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China / Military

Why Japan's hypersonic and underwater weapon plans might worry China

Beijing has hit out at Tokyo's moves to arm submarine drones with long-range missiles and test hypersonic weapons in Australia

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Japan plans to arm its fleet of unmanned underwater vehicles. Photo: Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force

In its latest swipe at Tokyo's military build-up, China singled out Japan's plans to arm its submarine drones with long-range missiles and test hypersonic weapons in Australia.

Analysts say those moves could threaten [People's Liberation Army](#) amphibious groups and surface combatants within the "first island chain" – potentially affecting the PLA Navy's ability to operate in the event of a [Taiwan](#) conflict.

The strategically important [first island chain](#) stretches from Japan to Taiwan, the Philippines and Borneo.

China's defence ministry spokesman Zhang Xiaogang highlighted the two initiatives on Thursday, saying Japan had "openly expanded its military arsenal".

Zhang said the "dangerous" moves had a "striking resemblance" to Japan's pre-World War II militarisation, though he did not explain why these particular weapon programmes could pose challenges for the PLA.



Japan is deploying stand-off weapons like the Type-25 HVGP. Photo: Japan Ground Self-Defence Force

Japan has rapidly expanded its long-range strike capabilities since adopting a "counterstrike capability" in its 2022 security strategy. Under the policy, Tokyo says it could strike military targets in an adversary's territory for self-defence following an armed attack, with

Japan has already begun deploying the Type-25 hypervelocity gliding projectile (HVGP), which

Japan does not currently have the Type-25 hypervelocity systems – including the Block 2 HVGP, which the defence ministry says will fly at hypersonic speed, and a scramjet-

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the Type-25 hypervelocity

analysts. More advanced

powered hypersonic cruise missile (HCM) – remain under development.

Beyond land-based systems, Tokyo is also looking to take its long-range strike capabilities under water. Kyodo News on August 19 reported plans to develop an underwater-launched hypersonic missile, which analysts said would be an HCM fired from a crewed submarine.

Separately, the news outlet reported that Tokyo planned to research technology that could enable unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) to launch long-range missiles.

The research would build on Japan's existing work on underwater drones. Defence analyst Yoshihiro Inaba, the Japan correspondent for Naval News, said the defence ministry's technology agency was developing a modular UUV for surveillance, submarine tracking and mine-laying.

While plans to arm the UUV remained at an early stage, he said they could eventually supplement Japan's smaller submarine fleet.

If equipped with such weapons, the UUVs could pose a "persistent threat" to PLA naval vessels operating around Japan's southwestern Nansei Islands or supporting a potential attack on Taiwan, Inaba said.



UUVs equipped with long-range missiles could pose a "persistent threat" to PLA naval vessels near Japan, according to an analyst. Photo: CCTV

Timothy Heath, head of defence research firm Perceptum, said missile-armed UUVs could be difficult to detect because they might be quieter than submarines and launched from unexpected locations, giving Beijing little warning.

He said their lower cost could also allow Japan to deploy them in greater numbers. If several launched missiles simultaneously, they could potentially overwhelm a target's defences.

Christopher Hughes, professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick, said China was "clearly irked" by Japan's development of these capabilities and was "probably right to fear them".

Hughes noted that lessons from the Ukraine war were helping shape what Tokyo calls its "new ways of warfare", influencing procurement and the coming review of Japan's three strategic defence documents.

He said Japanese defence planners had watched how [Ukrainian](#) drones and missiles severely constrained Russia's Black Sea Fleet and were considering whether similar capabilities could constrain the PLA Navy.

The two emerging technologies could pose different operational problems for the PLA. Hughes said the speed and manoeuvrability of Japan's future HVGPs could make them difficult to intercept, while UUVs deployed in large numbers could also be difficult to counter.

Japan's more advanced [hypersonic weapons](#) could also significantly extend the country's strike range, with Inaba saying Tokyo was pursuing more capable HVGP variants and the separate scramjet-powered HCM.

Inaba said the planned Block 2A and Block 2B variants of the HVGP were expected to reach about 2,000km (1,240 miles) and 3,000km (1,860 miles), respectively, potentially putting some targets on the Chinese mainland within reach.

But Masashi Murano, a senior analyst at the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force, said Japan's future hypersonic weapons would lie primarily in anti-shipping roles.

Murano was more cautious about the missiles they could carry, while

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“China’s ground targets are highly redundant and dispersed,” he said, noting that land attacks at the scale Japan could conduct would have limited impact unless integrated into a broader US campaign, while damaged infrastructure could be repaired.

Targeting PLA naval forces would be the most efficient way to inflict losses on Beijing, according to Murano.



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China last week also took aim at Japan’s plan to test hypersonic weapons in Australia.

On August 18, Japanese Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi and his Australian counterpart Richard Marles agreed to advance arrangements for Tokyo to use Australian missile ranges over the next decade, including for its hypersonic programme.

Koizumi called the move “groundbreaking”, while Marles said it built on discussions about Australia providing “strategic depth” to Japan.

For Beijing, however, the cooperation could have implications beyond giving Japan more space to test its weapons.

“Conducting tests in Australia would make Chinese intelligence collection considerably more difficult than if such activities were carried out in waters around Japan,” Inaba said.

“Moreover, the arrangement clearly reflects the growing political and military alignment between Japan and Australia, which itself is likely to be viewed with concern in Beijing.”

