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Japan's Quest for Security

By Tomohiko Satake

SYNOPSIS

Japan perceives that the security environment it operates in has continued to worsen and its existing defence arrangements need “fundamental reinforcement.” Japan has sought to break away from its previous low-profile security posture and to strengthen its defence capabilities through strategic use of military assets and supply lines, advanced technologies, economic security, and partnerships with like-minded countries.

COMMENTARY

The resurgence of great power competition has had a significant impact on Japan's security. Previously, Japan's major security concerns came mostly from North Korea's missiles and “grey zone” threats that fall short of major conflicts. Because of rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, there has been growing concerns about the possibility of high-end conventional conflicts, or even nuclear ones. It has been increasingly common for analysts to observe that a “Taiwan contingency is a Japanese contingency” and that “today's Ukraine may be tomorrow's Asia.”

This explains why Japan has actively supported Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion and, in line with its European partners, imposed strong sanctions against Russia. Despite Japan's previous efforts to avoid a two-front war with Russia and China, these two countries have increasingly aligned themselves and coordinated their joint military actions in areas surrounding Japan. China has continued to expand its maritime and air activities around Japan and has more than 2,000 missiles within range of Japan. With North Korea's continuing advance in its nuclear and missile capabilities, Japan now faces security challenges on three fronts.

Given the worst-ever security environment since the end of World War II, Japan's political stance in the great power competition has become clearer than before. Japan can no longer enjoy the luxury of keeping its distance from this competition, and has, in fact, become increasingly involved as an important player. Japan's active support to Ukraine, as well as its active diplomacy in the G7 and NATO, have clearly demonstrated its determination to support the Western community. So long as the existing order continues to be challenged by revisionist powers, Japan is likely to maintain this posture.

Fundamental Reinforcements of Defence Capabilities

Faced with this strong sense of crisis, Japan is moving forward rapidly with efforts to "fundamentally reinforce" its defence capabilities. According to Japan's brand-new *National Defence Strategy* released in December 2022, the "fundamental reinforcement" of its defence capability includes seven elements: (1) stand-off defence capability, (2) integrated air and missile defence capability, (3) unmanned defence capability, (4) cross-domain operation capability, (5) command and control and intelligence-related functions, (6) mobile deployment capability/civil protection, and (7) sustainability and resiliency. To strengthen these capabilities, Japan aims to increase defence-related budgets by up to 2 per cent of GDP by 2027.

Regarding the enhancement of standoff defence capabilities, Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) has long sought to build a defence capability that would not pose a threat to other countries, such as, by intentionally shortening the range of its fighter jets. Japan has reviewed this policy in the face of China's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, as well as the expanding "missile gap" between the two countries. The SDF has already decided to extend the range of the Type 12 surface-to-ship guided missiles deployed in the Nansei Islands and to acquire JSM air-to-ship missiles and JASSM air-to-surface missiles for use on fighter aircraft. It has also reportedly considered introducing submarine-launched cruise missiles.

In addition, lessons learned from the war in Ukraine include the need to strengthen the ability to sustain the war effort over the long term. In particular, it has become urgent to secure ammunition and fuel depots in the Southwest Islands (which will be the base of operations for the SDF and US forces in the event of a contingency), increase equipment production, and enhance warfighting capability through rapidity in the transportation of troops and supplies. To prepare for missile attacks, the strengthening of base compatibility and the decentralized deployment of military assets are also being discussed.

Japan has also sought to strengthen defence capabilities by using advanced technologies such as AI, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and quantum technology. In addition to research into the development of stand-off electronic warfare aircraft, unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) technology, and high-speed glide bombs for island defence, Japan's Defense Equipment Agency is also working with the private sector to strengthen the development of technologies that could be "game changers" in the future. Those technologies may potentially include directed energy weapons or quantum positioning systems. The introduction of attack-type UAVs is reportedly also being considered.

Japan has also enhanced the SDF's interoperability with the military forces of allies and friends to strengthen deterrence. In particular, Japan has promoted institutional, tactical, and strategic integration with the United States, with particular emphasis on the integration of US forces and the SDF in new domains. As part of this effort, for example, the Ground SDF and the US Army's Multi-Domain Task Force conducted joint training in the Southwest Islands in August last year. The Ministry of Defense has also decided to establish a permanent joint headquarters to provide for unified command of the SDF's ground, maritime and air forces. This could also contribute to jointness and interoperability between SDF and US military units.

Further, Japan has strengthened its partnerships with countries other than the US. In January 2021, Japan and Australia agreed to a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). The SDF also began protecting Australian military assets in 2021. In November 2022, the two countries announced a new Declaration of Security Cooperation, which made it clear that Japan and Australia would consult and consider joint actions in the event of regional contingencies. Japan also concluded an RAA with the United Kingdom in January 2023. With India, Japan agreed to promote defence equipment and technology cooperation, as well as conducting a first fighter jet training exercise.

Finally, Japan has stepped up its defence engagement with Indo-Pacific countries under the banner of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". The Indo-Pacific Deployment – a long-term deployment mission conducted by Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) that began in 2017 – has returned to normal operations after a temporary reduction in size and duration due to the spread of COVID-19. In 2022, the total number deployed amounted to 980 personnel from air and maritime force units, the largest number ever. In addition to Australia and India, SDF units have also been deployed to Pacific Island countries such as Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea, strengthening the SDF's presence in the region.

Economic Security

Another important measure to cope with diversified threats is the promotion of economic security. Since 2019, the Japanese government has been rapidly developing new organizations, posts, and laws related to economic security. In May 2022, the *Law for the Promotion of Economic Security* was passed by the Diet. The new law aims at strengthening supply chain resilience, protection of critical infrastructures, support for the development of emerging technologies, and the closed-door filing of patent applications. Japan has also strengthened economic security cooperation with the US through the economic version of the "2 plus 2" talks newly established in April 2022.

Key concepts in Japan's economic security policy are "strategic autonomy" and "strategic indispensability." The former concept entails the strengthening of the foundations essential for the maintenance of national life and socioeconomic activities in extreme circumstances in order to avoid excessive dependence on other countries. The latter concept, on the contrary, is about Japan's strategic intent to develop and produce internationally indispensable technologies and capabilities and to create situations where other countries are forced to depend on Japan. To achieve these goals, Japan has sought to invest resources in internationally competitive fields, such as semiconductor materials or machine technologies.

Since the end of World War II, Japan has prioritized economic activities over security under the so-called "Yoshida Doctrine." Although security has never been neglected, Japan has considered it prudent to take a low profile in this aspect so long as it could come under the security umbrella of the United States. Now, however, the economy could become subordinate to military security, and the Kishida administration is working to increase defence spending under the banner of "fundamentally reinforcing" defence capabilities. Apparently, the long era of peace, a low-profile defence posture and heavy reliance on the US, has come to an end, and Japan is stepping up to a critical turning point in its approach to security and defence.

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