



SINOPSIS

Japan's Defense Transformation in the 2026 Defense White Paper

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The 2026 Defense White paper, “DEFENSE OF JAPAN 2026,” released on 4 August 2026, points toward a posture enabling Japan to defend itself more proactively and sustain that defense longer in response to the deteriorating security environment and lessons from the war in Ukraine. Its fundamental reinforcement centers on seven functions and capabilities:

- (1) stand-off defense;
- (2) integrated air and missile defense;
- (3) unmanned defense;
- (4) cross-domain operations;
- (5) command and control and intelligence;
- (6) rapid maneuver, deployment, and civil protection; and
- (7) sustainability and resiliency.

Counterstrike capabilities, introduced in the 2022 strategic documents, are being operationalized mainly through stand-off defense and related means, while Japan retains its basic principles: an exclusively defense-oriented policy, not becoming a military power that threatens other countries, the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, and civilian control.

This paper examines three cross-cutting pillars: “new ways of warfare,” integrating unmanned assets, AI, space, networks, and other capabilities; “sustainability,” based on stockpiling, production, supply, repair, and cooperation with allies and like-minded countries; and the “human resource base”, centered on labor saving, unmanned systems, and limiting personnel losses amid demographic decline.



Key Findings

● From Individual Threats to an Interconnected Security Environment

Japan's basic security assessments of China, Russia, and North Korea remain broadly unchanged, but the White paper places greater emphasis on their interconnectedness: PLA activities extending into the Western Pacific, including the Second Island Chain; growing China–Russia military coordination; and deepening Russia–North Korea military cooperation.

● External Pressure, Internal Constraints: Why the Strategic Documents Are Being Revised Early

The early revision of the three strategic documents—the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program, all issued in December 2022—responds to both external and internal pressures. Externally, these include expanding Chinese military activities, China–Russia and Russia–North Korea cooperation, Taiwan Strait risks, and uncertainty over the scale, speed, and sustainability of U.S. engagement. Internally, Japan faces weaknesses in its defense industry, supply chains, equipment availability, unmanned-system development and mass production, and a shrinking human resource base.

● Lessons from Ukraine: Integrating New Ways of Warfare, Sustainability, and Human Resources

The war in Ukraine has reinforced the importance of integrating technological adaptation with the ability to sustain prolonged operations. Within the Japan–U.S. Alliance, Japan's response therefore links “new ways of warfare” with stronger industrial, logistical, and human-resource foundations needed to maintain combat power over time, although social cohesion and resilience remain insufficiently addressed.

● “New Ways of Warfare”: From Platforms to Integrated Defense Systems

Japan seeks to integrate unmanned assets, AI, space, cyber, electromagnetic, information, and network capabilities with existing forces to accelerate detection, decision, and response. Under SHIELD, to be established during FY2027, relatively inexpensive UAVs, USVs, and UUVs will be combined with manned forces in a multilayered littoral defense architecture adapted to Japan's geography and exclusively defense-oriented policy.

● Sustainability: From Possessing Capabilities to Sustaining Combat Power



Japan is strengthening ammunition, missile, unmanned-system, and parts stockpiles, production, supply, and repair while rebuilding its defense industry and supply chains. Joint development and production, parts sharing, interoperability, and interchangeability with allies and like-minded countries are intended to preserve operational availability after equipment is consumed or damaged.

● **Human Resource Base: Maintaining Combat Power with Fewer Personnel**

With declining SDF fill rates and a shrinking recruitment-age population, Japan is combining better recruitment and retention with outsourcing, AI, robotics, and unmanned systems. The aim is to maintain defense capabilities with fewer personnel while reducing exposure to dangerous missions.

● **From the Southwest Islands to the Entire Homeland: Reconstructing the Defense System**

Japan is moving beyond reinforcement of the Southwest Islands toward defense of the entire homeland by networking Pacific-side surveillance, stand-off defense, integrated air and missile defense, SHIELD, counter-drone capabilities, and the space, cyber, electromagnetic, and information domains with existing forces.

● **Defense Transformation, Not “New Militarism”**

The White paper retains Japan’s established principles—an exclusively defense-oriented policy, not becoming a military power that threatens other countries, the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, and civilian control—while emphasizing capabilities intended to deter, deny, and, if necessary, sustain defense against invasion. Military spending or equipment growth alone should therefore not be equated with “militarism”; the relevant questions are what capabilities are developed, for what purposes, under what principles, and according to what operational concepts.

Against these criteria, Defense of Japan 2026 provides little direct evidence of a shift toward a posture designed for aggression abroad, leaving a substantial gap with China’s “new militarism” narrative. This contrast is notable as China continues to develop large-scale, sustained power-projection capabilities, including ballistic and cruise missiles, transport aircraft, amphibious assault ships, and specialized amphibious equipment.



1. From the 2022 Framework to the 2026 Transformation of Japan's Defense Posture

Defense White paper annually explains the security environment surrounding Japan, Japan's defense policy, and the activities of the Ministry of Defense and the Self-Defense Forces. 2026 White paper¹ is particularly forward-looking, presenting major issues in anticipation of the accelerated revision of the three strategic documents² issued in December 2022: the National Security Strategy of Japan, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program. The revision is scheduled for the end of the year.

To explain revision after only four years, 2026 White paper identifies: (1) challenges to a free and open international order based on the rule of law; (2) the military buildup of China and North Korea, together with China–Russia and Russia–North Korea cooperation; and (3) preparations for “new ways of warfare” combining inexpensive (low-cost) and mass-deployed unmanned assets, AI, space, cyber, the electromagnetic domain, and information warfare, as well as for protracted conflict, as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine. On 24 October 2025, the Ministry of Defense held the first meeting of the Promotion HQ for Transformation of Defense Capabilities³ and began deliberations toward revising the three strategic documents by the end of 2026.

As part of the fundamental reinforcement of Japan's defense capabilities, the 2026 White paper again emphasizes the “seven functions and capabilities” set out in page 23-29 of the 2022 National Defense Strategy⁴ and the Defense Buildup Program: (1) stand-off defense capabilities; (2) integrated air and missile defense capabilities; (3) unmanned defense capabilities; (4) cross-domain operational capabilities; (5) command and control and intelligence-related functions; (6) rapid maneuver and deployment capabilities and civil protection; and (7) sustainability and resiliency. Together, they aim to deter an invasion, prevent and repel it if deterrence fails, and enable Japan to continue fighting tenaciously.

In 2026, the 2022 Defense Buildup Program (FY2023–2027) based on the 2022 strategic documents is being translated into operational capability. As part of stand-off defense

¹ Japan Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan 2026”, [online](#).

² Japan Ministry of Defense, “Strategic Documents of National Security and Defense”, [online](#).

³ Japan Ministry of Defense, “The Promotion HQ for Transformation of Defense Capabilities”, Ministry of Defense, [online](#).

⁴ Japan Ministry of Defense, “National Defense Strategy”, December 16, 2022, [online](#).



capabilities, land deployment of the Type-25 Surface-to-Ship Missile (Type-25 SSM)⁵ and the Type-25 Hyper-Velocity Gliding Projectile (Type-25 HVGP) began on 31 March 2026, while the provision of Tomahawk cruise-missile operational capability to the JMSDF Aegis destroyer “*Chokai* (DDG-176)” was completed on 27 March 2026, followed by a live-fire test on 29 July.⁶

The FY2027 budget request, presented at the end of August, was described as supporting the “transformation of defense capabilities,” translating the White paper’s emphasis on “new ways of warfare,” sustainable response capabilities, the defense production and technology base, and the human resource base into concrete requirements.

This analysis distinguishes the contents of the White paper itself, the FY2027 budget request presented thereafter, and the draft of the next Defense Buildup Program reported by 17 September,⁷ and examines how its direction is being translated into concrete measures.

The accelerated revision is best understood through the interaction of external pressure and internal constraint. Chinese military expansion and closer China–Russia and Russia–North Korea cooperation coincide with weaknesses in Japan’s defense production, technology, supply chains, equipment availability, adaptation to unmanned systems, and human resources. The revision is therefore less about spending alone than redesigning defense capabilities to restore deterrence, sustainability, and technological adaptation with limited industrial and human resources.

The next buildup may exceed a simple extension of current plans. The news agency Kyodo reported on 17 September that in a draft Defense Buildup Program for FY2027–31, the government is considering the introduction of approximately 52,000 unmanned assets, more than ¥9 trillion for stand-off defense capabilities, and approximately ¥7 trillion for AI and unmanned assets.⁸ Of roughly 52,000 unmanned aerial vehicles, the report cited approximately 10,000 for long-range ground attack, 1,300 for attacks against vessels, and 7,500 for ISR missions. Senior government officials have indicated that the five-year total spending could reach ¥70–80 trillion. This would substantially exceed the approximately ¥43 trillion allocated under the current FY2023–

⁵ Kosuke Takahashi, “Japan Deploys New Longer-Range Missiles, Formally Designates ‘Type 25’ Systems”, *Naval News*, March 31, 2026, [online](#).

⁶ Dzirhan Mahadzir, “Japan’s First Tomahawk Cruise Missile Destroyer Back from U.S.”, *USNI News*, August 31, 2026, [online](#).

⁷ Kyodo News, “Japan Mulls 52,000 Unmanned Systems Target in 5-Yr Defense Buildup: Sources”, *Kyodo News*, September 17, 2026, [online](#).

⁸ *Ibid.*



27 program, though all remain draft or reported figures pending a year-end decision. Financing details remain unclear.

The revision concerns not only equipment quantity but also the redesign of the defense space itself. The coalition agreement calls for a VLS-equipped submarine using “next-generation propulsion” that would enable long-range and long-duration movement and submerged operations while carrying long-range missiles. The propulsion method has not been decided; Defense Minister Koizumi has stated that “no options are excluded,” including nuclear propulsion, while stressing that Japan has not decided to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. On the Pacific side, the Air Self-Defense Force is proceeding with the deployment of a mobile air-surveillance and control radar to Kitadaito Island⁹ and plans to establish a warning unit at the Amami Oshima Subbase in FY2027. Expansion to Iwo To island and Minamitorishima island has not been decided, but stronger surveillance of Japan’s Pacific islands remains under consideration.

Japan is also integrating cross-domain capabilities—including cyber, space, the electromagnetic domain, and information warfare—with existing land, maritime, and air forces. In the unmanned assets, the MOD and SDF aim to establish SHIELD (Synchronized, Hybrid, Integrated and Enhanced Littoral Defense)¹⁰ during FY2027, acquiring large numbers of relatively inexpensive/low-cost UAVs, USVs, and UUVs and optimally combining them with manned assets. To counter swarm and saturation attacks, development of a Close-Range Air Defense System (CRADS)¹¹ combining guided missiles, guns, and lasers is also planned from FY2027. The aim is to adapt homeland defense—including bases, radar sites, and critical infrastructure, rather than only the Southwest Islands—to “new ways of warfare.”

2. From Individual Threats to an Interconnected Security Environment

The 2026 White paper retains the differentiated 2025 assessments: China remains “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge,” North Korea’s military activities, especially its nuclear and missile development, “an even more grave and imminent threat,” and Russia’s Indo-Pacific military activities “a strong security concern,” particularly

⁹ Dzirhan Mahadzir, “Japan Will Deploy Mobile Radar Site in the Philippine Sea, U.S. Marines Test Attack Helicopter in Anti-Surface Role”, *USNI News*, June 30, 2024, [online](#).

¹⁰ Adam Bartley and Tom Saxton, “Japan Is Pushing Hard on Autonomous Weapons”, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), April 7, 2026, [online](#).

¹¹ Akhsan Erdo Elezhar, “Japan Develops Air Defense System With Three Types of Weapons”, *NextGen Defense*, August 26, 2026, [online](#).



alongside strategic coordination with China. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is regarded as the most significant and direct security threat in Europe.

The principal change is the scale, scope, intensity, and interconnectedness of these activities. China is operating farther into the Pacific, North Korea continues advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, Russia remains active in the Far East, and China–Russia and Russia–North Korea military cooperation have deepened.

China's growing capacity for distant operations is especially visible at sea. In June 2025, the MOD confirmed for the first time a Chinese aircraft carrier east of Iwo To while two Chinese carriers operated simultaneously in the Pacific; annual carrier-based takeoffs and landings there exceeded 1,400, and operations beyond the Second Island Chain were confirmed.

The boundary between China's military and non-military activities is also blurred. The China Coast Guard, under the People's Armed Police and Central Military Commission, increasingly cooperates with the PLA Navy in personnel, equipment, and training alongside maritime militia, linking peacetime law enforcement, gray-zone activity, and military operations.

Chinese military activities around Taiwan have also become increasingly operationally realistic and normalized. The National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) assesses that since 2022 the PLA has intensified realistic training for joint operations in a Taiwan contingency while maintaining forces around Taiwan before and after major exercises. During Strait Thunder-2025A in April 2025, ground, naval, air, and rocket forces conducted exercises involving combat-readiness patrols, comprehensive control, strikes against maritime and ground targets, and blockade and control of key areas and routes. Recent NIDS analysis also points to expanding military infrastructure along the Taiwan Strait and possible new airpower concepts for a Taiwan contingency.¹²

Japan's capability development is intended to reinforce deterrence. The White paper notes that relatively inexpensive unmanned assets used in large numbers can "impose costs on the adversary" against expensive manned platforms; stand-off capabilities, dispersal, SHIELD, and ammunition production can similarly strengthen deterrence by denial and cost imposition.

¹² Moriki Aita, "Satellite Imagery Suggests a New Operational Concept for China's Airpower: Tracing the Origins of Obsolete Fighter Aircraft Along the Taiwan Strait Coast", NIDS No. 425, March 17, 2026, [online](#).



China, Russia, and North Korea therefore cannot be considered entirely in isolation. China–Russia coordination has deepened,^{13 14} while the Russia–North Korea Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,¹⁵ in force since December 2024, provides for military assistance in the event of armed aggression. North Korea has supplied Russia with weapons, ammunition, and ballistic missiles and deployed troops since late 2024;^{16 17} both governments acknowledged North Korean combat participation in Kursk Oblast in April 2025.¹⁸

Against this background, Japanese policy maintains that a serious situation similar to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could occur in the Indo-Pacific, particularly East Asia. Although this formulation already appeared in 2025, the 2026 White paper accelerates preparations for counterstrike capabilities, unmanned assets, sustainability, the defense industry, and human resources while linking them to revision of the strategic documents.

A further factor, not stated directly in the White paper, is uncertainty over the scale, speed, and sustainability of future U.S. engagement. The alliance remains the cornerstone of Japanese security, but burden-sharing demands, adjustments to the U.S. regional role, outreach to North Korea, reduced U.S.–ROK exercises, and diversion of assets to the Middle East have raised concerns about deterrence in the Western Pacific.

In this context, Defense Minister Koizumi’s call for Japan to “strengthen its defense capabilities proactively on its own initiative”¹⁹ indicates an effort to expand Japan’s own role and autonomous response capabilities within, rather than apart from, the alliance framework. It is better understood not as preparation for a scenario in which “the United States does not come,” but as a response to uncertainty over whether the scale, speed, and sustainability of U.S. engagement will always meet expectations.

¹³ Riho Aizawa, “Beyond Deterrence: Evolving China–Russia Military Coordination and the U.S.–Japan Alliance”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, July 22, 2026, [online](#).

¹⁴ Masayuki Masuda, Hiroshi Yamazoe, and Asaki Asami, “Imbalanced Partnerships: China, Russia, and North Korea”, *National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS)*, November 2025, [online](#).

¹⁵ Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT), “Unlawful Military Cooperation including Arms Transfers between North Korea and Russia”, *United Nations Security Council*, Document S/2025/340, June 3, 2025, [online](#).

¹⁶ Tianran Xu, “North Korea’s Lethal Aid to Russia: Current State and Outlook”, *38 North*, February 14, 2025, [online](#).

¹⁷ Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT), “Unlawful Military Cooperation including Arms Transfers between North Korea and Russia”, *United Nations Security Council*, Document S/2025/340, June 3, 2025, [online](#).

¹⁸ Rachel Minyoung Lee, “North Korea’s Acknowledgement of War Participation”, *38 North*, April 29, 2025, [online](#).

¹⁹ Kurumi Mori, “Japan Ramping Up Defence Is ‘Critical’ to Prevent War, Defence Minister Koizumi Tells BBC”, *BBC News*, June 17, 2026, [online](#).



3. “New Ways of Warfare”: From Platforms to Integrated Defense Systems

The 2026 edition devotes four pages to “new ways of warfare.” Building on the 2022 framework, it emphasizes the integration of emerging technologies and existing forces to accelerate information collection, decision, and engagement, supported by R&D, mass production, logistics, industry, and sustainability.

The concept was formalized in the 2022 National Defense Strategy, drawing lessons from Ukraine’s use of conventional forces together with long-range precision weapons, unmanned systems, cyber and electronic warfare, information warfare, and nuclear coercion. It called for stronger stand-off defense, integrated air and missile defense, unmanned assets, cross-domain operations, and command-and-control and intelligence capabilities.

Since then, FPV drones, loitering munitions, USVs, commercial satellites, electronic warfare, and digital command and control have spread rapidly. More important than any single weapon is the ability to network information, process it rapidly, shorten decision and engagement cycles, adapt software and drones, and replenish equipment and ammunition at scale.

Japan has not led this transformation. China has developed AI and unmanned systems as elements of “intelligentized” warfare, while the Russia–Ukraine war has demonstrated mass consumption and rapid modification of unmanned systems. Japan began full-scale work on SHIELD in FY2025 and aims to establish it in FY2027, reflecting the need to close gaps in technology, mass production, and iterative improvement.

The Institute of Geoeconomics (IOG), headed by University of Tokyo Professor Kazuto Suzuki, a member of the expert panel on the revision of Japan’s three strategic documents, has also presented policy recommendations (in Japanese)²⁰ to the LDP on incorporating “new ways of warfare.” In 2026, discussions concretized a concept in which frontline units, unmanned assets, and satellites are linked through networks, information is shared in real time, and large volumes of data are processed by AI to accelerate decision-making.

Japan also debated the term “new ways of defending.” Defense Minister Koizumi called for adapting emerging ways of warfare to Japan’s island geography, exclusively defense-oriented policy, and security environment. The FY2027 budget request ultimately used “responses to new ways of warfare,” further developing unmanned assets, AI, and cross-

²⁰ Kuniharu Kakihara, Hirohito Ogi, Rintaro Inoue, Kota Umeda, and Yuki Goto, “持続的拒否と戦略的縦深性—次期戦略三文書に向けた政策提言—”, 地経学研究所 (Institute of Geoeconomics), July 2026, [online](#).



domain capabilities. The debate reinforces that the concept is directed primarily toward more effective homeland defense rather than large-scale overseas power projection.

4. Sustainability: From Possessing Capabilities to Sustaining Combat Power

The 2026 White paper treats the defense industrial base as a foundation of sustainability for both “new ways of warfare” and prolonged contingencies. The 2022 strategic documents already described the defense production and technology base as “defense capability itself,” encompassing R&D, production, maintenance, repair, and supply.

This reflects structural weaknesses in Japan’s defense industry. With no state-owned arsenals, production and maintenance depend on large firms and many SMEs serving a predominantly MOD/SDF market characterized by small-lot, high-variety production and long-term sustainment. Fluctuating demand and difficult cost recovery constrain investment, while corporate withdrawal can weaken supply chains, competition, and innovation. The White paper therefore calls for production and maintenance capacity able to respond to sudden demand increases.

The P-1 maritime patrol aircraft illustrates the gap between the number of platforms possessed and the number actually available for operations. A June 2025 report by the Board of Audit of Japan noted frequent corrosion-related defects in F7-10 engines caused by salt accumulation and other factors, as well as failures in onboard electronic equipment and constraints on mission-capable aircraft resulting from long procurement lead times and shortages of replacement parts.²¹ The MOD aims to eliminate non-availability caused by parts shortages by FY2027. Beyond this aircraft, the case shows that the supply chain itself—the ability continuously to supply parts, conduct repairs, and maintain operational availability—constitutes military capability.

In 2026, the industrial base is treated as essential not only to peacetime procurement but also to replenishing equipment and ammunition consumed or lost in a contingency. Ukraine has shown that advanced equipment is insufficient without the capacity to produce ammunition, missiles, unmanned systems, and replacement parts, as well as to repair damaged equipment.

This directly supports “new ways of warfare.” Large-scale use of relatively low-cost unmanned assets and guided weapons alongside conventional forces requires rapid production and replenishment. Such systems still trade off range, speed, payload,

²¹ Akhil Kadidal, “Audit Reveals Low Availability Rate of Japan P-1 Fleet”, *Janes*, July 1, 2025, [online](#).



survivability, and electronic-warfare resistance, requiring an appropriate mix rather than wholesale substitution.

The same logic applies to counterstrike capabilities. Sustainable stand-off defense requires not only foreign missiles but also indigenous development, production, and replenishment capacity, supporting technological autonomy and resilience if foreign supply is constrained.

Domestic production does not imply autarky. Japan seeks to retain essential domestic capabilities while promoting joint R&D, co-production, and licensed production, and increasingly considers international-standard specifications from the development stage to improve interoperability and interchangeability with allies and like-minded countries.

International compatibility broadens access to allied production, supply, and repair capacity by improving commonality, interoperability, and interchangeability of equipment, ammunition, and parts. Alignment with standards including NATO STANAGs can support sustainability, as can U.S.–Japan cooperation in joint development and production, compatibility, networks, domestic maintenance, and supply chains.

Defense equipment transfers can likewise strengthen Japan's own production and technology base as well as partner capabilities. Joint development and production, reciprocal parts provision, maintenance of foreign equipment, and participation in international parts-sharing systems can create peacetime production, supply, maintenance, and repair networks.

Examples include the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP),²² through which Japan, the United Kingdom, and Italy combine technological and industrial bases while sharing development costs and risks, and Australia's selection of an upgraded Mogami-class frigate,²³ which can strengthen Japan–Australia interoperability as well as shipbuilding, maintenance, and sustainment through joint development and production. Other forms of cooperation include second-hand equipment transfers: Japan and the Philippines are discussing the transfer of decommissioned Abukuma-class destroyer escorts,²⁴ while Japan and Indonesia have begun discussions on the possible transfer of second-hand Asagiri-class destroyers, including related training, maintenance, sustainment, and operational aspects.²⁵ Under Official Security Assistance (OSA), Japan is also providing

²² "The ABC of the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)", *Edgewing*, May 5, 2026, [online](#).

²³ "Mogami-Class Frigate Selected for the Navy's New General Purpose Frigates", *Australian Government, Department of Defence*, August 5, 2025, [online](#).

²⁴ Kosuke Takahashi, "Japan, Philippines Launch Working Group on Transfer of Abukuma-class Destroyer Escorts", *Naval News*, May 6, 2026, [online](#).

²⁵ Kosuke Takahashi, "Indonesia Eyes JMSDF Asagiri-Class Destroyers as Japan Tailors Warship Transfers to Southeast Asian Partners", *Naval News*, June 5, 2026, [online](#).



maritime-security and related support for Indo-Pacific partners including the Philippines and Indonesia.

5. The Human Resource Base: Maintaining Combat Power with Fewer Personnel

The human resource base is the third pillar. With population aging, demographic decline, and a record-low total fertility rate of 1.14 in 2025, Japan must strengthen defense while its pool of potential recruits contracts.

As of the end of March 2026 (data in Japanese),²⁶ the SDF had an authorized strength of 247,154 personnel and an actual strength of 217,701, for a fill rate of 88.1 percent. The Ground Self-Defense Force had 129,176 personnel against an authorized strength of 149,403, a fill rate of 86.5 percent, lower than the Maritime Self-Defense Force's 91.2 percent and the Air Self-Defense Force's 89.8 percent. Recruitment alone cannot offset a shrinking recruitment-age population and competition with the private sector for human resources.

The problem is structural, not temporary. A recommendation proposal of the security research committee of LDP (in Japanese)²⁷ issued in June 2026 stated that the recruitment-age population would decline by approximately 30 percent over the next twenty years and that mid-career departures in FY2024 were equivalent to roughly half the number of recruits, describing the decline in actual SDF personnel as “a major challenge that will be difficult to avoid.” Better treatment and working conditions, reemployment support, greater participation by women, and extensions of retirement age are necessary, but future defense cannot assume current authorized personnel levels can be maintained.

The reserve base is also limited: as of March 2026, 32,267 of 47,900 Reserve SDF Personnel positions were filled (67.4 percent), 3,805 of 7,981 Ready Reserve positions (47.7 percent), and 3,499 of 4,621 Reserve Candidate positions (75.7 percent), limiting surge capacity.

The recruitment of foreign nationals was also raised as a policy option, but on 4 September, Defense Minister Koizumi stated,²⁸ in response to a proposal by the

²⁶ “自衛官等の充足・採用状況”, *Ministry of Defense of Japan*, March 31, 2026, [online](#).

²⁷ “新たな国家安全保障戦略等の策定に向けた提言”, 自由民主党 (Liberal Democratic Party of Japan), June 9, 2026, [online](#).

²⁸ Jesse Johnson, “Japan Defense Chief Dismisses Idea of Recruiting Foreign Nationals for SDF”, *The Japan Times*, September 4, 2026, [online](#).



Sasakawa Peace Foundation (in Japanese),²⁹ that the government was not considering recruiting foreign nationals into the Self-Defense Forces. The government's approach instead combines improved treatment and retention of existing personnel, identification of tasks that can only be performed by SDF personnel, outsourcing of other functions, and productivity improvements through AI and related technologies.

Because major personnel increases are difficult, the human resource base is directly linked to “new ways of warfare.” The 2022 Defense Buildup Program calls for “unmanning, labor saving, and optimization” and for unmanned assets to conduct missions “while limiting personnel losses”; the LDP’s 2026 proposal similarly assumes declining personnel strength and emphasizes AI, robotics, labor saving, and loss limitation.

Limiting losses also matters socially and politically. Although public support for the SDF is well established, caution toward war and human sacrifice remains; heavy SDF casualties could therefore be both an operational loss and a shock to public support for prolonged operations.

Government documents do not state that unmanned systems are intended to avoid provoking pacifist opinion; this is an analytical assessment. Yet in Japan’s strategic culture, limiting personnel losses concerns both scarce manpower and the social and political sustainability of prolonged homeland defense.

This also raises the issue of social resilience. The White paper addresses personnel, infrastructure, logistics, and civil protection but gives less attention to how society would maintain cohesion and preparedness during a prolonged emergency, even though sustainable homeland defense ultimately depends on both military capability and societal endurance.

²⁹ 笹川平和財団 (Sasakawa Peace Foundation), “政策提言” [Policy Recommendations], 笹川平和財団, September 2, 2026, [online](#).



6. Conclusion: Defense Transformation without “New Militarism”?

The 2026 White paper points toward a posture enabling Japan to defend itself more proactively and sustain that defense longer. Ukraine’s determined resistance has reinforced a fundamental lesson: while alliances and international support remain indispensable, a state must possess the will and capabilities to assume primary responsibility for its own defense. Japan’s defense transformation reflects this lesson by strengthening its capacity to respond to and sustain a prolonged contingency.

The accelerated revision of the strategic documents reflects external and internal pressures. Key external drivers are Japan’s perception of a growing military asymmetry vis-à-vis China and concern over a possible Taiwan contingency, compounded by China–Russia and Russia–North Korea cooperation and uncertainty over future U.S. engagement. Internally, industrial and supply-chain weaknesses, equipment availability, personnel shortages, and demographic decline demand a more sustainable and manpower-efficient posture. The emphasis on unmanned assets, stand-off capabilities, AI, and sustainability therefore represents not merely quantitative growth but an effort to strengthen deterrence by denial and cost imposition while assuming greater responsibility for Japan’s own defense.

One lesson from Ukraine nevertheless remains insufficiently addressed: social resilience. Sustained national resistance depends not only on military capabilities and infrastructure but also on society’s willingness and preparedness to withstand prolonged pressure and disruption. The White paper offers limited specific measures for strengthening such resilience, leaving a gap between material defense capabilities and broader national resilience.

Japan’s defense buildup should not itself be equated with “militarism.” Militarism cannot be assessed solely by military expenditure or capability scale; it also requires examining the military’s social role, attitudes toward the use of force, the purposes and expected employment of capabilities, and the political and institutional constraints on their use. By these criteria, Defense of Japan 2026 primarily seeks more effective, sustainable, resilient, and manpower-efficient homeland defense, not the capabilities required for large-scale sustained offensive operations abroad. A substantial gap therefore remains between China’s “new militarism” narrative and the direction of Japan’s defense buildup presented in the White paper.



Japan's wartime past nevertheless remains relevant because it makes the distinction between defense and aggression fundamental. The capabilities examined here provide little indication of a return to the pre-1945 trajectory of military expansion and overseas aggression. Their principal direction is to protect Japan's sovereignty and territory, mitigate its growing military asymmetry vis-à-vis China, make aggression more difficult and costly, and sustain defense under increasingly demanding strategic and demographic conditions.

The central issue is thus how the postwar rejection of military aggression should operate in a changed security environment. If postwar pacifism is understood primarily as rejecting aggression and the use of force to resolve international disputes, credible capabilities to defend Japan's sovereignty need not contradict it. Japan's defense transformation can instead be understood as reconciling postwar restraint with a lesson underscored by Ukraine: effective national defense requires the will and capabilities to defend oneself even while relying on alliances and international cooperation.



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