

Japan's Three Core Defense Documents and Defense of Southwest Islands

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1. News Highlights

On December 16, 2022, Japan's Fumio Kishida administration announced a new version of the "National Security Strategy," the "National Defense Strategy" (formerly known as the "National Defense Program Guidelines"), and the "Defense Buildup Program" (formerly known as the "Mid-Term Defense Program"). These documents will be collectively referred to as the "Three Defense Documents" in this article.¹ The three documents are all related to the outlying islands in the southwest region of Japan (later referred to as "Southwest Islands"), and the contents are summarized as follows:

1. The National Security Strategy focuses on the Southwest Islands, particularly the rapid evacuation of the area's residents before an armed attack (p. 25).
2. The National Defense Strategy emphasizes the protection of the lives and property of the residents of the outlying islands (p. 5); in peacetime, the police, the Coast Guard, and the Self-Defense Forces should conduct drills to respond to possible "gray zone" conflicts on the outlying islands (p. 11). Inter-ministerial collaboration should be enforced to improve the readiness of the Southwest Islands' airports and harbors (p. 12); the logistic capacity

1. "国家安全保障戦略について," *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, December 16, 2022, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/pdf/security_strategy.pdf; "国家防衛戦略について," *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy.pdf>; "防衛力整備計画について," *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/plan.pdf>.

of the airports and harbors should be expanded for combat operations (p. 21).

In the area of medical care, emphasis should be placed on evacuating patients from the Southwest Islands frontlines and establishing local medical stations in the region (p. 28).

3. The “Defense Buildup Program” asserts that Japan should better plan for the acquisition of ships and aircraft for transportation to quickly project forces into the southwestern region (p. 8); the required military supplies should be stockpiled locally in the southwestern region to reduce the need for inbound transportation (p. 9). An integrated maritime transportation force should be established (p. 11), and the 15th Brigade of JGSDF should be expanded into a division-level unit to strengthen the region’s defense (p. 11). The force projection capability should be improved, and joint exercises involving police, Coast Guard, and firefighting agencies should be conducted to respond to the gray zone conflicts in the southwest region (p. 18). In addition, the capacity and bomb resistance of the SDF Naha Hospital in Okinawa should be expanded (p. 28).

2. Security Implications

2-1. New defense documents confirmed the importance of the Southwest Islands

Over the past decade, successive Japanese administrations have kept strengthening the defense and construction of the Southwest Islands. The Japanese Ministry of Defense’s annual white paper “Defense of Japan” has addressed the security situation of the Southwest Islands every year and explained Japan’s defense preparations for the islands to society.

The new contents of the Three Defense Documents released under this situation reaffirm the Japanese government’s determination to strengthen the defense of the Southwestern Islands and reinforce the related deployment of personnel and weapons. At the same time, perhaps because of the lessons learned from the US evacuation of Afghanistan, the documents also emphasize non-combatant evacuation plans under the category of “the Protection of the Japanese Nationals,” making the relevant strategy more pragmatic in the sense of “facing the regional situation”. Overall, the new version of the Three Defense Documents reflects that the Southwest Islands will

remain a top priority in Japan's defense planning for the next decade, and the Japanese government will focus on accelerating military preparation based on the policy direction epitomized by these documents.

2-2. Japan is facing up to rising pressure from China

China is undoubtedly the biggest factor behind Japan's continued efforts to strengthen the defense of the southwest region. It is well known that Beijing has always advocated that the Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyutai Islands in Taiwan and Diaoyu Island in China), over which Japan also claims sovereignty, as part of its territory, and has made it clear to Japan that the islands are a "core interest" of China.

Although Japan continues to maintain its administration of the Islands, China has kept sending Coast Guard vessels to the surrounding areas and occasionally entering the Japanese-claimed territorial waters, prompting protests from the

Japanese government. In the past three years, Chinese maritime police vessels have remained in the waters for more than 330 days: 333 days in 2020, 332 days in 2021, and 336 days in 2022, a record high since the Japanese government nationalized the islands in 2012.² The China Coast Guard vessels entered and remained in the aforementioned territorial waters even for a record-breaking duration of 72 hours and 45 minutes on December 26, 2022 (the last record was 64 hours and 17 minutes from July 5 to 7, 2022), which the Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary called an "unacceptable" act.³

In addition, there have been many recent cases of Chinese vessels chasing or attempting to approach Japanese fishing boats operating in the above-mentioned waters. In early August 2022, the PLA conducted military exercises in the sea and airspace around Taiwan, with five of its ballistic missiles even landing in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claimed by Japan, triggering high tension among the Japanese government and citizens.

2. “中国当局の船、尖閣諸島周辺の接続水域での確認日数が2022年に336日で過去最多に,” *TV Asahi News*, January 1, 2023, https://news.tv-asahi.co.jp/news_society/articles/000281938.html.

3. “尖閣沖 中国船が72時間余領海侵入 官房長官「受け入れられず」,” *NHK*, December 26, 2022, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20221226/k10013934831000.html?utm_int=nsearch_contents_search-items_002.

Needless to say, the Japanese government has a heightened sense of crisis. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) even raised concerns at a party meeting in 2021 that China's plan to "annex" the Senkaku Islands was already in process.⁴ Such a high sense of crisis no doubt drove the Japanese government to strengthen the defense of the Southwest Islands, including the Senkakus. It also became an important force prompting the Japanese government to revise the three documents one year earlier than the originally-scheduled 2023.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. Japan will focus on the Southwest Islands in response to the gray-zone conflicts

Although the PLA's navy and air forces have been present in Japan's periphery from time to time in recent years, and its exercises have raised Japan's security concerns, the long-term presence of Chinese maritime police vessels in the

waters surrounding Senkaku Islands is more frequent and can actually influence the perception of the Japanese people.

In this regard, in addition to the aforementioned China Coast Guard vessels chasing Japanese fishing boats, forcing the Japanese Coast Guard patrol vessels to come forward to protect them, resulting in a standoff between the Chinese and Japanese maritime law enforcement forces, the Japanese government has not forgotten the lesson learned from the successful landing of Chinese protesters on the island.

Although the National Security Strategy does not specifically refer to the Southwest Islands, it does point out the threat of gray-zone conflicts; the National Defense Strategy and the Defense Buildup Program both emphasize responsiveness to the gray-zone conflicts that could occur in the Southwest Islands, as mentioned above. Since the gray-zone conflicts are yet to reach the "war level" in nature, paramilitary units such as the police force and the Coast Guard will play an increasingly important role in response to

4. "尖閣諸島をはじめとする我が国の領土・領海・領空を断固守り抜くための緊急提言," *LDP Administrative Investigation Committee*, April 6, 2021, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/news/policy/201441_1.pdf.

such conflicts. As a result, the Japanese government will escalate the collaboration between the Self-Defense Forces and law enforcement agencies (mainly the police and the Coast Guard) in the future. The establishment of Japan's peacetime/wartime transition mechanism and the joint exercise involving military, police, and civilian units can become Taiwan's reference for building a similar system.

3-2. The Southwest Island residents' attitude is still an uncertain factor in Japan's military establishment

Although polls show that the Japanese public's sense of threat from China is rising rapidly, many Southwest Island residents are worrying that the risk of being involved in a war is also rising rapidly as the Japanese government strengthens the war preparations of the islands and the situation in Taiwan and China continues to be tense. In addition, the residents have been suffering from the influence of military bases and exercises (mainly the US military) for years, and negative factors such as the high density

of military facilities in Okinawa, the promotion of southwest defense may not be without resistance. The attitude can be observed from last year's Okinawa governor election result — Denny Tamaki, who opposed the US military presence in Okinawa, was elected.

At a press conference held at Ginowan City Hall in Okinawa Prefecture on December 4, 2022, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu said that “the strengthening of the southwest defense system is still under review and no decision has been made yet” in response to reports about the expansion of the 15th Brigade of JGSDF. On the eve of the upcoming announcement of the finalized defense policy, the Japanese government still kept silent about the details, showing that it was still concerned about the local opposition voices.⁵ Tamaki, the Okinawa Prefecture governor, immediately criticized the JGSDF expansion plan the next day, saying that the US military bases already constitute an excessive burden on Okinawa, and he opposed the expansion of JGSDF since it would be “more burden

5. “南西地域の防衛強化「現在検討中で、何ら決まっていない」 沖縄で松野官房長官,” *Okinawa Times*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.okinawatimes.co.jp/articles/-/1067952>.

on the excessive burden”.⁶

In this regard, the National Security Strategy emphasizes that self-defense force officers, Coast Guard officers, and police officers who courageously defend the country should be appropriately respected in Japanese society; the strategy also includes the idea as part of its “strengthening the foundations of society” section (p. 30). In the future, the possible opposition between the local people and the central government around “strengthening southwest defense” is critical for the smooth promotion of Japan’s southwest defense plan and also has security implications for the Taiwan Strait situation that should be paid attention to.

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(The contents and views in the assessments are the personal opinions of the author, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

6. “玉城デニー知事「自衛隊を強化するなら、米軍の負担は減らすべきだ」 陸自の増強を受け、” *Okinawa Times*, December 6, 2022, <https://www.okinawatimes.co.jp/articles/-/1068712>.