japan took a firmly pacifistic stance with the publication of its Constitution in 1946. Article 9, known as the “peace clause,” rejected the right of the Japanese state to use force or threat of force to settle international disputes, specifically promising that “*war potential*” would not be maintained.² The principal role of the JSDF and its progenitor organization, the Police Reserve Force, was to maintain the territorial integrity and stability of internationally recognized Japanese territory in accordance with the UN-recognized right to self-defense, thus maintaining a fig-leaf of legality within the Japanese Constitutional system.^{3 4 5} Firmly situated within the U.S. Security umbrella during the Cold War, the JSDF were of little consequence, and focused exclusively on the

² Kenneth Mori McElwain and Christian G. Winkler, “What’s Unique about the Japanese Constitution? A Comparative and Historical Analysis,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 254.

³ Yukio Matsui, “Characteristics of the Japanese Constitution: An Overview,” *King’s Law Journal* 26, no. 2 (2015): 191, DOI: [10.1080/09615768.2015.1076205](https://doi.org/10.1080/09615768.2015.1076205).

⁴ Arakawa Ken-ichi, “The Cold War and the Foundation of the Japanese Self-Defense Force,” *Army History*, no. 41 (1997): 14-15.

⁵ Arpita Mathur, “Japan’s Self-Defense Forces: Towards a Normal Military,” *Strategic Analysis* 31, no. 5 (2007): 726, DOI: [10.1080/09700160701662260](https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160701662260).

protection of the Home Islands, stabilizing the area around the Home Islands, and preserving the international order.⁶

The collapse of the Soviet Union has ushered in a new era of security dilemmas facing the rules-based international order in which the island nation was firmly embedded.⁷ The Japanese government has responded to these challenges by incrementally increasing the legal scope of possible JSDF missions, starting, paradoxically, from the outside in. The adoption of the *UN Peacekeeping Operations Cooperation Law* in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War enabled JSDF personnel to assist in non-combat peacekeeping operations, including election monitoring, humanitarian relief, and engineering assistance.⁸ In 1994, fears over a war on the Korean Peninsula prompted a renewed U.S.-Japanese security treaty, emphasizing the stabilization of the Sea of Japan and the Northern Pacific through bilateral cooperation. The launch of an indigenous North Korean ballistic missile in 1998, in conjunction with the discovery of North Korean spy boats off the coast of the Noto peninsula in 1999, showed the vulnerability of Japan's territorial defense strategy and promoted the improvement of JSDF capabilities in defense of the Home Islands, as well as committing itself to the defense of South Korea in the event of war.^{9 10 11}

In 2013, Japan created and published its first National Security Strategy, recognizing the JSDF as a “Proactive Contributor to Peace” within the framework of safeguarding the rules-based international order and emphasizing the need for further bilateral and multilateral cooperation.¹²

⁶ Timothy J. Hetteberg, “Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force Efforts to Counter Threats to Japan” (masters thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2018) 25.

⁷ Giuseppe A. Stavale, “The GSDF During the Post-Cold War Years, 1989-2015,” in *The Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force: Search for Legitimacy* ed. Robert D. Eldridge and Paul Midford (New York, NY: Springer Nature, 2017) 183-231.

⁸ Aurelia George Mulgan, “International Peacekeeping and Japan’s Role: Catalyst or Cautionary Tale?” *Asian Survey* 35, no. 12 (1995): 1102.

⁹ Yoshikazu Watanabe, Masanori Yoshida, and Masayuki Hironaka, *The U.S.-Japan Alliance and the Roles of the Japan Self-Defense Forces: Past, Present, and Future* (Washington, D.C.: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, 2016) 18-22.

¹⁰ Muchishita Narushige, *Japan’s New National Security Strategy: Getting Committed to the Defense of Taiwan* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023) 1.

¹¹ Hiromi Nagata Fukishige, Yuji Uesugi and Tomoaki Honda, *Japan’s Peacekeeping at a Crossroads: Taking a Robust Stance or Remaining Hesitant?* (Cham, CH: Springer Nature, 2022) 44.

¹² National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo, JP: 2022) 4.

A year later, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced an official reinterpretation of Article 9, which recognized the legality of the JSDF to engage in collective self-defense.¹³

The Incentives

The threat environment around Japan is once again changing, though this time around the Japanese seem cognizant of the changes and are actively attempting to stay ahead of the curve. There are four areas of concern facing Japan in the modern era which are prompting it to rearm itself in a manner unseen since the Second World War.

1: The illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine and its damaging effect on international law.¹⁴

The Japanese Ministry of Defense (MoD) recognizes the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a serious and dangerous violation of the rules-based international order in place since the end of WWII. If successful or tolerated, this action has the possibility of setting a precedent that force may be used to enact changes in the status quo in other regions of the globe, leading to the breakdown of the international system.^{15 16} The invasion has also seen increased public support for autonomous, self-defense initiatives.^{17 18}

2: Chinese efforts to change the status quo in the East and South China Sea and cooperation with Russia.¹⁹

The balance of power in East Asia has been favoring China for years, and recent revanchist tendencies in the South and East China Seas have increased fears over a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan and/or the disputed Senkaku islands. Japan has identified the maintenance of Taiwan and freedom of navigation within the Taiwan Strait as key security objectives directly related to

¹³ Reuters, "Japan takes historic step away from postwar pacifism, okays fighting for allies," The Washington Post, 1 July 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/japan-takes-historic-step-away-from-postwar-pacifism-okays-fighting-for-allies/2014/07/01/10162eb8-0152-11e4-b8ff-89afd3fad6bd_story.html.

¹⁴ Hamada Yasukazi, "On the Publication of Defense of Japan 2023," in "Defense of Japan 2023." https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/index.html.

¹⁵ Ministry of Defense, "Defense of Japan 2023," 35-44. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/index.html.

¹⁶ "National Security Strategy of Japan," 6.

¹⁷ Alessandro De Cicco, *Japan's new national security strategy: a platform for further cooperation with the EU?* (Bonn, DE: Konrad Audenauer Stiftung, 2023) 19.

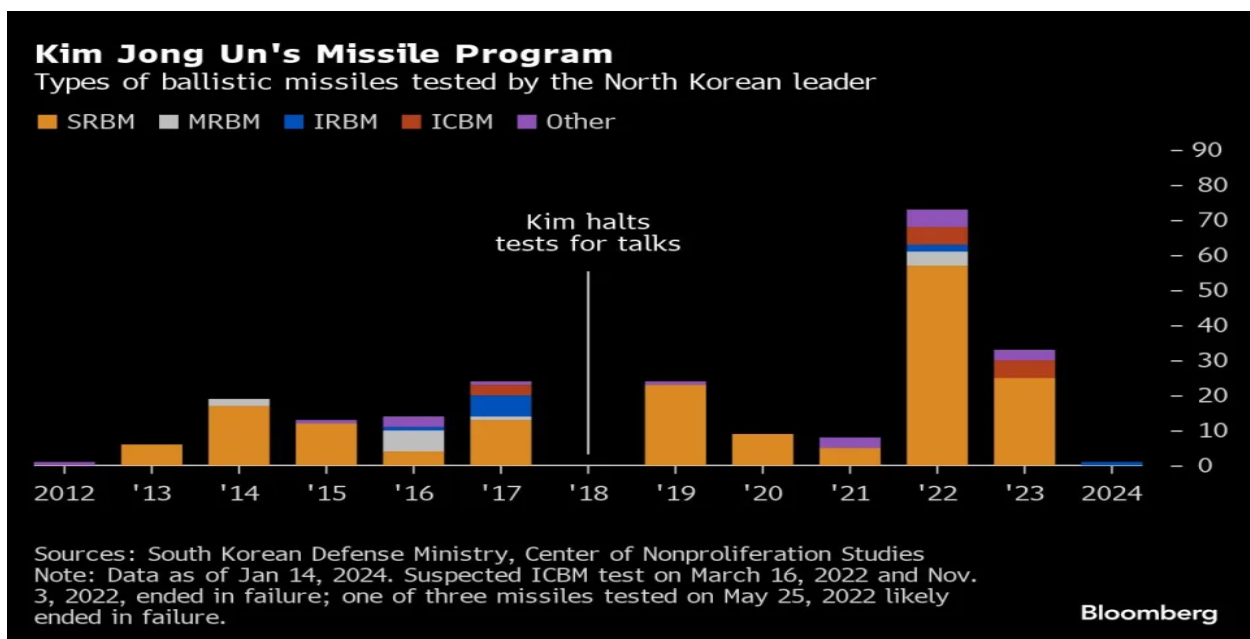
¹⁸ Naoko Funatsu et al., "The US-Japan Alliance in the Age of Crisis," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 29 March 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/us-japan-alliance-age-crisis>.

¹⁹ Yasukazi, "On the Publication of Defense of Japan 2023."

the security of the Home Islands.²⁰ Similarly, the nationalization of several of the Senkaku Islands in 2012 indicates Japanese similar perspectives on the importance of these territories.²¹ Finally, strategic cooperation between Beijing and Moscow in the form of joint military exercises is a concern of Japan's. Taken as a whole, China constitutes the greatest strategic challenge facing Japan, according to its 2022 National Security Strategy.²²

3: North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile developments.²³

The nuclear capabilities of North Korea, including but not limited to regular and highly destabilizing ballistic missile tests over Japanese territory, highly mobile Transporter-Erector-Launcher's (TELs), and the rapidity of their improvement in both quality and quantity, constitute an "imminent threat" to Japan. Moreover, abductions of Japanese citizens by the North Korean government.^{24 25}



Source: Bloomberg

²⁰ Narushige, *Japan's New National Security Strategy*, 1.

²¹ Christopher B. Johnstone, "The East China Sea: Ten Years After the Senkaku Nationalization Crisis," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 29 September 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/the-east-china-sea-ten-years-after-the-senkaku-nationalization-crisis/>.

²² "National Security Strategy of Japan," 9-10.

²³ Yasukazi, "On the Publication of Defense of Japan 2023."

²⁴ National Security Strategy of Japan," 9.

²⁵ Stephen Nagy, "Is Japan's New National Security Strategy a Paradigm Shift?" Geopolitical Monitor, 27 December 2022, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/is-japans-national-security-strategy-a-paradigm-shift/>.

4: Likely doubts about American commitment to its security alliance.

The U.S. has made it clear that it will stand by Japan in the case of war with an external aggressor.²⁶ However, distrust of this position has been a constant factor within Japanese security discourse, beginning at the turn of the millennium amid American public war weariness from inconclusive wars in the Middle East. The election of Donald Trump in 2016, his discontinuity with previous U.S. foreign policy decisions, and the erosion of democratic rule within the U.S. have likely contributed to feelings of isolation among Japanese policy makers and the Japanese public.^{27 28} The dysfunction of U.S. political leadership, as well as its preoccupation with Ukraine, are likely incentives for JSDF rearmament and adoption of a new, enhanced security posture.

Modernization in Practice and Implications for the Indo-Pacific

Japan has signaled its intention to bolster its conventional capabilities to face these emerging threats, approving a ¥7.95 trillion (\$56 billion) defense budget in 2024 as part of its 5-year buildup plan, with defense expenditure increasing 56% to reach a planned 2% of GDP by 2027.^{29 30} Further, parliament has relaxed many of the laws surrounding the export of lethal weapons systems, marking the advent of a new, previously untapped revenue stream for Japanese industry.³¹ Much of this is concerned with the defense of the island in a traditional sense, particularly regarding the issue of missiles. Recognizing the inherent fragility of a missile-defense network, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has sought to acquire a counter-strike capability. This includes a planned 22 new *Mogami*-class multi-role frigates replacing the ageing *Abukuma*-class destroyer escorts and *Asagiri*-class light destroyers, of which it has eight and six, respectively. These will compliment a force of at least 24 Diesel-electric attack submarines (including the brand new *Taigei*-class), and approximately 50 surface combatants, including four helicopter destroyers, two

²⁶ David Vergun, “Austin Says U.S. Committed to Defending Japan, Including Senkaku Islands,” U.S. Department of Defense, 4 October 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3548692/austin-says-us-committed-to-defending-japan-including-senkaku-islands/>.

²⁷ Richard J. Samuels and Corey Wallace, “Introduction: Japan’s pivot in Asia,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2018): 703-704. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy034>.

²⁸ Funatsu et al., “The US-Japan Alliance in the Age of Crisis.”

²⁹ Tim Kelly and Sakura Murakami, “Pacifist Japan Unveils biggest military build-up since World War Two,” Reuters, 17 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pacifist-japan-unveils-unprecedented-320-bln-military-build-up-2022-12-16/>.

³⁰ Ellen Ioanes, “Japan’s plan to ramp up military spending, explained,” Vox, 15 January 2023, <https://www.vox.com/world/2023/1/15/23555805/japans-military-buildup-us-china-north-korea>.

³¹ Mokoto Rich and Hisako Ueno, “Japan Relaxes Export Restrictions to Sell Patriot Missiles to U.S.,” The New York Times, 22 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/22/world/asia/japan-export-patriot-missiles-us.html>.

of which are undergoing modifications to allow STOVL aircraft to allow the deployment of fixed wing assets.³² Japan continues to modernize its aircraft fleet, replacing ageing fighters with F-35's. The JSDF has also acquired Tomahawk missiles, and the country's military-industry is investing heavily in hypersonic weapons. All of these factors mean Japan now has the capability to project power far beyond the horizon, which represents the onset of a new paradigm within the Indo-Pacific. This new environment is likely to be centered on four axes.

1. Shifts in Regional Power Dynamics and Relationships

JSDF modernization and the heavily increased defense spending of the Japanese Government are clear indicators of a more proactive security posture in the Indo-Pacific. This is likely to alter regional power dynamics, especially in relation to China's growing military presence and assertiveness. JSDF contribution to a balance of power that counters China's influence may potentially encourage other regional powers to also bolster their defense capabilities, further nullifying Chinese power projection in the Indo-Pacific.

2. Enhanced Defense Cooperation and Alliances

Japan's rearmament is almost certain to strengthen existing alliances and foster new defense partnerships within the Indo-Pacific. Japan's security relationship with the U.S. is certain to be enhanced – JSDF modernization greatly multiplies the combat potential of joint SDF-U.S. forces, and provides a far more credible deterrent than previously, which of course is the goal of the alliance.³³ Furthermore, reindustrialization and a reinvigorated military-industrial complex presents technology sharing and development opportunities with Japan's close allies, and potential buyers for advanced weapons systems. This is already partially true in the case of the Tempest FCAS, a prospective 6th Generation Fighter.³⁴

³² International Institute for Security Studies, *The Military Balance 2024* (London, UK: Routledge, 2024) 278-280.

³³ Heino Klinek, "Japan's Defensive Priorities and Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23 June 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-defense-priorities-and-implications-us-japan-alliance>.

³⁴ Jean-Michel Bezat, "Combat Aircraft: Developing an Anglo-Italian-Japanese rival to the FCAS," *Le Monde*, 3 January 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2022/12/10/combat-aircraft-developing-an-anglo-italian-japanese-rival-to-the-fcas_6007276_19.html.

Both of these factors are likely to extend to other Quad members (Australia and India), enhancing the collective security mechanism against common threats, notably in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

3. Positive Economic and Defense Industry Growth

The rearmament effort, particularly Japan's plan to enhance its defense industrial base, could have economic implications for the Indo-Pacific, possibly stopping years of lackluster economic performance. By integrating more deeply with the global defense industry, Japan might not only boost its own economy but also contribute to the economic vitality of partner countries through joint defense projects, technology transfer, and defense procurement. This may foster a network of interdependence that enhances regional stability through economic ties. For example, the F35 program contributes \$72 billion to the economy and nearly 300,000 advanced manufacturing jobs throughout various partner countries.³⁵

4. Escalation of the Security Dilemma

While Japan's rearmament aims to deter aggression and enhance regional security, it could inadvertently result in the opposite. A security dilemma is where increased military capabilities of one country lead neighboring countries to perceive a threat, prompting them to also increase their military capabilities. These actions become reciprocal, hence the other name of the security dilemma, the spiral model. It is almost certain to escalate tensions in the region with North Korea and China. Additionally, it may also cause other states within the Indo-Pacific to fear for their safety and thus turn to alternative security partners – Japan is viewed unfavorably due to its militaristic past.³⁶

Conclusion:

As Japan navigates the intricacies of modern security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, its strategic pivot from a defense-oriented posture towards greater military assertiveness represents a critical juncture. This evolution, driven by regional tensions and global power shifts, prompts a reassessment of Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific, and its impacts on the region's geopolitical

³⁵ “Economic Impact,” F-35, Accessed 11 March 2024, <https://www.f35.com/f35/about/economic-impact.html>.

³⁶ Ryan Ashley, “From Boycotts to Selfies: Asia’s Myriad Perceptions of Japan,” War on the Rocks, 14 December 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/12/from-boycotts-to-selfies-asias-myriad-perceptions-of-japan/>.

environment. The long-term implications for regional peace, security architecture, and international alliances hinge on how Japan and its neighbors adapt to these changes.