

POLICY BRIEF

The Senkaku Islands and the Pivot in Japanese Defence Policy

Japanese defence policy made global headlines in December 2022 when Japan announced new versions of all three of its main security documents for the first time in nine years: the *National Security Strategy* (NSS),¹ Japan's capstone defence document, the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), which had previously been known as the *National Defense Program Guidelines* (NDPG), and the *Defense Buildup Program* (DBP), previously known as the *Mid-Term Defense Program*.² What grabbed global headlines was not merely the announcement of new versions of these three fundamental defence documents but the big changes in Japanese defence that they heralded.

Most strikingly, they called for Japan to spend 2% of its GDP on defence within five years, a seeming doubling of defence spending from the previous 1% that had been Japan's de facto target, a plan that, other things being equal, would make Japan the world's third largest defence spender by 2027. Second, for the first time ever the three new defence documents called for Japan to acquire a "counterstrike"

1 Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, December 16, 2022, accessed 29 October 2023 at https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/pdf/security_strategy_en.pdf

2 Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Japan, *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), 16 December 2022, p. 13, accessed 11 April 2023 at https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf; and Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Japan, *Defense Buildup Program*, accessed 29 October 2023 at https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program_en.pdf. For the previous versions of these two documents in 2018 see https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_policy/national.html, accessed 29 October 2023.



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capability, namely an ability to launch missile strikes on stationary enemy bases, including command and control and infrastructure nodes, in a foreign country that had attacked Japan. This appeared to many to entirely overturn Japan's postwar doctrine of defensive defence, or *Senshu Bōei*, under which Japan avoided acquiring offensive military capabilities and concentrated entirely on territorial defence. Many international pundits saw this as a reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and stated that it signalled Japan's willingness to contribute to combat operations to defend the island of Taiwan from a Chinese attack. For example, commentator Ryan Ashley wrote "Tokyo is signalling that it is willing to support Taiwan's sovereignty up to and including joining a military defence of the island against a Chinese attack."³ Similarly, Zack Cooper and Eric Sayers make the even more sweeping claim that Japan is in a "transition from pacifism to [being a] regional protector."⁴ The boldest claim came from Axel Berkofsky, who declared that "The gloves are off. Japan would – in the case of an unprovoked Chinese attack against Taiwan – get involved in defending Taiwan militarily."⁵

This article argues that the size and suddenness of changes in Japanese defence policy have been exaggerated, particularly by observers outside Japan. It argues that the three 2022 defence documents are a long-term result of the new status quo that emerged in 2012 of continual confrontation in the East China Sea, particularly around the Senkaku (which China calls the Diaoyu) islands, where China physically challenges Japan's asserted sovereignty. The long-term impact of this continual confrontation on Japanese defence policy has received little systematic attention. This article argues that this first direct ongoing challenge to Japan's territorial integrity since 1945 has become a catalyst for transformations of Japan's overall security posture in several ways, and a significant change in its domestic politics.

First, since 2012 Japan has been developing an Anti-access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, modelled on China's A2/AD strategy, protecting the Senkaku and Sakishima islands, which is designed to hold at risk any Chinese military or Coast Guard units operating in the vicinity of either group of islands. This new A2/AD strategy, which involves acquiring long-range counter-strike missiles to cover the Senkakus, in turn undermined the policy of not obtaining long-range missiles capable of striking enemy bases in neighbouring countries.

Avoiding acquiring offensive and power-projection capabilities had long been a staple of Japan's defensive defence doctrine. Following the decision to acquire counterstrike capabilities Japan decided to acquire and deploy approximately 400 Tomahawk missiles by 2026. These have sufficient range to hit targets in eastern China and North Korea.⁶ Although the decision to acquire these missiles represents a departure from the previous policy of avoiding acquiring missiles capable of striking targets in other countries, this modest capability is incorporated in Japan's defence strategy solely to deter or retaliate against missile attacks launched by others against Japan. Using these missiles to defend others, including Taiwan, is not a part of the new *NSS* and *NDS*, and neither is it a part of the national consensus and debate on security. Moreover, using this counterstrike capability to pre-empt an expected attack is explicitly excluded in both the *NSS* and *NDS*, with Prime Minister Kishida Fumio adding at a press conference announcing the three new defence documents that pre-emptive strikes are illegal under international law.

Second, the move to increase the share of defence spending from 1% to 2% of Japan's GDP does not in fact represent a "doubling" of defence spending, as has often been depicted by pundits. The *NSS* explicitly adopts the NATO accounting standard on defence spending, which includes many items, such as the Coast Guard budget, the budget to support the stationing of US troops in Japan, military pen-

3 Ryan Ashley, "Japan's Revolution on Taiwan Affairs," *War on the Rocks*, 23 November 2021, accessed 11 August 2023, at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/japans-revolution-on-taiwan-affairs/>

4 Zack Cooper and Eric Sayers, "Japan's Shift to a War Footing," *War on the Rocks*, 12 January 2023, accessed 7 July 2023, at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/japans-shift-to-war-footing/>

5 Axel Berkofsky, "Japan: All Dressed Up and Ready to Go (to the Taiwan Strait)?" *ISPI*, 23 September 2022, accessed 17 August 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/japan-all-dressed-and-ready-go-taiwan-strait-36244>

6 Nobuhiko Tajima & Ryo Kiyomiya, "Japan to procure U.S. Tomahawk missiles earlier than planned," *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 October 2023, accessed 29 October 2023 at <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15021823>

sions and civilian infrastructure projects that can be used by the military (e.g. lengthening airport runways in the Sakishima islands). When the definition of the defence budget was widened in this way to meet the NATO standard Japan was already spending around 1.3% or more of its GDP on defence. In adopting the NATO 'standard' for defence spending in the NSS, Japan also adopted the NATO aim of spending 2% on defence. Consequently, Japan's defence spending is not doubling as many pundits claim but only increasing by approximately 60%. Of course, 60% is still a huge increase that, other things being equal, will give Japan the world's third largest defence budget behind the US and China by 2027. Whether Japan can reach and then sustain this level of defence spending given its high level of national debt, aging population and majority opposition to tax increases to pay for this defence spending increase remains to be seen.⁷

International observers have not only exaggerated the scale of Japan's defence spending increase but they have also often misunderstood its purpose, seeing it, like the acquisition of a modest counterstrike capability, as marking a shift away from Japan's traditional defensive defence military doctrine, which focuses on territorial defence, and toward playing a military role beyond Japanese territory, starting with predictions that Japan would participate in combat alongside the US to counter a Chinese attack on Taiwan. In fact, the NSS and NSD specify that the large increase in defence spending is for territorial defence. The possibility of Japan being involved in combat beyond Japanese territory, e.g. to defend Taiwan, is not even mentioned in these documents. Instead, the NSS and NDS explicitly state that the aim of the large increase in military spending is for Japan to assume primary responsibility for its territorial defence by 2027. According to the NSS, "five years after the formulation of the strategy, Japan will strengthen its defence capabilities to the point at which Japan is able to take the primary responsibility for dealing with invasions against its nation and disrupt and defeat such threats while gaining the support of its ally and others."⁸

This also signals something that has been almost entirely ignored by observers about Japan's defence buildup: the aim of increasing Japan's defence autonomy from the United States. This new emphasis on autonomy may reflect growing doubts about US capabilities to defend Japan, and/or growing doubts about US willingness to defend Japan since US President Donald Trump began to raise questions about whether the US would defend Japan and other traditional US allies. At the same time, this defence buildup reflects a recognition that Japan's ability to defend its territory, especially vis-à-vis China in the Senkaku islands and even the Sakishima islands, has been declining despite Japan's best efforts to bolster its defence there since 2012. Until about fifteen years ago, Japan would have easily defeated a Chinese attempt to seize the Senkaku islands, not to mention the Sakishima islands or other Japanese territory. Since that time, Japan has not kept up with China's military expansion and the new defence documents are aimed at reestablishing Japan's ability to defend its territory by itself. The three new defence documents focus on 'southwest' defence, which centres on the Senkakus and Sakishima islands, including Yonaguni island, which is 110 km away from Taiwan.

Although Japan's southwest is relatively close to Taiwan, defending it is very different from defending Taiwan, both politically and militarily. Politically, the three new defence documents represent a consensus in the government and the ruling coalition on the need to significantly strengthen Japan's territorial defence, but they do not indicate any intention to help defend Taiwan. There are no provisions and no discussion in the three defense documents on the possibility of Japan using military force to help the US defend Taiwan, or even on Japan exercising the right to collective self-defence in a regional conflict, a topic that had been very prominent in Japan's defence debate several years earlier. More broadly, there has been no national debate about doing this and no suggestions from the Kishida administration that they are preparing to do so. Of course, if there were a Sino-US conflict over Taiwan, it is very likely (although not automatic) that Japan would allow the US to use its bases in Japan to help defend Taiwan.

7 For a careful analysis of Japan's defence spending increase, see Adam P. Liff, "No, Japan is not planning to double its defense budget," *Brookings Commentary*, 23 May 2023, accessed 3 September 2023, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/no-japan-is-not-planning-to-double-its-defense-budget/>

8 NSS) p. 20; NDS, pp. 11, 12.

It is also very likely that Japan would provide US forces with logistical support and defend US military assets in Japanese airspace and waters. These moves would certainly make a significant contribution to US efforts to help defend Taiwan, but they would not involve the SDF in militarily defending Taiwan.

Japan providing base access and logistical support to the US military in the event of a Sino-US conflict over Taiwan would run a significant risk of provoking Chinese missile strikes on US bases, if not attacks on SDF assets. In that event it is very likely that Japan would use its stand-off strike capabilities to hit back at Chinese sea and air assets, and if it had operational Tomahawk missiles at the time of the conflict it might also launch counter-strikes at fixed military targets on the Chinese mainland to reestablish deterrence. Nonetheless, it is likely that even in this case Japan would not become significantly involved in combat to defend Taiwan and would remain focused on territorial defence.

Japan will remain focused on territorial defence not only because this represents the defence consensus in the government, the ruling coalition and among the public at large but also because Japan has shaped, and is shaping, its forces to focus on territorial defence not conflicts beyond its territory. Although Japan is acquiring a modest counterstrike capability this decade, it is not acquiring other power projection or offensive capabilities (except for offensive cyber capabilities), such as bombers, offensive electronic warfare capabilities or other kill chain capabilities for targeting mobile targets, or large-scale amphibious assault, air or sealift capabilities beyond what is needed for southwest island defence. Even mounting a successful defence of the Senkaku and Sakishima islands would stretch its new capabilities thin.⁹

In sum, Japan's landmark new defence documents, the *ISS*, *NDS* and *NDB*, are focused on making up lost ground by recovering Japan's ability to defend its territory autonomously, not on assuming a military role in regional conflicts, including in a conflict over Taiwan. Finally, some international observers

have argued that Japan's new defence documents and more muscular defence policy reflect lessons it has drawn from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, lessons that point to playing a military role beyond its territory. However, the lesson that appears to have been drawn from the Ukraine war is the need to double-down on territorial defence, a trend that has been underway since 2012, when the new status quo of China continually challenging Japan's control of the Senkaku islands emerged. The three defence documents of 2022 represent a culmination of this trend. To the extent that the Ukraine war has made an impact, it has been to make it easier for Japanese to imagine their country being a victim of a similar invasion, rather than imagining Japan becoming the saviour of another country that comes under attack.

⁹ Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 2020), pp. 29, 52-53, 80-83; Garren Mulloy, *Defenders of Japan: The Post-Imperial Armed Forces 1946-2016* (London: Hurst & Company, 2021), pp. 249-257; Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018), pp. 128-169, at p. 149. It is possible that Japan may also be acquiring offensive cyber capabilities, but these would be unlikely to play a central role in defending Japanese territory or Taiwan.

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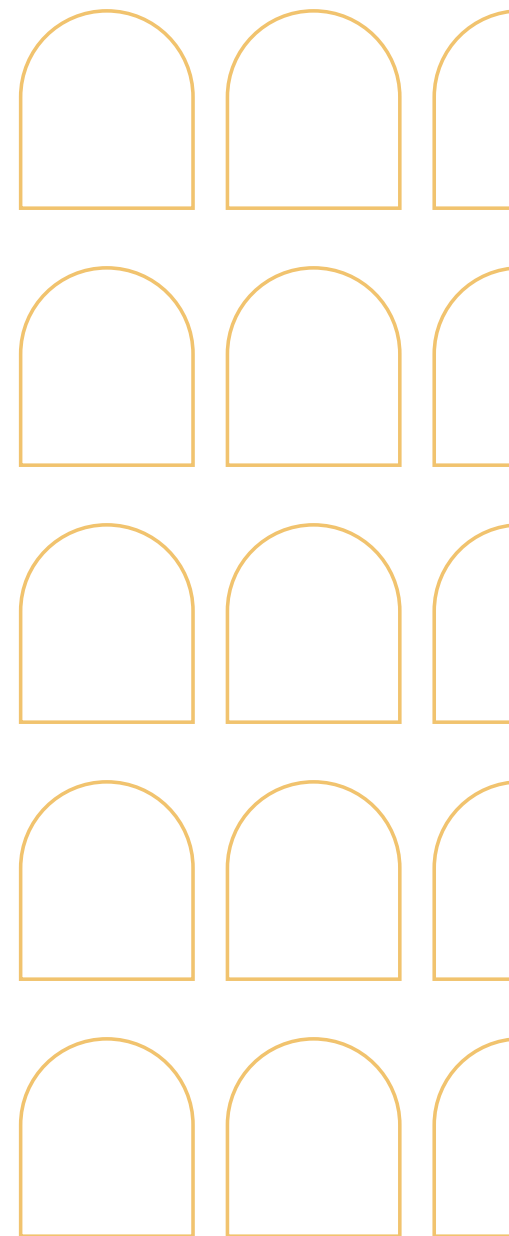
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