Japan's Annual Defense Whitepaper, 2021 Edition

In the middle of June this year, Japan’s Ministry of Defense published an English-language digest of its 500-page White Paper on the Defense of Japan, which gives readers an overview of this major Asian power’s defense policy, both in terms of its current status and how it is developing.

Among other functions, the whitepaper provides a conceptual basis for the Ministry of Defense’s request to parliament for enough funding to cover the expenses it will incur in meeting the challenges set out in the whitepaper over the next year. NEO has already commented on the Japanese parliament’s consideration of the 2021 draft budget for Japan’s armed forces.

It has to be said that the use of the words “armed forces” and “Japanese” in the same sentence (quite understandably) evokes painful historical memories. But nowadays - and this also applies to the foreseeable future, to give these words the extreme interpretation they once had and talk about the “rebirth of Japanese militarism” would clearly be an exaggeration.

Typically, when discussing which countries are “building up their military” analysts compare their military budgets. It is a rather arbitrary approach, as it does not take into account such issues as how the budget allocated to the armed forces is actually used. There is also no ideal way to assess the expenditure of different countries - normally...
expressed in dollars - in real terms.

Nevertheless it can confidently be stated that at no time since the end of the Second World War has Japan’s military budget exceeded 1% of its GDP. Other major powers spend several times that amount - which clearly undermines any claims about the militarization of Japan. Nevertheless for a country with a highly developed manufacturing base, Japan’s annual military budget of some $50 billion is enough to provide it with very considerable capacity to build up its military. Japan certainly cannot be accused of lacking the ability to carry out work to high standards.

And it should not be forgotten that both Japan’s military construction sector and its armed forces still retain, to a degree, their “institutional” character. The armed forces, by the way, are still rather euphemistically called the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). This reflects the restrictions set out in Article 9 of Japan’s Constitution, which has been in effect since 1947 and has not been amended.

Specifically, these restrictions give the military and political union between the US and Japan a very one-sided character. They require the USA to do everything possible (including using nuclear weapons) to defend Japan. But Japan itself, if it were attacked, would not be allowed to do anything to defend itself - even though it could theoretically provide its ally with significant military resources for this purpose. The last US president was particularly critical of this inherent imbalance in the US’s relations with its main Asian ally (and a similar situation applies in relation to its European allies). Significantly, Japan’s current constitution was actually drafted in the headquarters of the US occupying forces.

The above restrictions and the unequal character of Japan’s relationship with the US are reflected in the make up and activities of its armed forces, which are basically limited to carrying out a defensive function. As for any preemptive offensives - these can only be carried out by the US military.

But the senior partner in the military and political alliance is (quite understandably) dissatisfied with this distribution of responsibilities, and has called for the terms of the alliance to be “reviewed”. In the early 2000s Washington initiated a new policy - a gradual move away from the anti-war spirit enshrined in Japan’s current constitution, and a remodeling of the SDF as fully-fledged armed forces. This trend, by the way, is opposed by the majority of Japanese, who feel that their own ambitious national goals can be achieved without their becoming a threat to their neighbors.

Despite that sentiment, as part of the above trend, the SDF are increasingly being deployed a long way from their country’s borders. For example, in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean as a whole, and the Persian Gulf - all regions of rapidly growing strategic importance.

Nobuo Kishi, the Japanese Minister of Defense (and younger brother of former Prime Minster Shinzo Abe) has spoken out clearly about the need to extend the functions of the SDF beyond Japan’s frontiers.

In the opening article of the whitepaper on the Defense of Japan, which focuses on the military and political situation unfolding in Japan and in its wider region, Nobuo Kishi sets out the government’s main concerns: “China has continued its unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas, and China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels are sighted almost daily in the contiguous zone surrounding the Senkaku Islands, an inherent part of the territory of Japan.” In addition to China, the Japanese Ministry of Defense is also faced with another long-standing military and political threat - North Korea and its nuclear and missile programs.

The Indo-Pacific region has been described as “critically important” not only for Japan, but for the entire world. And Nobuo Kishi argues that in order to deal with a range of different security challenges, Japan needs to strengthen its defense capabilities and expand its role in the wider geographical arena. Significantly, he adds that in doing this Japan needs to “closely cooperate with countries that share the same fundamental values”.

The author will now offer some comments of his own on that statement, which appears to encapsulate the digest’s core message. And, most importantly, the author would like to reiterate the increasing significance of recent events in South East Asia, a region in which Japan is getting ever more closely involved.

The leading global powers are currently focusing on South East Asia, as part of their contest for dominance over the countries in the region. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has just visited the region, and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently participated in a meeting of regional foreign secretaries, held by video conference. At the end of August Vice President Kamala Harris will also visit the region - specifically Singapore and Vietnam.

All these senior politicians are mindful of the need to keep up with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who has made many trips to South East Asia, and also participated in a video conference with his counterparts from ASEAN
at the beginning of August.

As for Japan, when it comes to promoting its interests, both in South East Asia and globally, it has, as yet, been relying on its economic potential (and it is the third largest economic power in the world). But now we are seeing increasing signs of its military presence in the region, which could be described as a “historic tradition”. The Japanese Ministry of Defense is currently preparing to participate in the largest military exercises to have been held in the South China Sea for many years. The goal of the exercises is described by what Japan calls its vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, or FOIP - a phrase used numerous times in the whitepaper.

Most main “Western” powers will be taking part in these latest exercises in the South China Sea. The UK is sending an aircraft carrier strike group including a destroyer, a fleet of US F-35s and a Dutch Navy frigate. And at the beginning of August Germany’s indefatigable Minister of Defense Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer dispatched a frigate bound for the South China Sea.

All this military activity is aimed at promoting the vision of a FOIP referred to above. And there is no need to name the country that is threatening that vision. One country that the author would be disappointed to see participating in the exercises in the South China Sea is India, which Nobuo Kishi has named among the countries with whom Japan aims to maintain relations of “freedom and transparency”.

Naturally, the whitepaper on the Defense of Japan has not gone unnoticed by China - relations between the two countries have been far from easy in the past, and even now could be described as leaving much to be desired. The original painting reproduced on the cover of the document has also provoked lively discussion. As the document’s authors have pointed out, the ancient warrior depicted in the illustration is unarmed - in his hands he is holding the reins of his horse. The image symbolizes strength, and also a lack of any aggressive intentions.

However it is unlikely that this explanation has fully allayed all China’s doubts concerning the content of the White Paper on the Defense. After all, just to cite one issue, the document refers to the Taiwan problem as one of the issues that the Japanese military is concerned about.

As for Russia, the document notes the technological modernization of its armed forces, the “Northern Territories dispute”, and the growth of its military partnership with China.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that Japan, like any country, enjoys the right to have its own armed forces. A country’s armed forces constitute one of the tools that its leadership can use to defend its national interests.

Problems generally arise when that instrument rises to the highest position in the state hierarchy and starts to decide what the country’s priorities should be. That is what happened in Japan in the 1930s - leading to what can fairly be referred to as the country’s “militarization”.

Nothing of the kind is happening in modern Japan, nor is there any reason to believe that it might do so in the foreseeable future.

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