

Japan Ramps Up Defense Capabilities in Response to China Threat

2019-2023 Midterm Defense Buildup Program, China threat, Defense Spending Ratio, F-35B, Izumo Aircraft Carriers, Izumo-class destroyers, Japan's Defense, Japan's Self-Defense Forces, Nansei chain of islets, National Defense Program Guidelines, Security in Cyberspace, Security in Outer Space, Sense of Urgency, Shinzo Abe, Takeshi Iwaya



The Japanese government endorsed new National Defense Program Guidelines in a Cabinet meeting on December 18, outlining the basic concept of national defense alongside the fiscal 2019-2023 Midterm Defense Buildup Program budget.

The guidelines call for the “drastic strengthening of Japan’s defense capabilities” and “expansion of the roles of Self-Defense Forces.”

Spending on defense over the next five years is expected to total JPY27.47 trillion, exceeding the previous high. The ratio of defense disbursements will top one-percent of the nation’s gross domestic product — up to now the ratio considered a yardstick for the scale of Japan’s defense expenditures.

The National Defense Program Guidelines express Japan’s resolve to attain “truly

effective defense abilities.” The government is thus clearly moving away from a policy of simply extending its conventional defense posture.

Strong Sense of Urgency

Incorporated into the latest National Defense Program Guidelines and the five-year Midterm Defense Buildup Program are arrangements which may be expected to invite criticism. These include upgrading Izumo-class destroyers to serve as aircraft carriers and the adoption of long-range missiles capable of being refitted to strike enemy bases.

The government is moving to radically ramp up the nation’s defense capabilities against the backdrop of Beijing’s continuing enhancement of China’s arsenal. The Japanese government has reached the conclusion that it is imperative for the country’s defense posture to reduce its conventional constraints.

“Japan’s security environment has been increasing in both severity and uncertainty at an alarmingly speed compared to the time the last defense program guidelines were drawn up,” said Defense Minister Takeshi Iwaya in a news conference December 18.

In light of the regional security environment, the Abe administration assessed that the national defense program guidelines required updating five years after their last rewrite in 2013. Previously they were revised as a matter of principle every 10 years.

Bolstering Security in Outer Space and Cyberspace

The attention devoted to descriptions of China’s moves in the new defense guidelines is double that given to the United States and North Korea combined.

Expressing “strong concern,” the guidelines cite such key items in criticism of China as its intensifying military activities in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, rise in military spending combined with lack of transparency, buildup of its military maneuverability far off its shores, and acquisition of advanced technologies capable of conversion to military purposes.

Regarded as especially grave are China's "new menaces," namely, its soaring capabilities in such defense frontiers as space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic wave weapons. These are dubbed "a battlefield next to ground, sea, and air domains."

Beijing has obtained cyberattack abilities capable of disrupting the chain of command and related systems of its potential enemies. It is out of such a sense of urgency that Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines call for a "multi-dimensional joint defense force" to ensure comparative superiority in the new fields as a priority of Japan's defense policy.

From Izumo Aircraft Carriers to F-35B Fighters

Meanwhile, the government has decided to modify the deck boards of the Izumo-class destroyers' to facilitate integrated operations with top-of-the-line F-35B stealth fighter jets capable of short takeoffs and vertical landings. This initiative is aimed at solidifying Japan's air force superiority. Although F-35Bs' maneuverability radius is limited to about 800 kilometers, their operational fields, if enabled to take off and land aboard Izumo-class vessels, would be broadened significantly.

This would beef-up air defense capabilities over the Nansei chain of islets, which covers 1,200 kilometers in length, as well as the country's Pacific coastal regions that are without any major aerial defense base.

The possibility of integrated operations of Izumo-class aircraft carriers and F-35B fighters, however, could be criticized as "possessing offensive-type aircraft carriers," which is banned under the Constitution. Because of the constitutional constraint, the government intends to have the destroyers avoid carrying F-35B fighters on a regular basis, allowing them instead to be temporarily in charge of takeoff and landing missions, if necessary. Even so, this modification would significantly help Japan to hold China in check.

It is expected that takeoff and landing practice aboard Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSD) vessels will be conducted frequently after the vessels are refitted. In joint Japan-United States exercises, U.S. warplanes will presumably land on the

MSD destroyers. This is expected convey a message of alarm to China, which has been expanding its military activities from the East China Sea into the Pacific Ocean, according to a senior Defense Ministry official.

Defense Spending Ratio to GDP to Top 1%

The government has shown its resolve to carry out drastic defense policy reform through increases in defense appropriations. Up until now, the 1% of GDP ceiling on defense spending has reined in rises in overall defense expenditures.

More than JPY27 trillion — an all-time high — is scheduled to be disbursed in the five year period of the fiscal 2019-2023 Midterm Defense Buildup Program. However, if defense-related expenses are combined with those which have been technically separated from the defense budget so far, then actual defense outlays are expected to stand at 1.3% of GDP.

Indications are that a new age of Japan's defense capabilities is being ushered in, both in quality and quantity.

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