



## JAPAN'S 2018 MIDTERM DEFENSE PLAN STANDS TO BE CONSEQUENTIAL

BY JOHN WRIGHT

*Major John Wright is a US Air Force officer and a Mike and Maureen Mansfield Fellow. He is currently the Japan Country Director at Headquarters Pacific Air Forces. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author, and not those of the US Air Force, US government, Mansfield Foundation, or any foreign government.*

Japan's Ministry of Defense has begun preparing a new *Midterm Defense Plan* (MTDP), the five-year plan that guides Japanese defense projects and acquisitions. While the new plan looks similar to its predecessors, proposed capabilities target emerging domains considered essential to high-end warfare. This makes the plan the most consequential MTDP in a long time, especially for the US-Japan alliance.

A June 2017 Diet Security Committee report calls for an ambitious plan with new capabilities, such as cyber security, space assets, amphibious vehicles, improved integrated missile defense, and [cruise missiles](#) capable of striking ground targets. Defense Minister Onodera's [announcement on March 2](#) that the ministry is studying F-35B takeoff and landing operations on *Izumo*-class carriers has raised eyebrows in friendly and rival nations alike; even the mention of carrier-based fighter operations was unthinkable 10 years ago, a reflection of how a worsening Indo-Pacific security situation has affected Japanese security thinking.

Vital questions hang over these options. Are these capabilities right for Japan? Will they be worth the considerable cost? First, the draft plan should be viewed as an attempt to improve defense needs *despite* budgetary realities, and not as an attempt to reconcile defense desires with available funds. In

other words, the proposals could be described as a laundry list of desired capabilities that Japan may not be able to afford right now, or as capabilities that Japan wants to reduce its dependence on the US. Through this lens, the proposed capabilities do support enhanced bilateral deterrence, maritime security, and air and missile defense, all of which are major themes in the [US-Japan Guidelines for Cooperative Defense](#) – but only if the budget can be reconciled.

The government's seriousness about defense indicates there is the political will to spend more. Since taking office, the Abe administration has ordered two revised *National Defense Program Guidelines*, revised the *US-Japan Guidelines for Cooperative Defense*, spearheaded the *2015 Legislation for Peace and Security*, and recently pledged to amend Article IX of the Constitution to codify the Self-Defense Force's existence. Numerous Japanese acquisitions in the same timespan have also clearly favored US-Japan bilateral cooperation.

The new MTDP is also significant because [it will not follow the informal limit](#) on defense spending – it must be less than 1 percent of GDP – set during the Miki administration in 1976. Thus far, however, the Abe administration has yet to challenge the limit: FY 2017 figures indicate defense expenditures of 0.9 percent of GDP, and a weak yen continues to chip away at real purchasing power despite four years of successive defense budget growth. Further, Abe pledged to base the new plan on the grim security situation surrounding Japan, and has authorized six successive annual defense spending increases since 2012 (and garnered Cabinet approval for an extra \$208M from

December 17 to March 18). While the new plan does not answer if Japan will continue to spend more on its defense – trends indicate it will – it does reveal how it will spend additional defense money.

Most consequentially, this plan alters the project selection and spending patterns of past MTDPs. Previous plans depended on each branch of the self-defense forces (SDF) determining projects that best met its needs, disregarding projects it did not want or support. In the new plan, the National Security Secretariat (NSS) [will have a say](#) in selecting and approving acquisitions. The NSS will advocate programs that lack service sponsorship, which can be critical ones like cyber defense and space-based situational awareness capabilities. The services will still control acquisitions, but since the NSS is better positioned to drive a long-term acquisitions strategy based on national policy, service parochialism can potentially be outflanked and capabilities can be forced on unwilling services. Precedent exists for ordering the services to take on projects they do not want – the Ministry of Defense announced Japan's *RQ-4B Global Hawk* acquisition will be operated jointly, with no single service in charge. Japan is clearly changing its acquisition processes to allow for programs the central government thinks it needs, despite what the SDF branches want.

These changes are welcome and have real significance for the US-Japan alliance. Many potential acquisitions in the plan reflect bilateral defense capabilities mentioned in the *US-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation*, especially improvements to missile defense (*Aegis*) and standoff deterrence (cruise missiles). For the US, the plan could be a big win; the addition of more interoperable technology, better intelligence and surveillance capabilities, as well as the rumored F-35s, could mollify US observers who believe Japan needs to do more to meet its growing regional defense responsibilities.

But the plan remains just that – a plan – and doubt exists about which projects, if approved, will best match US defense needs. For example, cyber security will likely be pursued unilaterally since policy restrictions make bilateral cyber defense unrealistic for now. Further, Japan may have

different ideas on how to employ nascent capabilities like the RQ-4, cruise missiles, or even the F-35B. Without common employment methods, meaningful bilateral defense is difficult. Finally, there is host nation support: a Japan more willing to spend on its own defense may be less willing to provide support for US forces based in Japan, or may reallocate funds meant to support US forces to its domestic defensive needs.

Despite these concerns, the new plan looks promising. Combined with the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade rollout in 2018, Japan aims to use the upcoming MTDP to balance threats presented by China and other neighbors, and work more cooperatively with the US. This MTDP could redirect Japanese security priorities more than any other in recent memory.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.*