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Japan: Finally Beefing Up Its Military

By Richard A. Bitzinger

SYNOPSIS

Japan, increasingly concerned over China's military buildup and corresponding aggressiveness in the western Pacific, has decided to buy additional F-35 fighter jets and to convert two naval ships into fixed-wing aircraft carriers. These moves are part of a broader effort to beef up Japan's Self-Defence Forces.

COMMENTARY

CHINA, WITH its military buildup and corresponding assertiveness in the western Pacific, has become a growing military challenge to its neighbours, one that is expanding in terms of size, capabilities, and quality. Beijing is increasingly hard-line in pushing its regional great-power objectives, largely because its improving military permits such an aggressive approach. It is, quite simply, the foremost military threat to the West and to the political-military status quo in the Asia-Pacific region.

Moscow on the other hand has just one arrow in its quiver: hybrid operations, that is cyber warfare and information attacks, while its conventional forces are getting weaker and its oil and gas dependent economy can barely support its military ambitions. There is therefore one big difference between Russia and China as threats to their neighbours.

Japan Wakes Up to China

Nowhere has this growing insecurity regarding China been more self-evident than in Japan. Just a few years ago, Tokyo was much more tolerant of Chinese assertive behaviour; Japan's 2013 defence white paper noted merely that China's regional military activities were a "matter of concern".

Today, the mood in Japan is much darker. In its 2018 white paper, Tokyo bluntly accused China of attempting to “[change] the status quo by coercion,” noting that Beijing was militarising the Spratly and Paracel islands, expanding naval and paramilitary operations in the South China Sea, and working to increase the operational reach of the PLA into the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Closer to home, China is increasingly projecting sea and air power near Japan, particularly around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In addition, Tokyo asserts that China is attempting to “routinise” its air and naval operations in waters close to Japan.

Underpinning these efforts, the 2018 white paper maintains that China aims to “realise [a] fundamental modernisation of its military forces,” and to “transform the PLA into one of the world’s top militaries by the middle of the 21st century”.

Bulking Up With F-35s

Despite this recognition of a growing military threat from China, it took a while for Japan to react. Japan’s countervailing military buildup has been slow, and it has by no means matched China in terms of size and pace. At the same time, it has become increasingly purposeful. Tokyo has reversed a decade-old decline in defence spending and started adding to the military budget.

More importantly, it has begun a serious effort to increase the offensive fighting capacities of the Japan Self-Defence Forces (SDF), abandoning the country’s traditional “exclusively defence-oriented posture”. This has meant, for example, the acquisition of precision-guided air-to-ground weapons, such as the GPS-guided Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM).

This bulking-up is best exemplified by two recent SDF developments. The first is a recently approved buy of 105 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters (JSF), in addition to the 42 F-35s already acquired by the Air Self Defence Force (ASDF) a few years back.

It is likely that the ASDF would eventually replace all of its older combat aircraft (approximately 200 F-15s, F-4s, and F-2s) with fifth-generation fighters, either the F-35 or the new indigenous X-2/F-3 (currently under development). Such a solid force of perhaps 350 fifth-generation fighters would make for a formidable counter to China’s own, modernising air force.

Enter the Aircraft Carriers

In addition, in December 2018 the Japanese defence ministry announced that it would convert its two largest naval ships, the *Izumo* and the *Kaga*, into aircraft carriers, and outfit these with the “B” version of the F-35, the short-takeoff and vertical-landing (STOVL) variant of the JSF. Japan plans to buy 42 F-35Bs, enough for two squadrons.

The 20,000-ton *Izumo* and the *Kaga* are technically “helicopter destroyers,” open-deck vessels more resembling flat-top amphibious assault ships. At present, they

only operate helicopters, but they could be modified (for example, strengthening the deck to absorb the heat from jet engines) for fixed-wing aircraft.

If this occurs, then Japan will have its first aircraft carriers since the end of World War II. According to John Venable, a naval expert at the Heritage Foundation, SDF forces operating the F-35B would create a “more diverse set of complications for the PLA,” providing Japan with fighter aircraft that would not be dependent on runways and giving MSDF ships added firepower.

Complications Remain

The SDF is also adding to its arsenal in other ways, with new maritime patrol aircraft, a next-generation destroyer, an expanded missile-defence capability, and a new medium-range air-to-air missile (being codeveloped with the United Kingdom, a first for Japan). Nevertheless, the SDF has a long ways to go before it can consider itself a military capable of sustained force projection.

In the first place, Japan’s current efforts to develop a home-grown fifth-generation fighter jet (the X-2/F-3) could be a serious drag on SDF resources and efforts, and there is no guarantee that it will ever be deployed.

Moreover, Japan still has to settle the fundamental conundrum of its enduring postwar “pacifist psyche”. Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), in particular, has sought to upgrade the status of the SDF and legitimise its role as a military force.

In addition, many politicians have called for the revision of Japan’s so-called Peace Constitution in order to explicitly permit the maintenance of self-defence forces and to allow these forces to be used in international peacekeeping and security operations. Bold actions still need to be taken for Japan to take the next steps to becoming an effective counter to growing Chinese military power in the region.

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