



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

POLICY BRIEF

Japan's 2026 Defense White Paper

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Cover Images:

1. Japan's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi meets India's Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh in Tokyo on July 13, 2026. Source: @ModJapan-en
2. JS Mogami, the first Mogami-class frigate, at sea. Source: MoD Japan/JMSDF
3. Guided Missile Destroyers from the PLA Eastern Theatre Command sail together in the East China Sea on July 22, 2026. Source: Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China

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Japan's 2026 Defense White Paper

by

Lalit Kapur

The third quarter of every year sees the publication of the Defense of Japan White Paper, providing citizens an annual window into the approved government view of the country's security challenges and what the Ministry of Defence has done to address them during the preceding year. The paper is structured around four core chapters: the security environment surrounding Japan; Japan's security and defense policy; the three approaches to achieving defence objectives; and the activities of the JSDF. The 2026 edition of this white paper was approved by the Cabinet and released to the public by the current Defense Minister, Shinjiro Koizumi, on August 04, 2026¹.

The 2026 White Paper, as in the past, observes that states that do not share universal values or political and economic systems based on such values are expanding their influence. It portrays the global balance of power shifting dramatically and competition between states growing. It sees security challenges as particularly prominent and likely to intensify further in the Indo-Pacific, where Japan is located. It projects that inter-state competition between the US and China is likely to intensify, notwithstanding the changed US approach of seeking to build "a constructive relationship of strategic stability on the basis of fairness and reciprocity"² with China and de-prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific³.

China's military and other activities, the sustained growth in its opaque defence spending and concomitant improvement in military power, as well as its intensified activities in the Western Pacific continue to be projected as presenting the greatest strategic challenge to Japan and thus a matter of serious concern. The paper dwells on dangerous Chinese military activities around Japan, its intensified operations in the East and South China Seas and around Taiwan, and its coercive attempts to create a fait accompli in the region, as well as increased military cooperation between China and Russia. It notes that the overall military balance between China and Taiwan is rapidly tilting in the former's favour, and highlights the possibility of China imposing a grey-zone blockade of Taiwan using coastguard vessels. The growth in China's

¹ 2026 Defense of Japan Pamphlet, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/wp/wp2026/pdf/DOJ2026_Digest_EN.pdf

² Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Historic Deals with China, Delivering for American Workers, Farmers, and Industry, May 17, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2026/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-historic-deals-with-china-delivering-for-american-workers-farmers-and-industry/>

³ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "INDO-PACOM Reverts to PACOM" in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, June 2026, Volume VII Issue 6, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/storage/uploads/publications_file/publication_Indo-Pacific%20Monitor-%20Vol%20VII,%20Issue%206.pdf

nuclear capabilities is also addressed, though its SLBM test of July 2026 does not find mention.

Concerns that are raised in the paper about North Korea relate to its continued pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities, as well as the enhancement of capabilities through its partnership with Russia. Russia's military activities in the vicinity of Japan as well as its strategic partnership with China are viewed as posing a strong security concern. Other concerns are continued instability in the Middle East, new ways of warfare including the use of drones, missiles and AI, and trends in the space, cyber and electronic warfare domains. The paper makes special mention of the importance of maintaining regular stockpiles of equipment and ammunition, as well as of ensuring sufficient sustained operational capability. This becomes particularly relevant given media reports of the shortage of air defence missiles and precision strike weapons in the US inventory, which is said to constrain its strategic options in the ongoing confrontation with Iran.

The cornerstone of Japan's security and defence policy remains its alliance with the US, even as there is public concern about the reliability of US support in a crisis – a poll conducted last year indicated that the majority of respondents doubted that the US would protect Japan in a military emergency⁴. Doubts about US commitment to the alliance have grown sharply during the current administration. While President Trump frequently praises Prime Minister Takaichi, he notably did not come out in her support when she clarified Japan's position in a Taiwan contingency in November 2025, which led to punitive economic measures being taken by China. Nor did he hesitate in embarrassing her during her visit to the US in March 2026 by public comments regarding Japan's surprising the US at Pearl Harbour. Japan is also conscious that the US intervention in Iran has resulted in a dilution of US resources and attention towards the Indo-Pacific.

The White Paper reiterates the commitment to maintaining an exclusively defence oriented policy, not becoming a military power that threatens other countries, ensuring civilian control and observing the three non-nuclear principles approved by the Diet in 1971 (not possessing, producing or allowing nuclear arms on its soil or waters). This reiteration is notable in view of Koizumi's reported urging of a debate on the role of nuclear weapons in the country's defence⁵, despite strong support in Japan for retaining the three non-nuclear principles⁶. At the same time, it speaks of

⁴ Kazuaki Isoda, "Survey: 77% doubt US will protect Japan in military crisis", April 28, 2025, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15733368.html>

⁵ Japan 'cannot avoid' nuclear weapons debate, defense chief Koizumi says, July 19, 2026, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2026/07/19/japan/politics/koizumi-japan-nuclear-weapons-debate/>

⁶ 76% in Japan support upholding 3 non-nuclear principles: poll, August 03, 2026, <https://japantoday.com/category/politics/76-in-japan-support-upholding-3-nonnuclear-principles-poll>

promoting fundamental reinforcement of Japan's defence capabilities, including the possession of counter-strike weapons. It reiterates the ongoing revision of the three strategic documents, including the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy (including reinforcing seven key capabilities: stand-off defence, integrated air and missile defence, unmanned defence, cross-domain operation capability, C3I functions, mobile deployment and sustainability and resilience), and the Defence Buildup Programme.

The paper spells out activities undertaken last year towards the three approaches to achieving defence objectives: Japan's own architecture for national defence, the Japan-US alliance, and cooperation with like-minded countries. It also highlights initiatives on co-existence with local communities and the environment.

A fourth chapter spells out measures to strengthen Japan's defence production and technological bases. Noting the necessity of working with allies and like-minded countries to protect own and regional peace and security, the paper highlights revision of the three principles on transfer of defence equipment and technology in April 2026⁷. The paper spells out the range of cooperation on defence equipment and technology with the US, UK, Italy, France, Germany, Australia, Ukraine, Vietnam, the Philippines and India. The Mogami project with Australia and the GCAP with the UK and Italy are the major Japanese initiatives with other countries.

China's response to the White Paper has been harsh, self-serving and directed towards Japan's pacifist constituency. It portrays Japan as hyping up "China-threat" rhetoric as an excuse to remove long-standing restrictions on the military⁸. It warns that Japan's "new militarism" has become a serious challenge to the postwar international order and the real threat to regional peace and stability, and urges the country to stop misleading the Japanese public and international community. Chinese media accused Japan of fanning regional tensions and drew attention to Prime Minister Takaichi's "erroneous" remarks concerning Taiwan, repeated exaggeration of security threats in the Indo-Pacific region and acceleration of preparations for war⁹. This portrayal deliberately suppresses the underlying cause for Japan's actions: the massive growth in China's coercive power through weaponising economic dependencies, its vast military expansion and expanding nuclear capability, its militarisation of the South

⁷ See Lalit Kapur, "Japan Approves Changes in Rules on Arms Exports", Indo-Pacific Monitor Volume VII Issue 4, April 2026, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/storage/uploads/publications_file/publication_Indo-Pacific%20Monitor-%20Vol%20VII,%20Issue%204.pdf

⁸ China's defense spokesperson slams "China threat" rhetoric in Japan's new defense white paper, August 04, 2026, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/2025xb/H_251454/L_251456/16477749.html

⁹ Xinhua Commentary: New defense white paper lays bare Japan's neo-militarist ambitions, August 05, 2026, <https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20260806/a35a55af127e4f5bb2430239655e792a/c.html>

China Sea islands, and its increased grey zone activity to change the status quo and create a fait accompli in the East China Sea.

Of particular relevance for India is the white paper's reiteration of China as the primary security challenge, at a time when the US approach towards Beijing has changed. This aligns with India's own security concerns along its northern borders and in the larger Indo-Pacific. The evident strategic convergence will provide impetus to bilateral and minilateral defence alignment, as is visible from the 16th India-Japan summit¹⁰. The paper's emphasis on revitalising Japan's defence industrial base and the relaxation of constraints on arms exports provides opportunity for Indian companies to partner with Japan's defence industry. The shared need to protect vital sea lanes could also result in greater India-Japan maritime security cooperation.

The central message of the White Paper is that Japan is responding to the deteriorating regional environment through strengthening its comprehensive national power - diplomatic, military, technological, industrial, intelligence - as well as alliance partnerships. This is visible through increase of military spending, acquisition of long-range strike capability, changes in defence organisation, and relaxation on exports of arms. The focus remains homeland defence and does not stretch to the development of expeditionary capability. This is certainly not militarisation, notwithstanding China's misleading and self-serving portrayal. It is a prudent national response to an increasingly adverse security environment and uncertainty about US support in a crisis, necessitating moderation of the constraints that have stifled Japan's defensive capability for decades.

This response, which moves Japan further in the direction of becoming a "normal nation", will benefit the Indo-Pacific region and strengthen its strategic convergence with India. The policy direction on which Japan has embarked under Prime Minister Takaichi will become clearer with the release of three revised nation security and defence strategy documents which is due later this year.

¹⁰ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "Japan in India's Defence and Maritime Security Calculus", in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, Volume VII Issue 7, July 2026, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/storage/uploads/publications_file/publication_Indo-Pacific%20Monitor-%20Vol%20VII,%20Issue%207.pdf



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