

Japan's increasingly active self-defense strategy: What are the implications for France?

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At the end of 2022, Japan adopted a new defense strategy that expands upon changes set in motion in 2012-2013. Beyond maintaining defense principles, it marks Japan's adaptation to a strategic context that is perceived as threatening. This brief explains the role that France could play, despite Japan's partnership strategy favoring English-speaking countries.

In December, Prime Minister Kishida announced a new security strategy designed to improve Japan's defense in the face of "the harshest and most complex security environment since the end of World War II". **While Japan's fundamental principles – including the trifecta of "conventional deterrence, the Japan-US alliance and cooperation with ally countries" – remain well rooted, certain shifts are likely to reshape this situation in the long term.** First of all, Japan's defense budget is on the rise. Since 2012 and Shinzo Abe's second term, defense expenditures have increased by 25%. The new strategy is set to speed up this trend, with a 60% increase planned for the 2023-2027 period and a total budget of 43.5 trillion yen. By 2027, the Japanese government aims to spend 2% of its 2022 GDP on defense (currently 1 to 1.1%), thereby moving closer to NATO standards.

The Japanese government went on to announce the acquisition of a deep strike capability, dubbed "counterattack capability". The government emphasizes the reactive – as opposed to preemptive let alone preventive – nature of this new capability, while others see it as a break with Japan's "defensive" defense policy. However, Japan is not starting from scratch in this regard: since the 1980s, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) has equipped the Land Self-Defense Forces with Type 88 anti-ship missiles. Since 2013, a "stand-off capability" has also been mentioned. Discussions regarding a reaction capability resurfaced in the spring of 2020, when Defense Minister Taro Kono announced the suspension – followed by the cancellation – of the Aegis Ashore program, deemed incapable of responding to

the missiles developed by North Korea and their complex flight trajectories.

Finally, Japan plans to increase its investments in new military technology. The aim here is to regain technological superiority over China's military forces, which are growing in size and strength. In addition to the increased use of unmanned systems, the Japanese forces plan to expand their cyber unit from its current 900 staff members to about 4,000, set to engage in cyber operations by 2027. Space is also part of the new strategy: Japan is set to develop ground and satellite surveillance capabilities, establish a space domain awareness (SDA) system and increase the resilience of its current space assets.

In addition to these new capabilities, Japan has announced its intention to strengthen its cooperation with ally countries. Its defense strategy aims to "deter and respond to any attempt to change the status quo by force, in cooperation with ally countries." It goes on to state that "if an invasion of Japan were to occur, Japan would assume the primary responsibility of dealing with the invasion, while drawing upon support from ally countries and others in order to contain and prevent it." While Japan upholds – and even strengthens – its preeminent alliance with the U.S., having opted for capabilities that accentuate its dependence on U.S. technologies, it also plans to bolster its cooperation efforts with other partner countries (in order: Australia, India, the U.K., France, Germany, Italy, NATO, the European Union and South Korea).

Despite this lengthy list, the United States remain a central ally and Japan pursues its drive to join security initiatives launched by English-speaking countries. Tokyo has shown interest in joining the Five Eyes club, in order to complement existing intelligence exchanges within the Japan-U.S. framework and facilitate bilateral strategic dialogue with the club's members. More recently, Japanese leaders have expressed their interest in joining the capability programs developed within the AUKUS framework. Last December, Tokyo, London and Rome formalized the multinational Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) to create the successor of the F2 stealth fighter.

Since 2014 and the loosening of the legal framework governing arms exports, the export of lethal equipment has become more practicable – provided that it plays in favor of Japan's security. This shift highlights Japan's ambition to further its presence in the field of military capacity building. This move primarily benefits Japan's Southeast Asian neighbors, but also helps bolster the Japanese defense industry.

Japan's growing drive towards economic security is also worth noting, for it indicates that Tokyo pursues a global security approach rather than a strictly military one. Tokyo has not forgotten the restrictions on rare-earth element exports imposed by Beijing in 2010, following the collision of a Chinese fishing boat with a Japanese Coast Guard vessel. Economic security is one of the priorities of Japan's G7 Presidency and has already given rise to bilateral exchanges, in particular with the United States – e.g. the “2+2” consultation on the topic of supply chain security held on January 5.

At a first glance, Japan's strategic environment appears to be mainly focused on English-speaking countries. This raises the question of France's role in Japan's strategy. France acts as a “balancing power”, one that is not part of AUKUS and boasts a singular stance regarding the “Partners in the Blue Pacific” project. Thus, French diplomacy brings Tokyo's compatibility with America's strategy into question, as well as its desire to participate in the containment of a perceived Chinese threat. However, as part of the country's cautious and methodical approach toward investment, recent Japanese governments have confirmed their participation in the exceptional partnership signed in 2013 between former French President Hollande and then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Japan's primary motivation is that France is a reliable ally whose global military presence constitutes an invaluable asset. The Japanese Navy was able to set up in Djibouti between 2009 and 2010 thanks to French support. In 2011 in Côte d'Ivoire, the Japanese ambassador was besieged at his residence by a hostile crowd, before being rescued by the forces of France's Operation Licorne. More recently, in Ukraine, the last

Japanese diplomats posted in Kiev returned to Ljiv under French escort. The second reason is that France, whose overseas territories border on the Indo-Pacific, contributes to security in the South Pacific and thus hinders the expansion of China's sphere of influence. Since 2021, the Japanese navy has been making regular stops in Nouméa as part of its annual deployments in the South Pacific. It should be noted that Japan is opening a consulate in Nouméa this year. What's more, France is one of the few European nations to regularly deploy its military assets in Northeast Asia, as was the case in the spring of 2021 during the ARC21 exercise held in southern Japan. Finally, France's unique strategic stance opens up opportunities for cooperation, particularly in the field of defense equipment. While the two countries have not announced any new agreements since 2015, the Japanese Ministry of Defense is aware that Airbus is the only foreign helicopter manufacturer capable of performing heavy maintenance operations on Japanese soil. What's more, the Japanese Coast Guard has relied on Dassault as a supplier since the early 2000s and has just updated its fleet of maritime surveillance aircraft to Falcon 2000s. Similarly, the Japanese Navy – who recently sent a frigate to join the escort of French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* in the Indian Ocean – notes that its French counterpart is regularly lauded by the U.S. Navy for its expertise in the field of anti-submarine warfare.

Japan and France's cooperation is set to grow stronger in the context of a new bilateral roadmap, mentioned during Prime Minister Kishida's recent visit to Paris (January 9). Japan has already signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Australia and the United Kingdom; signing a similar agreement with France would open up new possibilities and complement the current rise in military cooperation between the two countries' armed forces. It would also accompany the growing number of initiatives between ally countries to improve the coordination of regional security efforts in the Indo-Pacific. ■

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