

Japan to further militarize the East China Sea

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Japan is engaging in the militarization of the East China Sea while increasing the ability of its military to launch offensive, first-strike attacks amid preparations for war with China by the US and its allies.

In an interview with *Nikkei Asia* on September 6, Japan's Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada stated that the ministry would “radically strengthen the defense capabilities we need, including our capacity for sustained and flexible deployment... To protect Japan, it's important for us to have not only hardware such as aircraft and ships, but also enough ammunition for them.”

Tokyo intends to construct an ammunition depot on Amami Island in the Ryukyu Island chain that is part of Kagoshima Prefecture. The depot will be located at the current site of a Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) base. The GSDF is the formal name of Japan's army. The government is also examining building additional port facilities and fuel tanks in the region, which also includes Okinawa Prefecture.

Hamada claimed in the interview that the decision is based on a potential crisis over Taiwan and the military's need to shift resources into the region. At present, approximately 70 percent of the Japanese military's ammunition is stored on Hokkaido, in the north, while only 10 percent is stored in Kyushu and Okinawa.

Tokyo also intends to conclude the scheduled deployment of surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missiles to islands in the region. The deployment of the missile batteries, with a range of 300 kilometers, was announced in 2016. They have subsequently been installed on Amami Island in 2019 and Miyako Island in 2020. A third deployment to Ishigaki Island will be completed by next March. Miyako and Ishigaki are further south of Amami and are a part of Okinawa Prefecture.

Tokyo also intends to send electronic warfare units to

at least three locations in the Ryukyu Island chain, including Yonaguni Island next year. These units are used to jam an enemy's communications and radar and would target Chinese vessels that use the sea routes around the islands to access the Pacific Ocean. Yonaguni Island lies just 110 kilometers to the east of Taiwan.

The Ryukyu Islands, also known as the Nansei Islands, stretch from Kyushu in an arc down to Taiwan. For the past decade, Tokyo has exploited and inflamed tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—claimed by Tokyo and Beijing—in the East China Sea in order to justify militarizing the Ryukyus. In 2015, Tokyo also announced it would deploy hundreds of additional troops to the islands of Ishigaki, Yonaguni, Miyako, and Amami.

Hamada's statement that Tokyo is planning for a “sustained and flexible deployment” violates Japan's constitution, specifically Article 9, known as the pacifist clause. The article explicitly states “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

However, Tokyo has exploited both the US/NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine as well as the US manufactured tensions over Taiwan to further dispense with the constitutional restraints on the Japanese military and to push through remilitarization in the face of widespread anti-war sentiment. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has regularly stated that “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow,” claiming that Beijing may invade Taiwan in the near future.

In reality, the United States, backed by allies like Japan and Australia, have denounced China over phony “human rights” concerns; accused Beijing of being responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic; and dangerously challenged the “One China” policy, which states Taiwan is a part of Chinese territory. Both

Washington and Tokyo acknowledge the “One China” policy and have no formal diplomatic relations with Taipei. This has not stopped the US from agreeing to massive arms deals with Taipei and conducting provocative visits to the island, including a trip last month by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

In line with this agenda, Japan’s Defense Ministry recently requested its largest-ever military budget for the 2023 fiscal year, surpassing last year’s record budget. The Defense Ministry submitted its request for 5.59 trillion yen (\$US39.19 billion) on August 31, which will likely grow in the future when supplementary budgets are added. The latest increase, which is sure to pass with little to no opposition, comes as Tokyo plans to raise military spending over the next five years to two percent of GDP, a doubling of the current budget. This would make Japan the third-largest spender on the military in the world.

There are seven “pillars” to the new budget, which the Defense Ministry states are “necessary efforts to drastically strengthen Japan’s defense capabilities within five years.” This includes the development and mass production of longer-range missiles, which would give Japan the ability to launch offensive strikes on distant targets. Tokyo also intends to produce the upgraded Type-12 missile with a range of up to 1,000 kilometers that will also be deployed to the East China Sea region.

Another significant item includes additional funds to further modify Japan’s two “helicopter carriers,” JS Izumo and JS Kaga, to convert them into full-fledged aircraft carriers capable of handling F-35B fighter jets. In the past, Japan has avoided the acquisition of nakedly offensive weaponry such as aircraft carriers so as to maintain the pretense of abiding by Article 9. The conversion of the Izumo and Kaga would make the two vessels the first new aircraft carriers in Japan’s fleet since World War II.

The other “pillars” in the budget request include improving air and missile defense capabilities, the use of drones, the improvement of intelligence-related functions, “sustainability and resiliency,” deployment capability, and the improvement of capabilities in space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic fields.

In an indication of how far Japan may go in acquiring offensive weaponry, in February, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seized on the war in Ukraine to

raise the possibility of Japan hosting US nuclear weapons as part of a weapons sharing program. Before his assassination in July, Abe had been one of the most belligerent anti-China voices in Tokyo. With the issue raised, it has already become an open debate in the Japanese establishment.



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