The Will to Fight: Japan’s Strategy to Strengthen Deterrence

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A t the end of 2022, Japan introduced a new national security strategy in response to what it considers the most severe and complex global security environment since the end of World War II.\(^1\) The strategy identifies China as the greatest strategic challenge to the peace and security of Japan, the international community, and the international order based on the rule of law.\(^2\) In response, Japan committed to employ all the tools of statecraft—what it dubbed comprehensive national power—to underwrite stability and prosperity in collaboration with like-minded countries. Foundational to this project is a new national defense strategy and procurement plan to acquire advanced defense capabilities and strengthen deterrence in Northeast Asia. Parallel advances in security cooperation with the United States under the rubric of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the cornerstone of Japanese security policy, constitute an important pillar of the new defense strategy. Japan and the United States should urgently address the operational implications for alliance cooperation to maximize the impact of this ambitious blueprint for enhancing deterrence in the region.

As a nation on the front lines of the China challenge, Japan has pursued a nuanced approach toward Beijing, balancing elements of competition and cooperation to reflect concerns about China’s strategic ambitions while recognizing a degree of economic interdependence and encouraging stability via diplomatic ties.\(^3\) But in light of China’s rapidly advancing military capabilities and recent pattern of coercive activities in the East China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait, Japan resolved to bolster the deterrence side of the equation.

The new defense strategy is designed to strengthen Japan’s deterrence posture. The government pledged to increase defense spending 60 percent over five years and approved a record $56 billion defense budget for 2024 to acquire a range of advanced defense capabilities.\(^4\) Examples include so-called counterstrike or long-range precision weapons, such as Tomahawk missiles; investments across the cyber, space, and electromagnetic domains; unmanned systems; and counter-hypersonic capabilities, including plans to
jointly develop a Glide Phase Interceptor with the United States.\(^5\) The defense strategy also supports new deployments across the Nansei (“Southwest”) Islands to bolster homeland defense and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, an urgent priority amid heightened concerns about the implications of a Taiwan contingency for Japan’s national security. These investments build on defense policy reforms instituted in 2015 based on a reinterpretation of the war-renouncing clause in Japan’s constitution allowing Japan to activate the right to collective self-defense, or the ability to defend the United States or allies and engage in joint operations outside Japan. In short, Japan seeks to enhance its capacity to deter Chinese aggression and strengthen interoperability with like-minded partners.

The greatest variable in this endeavor is time, which Japan cannot afford to waste if it is to keep pace with China’s rapidly advancing capabilities. This necessitates tough decisions to ensure effective implementation of the defense strategy, including avenues for enhancing security cooperation with the United States. For example, Japan’s military needs to maximize opportunities for training, including joint exercises with U.S. forces, which will prove critical to defending areas such as the Nansei Islands but are too often constrained by sensitivities in local politics.\(^6\) Command and control structures also merit urgent attention. Japan’s Ministry of Defense will set up a new joint operations command by spring 2025 to expedite internal decisionmaking and coordination with the U.S. military. This has prompted debate about whether the United States Indo-Pacific Command, based in Hawaii, should remain the counterpart for managing bilateral operations in an increasingly complex security environment that requires rapid response capabilities.\(^7\) The two governments could also tackle basic operational challenges such as munitions stockpiles, identified as one of seven priority areas in Japan’s defense strategy and a deficiency for the United States that seemingly favors increased emphasis on the co-production of munitions.\(^8\) Neither government should allow bureaucratic resistance to obstruct attempts at reform in these and other areas that could bolster alliance interoperability.

Potential implementation challenges notwithstanding, Japan has established momentum for strengthening its defense capabilities and sending deterrent signals to China. In August 2023, Taro Aso, former Japanese prime minister and vice president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party or LDP, visited Taiwan and stated in a speech that Japan and its allies and partners should deter China by conveying “the will to fight.”\(^9\) Japan is ambiguous about how it might respond in a Taiwan contingency, with potential options including, but not necessarily limited to, homeland defense, defending sea lanes, or providing non-combat support for U.S. operations.\(^10\) But signaling the will to fight complicates Chinese planning, and that itself constitutes a critical element of deterrence.

Japan’s decision to lean forward on defense is one of the most significant strategic developments in Asia in decades, with the potential to transform its leadership role in the international security order.\(^11\) It is still early days, but the trend line favors a sustained commitment to deterring aggression in partnership with the United States as a foundation for regional stability and future prosperity in the world’s most dynamic region.

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