#### **JAPAN / FOCUS**

# Japan starts 2024 with flurry of security deals



Ground Self-Defense Force members land using an amphibious vehicle on the shore of Tokunoshima island in Kagoshima Prefecture as part of large-scale joint drills with the U.S. Marine Corps in March 2023. | KYODO

#### **BY GABRIEL DOMINGUEZ** STAFF WRITER

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After a year that saw Japan significantly bolster its defense posture, Tokyo has hit the ground running in 2024, signing defense and security cooperation agreements at a pace without recent parallel as it reacts to an increasingly tense international security environment.

In January alone, Tokyo signed cooperation deals with at least four countries — Australia, Germany, the United Arab Emirates and the United States — strengthening and expanding its network of likeminded partners both in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

"This flurry of activity across so many areas, with so many different partners, is unprecedented," said Jeffrey Hornung, senior political scientist and a Japan expert at Rand Corp.

The government's key objectives, experts say, are to deepen both bilateral and multilateral ties, increase military interoperability and make cooperation routine, including on research and development projects. That is all in service of boosting deterrence as well as maintaining the U.S.-led international order, which Tokyo sees as more and more under threat.

"Japan feels that the cost and risks of inaction are big, given the increasingly challenging security environment," said Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, a project assistant professor at the University of Tokyo, pointing to the simultaneous threats posed by China, North Korea and Russia, as well as the mounting tensions over Taiwan and territorial disputes in the East and South China seas.

In particular, he added, Tokyo is working to sharpen its national defense strategy and improve the Self-Defense Forces' readiness and capabilities, so they can also "effectively operate in actual contingencies," including a possible dual hotspot scenario involving Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula.

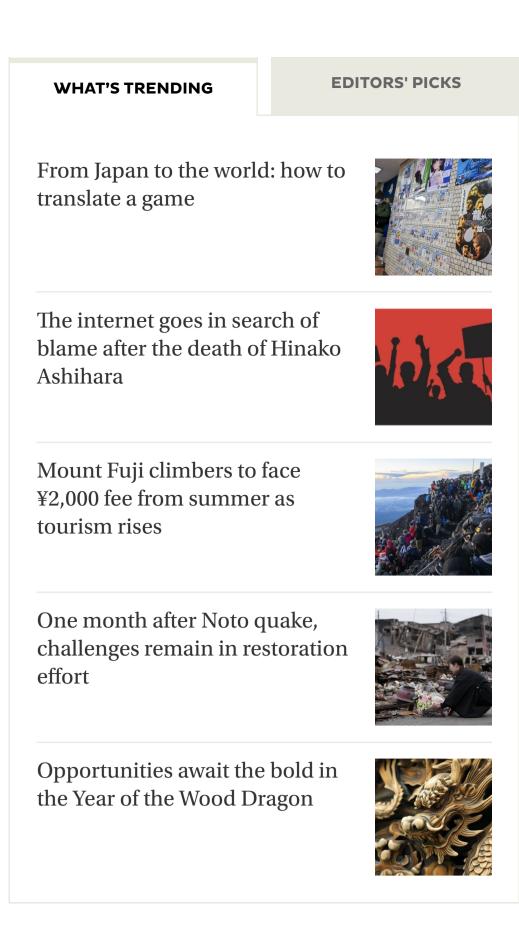
One of last month's deals was highly significant in this regard, as Japan formally agreed to purchase up to 400 Tomahawk cruise missiles from Washington for use as a "counterstrike capability."

The standoff weapons, which would enable Tokyo to launch strikes against bases and command-and-control nodes from beyond the range of enemy defenses, are to be acquired between April 2025 and March 2028, giving Japan a powerful deterrent in the powder-keg region.

Another important pact was signed with Japan's "quasi-ally" Australia, with the two sides agreeing to launch their first joint research project on robotic and autonomous systems for undersea warfare.

According to Canberra, the aim is to enhance undersea communication and interoperability capabilities to support an "asymmetric advantage" in the region.





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Members of the GSDF 1st Airborne Brigade take part in a new year joint military drill involving the United States, Britain and Australia at Narashino exercise field in Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture, in January 2023. | REUTERS

In recent days, Tokyo also concluded an acquisition and crossservicing agreement (ACSA) with Berlin to facilitate the exchange of supplies and logistical support between the SDF and the German military.

The accord not only simplifies the process of sharing food, fuel and ammunition, but will also allow the use of each side's facilities during exercises. The two sides have intensified joint military activities, arguing that the security of Europe is "inseparable from that of Asia."

Other announcements included the entry into force of a defense tech and equipment transfer deal with the UAE — Japan's first such pact with a Middle Eastern country — and the launch of a quantum computing research partnership between the University of Tokyo, Seoul National University and the University of Chicago.

While not strictly an intergovernment deal, the computing collaboration could give Tokyo, Seoul and Washington a strategic edge in areas such as artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

Moreover, Nikkei Asia quoted U.S. Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall as saying that Japan would participate in an American program to develop next-generation drones, known as collaborative combat aircraft, "at some point" in the future.

While such agreements are normally the result of years of negotiations, it has become increasingly evident that things in Tokyo are moving at a much faster pace than before, a development that experts attribute to two main factors.

First, the Japanese government now has precedent for at least some of the deals that have emerged. For example, it was simpler and faster for Tokyo to conclude an ACSA with Germany, as it had a template based on similar agreements with the United States, Britain, Australia and India.

This is also expected to apply to the visiting forces pact, formally known as a reciprocal access agreement (RAA), that Tokyo intends to sign with Manila later this year. The deal is expected to be concluded within just a few months, instead of the years it took to negotiate Japan's first RAAs with Britain and Australia.



A concept model of the Global Combat Air Program's fighter jet at the DSEI Japan defense show at Makuhari Messe in Chiba in March 2023 | REUTERS

But the rapid succession of security deals also points to a sense of urgency in Tokyo over not only the enhancement of Japan's defense and deterrence capabilities but also their credibility.

More specifically, in the National Security Strategy (NSS) revised in 2022, the government set the goal of strengthening the country's defenses by the fiscal year beginning in April 2027 "to the point at which Japan is able to take the primary responsibility for dealing with invasions against its nation, and disrupt and defeat such threats while gaining the support of its ally and others."

This reflects the seriousness with which Tokyo views the deterioration in its surrounding security environment, not least through the "historical changes in power balances" noted in the NSS, said Robert Ward, the Japan chair at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"Japan is now rearming and planning to take greater responsibility within the U.S. security alliance," Ward said, noting that Tokyo's policy shift is due to two main factors: the growth in size and sophistication of China's military, and Tokyo's perennial concerns about Washington's reliability, particularly should Donald Trump be

reelected president in November.

Indeed, Tokyo will watch the U.S. presidential election closely to determine how the result may impact the alliance.

"Continuity in the White House will allow for Tokyo to stay the course in its current security policy designs," a former U.S.-Japan alliance manager said on condition of anonymity.

However, there will invariably be concerns that a change in administration will bring less interest in alliances or more scrutiny on what security partners are contributing, he added.

As a result, this year will almost certainly see Japan continue to press ahead with the defense objectives announced in its revised national security documents, particularly in terms of its international security partnerships.

Indeed, Tokyo is expected to continue expanding its bilateral security relationships while looking for opportunities to exercise with military partners bi-, tri-, and multilaterally, including those that are NATO member countries.

There are also several other projects in the cards such as the next tranche of military aid under Tokyo's Official Security Assistance program, with Vietnam and Djibouti among those being considered as recipients in the coming fiscal year.

Japan will also join Britain and Italy this year in awarding the first contracts that are part of an industrial joint venture to be set up for the Global Combat Air Program, a multibillion-dollar project to jointly develop a next-generation fighter aircraft by 2035.

The move will see Tokyo cooperate for the first time with countries other than the United States to meet a major defense requirement.

The coming months are also likely to see Japan's first sale of Patriot airdefense missiles to the U.S. after Tokyo loosened the country's strict defense export rules.

And these rules could be loosened further, as the government has asked the ruling parties to make final proposals for potential changes to the five export categories by the end of February.

Under the current regulations, Japan can only sell defense equipment to its security partners in the areas of rescue, transport, warning, surveillance and minesweeping.

That said, some fear that Japan's growing commitment to international security relations may increase the chances of it being sucked into a major international conflict or dispute.

Indeed, as an open economy dependent on trade and the maintenance of the "rules-based international order," Japan is often affected by conflicts such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine or the Israel-Hamas war, despite the geographical distance.

But experts say the risk of entrapment remains relatively low, at least for the time being, not only because of legal constraints on SDF deployments but also because the SDF is not set up to execute and sustain combat operations far from Japan.

"I think Japan will remain highly circumspect about becoming involved in actual conflicts and will prefer to defend its own territory and support Washington in projecting power in the region," said Christopher Hughes, a Japan expert and professor at Warwick University in Britain.

**KEYWORDS** DEFENSE, U.S.-JAPAN RELATIONS, U.S., PHILIPPINES, AUSTRALIA





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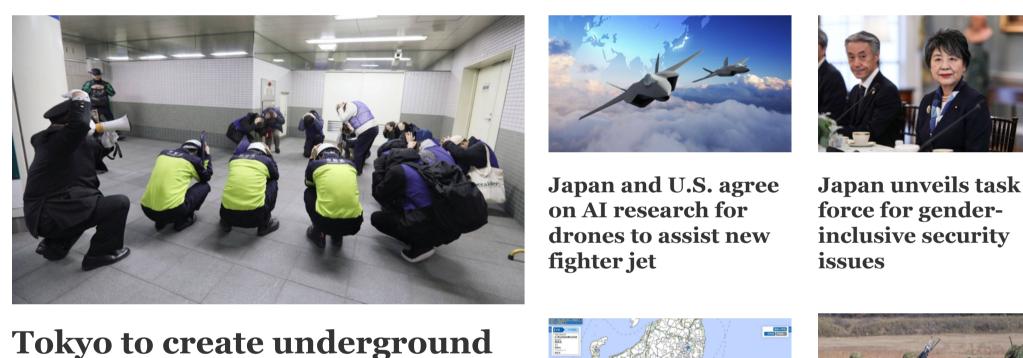
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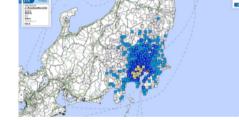
The move comes amid heightened geopolitical

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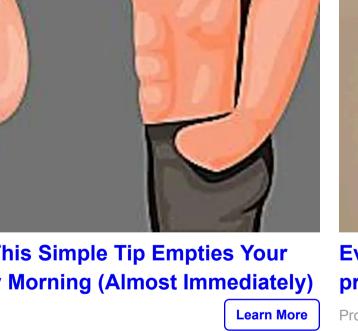
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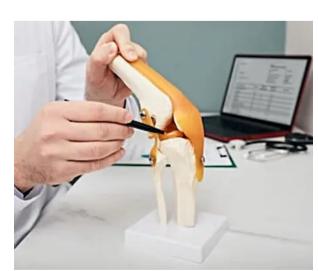


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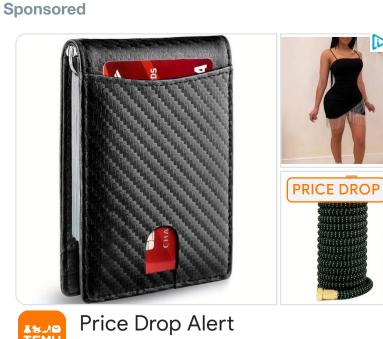


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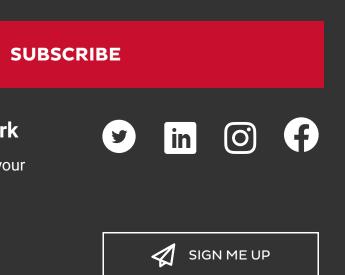
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