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Japan Plans More Aggressive Defense

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Japan's ruling party guidance calls for boosting the amphibious capabilities of the Army's Western Infantry Regiment, here training alongside US Marines in California in February. (Capt. Esteban Vickers/US Marine Corps)

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TOKYO — After almost seven decades of maintaining a limited defense posture, Japan should develop its amphibious and pre-emptive strike capability while bolstering sea- and ground-based ballistic-missile defenses, according to policy proposals by the country's ruling party.

The proposals, obtained by Defense News and released to a select group last week ahead of widespread distribution, were drawn up by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). They also call for Japan to beef up its space-based early warning systems and invest in cyber defense.

The proposals were generated by several internal LDP committees led by former LDP Defense Ministers Shigeru Ishiba and Gen Nakatani, and therefore carry considerable weight, according to Narushige Michishita, director of the Security and International Studies Program at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies here.

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“They’re important,” he said.

The recommendations will feed into policy, spending and acquisition priorities for Japan’s next five-year Mid-Term Defense Plan, which is being crafted by the Defense Ministry and will be published by December.

They also come as the LDP administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seeks to revise Article 9 of Japan’s constitution to delete provisions that prohibit Japan from using “war as a sovereign right of the nation” and maintaining “war potential,” and replace them with the right to hold a “National Defense Force” under the prime minister as commander in chief.

The LDP’s policy proposals do not name weapon systems or suggest budgets, and are deliberately more vague than similar proposals drawn up by the LDP in 2009, just before the party suffered a disastrous electoral defeat to the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

“The LDP was not in power then [in 2009],” and so could be more direct, Michishita said.

The 2009 proposals openly discussed Japan acquiring, for example, the Boeing KC-46 tanker refueling plane as a step toward developing pre-emptive strike capability, such as knocking out fueled North Korean missiles. They also suggested adding the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to Japan’s ship-based Aegis and ground-based Patriot systems.

Fast forward four years, and the proposals come from a resurrected LDP that delivered an even bigger electoral defeat to the DPJ last December. This time around, the language is more cautious because each word has more value.

While they carefully avoid all reference to Japan’s major sources of concern — China and North Korea — the proposals open intriguing possibilities over the extent to which Japan will strengthen its defense posture. In this context, Japanese defense planners are considering a number of options for each of the force enhancements, according to analysts and people familiar with the LDP’s discussions.

Most interesting and controversial is the proposed discussion of pre-emptive strike capability, which would require Japan to acquire Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs), long-range refueling capability for its nascent F-35 Joint Strike Fighters and/or a naval platform for the F-35B jump jet, should Japan opt to purchase that variant.

The proposals make no mention of the KC-46 this time around. The Air Self-Defense Force, meanwhile, has steadily equipped its fleet

of Mitsubishi F-2 multirole fighters with JDAMS. It is thought that the two 19,500-ton 22DDH-class helicopter destroyers planned for the Maritime Self-Defense Force can be converted to carry the F-35B.

In 2003, before Japan had deployed its Aegis SM-3 and Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) ballistic-missile defense (BMD) systems, then-Defense Minister Ishiba made it clear that Japan could launch a strike against a missile base in North Korea in specific sets of circumstances.

For example, a strike could take place if there was evidence the missiles were fueled and aimed at Japan, and Japan had no other credible means of defense, Michishita said.

But now Japan is steadily building out its BMD systems to intercept North Korea's longer-range Unha and Musudan mobile intermediate-range ballistic missiles, so such a strike would be potentially unconstitutional, he said.

Brad Glosserman, executive director of the Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), said he found recent talk of Japan bolstering its pre-emptive strike capability worrying.

"CSIS has been conducting discussions on the issue of pre-emptive strike for six years, and in recent months, we have seen resumption of calls to develop this capability resurface. I am concerned about the proliferation of these capabilities because of the potentially destabilizing consequences," he said.

Japan probably won't develop a separate marine corps, but it will more likely reinforce its amphibious capability, largely based on the Western Infantry Regiment of the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) that trained in amphibious warfare as part of the Iron Fist exercises with the US Marine Corps in California, analysts say.

Paul Giarra, president of US-based consulting firm Global Strategies & Transformation, said the language of the policy proposal opens the possibility of the GSDF equipping one or perhaps two regiments with advanced capabilities, including up to four dozen amphibious landing vehicles over the next five years, beyond the four AAV-7A1S vehicles already planned, and a suitable number of Bell-Boeing V-22 tilt-rotor Osprey aircraft.

"I read it more as the [Japan Self-Defense Forces] with some improved amphibious capabilities like vehicles and tilt-rotor aircraft. That is potentially a significant development, but the LDP does not look like it wants to go the whole hog on a marine corps," said Christopher Hughes, professor of international politics and Japanese studies at Britain's University of Warwick.

Japan is considering several options to boost its BMD portfolio, consisting of four Kongo-class destroyers and two larger Atago-

class Aegis cruisers, and PAC-3 units. While the 2009 version of the proposals specifically mentions purchasing THAAD and an “advanced” version of the PAC-3, the new version recommends strengthening land-based BMD, leaving Japan a choice between purchasing either THAAD or the Aegis Ashore land-based version of the Aegis system, and the PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement (MSE) system for last-ditch interdiction.

Giarra said deploying the PAC-3 MSE would complement Aegis Ashore, which Japan has shown an interest in purchasing to the tune of one or two 24-missile interceptor batteries, a number that could increase. In this case, purchasing THAAD systems might be too much of an overlap of similar capabilities, he suggested.

Japanese defense planners see cruise missiles in general and China’s DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile in particular as growing threats. This means that on top of the planned upgrades to employ the SM-3 Block IIA Aegis system when it becomes available, Japan also is considering purchasing the extended-range anti-air warfare RIM-174 missile.

“Cruise missile defense is becoming as important to Japan as ballistic-missile defense,” Michishita said.

Hughes said the proposals face many roadblocks, including opposition from more dovish LDP members and the MoD’s own panel scheduled to meet in January, which may have its own priorities. Last but not least is the Ministry of Finance, which will be unwilling to raise the defense budget under any circumstances.

“[But] if Abe/the LDP can pull all this off, then it will be very radical indeed,” Hughes said.

Regional Concerns

Japan’s moves will likely be welcomed across a region concerned about China’s aggressive territorial claims.

“Japan and the Philippines have a strained history, but the Filipinos are for a stronger Japan because Tokyo is helping train its Coast Guard,” Giarra said. “South Korea is less dependent on Japan and tensions run deeper, so it’s much less willing to go along with it.”

Tensions soared last week after Osaka’s mayor said forced prostitution in occupied nations was a military necessity for invading Japanese forces, prompting a South Korean newspaper to write that US atomic attacks on Japan were “divine punishment” for Tokyo’s brutality.

Some in Asia and Washington worry Japan’s nationalist leader believes Japanese forces did nothing wrong during World War II.

“Passive support for Japan will hold unless Japanese behavior changes,” Giarra added. “The question is whether Japanese

officials can resist the temptation to undo what they believe were unnecessary apologies for wartime actions they don't believe were wrong.

"The feeling of being wronged is as powerful in Japan as it is the other way around in Korea, Philippines, Indonesia . . . Germany dealt with its past and continues to do so, but Japan suppressed the issue, creating pent up pressure, and when it vents, it could change how this buildup is seen."

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