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Experts: Japan Budget Boost Won't Hit Goals

By Paul Kallender-Umezu 12:58 p.m. EST January 19, 2015



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TOKYO — While Japan's newly unveiled defense budget represents the third small hike in a row after decades of low spending, experts say such spending remains insufficient to fund Tokyo's plans for "dynamic defense forces."

Japan's defense budget for fiscal 2015 is edging up 0.8 percent to 4.82 trillion (US \$41.12 billion), according to figures by the Defense Ministry, bringing defense spending closer to 1990 levels.

While well below the 2.4 percent boost requested last August, the increase represents the third small hike in a row after a decade of decline. Japan has adopted a more assertive defense posture under the administration of the conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The MoD will receive funding for all the major purchases it has requested to begin updating its Air Force, restructure its defense posture to better protect Nansei Shoto, its southeast island chain south of Okinawa, and boost its naval fleet to strengthen its deterrence posture against China's Navy.

Three big-ticket items include ¥350.4 billion (down from ¥378.1 billion requested) to deploy 20 PC-3 replacement Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft; ¥168 billion to start the purchase of new Atago-class Aegis destroyers; and ¥103.2 billion (compared with ¥131.5 billion requested) for six F-35A joint strike fighters for the air self-defense forces.

The budget also solidifies the first steps the MoD is taking toward increasing its mobility, improving its ISR capabilities and deterring threats to the Nansei Shoto. For example, the purchase of five tiltrotor V-22 Ospreys has been funded, as well as the first of three Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles. The MoD also confirmed that it will now buy 30 AA-7 assault amphibious vehicles for its nascent Marine forces.

The Japanese fiscal year runs April through March. The ¥4.8 trillion figure reflects the MoD's own figures for its budget. Additional items such as new government planes

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used for diplomatic purposes and administrative costs associated with the realignment of US forces take the figure to ¥4.9 trillion.

The Abe administration is positioning the budget hike as the minimum necessary to deter aggression in the region, as Japan faces an unpredictable and nuclear armed North Korea, and an expansionist China.

"The level of defense spending reflects the amount necessary to protect Japan's air, sea and land, and guard the lives and property of our citizens," said Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani, speaking ahead of the release of the figures.

In July, Abe changed Japan's interpretation of its constitution to allow for limited rights of collective self-defense, meaning Japan could come to the aid of another country, for example, under certain circumstances. A huge raft of legislation concerning this change should preoccupy Japan's Diet this year.

Also, for the first time since 1997, Japan and the US are rewriting their defense cooperation guidelines to work together more closely.

Because of severe budgetary restrictions and the MoD's purchasing strategy of buying major weapons in small lots, the P-1s will be deployed in groups of five between 2018 and 2021, and Japan's Aegis fleet will not be expanded to eight ships until fiscal 2020.

However, under the headline-making purchases, the MoD is quietly upgrading its F-15 and F-2 fighters and building out its submarine fleet from 16 to 22 boats, including improving the propulsion systems on its already advanced, stealthy Soryu-class submarines.

The new budget clarifies three points about Japanese defense, said Alessio Patalano, a professor at the Department of War Studies, King's College London.

"First, the Japanese are serious about their security, and they are seeking to retain the current edge in implementing sea control in the East China Sea, whilst adding a small amphibious component adequate to defend the archipelago. Second, the investment is not a blank check. Procurement is targeted to either develop niche capabilities or modernize aging platforms. Third, this budget confirms the myth of a Japanese militarization. It is a cautious, moderate choice aimed at confirming the reintegration of military power in the tools of statecraft, without seeking to challenge the regional or international order," Patalano said.

However, analysts differ as to how far Japan is from establishing the "Dynamic Defense Force" set out by the nation's 2014 National Defense Program Guidelines. Those guidelines stressed for the first time a "full amphibious capability" for the recapture of remote Japanese islands subject to invasion.

"Building a Dynamic Joint Defense Force, which emphasizes both soft and hard aspects of readiness, sustainability, resiliency and connectivity, reinforced by advanced technology and capability for C3I, with a consideration to establish a wide range of infrastructure to support the SDF's operation, is a multiyear task still in its first year of implementation under the National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and beyond," said Jun Okumura, a visiting scholar at the Meiji Institute for Global Affairs.

"Given the necessary overhaul of the hardware, software and wetware involved, it must be very much a work still in progress," he said.

Grant Newsham, a senior research fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, a local think tank, welcomed the steps taken as a sign that Japan is finally paying long

overdue attention to the need to establish a military presence in the Nansei Shoto.

"If you're not there, you're not interested. Amphibious capability is essential and the budget recognizes this. The Ospreys will also help extend Japanese coverage in the southern areas," he said. "The AAVs also deserve comment. To use them properly, the Ground Self Defense Force and the Marine Self-Defense Force have to cooperate. It's rare that a piece of hardware — and an inexpensive one at that — has a strategic effect."

Those forces, tentatively named the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB), should number 3,000 by 2018, said Corey Wallace, a Japan security policy expert at New Zealand's University of Auckland. Around 700 troops have already undergone initial training in preparation for the core group to be set up this year. The brigade will be sent up at the Ground Self-Defense Force Ainoura base in Sasebo, Kyushu.

Also part of the shift south, the Ground Self-Defense Force will deploy the small 303 coastal surveillance unit on far-flung Yonaguni Island, only 70 miles from Taiwan.

"Japan is adding more MSDF capacity to try to prevent China asserting sea control in the East China Sea, and Japan is demonstrating that it is serious to defend the southern islands, even if it still has a long way to build the necessary capacity," said Christopher Hughes, an expert on Japan's military, and professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the UK's University of Warwick.

But Newsham argued that the current budget levels are chronically insufficient, as are the small purchases of advanced hardware and that Japan's budget is about "half" what it should be if it had been unable to rely on the US.

"In terms of percentage of [gross domestic product], Japan is still about at the same level as Nepal," he said.

"Japan is buying some useful equipment and hardware, but there are no silver bullets or wonder weapons that will make up for six-plus decades of too little defense spending," Newsham said. "Japan needs a number of consecutive years of genuine increases. And beyond simple hardware, it's about time JSDF personnel got a pay raise and more money allocated for training. That would say plenty about how serious Japan is about defense."

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