

JAPAN: NEXT GLOBAL MILITARY POWER?

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On October 26, the deputy foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea and the United States accused the North Korean regime of carrying out a "very destabilizing and very dangerous act" in the face of a possible atomic test. The United States Undersecretary of State, Wendy Sherman, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Japan, Takeo Mori, and his South Korean counterpart, Cho Hyun-dong, underlined the "serious challenge" that the escalation of North Korean weapon activities poses to the international community. "In the event of new provocations, such as a nuclear test, we agree to strengthen our cooperation, strengthen deterrence and expand diplomatic efforts," they said in their joint statement. Sherman reiterated the United States' commitment to the defense of its allies, and stressed that the three parties "share the goal of the complete denuclearization of Korea" despite the continued development of weapons by the regime led by Kim Jong-un. The number two of US diplomacy said that they are not only concerned about the North's offensive "show of muscle", but also stated that Pyongyang's test series "paves the way to use a tactical nuclear weapon". If the new atomic test is carried out by the Kim Jong-un regime, which would be the first since 2017, it would be "a very destabilizing and very dangerous act, not only for the region, but for the whole world." On November 1, North Korea launched a new missile that was directed at the Sea of Japan for the first time. This led the Japanese Defense Minister, Yasukazu Hamada, to denounce the launch as "a threat to the peace and security of the region and the international community" and summoned the National Security Council of his country.

According to SIPRI, Japan has the ninth largest military budget in the world, but the growing conflict with North Korea and eventually with China over Taiwan led it to increase its military spending. Japan's military budget is 54,124 million dollars, similar to those of France (54,657 million), Germany (56,017) and Saudi Arabia (55,564), which are between 5th and 8th place. The first military expenditure in the world is that of the United States, with 800,672 million dollars, 15 times that of Japan. The second is China, with 293,352 million. This is how the American is almost 3 times that of the Asian power. Regarding Chinese military spending, it represents a little more than 5 times that of Japan.

But Japan is a military ally of the United States in the Far East and facing the threat of North Korea and the possibility of a conflict between Washington and Beijing over Taiwan. This implies the alliance with Great Britain, which is the fourth military spender in the world with 68,366 million dollars, and South Korea, which spends 50,227 million and is the tenth military budget, close to that of Japan. It should be noted that the third is India with 76,598 million. Based on this situation, a marked increase in Japan's military spending is projected.

Japan plans to spend \$279 billion on defense over the next five years and could surpass Russia and India and emerge as the third global military power. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's aggressive pursuit of Taiwan and rising missile threats from North Korea appear to have accelerated Tokyo's plan to rebuild its defense. According to analysts, if implemented, it will make Japan the world's third largest military power. If Japan meets its budget targets over the next five years, it will emerge as the third-strongest military power (it is ninth at the moment in terms of defense spending) and surpass India. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan, in power today, has put forward a proposal that aims to drastically revise Japan's National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and the Buildup of Medium Term Defense Forces (MTDP). The LDP advocates strengthening the country's defense posture and its possession of counter-attack capabilities. It is therefore not surprising that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has pledged to "fundamentally strengthen" the country's defense capabilities in the face of China's military expansion and North Korea's rapid nuclear and missile development. For their part, Russia and Japan have problems over the possession of some island territories in the Pacific (the South Kuril Islands), similar to China's claims over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.

The argument is that Japan's three strategic fronts (China, North Korea, and Russia) require different defense capability requirements that cannot be neglected any longer. A sharp increase in Japan's defense budget has thus become a major internal debate. In fact, public support for a larger defense budget reached an all-time high during Japan's upper house elections in July 2022. If the LDP succeeds in passing the increase, Japan's defense spending will increase from \$54.124 billion to \$70.4 billion in 2027, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 7.3%, according to GlobalData.

That means that over the next five years, Japan could spend more than \$279 billion. It should be noted that article 9 of its Constitution limits defense spending to around 1% of GDP. But now the PLD wants it to rise to 2% of the GDP to meet the NATO standard. In this, the Japanese government seems to have public support. An opinion poll conducted earlier this year by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper found that 64% of Japanese are in favor of strengthening the defenses of their islands. It is the first time that this percentage has exceeded 60 points since 2003. Other polls find that popular support for a defense increase is around 72% and that the majority of Japanese is now in favor of acquiring long-range missiles, which would allow the country's Self-Defense Force (the Japanese military's description of its "pacifist constitution") to attack targets beyond Japan's territory, another break with established norms.

The Japanese Defense Ministry plans to use the additional funds to boost sustained combat capabilities, including improving missile and ammunition storage as well as production. According to analysts, the Japanese Armed Forces are developing into a multidimensional defense force with greater operational capacity. The modernization effort is expanding to its Army, Navy, and Air Force, while also expanding into new domains, such as cyber operations and space. All three Forces have recently made significant acquisitions in advanced capabilities that offer the potential for deployments on a global scale. In the air domain alone, Japan introduced the Kawasaki P-1 in 2013, with 33 aircraft now in service and 60 more to replace the country's P-3C fleet. In 2013, Japan signed a deal with Lockheed Martin for 42 F-35B aircraft, but later extended the deal in 2019 to purchase a total of 105 F-35A and 42 F-35B variants. In 2020, another deal was signed with Mitsubishi Heavy Industries as the lead developer for nearly 100 units of the sixth-generation FX stealth fighter. In the naval domain, Japan is expanding its blue-water capabilities by converting the Izumo-class helicopter carriers into full-fledged aircraft carriers capable of operating the F-35B fighter. Its surface fleet can hold more than 40 frigates and destroyers, while underground assets include the capable Sōryū-class submarines.

In conclusion: the tension around North Korea has ratified and deepened Japan's alliance with the United States and South Korea; the tension between China and the United States over the Taiwan conflict also drives Japan to significantly increase its military spending; the Japanese government has unveiled an

ambitious project to increase its military spending, which in five years could take it to exceed that of Russia and India, becoming the third global military power. This increase has the support of the population according to opinion polls, which supports the government's decision. Finally, Japan has decided to immediately increase military spending to improve the training and enlistment of its military forces.