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Is Japan eyeing Ukraine-style asymmetric warfare against China in defence shift?

Analysts detect a notable change in emphasis in Tokyo's latest white paper which they attribute to lessons from Ukraine

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Gabriel Dominguez

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Japan's latest defence white paper's emphasis on adaptivity and scale of drones signals its intention to seek asymmetric capabilities against [China](#) in the event of a conflict, while drawing lessons from Ukraine, according to experts.

[The 610-page document](#) released on Tuesday highlights the need to integrate unmanned systems, artificial intelligence (AI) and other advanced technologies across the Japan Self-Defence Forces as Tokyo confronts an increasingly complex security environment.

While Japan has invested in drones and AI for years, the white paper marks a notable shift in emphasis, framing autonomous systems not simply as capabilities under development but as an integral part of how Japan expects future conflicts to be fought.

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Rather than competing with the [People's Liberation Army](#) platform for platform, Tokyo was seeking to exploit China's vulnerabilities through autonomous systems, long-range precision strike capabilities and faster innovation, defence analysts said.

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Christopher Hughes, an international politics professor at the University of Warwick, noted that Japan was drawing one overarching lesson from Ukraine: a smaller military can frustrate – and potentially exhaust – a much larger adversary through rapid technological innovation and relatively inexpensive capabilities.

“The lessons are clearly transferable in Japanese defence planners’ minds to a potential conflict with China,” Hughes said.

Unlike last year’s white paper, which discussed unmanned systems largely in the context of capability development and equipment programmes, the 2026 document presents them as part of a broader effort to adapt to the changing character of modern warfare.

Beijing has criticised the white paper. [A PLA commentary](#) said Japan’s push for drones was to mitigate its declining population and sustain its capacity to fight, while further blurring the line between defence and offence, challenging its pacifist constitution.

Michael Bosack, director of the Parley Policy Initiative, said the paper marked an evolution in Japan’s defence thinking.

Whereas earlier planning centred on acquiring advanced platforms to keep pace with China’s military modernisation, Tokyo now recognises it cannot match Beijing’s expansion indefinitely because of economic constraints and demographic pressures.

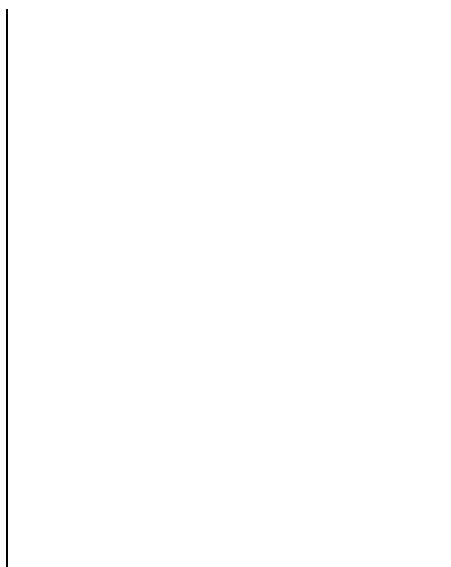
Instead, Tokyo was focused on fighting “in a way that disrupts China’s strengths, undermines its capabilities and allows Japan to achieve its own objectives in any potential conflict”, he said.

That evolution is also reflected in Japan’s [defence budget](#) – a record 9 trillion yen (US\$57 billion) this financial year, up 3.8 per cent on the previous year, with increased investment in unmanned systems, AI and other emerging technologies identified in the white paper.

One of the largest allocations is 100 billion yen for the Shield coastal defence programme, an integrated network of unmanned surface, aerial and underwater systems scheduled to be established in the 2027 financial year.

The budget also expanded investment in AI-enabled command and decision-support technologies.

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The white paper argues that adapting to modern warfare will require a stronger defence industrial base that is capable of rapidly integrating commercial innovation into military capability.

The document calls for closer cooperation between the military, industry and start-ups, as well as faster adoption of dual-use technologies.

Defence investment should also serve as a driver of technological innovation, given that keeping pace with China's expanding military-industrial capacity will require faster innovation as well as new weapons, according to the white paper.

These ideas are already reshaping how Japan acquires new military capabilities, with the procurement timeline for interceptor drones compressed from what would traditionally have taken years into a matter of months.

The streamlining is part of the defence ministry's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency's efforts since June to shorten the path from technological innovation to operational capability.

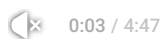
Bosack described this as a recognition that "the two most important qualities of acquisition programmes in modern warfare are adaptability and scale".

The white paper's more flexible procurement model "marks a significant departure from Japan's traditional acquisition system and will be essential if Tokyo hopes to maintain a technological edge in an increasingly competitive security environment", he said.

Japanese industry is moving in the same direction, with expanded investments in Ukraine's defence technology sector to gain access to battlefield-tested technologies and operational expertise developed in the war.

Tokyo-based Terra Drone this year acquired stakes in Ukrainian interceptor drone developers Amazing Drones and WinnyLab, pledging to bring those capabilities back to Japan.

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Ukrainian ambassador to Japan Yuriy Lutovinov said in March that Kyiv was prepared to share combat experience and technologies in drones, counter-drone systems and air defence as discussions on defence-industrial cooperation with Tokyo continued.

For Hughes, these changes point to an evolving Japanese approach to a potential conflict with China.

Rather than relying on a small number of major bases, Japanese forces would disperse across the southwest islands and combine long-range strike capabilities with the Shield drone network to complicate Chinese military operations in the East China Sea, he said.

The aim would be to ensure that “the PLA is trapped in Japan’s own anti-access/area denial zone”, according to Hughes.

At the same time, Tokyo’s new industrial strategy would allow it to reduce its reliance on highly sophisticated but expensive US-made systems, whose availability could be constrained during a conflict, he said.

Rather than trying to match Beijing platform for platform, Hughes said, Tokyo was betting that drones, AI and domestic manufacturing would provide a more affordable and sustainable means of deterring a numerically superior China.

“Japan may have found a way to wage its own form of asymmetric warfare against a rising China.”



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Gabriel Dominguez is a veteran defence journalist covering Indo-Pacific security, military affairs and geopolitics. His reporting focuses primarily on Chinese military...

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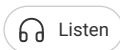
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Gabriel Dominguez and **Dannie Peng** in Beijing

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Japan's latest defence white paper warns of China's growing ability to sustain military operations farther into the western Pacific Ocean, while pledging to bolster its own monitoring systems, strike capabilities and ammunition production.

Released on Tuesday, the 610-page document cautions that Beijing is strengthening its aircraft carrier force as it steadily improves its capacity to operate in more distant seas and airspace.

In Beijing, defence ministry spokesman Chen Xi said the white paper was "replete with false narratives" and "hyped up the so-called China threat".

Chen said the Japanese government's defence build-up was a "vain attempt to deeply embed arms expansion and war preparations into national institutions, economic industries and public opinion".

Warning against what he called Japan's growing "neo-militarism", Chen added: "It has become a severe challenge to the post-war international order and a real threat to regional peace and stability."

He also urged Tokyo “not to go further down the wrong path of re-militarisation”.



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