

Japan's new defence strategy: a final deviation from pacifist post-WWII self-defence policy?

Recently Tokyo announced three key security-related documents, which – if implemented – would deeply change Japan's military capabilities and its position in a geostrategic landscape of Asia. Japanese decisions to boost its warfighting capabilities is a direct result of increasing militarisation by two Japan's potential adversaries: China and North Korea. It is also a reaction to a highly aggressive policy of Russia, with which Japan has never signed a peace treaty and has unresolved territorial disputes.

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In mid-December 2022 the government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who said that Japan was now at a “turning point in history”,¹ released a new *National Security Strategy* and two other policy documents – one outlines defence priorities over the next ten years (*National Defense Strategy*), while the other presents procurement initiatives (*Defense Buildup Program*, previously known as the *Medium-Term Defense Program*).

It is expected that this fiscal year (2023, which starts on April 1, 2023 and ends in March 31, 2024) Japan will spend on its defence roughly EUR 47.2 billion. This is a 26.3% increase compared to the previous fiscal year. If two timeframes of five-year plans are compared (2023–2027 and 2019–2023) then a growth is even more significant (56.5%). While a scale of an increase is undoubtedly impressive, the fact that Japan decided to spend more is not. This is a ninth consecutive year of increases of Japan's national defense budget under a Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-led administration.

Currently Japan spends roughly 0.96% of defense annually, but it is expected to reach 2% by 2027² (Tokyo would then meet NATO standards). That would be an important breakthrough, because since 1976 Japan has self-limited its spending to less than 1% (it was a decision made by Prime Minister Miki Takeo in 1976 to prevent Japan becoming a military superpower). Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that this is – at least for now – just a plan of Kishida's cabinet. The budget draft still has to be passed by the Japanese Parliament (The National Diet). However, if plans are

accomplished, Japan would become the world's third-biggest military spender after the United States and China.

One of the main obstacles is money. The government wants to issue bonds to fund some modernisation projects, but this is a very controversial and risky idea. "The Asahi Shimbun" newspaper reported that "for decades, the government has stood firm in not using them to fund defence expenditures for, among other things, building aircraft and naval vessels that have a relatively short shelf life."³ The last time Japan used bonds to fund military projects was during World War II. If at all, bonds would be used not to procure equipment, but rather to develop infrastructure. It was reported by "Kyodo" news agency that up to EUR 10.6 billion is to be spent for construction projects by the end of 2028 fiscal year.⁴

Political context

Kishida's decisions are a continuation of an approach of previous governments of Japan. A policy of leaving a path of non-alignment and having only symbolic military power was initiated a decade by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from a Liberal-Democratic Party. Abe, who was killed last year, was the first Japanese Prime Minister born after World War II, the youngest in history of Japan and the longest-serving (2006-2007, 2012-2020). Abe broke a psychological barrier and showed that Japan – still struggling with the ghosts of World War II – can have regular armed forces and has a right to use them to protect its national interests.

In this context, it should be recalled that in the case of Japan, any investment in the armed forces (which Japan formally does not have under the 1947 constitution) is very difficult. This is due to both a historical factor – during World War II Japan was an aggressive state and a brutal occupier of large parts of Asia – and a legal factor, i.e. the aforementioned constitution. Japan's famous Article 9 clearly states that „the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.“ Moreover, it has been written that any „land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be sustained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognised.“

While Japan does not have *de iure* armed forces, it maintains *de facto* military, which is officially known as the JSDF (Japan Self-Defense Forces). Japan's military, which officially does not exist, is equipped with combat vessels, including submarines, destroyers and even aircraft carriers, as well as with tanks, armoured fighting vehicles and fighter jets. In recent years Japan re-established, not without controversies, its naval infantry (Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade), which was equipped with the AAV7 tracked amphibious landing vehicles. It would be no exaggeration at all to claim that the JSDF is among the best military forces in Asia. It lacks, however, any long-range

offensive systems, such as ballistic or cruise missiles. Moreover, its ability to wage a long-term conventional war is also limited.

Military priorities

In the wake of deteriorating international situation, Prime Minister Kishida – who replaced Yoshihide Suga in October 2021 – announced that money would be devoted to “fundamentally upgrade”⁵ the JSDF. This includes an ambition to increase mobility of the JSDF, particularly those units, which are deployed in the southwestern islands (this is where tensions with China are high). Moreover, Tokyo wants to increase stockpile of ammunition and spare parts (3.3 times more than last fiscal year is to be spend). This is most likely a lesson learn from the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

A particularly interesting plan is to acquire capabilities that – as mentioned earlier – Japan does not have. This covers so called “counterstrike missile capabilities” or “stand-off defence capabilities”. It is expected that Japan will spend at least EUR 34 billion on this element over the next five years. Japan rightly argues that currently potential adversaries have a significant advantage over Japan in this regard – both Japanese troops and infrastructure could be attacked from a long distance, while Japan would not be able to respond effectively. This includes North Korea, which has been testing various ballistic and cruise missiles on regular basis. Some of them fly over Japan. In the case of China, Japan has no tools to response to the new generation of Chinese missiles, including the Dongfeng (DF-17) hypersonic missiles.

One of the most important decisions in this regard is a plan of Japan to acquire up to 500 US-made Tomahawk cruise missiles (reportedly in the latest Block V variant) for roughly EUR 2 billion. They are expected to be integrated with the Aegis-equipped destroyers by the end of 2027 fiscal year. When deployed, Japan will significantly boost its long range-capabilities (Naval Tomahawk has a maximum range of 2500 km). Apart from that, Japan has been developing an extended-range version of the domestically produced Type 12 Surface-to-Ship Missile (SSM) and has been working jointly with the United Kingdom to develop a JNAAM (Joint New Air-to-Air-Missile). This is Japan's first defence development program carried out with a foreign partner other than the United States. Another important international program is the one devoted to a of the next-generation (6th) fighter by 2035. This project, known as GCAP (Global Combat Air Program) has been carried out jointly with the United Kingdom and Italy.

At the same time Japan is procuring Kongsberg's the JSM (Joint Strike Missile) 5th generation stealth air-to surface missiles for its F-35 multirole jets (in total Japan wants to get 147 F-35s over the coming decade: 105 x As and 42 x Bs. The latter variant is capable of short take-offs and vertical landings). This is an important project, because JSMs will provide the Japanese with an ability to

engage ground and surface targets within a radius of 500 km, i.e. both in China and North Korea. In addition, Tokyo plans to equip its military with the AGM-158B JASSM-ER and AGM-158C LRASM anti-ship missiles. These, in turn, are primarily intended for the Japanese F-15J/DJ. Japan will also continue investing in hypersonic missiles, which are to be ready in the early 2030s. Project was launched in 2019. It is clear that introducing new, long-range strike capabilities within "active defence" concept will not end Japan's efforts. Japan will have to also develop advanced reconnaissance and tracking systems

Conclusions

1. The latest decisions to increase defence funding in the first place show continuity among Japanese decision-makers. The current government is implementing goals and plans set almost a decade ago by Shinzo Abe. Such policy, which has been gradually changing Tokyo's approach to military and its position in the region, has a backing of majority of the Japanese population.⁶ It seems that majority of the Japanese population share this perception - domestic opposition to a military build-up has been minor.
2. What draws attention, however, is not so much the increase in expenditure but rather a significant scale of this boost. This is the biggest military build-up since World War Two (EUR 294 billion in five years). It is right to assume that Tokyo will not use its military to intimidate its neighbours but will stay devoted to its defence-oriented policy. Both China and North Korea slammed Japan's announcement, but most likely it will not trigger any real change. Both Beijing and Pjongjang have been anyway upgrading their armed forces, including their missile arsenals, regardless of Japan and its modernisation plans.
3. A decision to enhance warfighting capabilities by Japan – a state that since the end of World War II has maintained a relatively high level of military neutrality and confined itself to its own borders – clearly shows all negative changes in the international system. Many of those changes have been generated in recent years by two Asian states – North Korea and China. Japan invariably considers both of these countries to be the main threat to its security. Regarding the latter, Tokyo has openly said that "the strategic challenge posed by China is the biggest Japan has ever faced".⁷
4. Russian factor plays its negative role too. Japan's recent decisions were also influenced by a difficult situation in Central-Eastern Europe. Tokyo might worry that the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine could provoke China to either attack Taiwan or to use a limited force against Japan. Any war in the region, even if Japan is not directly involved, would negatively impact Japanese security and economy. Moreover, Japanese decision to increase its stockpiles of spare parts and

munition clearly shown that Tokyo has drawn right conclusions – large war reserve stocks and a capability to sustain a prolonged fight is crucial. Previously Japan was not prepared sufficiently.

5. Japan's military build-up might also have a limited impact on Central and Eastern Europe. States from the region will now have an opportunity to establish closer political, military and industrial relations with Japan, which – at least to some extent – wants to follow the path of South Korea, who has now become more Europe-oriented. Regarding an industrial dimension, Japan wants to increase export of its military systems in order to get additional funds. Moreover, Tokyo is eager to look for new partners regarding research and development. Secondly, Japan is already a NATO partner and an extremely important political and military ally of the United States, which is a guarantor of the security in Central and Eastern Europe. A strong, independent and democratic Japan – capable of deterring threats and actively building peace and stability in Asia – serves the Americans, and thus also NATO and Central and Eastern Europe.

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¹ Tim Kelly, Sakura Murakami, Pacifist Japan unveils biggest military build-up since World War Two, last modified January 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pacifist-japan-unveils-unprecedented-320-bln-military-build-up-2022-12-16/>

² Press Conference by Prime Minister Kishida , last modified January 30, 2023, https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/101_kishida/statement/2022/1210kaiken.html

³ Major shift as Japan mulls use of construction bonds for defense, last modified January 30, 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14792417>

⁴ Tetsushi Kajimoto, Japan eyes \$11.6 bln in construction bonds for military facilities –Kyodo, last modified January 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/japan-eyes-116-bln-construction-bonds-military-facilities-kyodo-2022-12-13/>

⁵ Sheila A. Smith, Financing Japan's Defense Leap, last modified January 30, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/financing-japans-defense-leap>

⁶ Yomiuri public opinion poll: 51% agree to increase defense spending, 51% agree to extend nuclear power plant, last modified January 30, 2023, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/election/yoron-chosa/20221204-OYT1T50120/>

⁷ Pacifist Japan unveils unprecedented \$320bn military build-up, last modified January 30, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/16/pacifist-japan-unveils-unprecedented-320bn-military-build-up?traffic_source=KeepReading

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