

Opinion – Japan’s Military Awakening

Written by Julian McBride

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JULIAN MCBRIDE, APR 6 2025

After decades of stagnation and a state of vassalage under the United States, Japan is preparing to transform its self-defense forces into a full-fledged military to counter various threats. In 2015, under then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Tokyo discussed efforts to begin remilitarization and transform the self-defense forces into a full-fledged military—particularly due to China’s rapid force projection. In late 2022 and early 2023, Japan officially started the process of remilitarization as the Russian invasion of Ukraine changed the geopolitical landscape across the globe.

Former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated in late 2022 his intentions to push Japan to meet the 2% GDP allocation for defense, similar to NATO’s standards, to meet rising threats in the Asian Pacific. Presenting a five-year strategy on reinvigorating its armed forces, Tokyo plans to allocate \$320 billion towards defense, third only to the United States and China. The soon-to-be-instituted Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) will be a major flashpoint in command and control of all branches of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Coordination in the PJHQ will allow the general officer staff to closely monitor and respond to any crisis management, such as North Korean missile launches, Russian aggression via the Pacific fleet, and Chinese threats to the Japanese islands and Taiwan.

Under the American-written constitution for Japan, following Japan’s defeat in the Second World War, Tokyo could not have a standing military; instead, it could have a self-defense force (JSDF) with direct oversight by Washington. Japan relied on direct American military protection and oversight of the JSDF for several decades. However, despite decades of reliance and stagnation in defense spending, Japan remained a capable force. The JSDF regularly conducts military exercises with the 50,000-plus US troops stationed throughout the Japanese archipelago and rotating forces such as the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit. Mirroring innovations in warfare, such as first-person view drones in Ukraine and the Israeli-pager attack against Hezbollah, Japan understands the need for defense-tech innovations – a priority in Tokyo’s five-year remilitarization plan.

Tokyo is taking multiple paths to fully rearm the JSDF as Japan continues to grow its strategic autonomy while maintaining close relations with the United States. In early 2024, Japan finalized its purchase of four hundred Tomahawk cruise missiles, considered some of the top land-attack missiles today. The acquisition of Tomahawks includes two hundred Block IV and 200 Block V variations of the missiles. Furthermore, logistical elements such as training and maintenance were included in the package. Japan will fit its Tomahawks on their eight Aegis destroyers to reinvigorate the Japanese navy. The cruise can be a valuable deterrence and offensive weapon in warfare, particularly against China and Russia, whose fleets have engaged in hostile actions around the Japanese archipelago.

Further solidifying naval growth, Tokyo upgraded the JS Kaga from a sole helicopter aircraft carrier to a light aircraft carrier. The modifications will allow the Japanese navy to place several F-35 Bs on the JA Kaga, as the defense ministry plans to purchase forty-two of Lockheed Martin’s top city-generation aircraft. Furthermore, the Japanese Air Force will receive major upgrades from the United States. At least seventy of Japan’s F-15s will be upgraded in the Super Interceptor Program, including upgrades in Raytheon radars and passive warning survivability systems from BAE Systems.

Despite efforts to support conflicts abroad, the JSDF is limited in the operations it can take. For example, Japan’s bureaucratic arguments for financial support for the Gulf War came too late for the American-led coalition, and the

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JSDF primarily focused on peacekeeping rather than combat operations in Iraq. Efforts can be made for Japan's field officers and non-commissioned officer corps (NCOs) to gain more experience alongside American counterparts in war-torn and unstable countries as the knowledge can be brought back to further instill confidence in the JSDF. Japan's military base in Djibouti is a positive step toward enhanced partnerships for forward operations. Furthermore, in the economic, technological, and defense spheres, Japan has grown relations with other Indo-Pacific nations, such as South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan.

Japanese remilitarization in the Indo-Pacific can be a net positive for many countries, even though Tokyo still faces hurdles over past imperial transgressions. Regarding Taiwan, the United States can have a close ally that could potentially directly intervene if China does decide to invade or blockade the republic amphibiously. Tokyo has a close diplomatic and cultural relationship with Taipei, and threats to Taiwan's independence represent an existential crisis for Japan. Though maintaining a policy of strategic ambiguity, Japan stated in its 2022 National Security Strategy in the Eurasian Review:

Taiwan is an extremely important partner and a precious friend of Japan, with whom Japan shares fundamental values. Peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are an indispensable element for the security and prosperity of the international community.

Taiwan and Japan are also part of the First Island Chain, representing a major defense against growing Chinese naval ambitions and expansion. If Taiwan were to fall, the Chinese navy (PLAN) would pose a major threat to the Luzon Strait, a major economic and trading lifeline to the Japanese economy, which gives Tokyo an ever-greater incentive to bolster its military.

Furthermore, Japan is growing its influence in countering North Korea (DPRK). Internationally condemned missile launches by the DPRK are a direct threat to Japan along with South Korea and the United States, as North Korean missiles are landing in the vicinity of the Sea of Japan. Mending ties under American-backed mediation, Japan and South Korea came to a mutual understanding in sharing intelligence and hotlines on North Korean missile warnings. Concurrently, the heads of the JSDF and Republic of Korea Armed Forces met several times under President Biden, and recently, the foreign ministers of Seoul and Tokyo reaffirmed cooperation with Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Examples such as these indicate that Japanese remilitarization will benefit the people of Japan against numerous looming threats, and in a wider sense the growing JSDF capabilities will be a much-needed counterbalance in the Indo-Pacific.

About the author:

Julian McBride is a defense analyst and 19FortyFive contributing editor.