On Japan's Proposed Defense Budget

The proposed budget posted on the Japanese Ministry of Defense website for this agency for the next financial year, subject to approval during the upcoming regular session of parliament, is worthy of attention for several reasons.

First of all, this is because its main provisions attest to the fact that the entire process of the country's military development has taken on a new quality. One very important intermediate result of this in the coming years will be the formation of full-fledged armed forces that are capable of fulfilling both of the "traditional" objectives that are set for the armed forces in all "normal" states. These objectives are to ensure the defense of these forces' own country if there is an armed attack from the outside and to commit attacks (naturally, "pre-emptive" ones) to foil a political opponent's hostile plans.

Until the beginning of the 2000s, in accordance with the bilateral Security Treaty of 1960 fulfilling both these objectives was chiefly the responsibility of the United States. And this despite the fact that the process of gradually forming its own armed forces, which are still called by the euphemism "Self-Defense Forces" was initiated in Japan in the mid-1950s.

It is worth noting that Japan itself does not have the right to provide military assistance to a key ally, due to the restrictions stipulated in Article 9 in its 1947 Constitution, which is still in force. Incidentally, according to that same
article Japan also does not have any armed forces - something which long ago started to look like a blatant absurdity. However, that does not bother the Japanese average citizen at all, who stubbornly refuses to “understand” the desire on the part of the country’s leadership to finally bring the country’s Basic Law in line with reality.

As far as the aforementioned overall defense problem is concerned, since around 2005 Japan has delineated an increase in its own role in protecting itself, leaving (mostly) the United States with the issues of delivering “preventive” strikes. Up until now, special attention has been given to providing missile defense. To accomplish this, American Patriot PAC-3 “lower echelon” missile defense systems were purchased, and multi-purpose destroyers were built (there are now about ten of them), whose objective is to intercept ballistic missiles along the “middle sections” of their flight paths.

These destroyers are Japanese-built replicas of one of the most successful American projects over the past few decades: the Arleigh Burke. Japanese destroyers are fitted out with American target recognition and guidance control systems (Aegis), as well as various modifications of SM-3 anti-ballistic missiles.

It is worth noting that Japan participated in developing the last modification of this missile, dubbed the Block IIA. It was reported that in mid-November this year a test for this missile to intercept ICBMs was successfully conducted. Although this modification of the SM-3 was originally intended to intercept medium- and short-range missiles. The budget under discussion provides for starting the procurement of the SM-3 Block IIA, for which 300 million USD has been allocated.

In June this year, the government finally abandoned its initially flawed idea of building two ground-based bases with missile defense systems that have the same basic components, with which destroyers are equipped. NEO has talked about the possible motivation for launching the Aegis Ashore project, one that is hardly related to missile defense in and of itself.

It is worth reiterating that this project is a thing of the past, but has not disappeared completely, rather turning into a project to construct certain vessels (from all appearances, just inexpensive barges) narrowly aimed toward deploying those same Aegis systems, as well as some anti-ballistic missiles. When asked why Japan would not simply replenish its anti-missile defense potential by building two more multi-purpose destroyers, the Ministry of Defense declared that even now they are already experiencing a shortage of trained crews.

It cannot be said that the objective involved in a “pre-emptive” attack has lain completely outside the boundaries of Japan’s military development in recent decades. Soryu submarines could very well be tasked with achieving these objectives, which are considered (so far) to be one of the best in the world among non-nuclear class submarines. Types of offensive weapons include 4 helicopter carriers. F-2 fighter-bombers (these are also replicas, but of the F-16 fighter made by the American company General Dynamics) can also carry out strikes on ground targets.

However, up until recently the country’s leadership did not delineate these objectives publicly or sufficiently definitively. In this regard, a milestone was reached in September 2020 when Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi proclaimed that the possibility existed of delivering strikes “against enemy bases” where a threat to be ascertained that missiles would be launched from them. In the comments that accompanied this statement, China and North Korea are mentioned as potential “opponents”.

The main means of attack would be a line of low-observable cruise missiles whose range would vary from 200-1000 kilometers. They are being developed on the basis of the existing Type 12 surface-to-ship missile.

The carriers for the future missiles will be two new Maya-class destroyers (the first of which was launched in March 2020), special-purpose Kumano-class frigates with twice the deadweight tonnage (there will be 22 in total),and fighter-bombers.

Those last include (along with the aforementioned F-2) fifth-generation F-35A fighter jets (conventional takeoff and landing) and F35Bs (short takeoff and vertical landing). F-35s were developed by the American company Lockheed Martin, but in the process of manufacturing them to deliver to the Japanese SDF the share held by the Japanese company Mitsubishi will increase. Over the course of several years, the Japanese Ministry of Defense plans to purchase 147 F-35 fighters that fall under both categories.

Modernization work on two Izumo-class helicopter carriers will begin to accommodate those same F-35B fighters. About 700 million USD will be spent next year to build 4 submarines that belong to a new class (and one that is allegedly significantly superior in terms of its baseline characteristics to the Soryu). The first of these - the Taigei (or "Big Whale") - was set afloat on October 14, 2020.
About 100 million USD has been allocated for joint development work with US companies on a new fighter jet that will replace the F-2 in the 2030s.

And finally, what draws attention is the fact that new “domains” have emerged in the SDF’s structure, and specifically “Space”, “Cybersecurity”, and “Electromagnetic Security”. To ensure that the first two function well, 500 million and 250 million USD, respectively, have been earmarked. The area of responsibility for the third “domain” is to parry attacks committed on all structures across the SDF using electromagnetic radiation.

It would seem that this is the right time to wind up a street organ singing propaganda on the theme of “the revival of Japanese militarism”. But the author is not going to become involved in this, because the set of facts given above is clearly not sufficient for this. Until now, one of the main characteristics in all this has not been pointed out - one which reflects the level of the burden created on the country by defense spending. And although the absolute annual figure looks very considerable (about 50 billion USD on average over the past few years, with a slight uptick), it is only 1% of Japan's GDP. That is, in terms of its relative indicator the Japanese lag several times behind other participants in the pool of leading world players who are doing more or less the same things in the field of military construction.

It is quite another matter that some kind of “integral” indicator cannot exhaustively characterize the level of defense potential a particular country has. “Details” are important, such as the quality, with which the funds allocated to industry are used, and the products that it then makes for the armed forces. The latter, however, can only be verified “in practice,” and hopefully it will not come to that.

In addition, one extremely important circumstance should not be overlooked: Japan's main instrument for ensuring its national interests in the international arena throughout the post-war period remains its economic power. Recently, that has been supplemented by Japan's leadership in the regional association CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership), which includes 11 countries in Asia, South America, and North America. This means that Japan's principal national instruments are still not part of the defense industry.

Although having modern armed forces also does not hurt. And the Japanese leadership's awareness of this fact will play an ever-increasing role in the country’s process of nation-building. There is also no doubt that over subsequent years, as Japan “normalizes”, the issues involved in its defense will increasingly be resolved by it relying on its own potential.

And there should also be a “calm and philosophical” attitude toward this, like changes in the weather forecasts. If there is an announcement that it will rain soon, and you need (“urgently”) to go outside, then you just need to wear the appropriate shoes and not forget to take an umbrella. But, of course, both the “shoes” and “umbrella” must be on hand.

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