



## **REARMING JAPAN: AMBITION, CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITS**

**BY TANG MENG KIT**

*Tang Meng Kit ([mktang87@gmail.com](mailto:mktang87@gmail.com)) is a Singaporean and is a freelance analyst and commentator. He graduated from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU, Singapore in 2025. By profession, Meng Kit works as an aerospace engineer and has keen interest in geopolitics and cross-straits affairs.*

In barely half a year, Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae has [pushed](#) Japan's defense policy into unfamiliar territory. The FY2026 main defense budget has [reached](#) ¥9.04 trillion (approximately \$58 billion), with total security-related spending at roughly ¥10.6 trillion, [at about](#) 1.9% of GDP. The 2% threshold, long treated as sensitive, has effectively been reached ahead of schedule. At the April 2026 LDP convention, she [signaled](#) that constitutional revision is [imminent](#), with a proposal targeted for 2027.

This is more than higher spending. It is a compressed phase of military normalization under pressure. The driver is a China–Taiwan trilemma: Japan must deter China, prepare for instability around Taiwan, and hedge against uncertainty in US commitments, all without provoking escalation or exhausting its own capacity. While a stronger military posture can enhance deterrence and reassure the United States, rapid acceleration still creates inherent trade-offs, and prioritizing one objective can weaken another in practice. The pressing question is whether Japan can transform this accelerated buildup into enduring military capability before structural limits impose constraints.

### **Acceleration beyond predecessors**

Japan's trajectory did not begin with Takaichi. Under long-serving PM Abe Shinzo, the outer boundaries of postwar security policy were stretched, most notably through the 2015 legislation that [reinterpreted](#) Article 9 to permit limited collective self-defense. Kishida Fumio, PM from 2021-2024, [consolidated](#) that trajectory, committing Japan to reach 2% of GDP in defense spending by FY2027 while revising core strategic documents.

Takaichi has forced execution under time pressure. Her February 2026 supermajority mandate [allowed](#) her to compress what had been a gradual process. Speed has reduced political resistance, but it has also limited the time available for institutions to absorb change.

The March 2026 [reorganization](#) of the Self-Defense Forces reflects this shift. A centralized Fleet Surface Force concentrates naval command, while a new Amphibious and Mine Warfare Group sharpens the focus on island defense. The Air Self-Defense Force has expanded into an Air and Space Self-Defense Force. Procurement has accelerated, including [Tomahawk acquisition](#) and upgrades to indigenous systems. Restrictions on arms exports have been [eased](#), signaling a more active role in defense industrial cooperation.

The emphasis has moved beyond preparing for contingencies and toward shaping them. That transition brings initiative, but also greater exposure to miscalculation and institutional strain.

### **The China-Taiwan trilemma as the central driver**

The strategic logic behind this acceleration is rooted in geography and timing. China's military modernization [continues at scale](#), accompanied by [persistent](#) gray-zone activity around the Senkaku Islands. At the same time, a Taiwan contingency, whether through blockade or direct force, has [become](#) a planning scenario rather than a remote possibility.

Japan sits uncomfortably close to this potential flashpoint. The Nansei Islands extend toward Taiwan, with some points only about 110 kilometers (68 miles) away. Critical sea lanes [passing through](#) the Miyako Strait and the Bashi Channel carry the vast majority of Japan's energy imports. Disruption in these corridors would register immediately as an economic shock.

Tokyo increasingly treats Taiwan as strategically aligned but operationally constrained. Political gridlock and readiness gaps [raise doubts](#) about its ability to sustain a prolonged defense. Japan cannot assume time or US availability will be on its side,

particularly under an administration that frames alliances in more transactional terms.

These pressures cannot be reconciled cleanly. Strengthening deterrence risks escalation. Preparing for a Taiwan contingency demands resources that strain sustainability. Hedging against US uncertainty requires autonomy that can complicate coordination. The result is a managed tension rather than a balanced strategy.

### Geographic focus and operational shift

Japan's response is most visible along its southwestern arc. The islands of [Yonaguni, Ishigaki, and Miyako](#) are being fortified with missile deployments, surveillance systems, and logistical infrastructure designed to support sustained operations. [Forward arming and refueling points](#) extend air coverage. [Unmanned systems](#) improve surveillance while reducing risk to personnel. Electronic warfare capabilities aim to disrupt adversary targeting.

This “[southwestern wall](#)” is a distributed network designed to complicate movement through the [First Island Chain](#) and raise operational costs. The emphasis lies on denial—slowing and constraining an adversary rather than defeating it outright.

From Beijing's perspective, such a network complicates rapid coercive options but does not eliminate them. Saturation tactics or blockade strategies could still impose severe pressure, especially if Japan struggles to sustain operations. Denial depends as much on endurance as on initial positioning

### The core constraints: Human resources, demographics, and doctrinal legacy

The ambition of Japan's defense buildup faces structural limits that are harder to overcome than budget ceilings.

The most immediate is manpower. As of the end of FY2024, the Self-Defense Forces [stood](#) at 89.1% of authorized strength, with recruitment shortfalls persisting despite expanded eligibility and retention measures. This gap already affects readiness.

A denial strategy built on dispersed, high-tempo operations across the southwestern islands is manpower-intensive. It requires rotation, redundancy, and the ability to absorb attrition. Japan is weakest where its strategy demands the most.

Demographic trends reinforce this constraint. The pool of recruitment-age citizens continues to shrink, as it is projected to decline by another 30% or so by the mid-2040s, while competition from the civilian labor market remains strong. Expanding the force will be difficult regardless of budget growth.

Doctrine presents a different challenge. The long-standing emphasis on an exclusively defense-oriented policy under [Article 9](#) has become increasingly detached from operational practice. Counterstrike capabilities and force restructuring point toward a more flexible doctrine. Takaichi's [push](#) for constitutional revision seeks to reconcile this gap, but the process remains politically sensitive.

Even where funding exists, conversion into capability is uneven. Roughly ¥1 trillion in defense allocations goes [unspent](#) annually due to procurement delays, industrial bottlenecks, and currency effects. The constraint is no longer willingness to spend, but the ability to sustain capability over time. These pressures concentrate risk in long-duration operations, where initial gains are hardest to maintain.

### Historical echoes as cautionary restraint

Japan's postwar identity continues to shape both domestic debate and external perception. The legacy of World War II and the normative weight of pacifism remain embedded in political culture. They no longer function as an outright barrier, but they define the boundaries of acceptable policy.

Public protests in April 2026, including a [large demonstration](#) outside the Diet and coordinated actions nationwide, reflect persistent unease. [Coalition dynamics](#) reinforce the need for caution. Younger voters appear [more open](#) to a stronger defense posture, but this openness does not translate into unconditional support.

Externally, China [continues to frame](#) Japan's military developments through historical narratives, while other regional actors [watch more quietly](#). Tokyo's challenge is to signal restraint externally while expanding capability internally. Perception remains integral to deterrence.

### Forward outlook: 2026–2035 inflection points

The upcoming revisions to Japan's National Security Strategy [will shape](#) the next decade. Technology will play a larger role, [particularly](#) in unmanned systems and AI-enabled support, offering partial relief from manpower constraints. Partnerships will deepen, including with the [Philippines](#) and Australia.

Several trajectories stand out. Prolonged gray-zone pressure in the East China Sea would [test](#) operational endurance, exposing weaknesses in personnel and logistics. [Economic coercion by China](#), combined with fiscal constraints, could slow expansion. A successful [constitutional revision](#) could strengthen legal clarity and alliance coordination, while testing domestic cohesion.

Each path stresses a different dimension of Japan's strategy—operational endurance, fiscal sustainability, and political legitimacy. None can be managed through spending alone.

### Conclusion: Realism must match resolve

Takaichi has supplied what Japanese defense policy long lacked: urgency backed by resources. The challenge has shifted. It is no longer about overcoming political hesitation or breaking fiscal taboos.

Japan's rearmament now depends on whether the state can sustain what it has chosen to begin. The constraints it faces are enduring, not transitional. How they are managed will determine whether this acceleration produces lasting military capacity or a force that expands quickly but struggles to endure when it is tested most.

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