

Japan's Quest for Military Modernization



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International Relations Insights & Analysis

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Published on: June 30, 2024

**IRIA Defense Review - Use of Advanced Technologies
and AI in Shaping Modern Warfare**

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Japan's Quest for Military Modernization

Japan has embarked on sweeping military modernization efforts with the most ambitious and rapid expansion of military power. The recent spendings mark the most substantial investment in defense since the establishment of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in 1954.

This unprecedented modernization initiative seeks to bolster Japan's deterrent capabilities and ensure readiness for potential conflicts in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape. The surge in defense spending since 2017 underscores Japan's commitment to fortifying its security posture. The record increase in defense spending by more than 16% in 2024 is aligned with Japan's new National Security Strategy that aims to increase military expenditure to 2% of GDP by 2027.

In September 2023, the Japanese Ministry of Defense submitted a request to the country's Finance Ministry seeking approval for a record-high 7.7 trillion Yen (\$53 billion) defense budget for fiscal year 2024.¹ Tokyo has exponentially expanded its defense spending in recent years amid increasing tensions with China and North Korea.

Japan's pursuit of military modernization started in the year 2022 when Prime Minister Fumio Kishida unveiled a detailed ten-year plan for the country's defense spending. According to the plan, Japan would spend at least 2% of its annual GDP on defense each year, a standard also encouraged by NATO for its member states.²

In 2022, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida told his Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki and Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada that in the first phase of the military modernization campaign, Japan needs to urgently increase its defense budget by the fiscal year 2027. He also said that the government needs to review expenditures and revenue streams to decide how it can secure extra funding to increase the defense budget.



Japan Ground Self-Defense Force troops marching. (Image Credit: JGSDF)

1. IRIA News, Japan unveils record-high \$53 billion defense budget for 2024, International Relations Insights & Analysis, September 2, 2023. <https://www.ir-ia.com/news/japan-unveils-record-high-53-billion-defense-budget-for-2024/>

2. IRIA News, Japan seeks to increase its defense budget to 2% of GDP, International Relations Insights & Analysis, December 3, 2022. <https://www.ir-ia.com/news/japan-seeks-to-increase-its-defense-budget-to-2-of-gdp/>

As proposed by the current administration, the gradual increase would total about \$287 billion over the next five years. Japan typically holds a very limited approach toward defense spending. The \$46 billion defense budget in 2023 was already a leap forward compared to the country's previous defense spending. The 2024 budget would exceed last year's budget by 16%.³

Japan's National Defense Strategy says that the country will fundamentally reinforce the current multidomain defense force and "will possess a capability that makes the opponent realize that the goal of invasion of Japan is not achievable by military means and that the damage the opponent will incur makes the invasion not worth the cost".

This strategic realignment signifies a pivotal shift in Japan's defense policy, previously constrained by stringent limitations on military spending. As Japan emerges as a key player in regional security dynamics, this transformation holds profound implications for the country's role in shaping the future of East Asian geopolitics.

Japan's Defense Objectives

Based on Japan's National Defense Strategy released in 2023, Tokyo has three main defense objectives and plans to utilize three different approaches to attain them.



Japan's JS HYUGA conducting a trilateral naval exercise with U.S. and Canadian naval forces. (Image Credit: Ministry of Defense Japan)

1. To shape the regional and global security environment to maintain the status quo by force.
2. To deter and respond to unilateral challenges to the regional security environment and to maintain collaboration with Japan's allies and like-minded countries on the matter.
3. To enhance military capabilities to deal with aggression unilaterally while receiving support from allies and like-minded partners.

Japan pursues its defense objectives through a multifaceted approach that combines both military and diplomatic efforts. Tokyo's National Defense Strategy puts a strong emphasis on enhancing defense cooperation and partnerships with like-minded countries, participating in joint exercises, information sharing, and capacity-building initiatives to strengthen regional security networks.⁴

3. Kosuke Takahashi, Japan Approves Record Defense Budget For Fiscal Year 2024, Naval News, December 22, 2023. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/12/japan-approves-record-defense-budget-for-fiscal-year-2024/>

4. The Yomiuri Shimbun, Govt Plans to Establish 'Joint Operations Command' in SDF, Looks to Prepare for Challenges in 'Complex Security Environment', The Japan News, February 10, 2024. <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/defense-security/20240210-168103/>

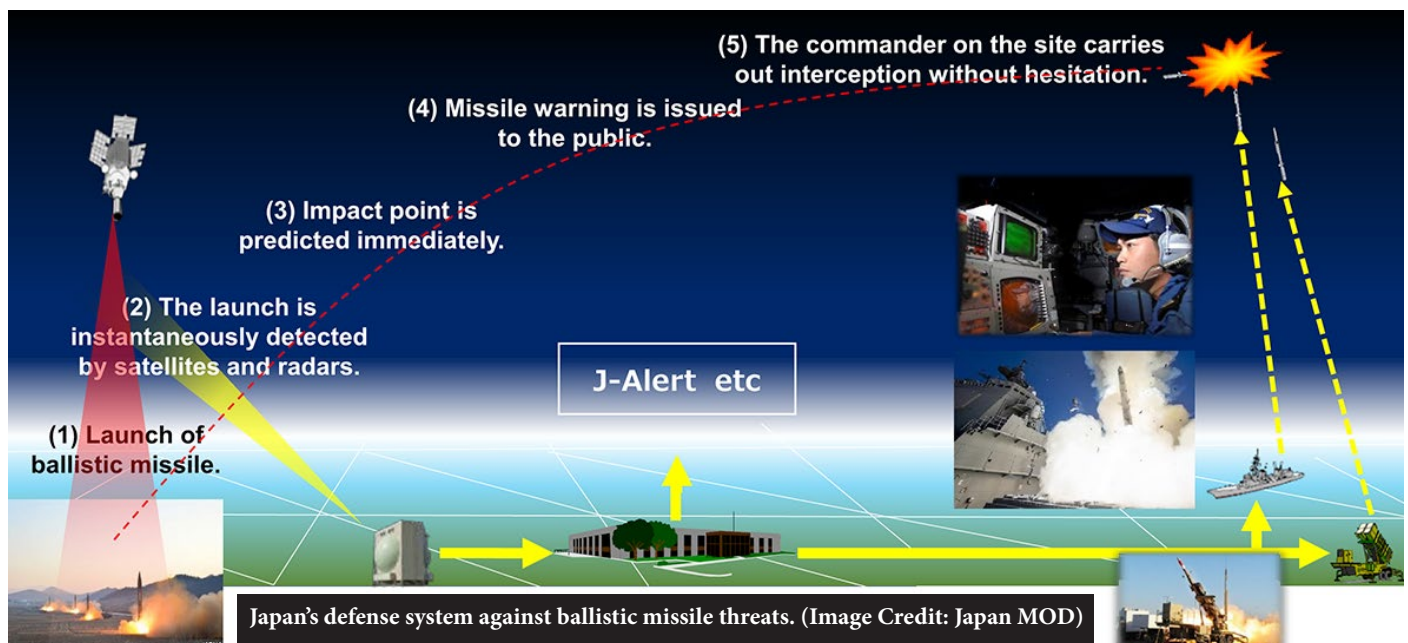
Japan emphasizes diplomacy and dialogue as key tools for promoting peace and stability in the region, engaging in multilateral forums and bilateral discussions to address security concerns and foster mutual understanding among nations.

Seven Fields of Fundamental Reinforcement

Japan's latest national defense strategy has outlined that the military modernization efforts are focused on enhancing seven key areas by 2027.⁵

1. Standoff Defense Capabilities: Strengthening of the ability to respond to the opposing forces by utilizing long-distance strike capabilities. In this regard, Japan has initiated at least two programs. First, Tokyo is acquiring U.S.-made Tomahawk missiles to enhance its long-distance strike capabilities. Secondly, Japan is working to upgrade its domestically developed Type-12 surface-to-surface long-range strike missile. The Japanese government plans to spend more the \$33 billion over the course of five years to improve its standoff defense capabilities.

2. Integrated Air and Missile Defense: This program focuses on strengthening the capabilities to respond to airborne threats, including missiles. Japan has acquired, developed, and deployed several Aegis system-equipped naval vessels to enhance its missile defense capabilities. Tokyo plans to spend more than \$19 billion over five years to upgrade its integrated air and missile defense capabilities. This program also includes counterstrike capabilities that leverage standoff defense capability and other capabilities in case an armed attack against Japan occurs using ballistic missiles and other means.



3. Unmanned Defense Capabilities: The importance of a strong defense capability against unmanned aerial and underwater threats has become more evident in recent years, especially

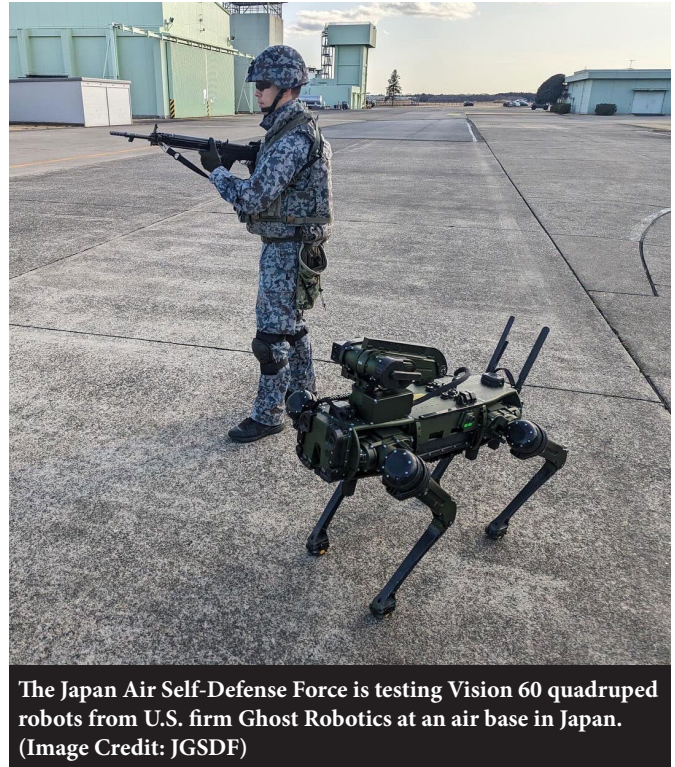
5. Kisho Yoshida, Acquiring counterstrike capabilities is no simple matter for Japan, Goeconomic Briefing No.171, Asia Pacific Initiative, December 14, 2023. <https://apinitiative.org/en/2023/12/14/53649/>

after the Russia-Ukraine war. Japan is also rapidly enhancing its unmanned defense capabilities by developing and acquiring mid-range as well as long-range reconnaissance and combat drones. Tokyo is projecting to spend \$6 billion by 2027 to enhance its unnamed defense capabilities.

4. Cross-domain Operation Capabilities:

Cross-domain defense operation refers to the ability to manage defense operations in non-conventional domains such as space, cyber, and electromagnetic spectrum. According to the National Defense Strategy, Japan has put a strong emphasis on enhancing its defense capacities in these domains and plans to spend \$53 billion over the next five years on enhancing its cross-domain operation capabilities.

5. Command-and-Control and Intelligence-Related Functions: Another strong emphasis has been put on reinforcing military command and control operations as well as integrating AI and other modern technologies into the conventional security architecture for quick and accurate decision-making. A \$6 billion budget has been estimated for such upgradation of command-and-control and intelligence-related functions by 2027.



The Japan Air Self-Defense Force is testing Vision 60 quadruped robots from U.S. firm Ghost Robotics at an air base in Japan. (Image Credit: JGSDF)

6. Mobile Deployment Capabilities and Civil Protection: To reinforce, protect, and enhance the country's maritime and air transportation capability for rapid military maneuvering and deployment, Japan plans to \$12 billion over the next five years.

7. Sustainability and Resiliency: Japan plans to spend extensively on developing a reliable military infrastructure and building up a sufficient ammunition backup as well as securing the ammunition and fuel storage facilities. A \$12 billion fund has been projected to improve Japan's sustainability and resiliency.⁶

Japan's Defense Strategy for All Domains

Japan's ambitious initiative to overhaul all military domains by 2027, marks a significant milestone in Japan's defense modernization efforts. Enhancements across land, air, sea, and cyber domains, reflect Japan's commitment to bolstering its defense capabilities in the face of evolving security challenges.⁷

6. Japanese Ministry of Defense, Defense of Japan 2023. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2023/DOJ2023_EN_Full.pdf

7. Yoshihiro Inaba, Here Are Some Of The Future Naval Systems Japan Is Working On, Naval News, October 18, 2023. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/10/here-are-some-of-the-future-naval-systems-japan-is-working-on/>

Key Projects Japan Plans to Complete by 2027:

Naval Defense

In 2023, The Defense Ministry requested a \$2.6 billion budget for the construction of two Aegis system-equipped naval vessels to bolster defense against ballistic missile threats. Currently, Japan operates 8 Aegis system-equipped vessels.

After the approval of the required budget, the construction of the first vessels would begin in 2024 with commissioning planned for 2027. The second vessel is to join the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) in the following year.



USS George Washington (CVN-73) with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Kongo-class guided-missile destroyer JS Kirishima (DDG-174) on Nov. 18, 2014. (Image Credit: U.S. Navy)

The two vessels would include 128 vertical launching system cells for ballistic missile interceptors as well as launchers for the indigenously produced Type 12 anti-ship, land-attack missile which is currently under development.⁸

Japan will also start the construction of a new class of frigates in 2024. The Defense Ministry has set a budget of \$1.2 billion for the construction of the first two frigates. Japan plans to add 12 new Mogami class of frigates to its naval fleet. The frigates would also be equipped with the Type 12 missile.

Air Force

To bolster its air defense capabilities, Japan is actively pursuing the acquisition of air-to-air standoff weapons from international firms. The Japanese Defense Ministry has requested an additional budget in 2024 to purchase the Joint Strike Missile made by Norway's Kongsberg Defense, as well as the AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile made by U.S. defense giant Lockheed Martin. The missiles will be paired with the F-35 fighters and upgraded Mitsubishi F-15J Eagle interceptors with the Japanese Air Force, called Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF), respectively.

The Japanese Defense Ministry has requested a \$739.3 million budget in 2024 to acquire eight F-35A conventional-takeoff-and-landing variants as well as \$862 million for seven F-35B short-takeoff-and-vertical-landing versions in 2024.

Japanese Air Force is on track to become one of the largest operators of the F-35 jets outside the U.S. as it plans to acquire 105 F-35A and 42 F-35B jets. Japan has already finalized a deal for 83 F-35 jets and is set to receive some deliveries in 2025.

8. Dzirhan Mahadzir, Japan Locks in Funding for 2 New Aegis Destroyers, USNI News, December 20, 2023. <https://news.usni.org/2023/12/20/japan-locks-in-funding-for-2-new-aegis-destroyers/>

Japan's Defense Ministry also released a defense buildup strategy document in 2023, that outlines the ongoing and upcoming plans for the Japanese military strategy. The document highlighted that Japan would become the first country to replace its military helicopter fleet with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).⁹ The replacement would include combat, utility, and observation helicopters.

The Defense Ministry is strategizing to deploy hundreds of attack drones by approximately 2025. These drones will be tasked with launching assaults on enemy ships and troops that approach Japanese islands during emergencies, while also conducting surveillance and vigilance over specific encampments and bases. Japan plans to establish a drone unit at the Kanoya base of the JMSDF and integrate eight U.S.-manufactured MQ-9 Reaper attack drones into its existing fleet.



Sources indicate that the respective forces are exploring their application as an air combat platform for small drones. These small drones can potentially combine with the latest “Sparrowhawk” drones developed by General Atomics in the US, forming drone swarms capable of executing suicide attacks when deemed necessary.¹⁰

The Japanese Defense Ministry has also requested a budget of \$82 million to upgrade the existing fleet of F-15J and F-2 jets. After upgradation, the jets would become capable of carrying air-launched Type 12 missiles.¹¹

Army

The Japanese army, officially known as the Ground Self-Defense Force, is focused on designing a system prioritizing stand-off defense capability, swift maneuverability, dispersed deployment capabilities, and advanced command, control, and intelligence functions.

9. Janes, Rise of the machines: Japan plans to replace some manned air assets with UAVs, Janes OSINT Insights, June 8, 2023. <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/defence/rise-of-the-machines-japan-plans-to-replace-some-manned-air-assets-with-uavs/>

10. Zi Ge, Diversified UAV development layout underlines Japan's military ambitions, August 3, 2023. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/OPINIONS_209196/Opinions_209197/16242512.html

11. Bradley Perrett, Japan could quickly build a more powerful fighter force, The Strategist -The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Blog, May 9, 2023. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/japan-could-quickly-build-a-more-powerful-fighter-force/>



H22 Parade of Self-Defense Force. (Image Credit: JGSDF)

The government is also seeking substantial funding for GSDF to acquire more combat vehicles. The Defense Ministry has asked for \$561 million to buy 24 wheeled infantry fighting vehicles, eight self-propelled mortars, 19 Type 16 maneuver combat vehicles as well as 10 Type 10 main battle tanks. It is also asking for \$215.4 million to procure 28 AMV wheeled armored personnel carriers from Finland.¹²

Japan is upgrading its military equipment transportation infrastructure by acquiring 15 new C-2 transport aircraft. Currently, the Japanese army only has one such aircraft. Japan is also in the process of purchasing the U.S.-made GSDF V22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft for personnel movement. The Japanese military is developing at least 6 new rapid deployment regiments.

The Japanese Self-Defense Forces have also gradually increased their participation in military exercises over the course of the last few years in an attempt to strategically develop an expansive plan aimed at fostering robust military interoperability, particularly with the United States as well as other allied military partners who share similar strategic objectives. This comprehensive plan underscores Japan's commitment to enhancing regional security, promoting stability, and fortifying collaborative defense capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region.

During the Exercise Talisman Sabre 2023, Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force conducted the first live-fire demonstration of its Type-12 anti-ship missile off the coast of Australia. The missile was launched from a truck-mounted system at the Beecroft Weapons Range and successfully hit the target in the East Australia Exercise Area off the coast of Jervis Bay.¹³



Japanese forces conducted a live fire demonstration of a Type 12 Surface-to-Ship Missile truck-mounted system. (Image Credit: X/@DefenceAust)

Missiles and Hypersonic Weapons

For 2024, the Japanese Defense Ministry has requested a budget to continue research and development for a land-based long-range Type 12 missile.¹⁴

12. Janes, Japan to procure Hawkei, Eagle light vehicles for trials, Janes OSINT Insights, June 26, 2023. <https://www.janes.com/defense-news/news-detail/japan-to-procure-hawkei-eagle-light-vehicles-for-trials/>

13. IRIA News, Japan fires Type-12 anti-ship missile for first time in Australia, International Relations Insights & Analysis, July 26, 2023. <https://www.ir-ia.com/news/japan-fires-type-12-anti-ship-missile-for-first-time-in-australia/>

14. Sheila A. Smith, How Japan Is Doubling Down on Its Military Power, Council on Foreign Relations, December 20, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-japan-doubling-down-its-military-power/>

In April 2023, the Japanese Defense Ministry signed a \$2.8 billion contract with Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, for the development and mass production of Type 12 long-range missiles. Under the contract, Japan's domestically produced Type 12 missile would be developed for surface, air, and sea launch. The project is also expected to explore the possibilities of developing Japan's first hypersonic weapons.¹⁵

The Hypersonic variant of the Type 12 guided missile has already been under development. According to the Japanese Defense Ministry, the missile would be put under mass production, however, due to the lack of testing space in the island nation, Japan plans to hold some of its hypersonic missile tests at military bases in the United States.

Japan is also working to improve the range of its domestically produced Type-12 surface-to-surface cruise missiles. The current range of these missiles is about 200 kilometers with a maximum range of up to 1000 kilometers. The Japanese Ministry of Defense's project to enhance the range of these missiles is expected to be completed by 2026.

In response to growing threats from North Korea, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces is focused on increasing long-range missile defense capabilities. The Japanese government has made a deal with the U.S. to acquire at least 400 units of Tomahawk long-range cruise missiles to reinforce its counterstrike capabilities. The introduction of the Tomahawk, a mainly land-attack cruise missile, is expected to allow Japanese forces to attack enemy bases and other targets overseas until its own domestically produced Type 12 long-range missile is ready for deployment.¹⁶



U.S. Air Force and Japan Air Self-Defense Force aircraft perform a wing capabilities demonstration during an exercise at Misawa Air Base, Japan, on May 13, 2022. (Image Credit: U.S. Air Force/Airman 1st Class Leon Redfern)

15. IRIA News, Japan signs \$2.8 billion deal for long-range missile development, International Relations Insights & Analysis, April 13, 2023. <https://www.ir-ia.com/news/japan-signs-2-8-billion-deal-for-long-range-missile-development/>

16. IRIA News, Japan plans to acquire US-made Tomahawk missiles to increase counterstrike capabilities, International Relations Insights & Analysis, November 30, 2022. <https://www.ir-ia.com/news/japan-plans-to-acquire-us-made-tomahawk-missiles-to-increase-counterstrike-capabilities/>



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Cover Image:

Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force personnel in armored vehicles during a military parade.
(Image Credit: JGSDF)



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