

# Japan's Defence Dynamics: Enhancing New Military Capabilities

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the security environment surrounding Japan has become quite adverse owing to China's expansionist behaviour, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the Taiwan Strait crisis and also Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Due to these emerging threats to its security, Japan has attempted to move away from its pacifist stance, and revised its National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2022.<sup>1</sup> The revised NSS, the National Defence Strategy (NDS), and the defence build-up programme focus on projects pertinent to Japan's defence and military capabilities.

The NSS represents a significant shift in Japan's national security strategy and reflects the country's citizens' increasing awareness of threats. However, the execution of the initiatives

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1. Watanabe Tsuneo, "What's New in Japan's Three Strategic Documents", *CSIS*, February 13, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whats-new-japans-three-strategic-documents>. Accessed on July 8, 2024.

in the strategy documents drives the significant shift rather than “fundamental principles and policies.” The fundamental three pillars of national security policy are, in reality, mostly still in place. The NDS has three distinct objectives: (1) bolstering Japan’s domestic defence architecture; (2) fortifying the Japan-U.S. alliance’s combined deterrence and response capabilities; and (3) fortifying cooperation with like-minded nations.<sup>2</sup>

Aiming to have the ability to counter-attack to avert an enemy attack is one of the significant adjustments made to the security strategy. Another is raising the defence budget to 2 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over five years (by 2027) to shield the country from numerous threats from North Korea, China, and Russia.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the defence build-up’s fundamental structure doesn’t change. According to the NDS, “through further accelerated efforts, Japan will fundamentally reinforce the current Multi-Domain Défense Force.”

### **ENHANCING FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC (FOIP)**

The revised NSS focusses on Japan promoting efforts to realise the FOIP through deepening cooperation with other like-minded countries in the region. On March 20, 2023, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida gave a speech in front of the Indian Council of World Affairs, outlining a new proposal for FOIP<sup>4</sup>. The Kishida speech provides guidance even if the NSS and NDS do not explicitly articulate the FOIP goal. In comparison to earlier government presentations, his statements provide a clearer understanding of the goals, strategies, and tactics to realise the

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2. Ibid.

3. Simran Walia, “Makeover for Japan’s Security Strategy”, Institute For Security and Development Policy (ISDP), December 29, 2022, <https://www.isdp.eu/makeover-for-japans-security-strategy/>. Accessed on July 9, 2024.

4. Benny Teh, “Kicking off Kishida’s New Free and Open Indo-Pacific Plan”, East Asia Forum, May 11, 2023 <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/05/11/kicking-off-kishidas-new-free-and-open-indo-pacific-plan/>. Accessed on July 9, 2024.

FOIP objectives. The promotion of fundamental principles, economic prosperity, and peace and security were the three pillars of Japan's original Framework of Free International Peace; however, the new plan has four pillars: (1) advancing peace principles and rules for prosperity; (2) tackling challenges in an Indo-Pacific manner; (3) constructing multi-layered connectivity; and (4) expanding security and safe sea use initiatives to the air. The fundamental ideas and principles are more apparent, as is the geographic priority, which is Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands region, with a focus on increasing connectivity.<sup>5</sup>

Japan is no longer an observer in the domains of international defence and security. Tokyo has initiated a new programme that offers security assistance to emerging nations and is actively pushing and creating defence cooperation with a wide range of nations. Japan launched a new initiative in April 2023, the Official Security Assistance (OSA) programme to provide military grant help to developing countries in the Indo-Pacific area.<sup>6</sup> Japan set aside Yen 2 billion for this programme in the fiscal year 2023–24.<sup>7</sup> This initiative represents a shift in Japan's long-standing policy of not supporting foreign militaries, despite the programme's modest size and initial restriction to a small number of countries.

## JAPAN-US ALLIANCE

As mentioned in the NSS, Japan is attempting to implement the FOIP idea, with the Japan-US alliance serving as its foundation. The NSS does, however, also point out that it has become harder for the US to control risks in the global community and

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5. Ibid.

6. Purnendra Jain, "Japan's New Security Assistance to the Indo-Pacific Region", Observer Research Foundation, January 8, 2024 <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/japan-s-new-security-assistance-to-the-indo-pacific-region#:~:text=Providing%20military%20grant%20aid%20to,billion%20yen%20for%20this%20programme>. Accessed on July 10, 2024.

7. Ibid.

uphold an open and free international order on its own. To reinforce alliance duties and missions, Japan and the United States should collaborate more closely. According to the NSS and NDS, Japan is developing new defensive capabilities, especially in counter-strike. Japan will play a bigger part in both regional and global security. Concurrently, the US is fortifying its capacities based on the integrated deterrence theory. The duties and purposes of the alliance must be reviewed in the light of these developments in both nations, with a focus on enhancing cooperative capabilities.

Cooperation with other partners should be included in the defence guidelines' scope expansion. The Asia-Pacific region's US-centred alliance network includes the Japan-US alliance. Japan's collaboration with other US regional allies may, and should, be strengthened as Japan's roles and capacities grow to strengthen the alliance network. In this regard, additional multilateral components will need to be included in the defence guidelines.

Strengthening the alliance network based around the United States is essential for promoting Japan's international security cooperation and realising the FOIP concept, especially in the area of maritime security.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines are especially significant. Vietnam and the Philippines are essential in stopping China's territorial expansion in the South China Sea. As a growing maritime power in the Indo-Pacific, India is also a vital ally. Given the tensions surrounding the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan should be accorded a suitable place even if it is not formally a part of an alliance network.

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8. Tokuchi Hideshi, "Japan's New National Security Strategy and Contribution to a Networked Regional Security Architecture", *CSIS*, June 23, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-new-national-security-strategy-and-contribution-networked-regional-security>. Accessed on July 10, 2024.

## **NEW MILITARY CAPABILITIES: FIGHTER JET COLLABORATION**

To counter threats such as China's expansionist behaviour and North Korea's nuclear ambitions, Japan is focussing on enhancing and implementing its defence, technological and intelligence capabilities. One of the important aspects of Japan's military capabilities is that it intends to develop an operational capability that is cross-domain and multi-layered in order to confront any danger to the country. The Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) will become more capable as a result of this strategy. Along with the aforementioned relationships and capabilities, Japan will also seek to strengthen its stand-off defence capabilities, particularly with the US. The ultimate goal is to dissuade invading or aggressor forces and, in the event of an attack, to respond accordingly.

Tomahawk land attack missiles worth US\$ 2 billion will be purchased by Japan and installed on warships of the Naval Self-Defence Forces.<sup>9</sup> The planned Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) ships are an additional development. These were put forth as a substitute for the abandoned Aegis ashore BMD system, which was shelved because of financial and technological problems, as well as the national discussion about the possible health effects on the inhabitants of Japan.

The three nations, Japan, Britain and Italy, mentioned in a joint leaders' declaration in December 2022 that they would work together to create a next-generation fighter by 2035.<sup>10</sup> The Global

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9. Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Japan Signs Deal for 400 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles", *USNI News*, January 18, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/01/18/japan-signs-deal-for-400-tomahawk-land-attack-missiles#:~:text=The%20acquisition%20contract%20is%20for,acquisition%20cost%20at%20%242.35%20billion>. Accessed on July 10, 2024.

10. Tim Kelly, Paul Sandle and Nobuhiro Kubo, "Japan, Britain and Italy to Build Jet Fighter Together", *Reuters*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/japan-britain-italy-build-joint-jet-fighter-2022-12-09/>. Accessed on July 11, 2024.

Combat Air Programme (GCAP) is the name of this initiative<sup>11</sup>. The next generation of fighter aircraft will require more than a decade to be jointly designed, developed, produced, and deployed. The three nations will establish the GCAP International Government Organisation, or GIGO, this year, by the terms of the treaty. The private sector joint venture, which is made up of Italy's Leonardo, Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, and Britain's BAE Systems PLC, is intended to be managed and operated centrally by the GIGO.<sup>12</sup> This will guarantee that the GCAP is implemented smoothly. Several hundred government representatives from the three nations will make up the organisation. The company will have its headquarters in the United Kingdom, and its first Chief Executive Officer (CEO) will be a Japanese national. The GCAP is an important initiative for maintaining stability in the Euro-Atlantic, Indo-Pacific, and for wider international security. It also serves as a powerful illustration of the UK's leadership in the development of next-generation military capabilities to thwart and defeat threats to the UK and its allies.<sup>13</sup>

Tokyo plans to use the GCAP jet as a back-up fighter to replace the roughly 90 Mitsubishi F-2 aircraft that are now in service. The F-16 was the basis for the F-2's original development, which was done in collaboration with the US in the 1980s. For the time being, Japan's primary aircraft will continue to be the F-35. Nonetheless, London and Rome hope to replace their respective fleets of 144 and 94 Eurofighter Typhoons with the GCAP fighter as their own primary aircraft.

Beyond modernising the outdated platforms of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and conserving financial resources, the GCAP

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11. Ibid

12. Varuna Shankar, "Japan's New Partnership and Change in Defence Posture", Vivekananda International Foundation, April 3, 2024, <https://www.vifindia.org/2024/april/03/Japan-s-New-Partnership-and-Change-in-Defence-Posture>. Accessed on July 11, 2024.

13. Ibid.

is significant for Japan. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO's) founding and most powerful nations, Britain and Italy collaborated to develop the Eurofighter Typhoon. Since 1994, the NATO states have acquired more than 500 Eurofighter aircraft. Thus, the London and Rome decisions may open the door to potentially larger purchases and sales of the GCAP fighter.<sup>14</sup> Participating in the GCAP programme's development and exports would help Tokyo strengthen its security cooperation with the UK, Italy, and other NATO members. It would also deter authoritarian nations like China and Russia from making unilateral changes to the status quo on either side of Eurasia, which would promote world peace and stability. London sees fighter development as the cornerstone of a new "alliance" with Japan, one that will enable Britain to extend out into the Indo-Pacific region.

In a recent development, on March 26, 2024, Japan opted to relax its stringent regulations for defence exports.<sup>15</sup> This has made it possible for it to produce the next-generation fighter jet in partnership with Italy and Britain for export under specific circumstances. In December 2023, in Tokyo, the defence ministers of Japan, Italy, and the UK signed an international pact on the creation of a cooperative organisation to build their new sixth-generation fighter jet, which will make it possible for Japan to export its deadly weapons to foreign nations for the first time. The Komeito Party, a coalition partner, and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party have unanimously agreed on this. This action deviates from the nation's post-war pacifist beliefs.

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14. "Britain, Japan and Italy Sign Advanced Fighter Jet Programme Treaty", *Economic Times*, December 14, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/britain-japan-and-italy-sign-advanced-fighter-jet-programme-treaty/articleshow/105975918.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on July 11, 2024.

15. Mari Yamaguchi, "Why is Japan Changing its Ban on Exporting Lethal Weapons, and Why is it so Controversial?", *AP News*, March 26, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/japan-military-sale-lethal-weapons-fighter-jet-f6d578f8256ec87a44fd86f5240f8c36>. Accessed on July 12, 2024.

The rules for carrying out the nation's three guiding principles on the export of defence hardware were also updated. The exports will be restricted to next-generation fighters and will only be allowed to nations that have defence agreements with Japan and are not at war. Prior to the jets being exported, talks will also take place within the ruling coalition. The rules also say that Cabinet clearance will be needed for each shipment.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

Japan must strengthen its defences to adapt to the Indo-Pacific region's shifting security landscape. The endeavour to create a new fighter plane is a positive beginning toward preserving air superiority, averting threats to the country's defence, and strengthening its deterrence powers. It will have superior stealth and detecting capacities, providing it with a technological advantage over China and Russia, its neighbouring adversaries. It will strengthen Japan's position in international security and provide the country's armaments sector a boost. Furthermore, it demonstrates Japan's willingness to participate more actively in military and defence-industrial alliances. Tokyo must continue exporting warplanes to other nations to preserve its standing as a reliable partner in future international defence initiatives.

Japan's capacity to launch counter-attacks will be guaranteed by all of these acquisitions and development initiatives, which will also guarantee the deterrent component of the country's stand-off defence capabilities. These adjustments are the result of Japan realising that it cannot rely solely on its BMD systems to deflect ballistic missiles fired by an attacker. The most intriguing and significant change in the Japanese policy to emerge from the new NSS is the counter-strike capacity, which indicates that Japan will not think twice about defending itself against an attacker that has launched a ballistic missile strike on it.

The UK, Italy, and Japan are working together to co-develop a collaborative project that will eventually replace Japan's old fleet of F-2 fighters, which are designed in the United States, and the UK and Italian forces' Eurofighter Typhoons. Earlier, Japan was developing a domestic design that would be known as the F-X. It combined its efforts with the Tempest project, a British-Italian initiative, for deployment in 2035. By 2035, this combat aircraft should be in the air. Its goal is to utilise cutting-edge technologies to rank among the most sophisticated, versatile, interoperable, and linked fighter jets in use worldwide. Over the next ten years and beyond, it is anticipated that the programme will generate highly skilled jobs in the UK and in partner countries.

Japan's pacifist Constitution has long prohibited the export of weapons. This resulted from its history as an aggressor during World War II and the destruction caused by its loss in the conflict. Japan's military can only be used for self-defence, according to its new Constitution. The nation has traditionally upheld a stringent policy that forbids the export of deadly weapons and restricts the transfer of military hardware and technology. In 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made the first concessions to the arms export ban. In December 2023, he authorised a reform that would allow sales of 80 lethal weapons and components that Japan makes under licences from other countries back to the licensors. Japan had previously started exporting some non-lethal military goods.

The five capabilities that comprise comprehensive national power are defined by the Japanese government's new policy as being intelligence, economics, defence, diplomacy, and technology. Japan's actions, with the adoption of this new agreement, will bolster its credibility and increase its visibility internationally. It will increase the number of like-minded nations as well as others, enhancing the security situation around Japan.

Given that the sixth-generation fighters are intended to be manned aircraft with the ability to command a large number of

unmanned aircraft fitted with Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems to locate and attack enemy aircraft, their actual performance may prove difficult. Superior intelligence and superior information obtained from advanced radars and avionics are crucial. For this, a high degree of system integration proficiency is needed. Moreover, there is a chance that the three nations' rivalry for supremacy over the allocation of development tasks would heat up.

This is the first time Japan has worked with a partner other than the United States on a large-scale co-development of defence equipment. The foreign policy has reoriented itself, as seen by the increased diversity of its allies inside and outside the area. Over time, hard power diplomacy has gained more traction than long-standing soft power diplomacy. This has the potential to revolutionise the Japanese security architecture and act as a force multiplier. Minilateral forums and strategic alliances are important in a multipolar world. Japan has adjusted its security posture in response to the unpredictable geopolitical environment that is currently in place.