

Japan Shifts Air Force Posture South, Unveils Stealth Demonstrator

By Paul Kallender-Umezu, Defense News 2:18 p.m. EST January 31, 2016



(Photo: Toshifumi Kitamura/AFP via Getty Images)

TOKYO — On one level the Japanese Ministry of Defense latest budget request for the financial year starting April appears to be business as usual, as the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) chugs along with its piecemeal procurement of 42 F-35s and decisions on the eventual replacement of its aging F-2 and F-15 fleets shelved.

Behind this, the ASDF has signaled perhaps a more fundamental force shift south to better deter threats to Japan's long southeastern island chain, or Nansei Shoto. Into the mix, last week's unveiling of the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI)-developed X-2 Shinshin stealth fighter demonstrator hints that Japan wants to at least pitch in domestic technologies and productions for those later F-2 and F-15 replacements.



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The ASDF will spend around ¥135 billion (US \$1.1 billion) to purchase six F-35s and around ¥3.8 billion yen on upgrades to its F-2s, with some ¥29.4 billion yen allocated to local Japanese F-35 assemblers.

Japan opted for the F-35 in 2011 to replace its vintage F-4 Phantoms at a then-estimated cost of about US \$8 billion, while opting to continuously upgrade its F-2s and F-15s to maintain air superiority over the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), according to the Defense Ministry.

If there is a big shift occurring in Japanese force posture, however, it's south, with the ASDF doubling its number of F-15s to about 40 to Naha to form a new 9th Air Wing to fend off increasingly aggressive PLAAF probing of the Nansei Shoto, which last year provoked 441 ASDF scrambles, double that of 2011, according to JMoD.

"Much of it appears to be to move Japan's air power southwards to Kyushu and Okinawa. Fending off China's advances in the East China Sea is clearly the intention," said Christopher Hughes, a Japan military expert and professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick.

The shift south, while important, is compromised by the fact that the ASDF is becoming increasingly undercapitalized for long-term defense needs, based on an array of aging equipment, according to analysts.

"Shifting ASDF assets to the southwest is a good thing, not least it potentially takes some of the pressure off ASDF aircraft that are so busy responding to Chinese incursions that they have reduced training time along with the sheer wear and tear that comes of constantly responding to PRC aircraft," said Grant Newsham, a senior research fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies.

"Hopefully, ASDF will also deploy forward fighter elements on other islands, such as Shimoji, that are closer to the Senkakus. This is useful operationally, but also politically significant as the JSDF establishes a presence farther down the Nansei Shoto. This is long overdue and in line with deployment of GSDF troops to Yonaguni," Newsham said.

For now, the new air wing is significant in that Japan is facing up to the threat, and acknowledging that the defense of the Nansei Shoto is the first – and last – line of defense, said Steven Ganyard, president, Avascent International.

"I do think that moving squadrons closer to the front lines is a good idea. But their capacity is still well below where it needs to be to maintain continuous [combat air patrols]. There are some good ideas within the JMoD on the defense of the Nansei Shoto, but the defense budget as it is doesn't come close to meeting requirements," Ganyard said.

However, for now, even the F-15 program, despite being on track ... "is woefully inadequate," Ganyard said.

"The F-15J is essentially a USAF F-15 circa 1990. While Japan buys strike fighters, the air superiority role has withered. The two missions are different but complementary. Japan needs F-35 but it needs F-15 modernized to USAF standard as well," he said.

Richard Aboulafia, vice president, analysis, at the Teal Group, concurred.

"They ... have pressing fighter fleet recapitalization needs, and it's far from clear that the topline defense budget is growing enough to pay for all of these priorities. In other words, it's possible that their foreign policy words aren't backed up by defense dollars and equipment," he said.

One key consideration about executing a long-term effect deterrent is how much Japan thinks it can afford in order to support its expensive domestic industrial base in making future purchasing decisions. Last week's unveiling of a scale model Shinshin stealth fighter demonstrator, not prototype, developed at a locally reported estimated cost of around US \$335 million, and recent decisions to build the P-1 ASW/MPA aircraft (instead of buying Boeing P-8s) and the C-2 cargo plane (instead of C-17s or C-130Js), suggest that Japan is willing to pay a premium for domestically produced hardware and wants at least more of a stake in F-15 and F-2 replacements necessary in the next decade, analysts said.

"I am never sure what to make of the stealth fighter demonstration project. I guess it is about getting a foothold in these technologies to increase bargaining power for Japan to participate in any future fighter consortium so it will not be left out as it was on the development of the F-35," Hughes said.

But developing the Shinshin even into a full-scale prototype would cost many billions of dollars, and more billions to make it ready for production, money Japan can ill afford at present budget levels.

"Shinshin is a technology demonstrator, a science project. Like every other country in the world [e.g. Korea, Turkey, etc.] with post-5th gen ambitions, Japan will not have the money or the capabilities to go it alone," Ganyard said.

"Historically, the ASDF has done best with co-produced Western fighters, while the home-grown F-2 produced minimal but expensive results," Aboulafia said.

"As a result, that problem of paying for the country's more assertive defense posture will likely get worse. Thus, we're in for a long debate between more F-35s and development of an indigenous aircraft," he said.

Longer term an even more fundamental shift both in procurement practices and strategy would help the ASDF better meet its deterrence goals over the next decade, Newsham said.

"The Japanese approach is ultimately a haphazard one, no matter how well-intentioned. It would be even more useful if the ASDF in the Nansei Shoto region were used as part of a joint command structure.... [in which] forces are employed in a coordinated fashion under a unified chain of command. This alone would be as, or more, valuable than any given pieces of hardware ASDF might procure," Newsham said.

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