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# Big-Ticket Buys Could Hurt Japan

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As part of its push to boost military capabilities, Japan wants to purchase amphibious assault vehicles. Here, US Marines maneuver an AAV-7 during a July training exercise. (US Marine Corps)

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**TOKYO** — Japan's efforts to boost its military capabilities focus too much on big-ticket items, leaving operational gaps and undercutting how defense forces can effectively utilize their equipment, analysts said.

Following the December release of its National Security Strategy, the National Defense Program Guidelines laid down five- and 10-year targets for force structure and procurement so that Japan will set aside ¥23.97 trillion (US \$232.1 billion) over the next five years to fund military expansion.

Reflecting a growing concern about China and possible threats to Japan's Nansei Shoto (southern island

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chain), nearly half of Japan's Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) will be reconfigured for rapid deployment.

To deter invasion or to recapture that string of small islands that stretches southwest of Okinawa to within a few dozen miles of Taiwan, the GSDF will buy 52 amphibious landing vehicles, giving Japan its first postwar amphibious capabilities. It also will boost its mobility by buying 17 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft from the US, along with 99 locally produced maneuver combat vehicles.

The Marine Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) will benefit from the procurement of five destroyers, five submarines and 23 patrol aircraft, and the acquisition of two more Aegis cruisers will be a major improvement for Japan's ballistic missile defenses.

The Air Self-Defense Forces, meanwhile, will be equipped with better patrol, surveillance and transport capabilities by acquiring four early warning aircraft, 28 F-35A joint strike fighters, and three aerial refueling and transport aircraft. Not least, three Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk UAVs and long-range surveillance planes will be acquired to patrol the East China Sea.

### Staying Vulnerable

"The procurement scheme has some good aspects, and the people who drafted it have their hearts in the right place," said Grant Newsham, a senior research fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies here, and a former US Marine Corps liaison with the GSDF.

But, he said, "it continues the tradition of spending on a few pieces of expensive high-end hardware [F-35s, Aegis ships, P-3Cs] while ignoring less handsome items needed to 'fill in the gaps' for an effective defense."

Newsham said the Ministry of Defense badly needs to better integrate its command and control for air and cruise missile defense. And despite having spent a lot of money on some of the individual high-end elements, Japan cannot maintain a continuous air defense of the first island chain, not least because it has yet to upgrade its F-15 fighter jets, and this requirement cannot be covered by more than a "handful" of F-35s.

Further, he called Japan's air-to-air missiles "second-rate," and both operational and tactical communications, including with US forces, are too often "jury rigged."

"They are in danger of losing the air war because of second-rate air-to-air missiles," Newsham said. "Ironically, off-the-shelf hardware exists. And comms experts are well aware of the shortcomings and could fix them in short order if ordered to do so.



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Instead, it will take years to do so at the current rate.”

Because the Nansei Shoto are so spread out, the lack of a GSDF presence, except for a small forward station on Yonaguni Island, creates a dangerous vacuum that Japan lacks the hardware or force structure to fill.

“MoD seems to believe that with a few Global Hawks, Japan’s ISR requirements are largely met. Not so. Global Hawk is useful but is not the panacea. Other things are needed, such as the Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System,” Newsham said.

Japanese military analyst Shinichi Kiyotani questioned why the MoD is purchasing only three “very expensive” and “huge” Global Hawks when five are required to guarantee 24/7 surveillance and account for maintenance issues and mishaps. The job could be done more cheaply and effectively by a medium-altitude, long-endurance UAV such as the Heron (Machatz-1), developed by Israel Aerospace Industries, Kiyotani said.

“The MoD has failed to explain to the taxpayer why it needs the Global Hawk,” he said.

Kiyotani also said Japan is rushing to buy AAV-P7/A1 amphibious troop transports without having tested their suitability or understanding their performance or maintenance costs.

“We have determined to buy these without any performance trials. This is highly unusual,” he said.

Newsham disputed this, saying Japan is already testing four AAVs. He called Japan’s amphibious development effort “serious” and essential, but wholly insufficient.

“Time matters. Japan needs these now, not 10 years from now,” he said. “Without AAVs, Japan’s ship-to-shore capability is stunted.

“The idea that only a small GSDF amphibious force is needed is, of course, nonsense,” Newsham said. “There is more to defending Japan than just the southern islands. Even if the region around Japan was as peaceful as Bermuda, a GSDF of about current size would be needed for humanitarian assistance [and] disaster relief.”

### **Moving Past Cold War**

Christopher Hughes, professor of international politics and Japanese studies at Britain’s University of Warwick, said the MSDF remains the centerpiece of procurement as Japan slowly develops its power-projection capabilities in conjunction with the push by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe toward collective defense.

“I think Japan is slowly remilitarizing, [and] all of the kit planned for procurement really continues to quietly emphasize this,” Hughes said.

He said the Air-Self Defense Forces is striving to maintain air superiority around Japan. The new ambitious capability of the GSDF is an initial demonstration of deterrence that “may eventually grow into something respectable, as all the elements are falling into place for that kind of island assault capability down the line.”

Alessio Patalano, a Japanese naval expert at the Department of War Studies at King’s College London, agreed the MSDF’s procurement strategy is gradually moving beyond Cold War limitations to increase fleet numbers and improve air cover.

In particular, he said, the MSDF is boosting the number of P-1 aircraft, bolstering its ISR capabilities and strengthening deterrence.

“The development of naval drones seems an important asset that might increase its use in the JMSDF fleet structure,” Patalano said. “Twenty-two submarines of the type the Japanese build are a crucial advantage in the waters of the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. The change also to six divisions will increase the number of subs deployable at any given time.”

Newsham said defense procurement is partly driven by a belief that if just the right “equipment list” is put together, Japan will be perfectly defended. “Silver bullets” include the Aegis system, F-2 and F-35 fighter jets, Ospreys, smart bombs and cruise missiles, he said.

“There never has been a silver bullet, and there never will be,” Newsham said. “By shooting their wad on a few very high-end capabilities, they are creating easily exploited vulnerabilities.

“Ironic, isn’t it? The Japanese are, in effect, making themselves more vulnerable, not less, by procuring asymmetric capabilities that will allow the Chinese to focus on and exploit the gaps.” †

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