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Japan's Drive for Military Greatness in the Lengthening Shadow of US-China Confrontation

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Abstract: *A little over 75 years ago, a Japan-designed Asia-Pacific community collapsed, leaving not only Japan, but much of the region, in chaos. Millions were dead, with cities left in ruins. Important lessons the world—and many Japanese people—took from the catastrophe of the Asia-Pacific War and the demise of the Japanese Empire were incorporated in the American-crafted constitution of Japan that took effect one year later, which pledged under Article 9 that Japan would forever renounce "war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes," adding that "land, sea, and air forces … will never be maintained." That pledge remains, unrevised but steadily emptied of content, and the 1946 aspiration to create a new kind of state, one resting on the "peace" principle, has been largely forgotten. Over subsequent decades, the US, which had imposed Article 9 on an occupied Japan, came to regret its recrafting of Japan as a "peace state," and began steadily exerting pressure on it to revive and expand its military. Thus, with US encouragement, Japan has, over time, indeed built formidable land, sea, and air forces, evading constitutional proscription by calling them "Self-Defence" forces (rather than Army, Navy, and so on).*

Keywords: *Japanese Constitution, Article 9, the Self-Defence Force and a new Japanese militarism, Okinawa and the danger of war in the First Island Chain, US-Japan conflict with China.*

Regional states with good reason to know and fear Japanese militarism, Australia included, also abandoned their commitment to the idea of permanent demilitarisation. The constitution being steadily sidelined, by early 21st century Japan was already one of the world's great military powers, poised on the brink of further, massive expansion.

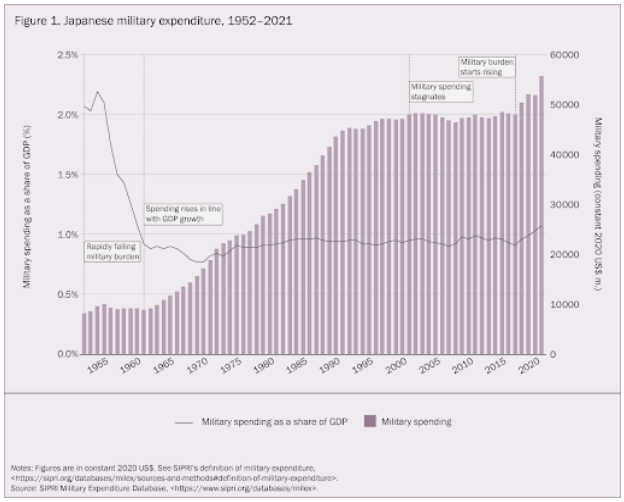


Figure 1: Japanese military expenditure, 1952-2021

In December 2022, the Government of Japan announced a series of measures designed to substantially elevate the country's already significant military posture**,** doubling military expenditure from one-percent of GDP (the NATO level) and expending a grand total of around 43 trillion yen ($US 335 billion) over the five-year period to 2027, bringing it to number three in the world for military spending (after only the United States and China).[1] Among other things, Japan is to purchase missiles (with the potential to strike enemy bases in China and Russia as well as North Korea), plus large quantities of attack and reconnaissance drones, F-35 stealth fighters, submarines, and warships.[2] It also declared readiness, under certain conditions, to carry out pre-emptive attack on threatening enemy forces.[3] The Article 9 principle renouncing war has clearly been degraded to an extreme degree.

Under Abe Shinzo (Prime Minister 2006-7, 2012-2020) and subsequent governments, responding to persistent and unequivocal US demands, Japan committed substantial resources to upgrading the existing US facilities on Okinawa Island. A major new facility in the north for the US Marine Corps to replace the obsolescent Futenma began construction, while at the same time, Self-Defence Force installations (basically missile, anti-missile and intelligence gathering electronics) were built in the outlying islands of Amami, Mage, Miyako, Ishigaki, and Yonaguni. Mage and Yonaguni constitute key components of the overall project.

First Island Chain

Significant US military presence—approximately 26,000 US personnel, or half the total stationed in Japan—is positioned on Okinawa Island, where most attention has been focused on the hugely unpopular and still hotly contested Henoko base being built there by Japan for the US Marine Corps to replace the obsolescent Futenma. Meanwhile, Japan over the past decade has steadily expanded its own military (Self-Defence Force) presence on its lesser known islands. Under strong US pressure, it has deployed, or is in the process of deploying, missile and counter-missile units in a series of new or under-construction bases, decisively changing the character of the Ryukyu island chain that stretches from Kagoshima to Taiwan, via

Mage, area 8.5 kms^2, population zero

Amami, area 306 kms^2, population 73,000

Okinawa, area 1,206 kms^2, population 1.4 million

Miyako, area 204 kms^2, population 46,000

Ishigaki, area 239 kms^2, population 48,000

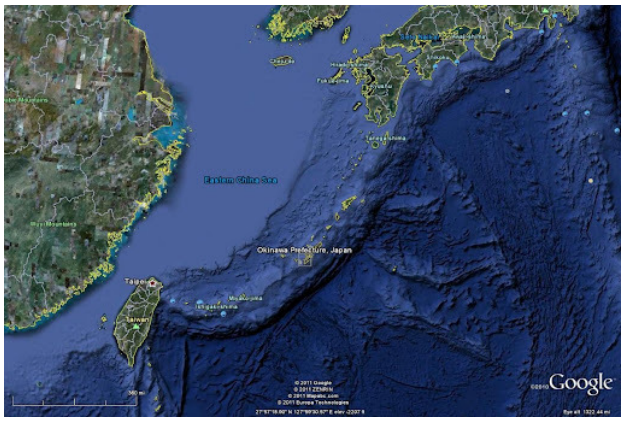
Yonaguni, area 28 kms^2, population 1,669

In geographical terms, a line drawn from Kagoshima City in western Japan to the northern shores of Taiwan passes through these islands, and Japan and the US believe that, when or if the need arises, they can "bottle up" and deny China access or egress to or from the Pacific Ocean that lies beyond it. Japan's southwestern frontier islands serve as a key component in this US-Japan "first island chain" China containment strategy.

Neither Mage, to the north and closest to Kagoshima, nor Yonaguni, to the south and just 110 kilometres from the coast of Taiwan, are named on the attached Google satellite photograph. Appearing there meely as insignificant blue dots, both nevertheless

demand attention.[4] Mage, adjacent to the Japanese space industry island of Tanegashima, was initially chosen to house US carrier-based fighter jet take-off and landing exercises, but gradually evolved into a project to accommodate all three of Japan's military forces (Ground, Sea and Air Self-Defence Forces) together with unspecified numbers of their US counterparts, under a US sharing arrangement that ensured ultimate Pentagon coordination, control, and command of Japanese military operations throughout the adjacent seas. Construction of this unprecedented Mage Island facility commenced in January 2023 and is projected to take four years.[5] As for Yonaguni, close enough to Taiwan that on a clear day its mountains may be seen and occasional Taiwan friendship missions have landed on Yonaguni beaches from motorized jet skis, went furthest of Japan's outlying islands in developing a distinctive post-Cold War vision for an East China Sea community. However, the community split over the choice between the government's commitment from about 2011 to install a major military installation on the island and the "peace" vision of 2004. Vision proponents eventually failed in a February 2015 island referendum to win the majority they needed.[6] A site was chosen, barracks and other installations installed, and in March 2016 a 160-strong Ground Self Defense Force unit marched in.

Mage and Yonaguni, both once renowned for the richness of their biodiversity, are thus to become centres for the preparation and conduct of war.



East China Sea from Space (Google)

Filling in the Blank Spots

Throughout the Cold War decades, what distinguished the southwestern islands (other than Okinawa itself, where major units of US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps are entrenched) was the absence of US military installations. Undefended, they posed no threat and so were themselves unthreatened. Those who knew the islands in their pre-military base days – this author among them – remember them as idyllic. But to bureaucrats and Self-Defence Force brass in Tokyo, and to the Pentagon, the absence of such military forces signified a blank spot to be filled. From 2010, the defence of the southwestern islands gradually became of paramount importance in national defence doctrine. The *raison d'être* for these Okinawan islands became their positions as US-Japan bastions from which to project force in the service of the regional and global hegemonic project, ultimately for "containing" China and addressing any "Taiwan contingency" or war over it.[7]

Japanese military spending steadily rose throughout the Cold War, but remained, until 2020, below the self-imposed one percent of GDP limit set in 1976. First, under former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, that restriction was set aside. Later, in 2022, the government

announced a commitment to spend up to two percent of GDP on military each year by 2027. In 2021, military expenditure reached 5.9 trillion yen ($54.1 billion) and a further 26 percent increase, to 6.8 trillion yen, was projected for 2023.[8] This considerable expansion allows Japan to update maritime and air systems and to acquire new weapon systems designed for counterstrike purposes. Over 80 percent of the planned aircraft and most of the long-range missiles will be procured from US arms producers.

The nominal reason for the militarization of the so-called "first island chain" is to defend Taiwan in case of a "contingency," the sobriquet by which war over Taiwan between China and Taiwan has come to be contemplated since former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's statement that "a Taiwan contingency would be a Japan contingency."[9] Yet, it is clear that the much broader role assigned the first island chain is to position US-Japan power in a place where they can contain a rising China in the region that has come to be known as the Indo-Pacific. The US insists on its own "full-spectrum dominance," meaning global economic, technological, and military hegemony, and to the extent that it challenges or appears to challenge that prerogative, China "threatens" the US. Consequently, over and under the East China Sea, battleships and aircraft carriers, missile and counter-missile systems, fighter jets and submarines—not only Japanese and American, but also British, French, Australian, Canadian, and German—rehearse a possible future war between a US-led coalition of the willing and China.[10]

A sane defence policy for a country such as Japan—or indeed for any sane country—would be one that attached highest importance to avoiding, rather than striving to "win," any such war. This is for two reasons. Firstly, any East Asian war today or tomorrow would be a missile war, involving naval and air power, and could conceivably become a nuclear war. Missile and anti-missile units are now being rushed to the southwestern islands, including 400 "off the shelf" Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles for which Japan suddenly placed an order (at a cost of about 21 billion yen, or $1.6 billion) late in 2022.[11] However, such missiles, capable of attacking forces within a 1,500-kilometre radius (including major centres in Russia, China, and North Korea) would provide little defensive reassurance for the roughly 160,000 people living on those Islands, who would surely be targeted in the earliest exchanges of such a war. Secondly, regardless of whoever "wins" this war, damage and devastation is assured for all sides of the conflict. Contemplating such catastrophe, Okinawans recall their sacrifice in the spring of 1945 in the final battle of the Pacific War, which took the lives of more than one-fourth of the civilian population. Japan's authorities might issue an "alert" warning in case of conflict breaking out, as was done on the occasion of several recent North Korean missile launches, but in 2023 as in 1945 there would be simply no time for the Okinawan civilians to be withdrawn to safety, and indeed nowhere to go.

500 Years of Friendship

The irony is that the Okinawa now being militarized and readied for war with China not only has no dispute with today's China, but has a 500-year-long history of friendly interchange with it (in Ming and Qing dynasties) and the Okinawan people (as Okinawa-based scholar Doug Lummis puts it) "do not share the militaristic Japanese Bushido ethic."[12] There is no evidence of the Chinese resorting to violence in its relations with the Ryukyu authorities over those multiple centuries, and the exchanges are still remembered and celebrated in Naha today. The experience of Okinawan incorporation in the modern

Japanese state, conversely, was accompanied with great violence, from the torture-induced assent by Ryukyu kingdom elites to the absorption of the Ryukyu Kingdom and its territories into Japan in 1879, through the violent attempts to crush the distinctive Okinawan language and identity since then, followed by the catastrophe of 1945 when Okinawa alone among Japanese territories suffered the horror of land war.[13] The violence continues even today, with ongoing assault from the contemporary Japanese state trying to break the Okinawan will for a non-militarized East China Sea community identity.[14]

Belatedly, the Okinawan prefectural government today appears to have realized that to overcome the threat of war, it must shift its emphasis from preparing for war to creating peace. This author recalls having urged a former (1990-1998) Okinawan governor, Ota Masahide, to combat militarist agendas by taking initiatives to build an East China Sea peace community, hosting leaders of East China Sea states at Naha to figure out an appropriate agenda of peace and cooperation. That suggestion went nowhere, as shortly after our conversation, Governor Ota was driven from office by an intense national government campaign. Reading now of today's Okinawan Deputy Governor Teruya Yoshimi's visit to the newly appointed Chinese ambassador to Japan,Wu Jinghao, to press upon him a meeting between today's governor, Tamaki Denny, and China's President Xi Jinping,[15] I could only reflect that the urgency of such steps is so much greater now than during Ota's office as governor.

From January 2023, Japan assumed a globally significant role with its two-year membership of the United Nations Security Council beginning and, simultaneously, holding the chair of the G-7 group of industrial states. After visiting major G-7 countries (France, Italy, UK, Canada), Prime Minister Kishida called on President Joe Biden in Washington. He stressed throughout the need for strategic coordination between Japan and the NATO states (under US direction) and support for the US/NATO war in Ukraine. The statement to which he and Biden added their names on 13 January referred to the Japan-U.S. alliance as "the cornerstone of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region," and to "Japan's bold leadership in fundamentally reinforcing its defence capabilities." In the fine print was the ominous message that the US would defend Japan "using all capabilities*, including nuclear weapons*."[16] Such explicit reference to the "deterrence" afforded by the US nuclear umbrella was rare, raising the question of whether Kishida had sought it in advance. In any case, the nuclear nature of the US-Japan relationship was made plain. So too was the threat to the people of these southwestern frontier islands as, increasingly, people in neighboring China perceive them to be "anti-China."

The post-World War II Asia-Pacific settlement thus continues to morph from the 1947 declaration of peace towards war preparation. While China, outraged by US-Japan led attempts to freeze it out of regional and global institutions, pours its formidable and rapidly growing resources into its military, reinforcing its presence in the East and South China Seas in particular, Japan deploys tanks and missiles to remote East China Sea Japanese islands, conducts evacuation drills, and urges local residents to make contingency plans for war. The US Marine Corps, meanwhile, "re-purposes" its Okinawa-based units, facilitating their deployment to farther, further islands and arms them with anti-ship missiles for use against Chinese shipping in the event of any Taiwan "contingency."

Early in 2023, Japan reached agreement with NATO on the establishment in Japan of an Asia-Pacific NATO liaison office, to open in 2024.[17] From a Chinese point of view, such steps could only be seen as part of the process of

consolidation of a global anti-China front. If a peaceful East Asian community of nations is to be constructed, it is certain that Okinawa, at the centre of the East China Sea, will be its centre, and if it cannot be constructed, the prospects for peace in both Okinawa and Japan will be dim.

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Notes

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