

A Thorough Dissection of the Three Security Documents



“Determined to decisively carry out my mission as prime minister of fully defending the Japanese nation and the Japanese people, as we approach this historic turning point, I have responded to our various security issues, including by drawing up a new National Security Strategy and fundamentally reinforcing our defense capabilities,” said Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at a press conference held on December 16, 2022.

Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office

What will change with the revision of the three security documents? An expert in military history unravels their history and future.

Chijiwa Yasuaki, Senior Fellow, National Institute for Defense Studies

A revision that clarifies Japan’s own responsibilities

Attempts at unilateral change of the status quo by force are gaining momentum in the Japanese periphery. The new “three security documents” approved by the Cabinet in December 2022 should be received with a sense of urgency and a recognition of the reality of the situation.

The topmost of the three security documents is the [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS). In light of this, the “[National Defense Strategy](#)” (NDS) (the former “[National Defense Program Guidelines](#)” [NDPG]) defines defense goals and approaches as well as means to achieve them. Moreover, the “[Defense Buildup Program](#)” (the former “[Medium Term Defense Program](#)” [MTDP]) is a medium- to long-term buildup program to achieve the level of defense capability that ought to be possessed under the NDS.



Chijiwa Yasuaki

The three security documents were first produced in 2013 during the second Abe Shinzo administration. The NDPG and the MTDP were revised in 2018, but this is the first time that the three documents have been revised at the same time.

To begin with, the three documents were not initially compiled as a “three-piece set.” Aside from the “[Basic Policy on National Defense](#)” (1957–2013), which had become a dead letter policy, there was originally only the NDPG as the “one document,” which was first developed in 1976 during the Miki Takeo administration period. Nine years later, during the Nakasone Yasuhiro administration period, the MTDP was created under the NDPG in 1985. Twenty-eight years later, in 2013, the NSS was formulated, thus finally marking the appearance of the three documents.

The main focus of Japanese national security policy during the Cold War was to promote progressive defense buildup under Japan-US security arrangements. There was little need for Japan to dare to mention “NSS,” as conversely, using words such as “strategy” risked being branded as a “revival of militarism.”

However, along with China’s military rise, North Korea’s brinkmanship diplomacy, and the long-term trend of the retreat of US foreign engagement, it became necessary for Japan to not simply be “passive” with a focus on defense buildup but to actively exercise influence in an attempt to create an international order that is desirable for Japan and the world. As a guideline for this purpose, the NSS was formulated with the philosophy of “Proactive Contribution to Peace.”

With regard to this revision of the three documents, the policy document system that prioritizes the NSS was not an arrangement unique to the government of Prime Minister Abe, which was highly interested in national security policy. Instead, you could say it was meaningful in showcasing both domestically and internationally that even if the Cabinet changes, the content of the policy documents is updated and passed on.

However, compared to 2013, the security environment surrounding Japan has become more severe. In addition to China’s hegemonic actions and advances in North Korea’s nuclear capabilities, Russia, which the NSS positioned as a “collaborator” of Japan in 2013, has trampled on international law and launched an invasion of Ukraine.

The purpose of the revision of the three documents is to clarify the responsibility of Japan itself, specified by the NSS to be that the “primary responsibility for defending Japan lies with itself.” In fact, the NSS states that “[NSS will] dramatically transform Japan’s national security policy after the end of WWII from the aspect of its execution.” This includes holding counterstrike capabilities, which we have not had before, and increasing the defense budget to 2% of GDP.

A shift to “counter-threat and operation-orientation”

Now, I would like to take a bird’s-eye view of this “transformation from the point of view of execution” advocated by the NSS from a historical perspective.

When the three documents were formulated in 2013, the NDPG proposed the idea of a “Dynamic Joint Defense Force” as a form of defense capability. This was aimed at building a defense capability with a more thorough implementation of the idea of joint operations of the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces, to be carried out seamlessly and dynamically, adapting to situations as they demand. The Dynamic Joint Defense Force was upgraded to the “Multi-domain Defense Force” in the 2018 NDPG to support “new domains” such as space, cyber, and electromagnetic waves. However, be it the Dynamic Joint

Defense Force or the Multi-domain Defense Force, the defense concept is in the same vein. Simply put, it is a “counter-threat/operation-oriented” policy.

Since its formulation in 1976, the former NDPG has long advocated the “Basic Defense Force Concept.” The Basic Defense Force Concept is based on the “beyond-the-threat” theory, which does not assume specific threats for the defense buildup. It is the antithesis of the “required defense force” (=counter-threat theory) that previously existed under the Five-Year Defense Build-up Plan (from the 1st to 4th Defense Build-up Plan), which has been formulated four times since 1957 (it shifted to the NDPG after the 4th Plan).

The first NDPG was formulated in the 1970s, an era of détente despite the Cold War. The reason why the beyond-the-threat theory was picked up was the emphasis on “building a public consensus on defense policy” against such a historical background. Not only that, but by not linking defense capabilities to threats, the intention was also to deflect downward pressure on defense capabilities during détente or the subsequent post-Cold War period.

Another characteristic of the defense concept in postwar Japan is that defense buildup has been emphasized, while operations have been secondary.

Japan has a history of being disarmed and then undergoing rearmament after defeat in WWII. Primarily, we have devoted ourselves to defense buildup. Therefore, there has been a tendency toward a “defense buildup for the sake of defense buildup” concept that is of a different dimension from operations, such as the “limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance” that constitutes the Basic Defense Force Concept. It was difficult to get to an operational discussion on how to concretely use the defense forces developed in this way.

Table: A brief history of the three security documents

Top	(Basic Policy on National Defense)										National Security Strategy (NSS) 2013	NSS 2022	
	Proactive Contribution to Peace												
Middle	(1st 5-year Defense Buildup Plan)	(2nd Plan)	(3rd Plan)	(4th Plan)	National Defense Program Guideline (NDPG) 1976	NDPG 1995	NDPG 2004	NDPG 2010	NDPG 2013	NDPG 2018	National Defense Strategy (NDS) 2022		
	(Required Defense Force)				Basic Defense Force				Multi-functional, Flexible, and Effective Defense Force	Dynamic Defense Force	Dynamic Joint Defense Force	Multi-domain Defense Force	
Bottom					Medium Term Defense Program (MTDP) 1986	MTDP 1991	MTDP 1996	MTDP 2001	MTDP 2005	MTDP 2011	MTDP 2014	MTDP 2019	Defense Buildup Program (DBP) 2023

Source: Created by the author

By contrast, in recent years, emphasis has been placed on the issue of what kind of defense capability is necessary for operations. The seed of this was the “multi-functional, flexible, and effective defense force” that NDPG advocated in 2004 along with the inheritance of the Basic Defense Force Concept. The

background is that there has been a growing need to respond to new threats and various situations, such as terrorism and North Korea's ballistic missiles, and to engage in international peace cooperation activities. Then, in 2010, the NDPG proposed a departure from the Basic Defense Force Concept and the idea of a "Dynamic Defense Force" to replace it. There, emphasis was placed on the operation of defense capabilities, such as seamlessly responding to various situations, including "gray zone" situations as an intermediate between emergency and peacetime.

In other words, we will gradually shift from a Basic Defense Force Concept centered on "beyond-the-threat and emphasis on defense buildup" to the concept of "counter-threat and emphasis on operation," which may be understood as an upgrade along the lines of "Multi-functional, Flexible, and Effective Defense Force → Dynamic Defense Force → Dynamic Joint Defense Force → Multi-domain Defense Force."

Overcoming the legacy of the *détente* period

On the other hand, even after the departure from the Basic Defense Force Concept, threat theory has remained somewhat ambiguous. By contrast, the new NDS states that "Japan needs to [squarely face the grim reality and] fundamentally reinforce Japan's defense capabilities, with a focus on opponent capabilities and new ways of warfare." It can be said that this is a way to move away from the beyond-the-threat and clarify the counter-threat policy.

However, even when it comes to the counter-threat, as an example, China's defense spending is about four times that of Japan. It is impossible for the single country of Japan to have power comparable to China's military power, and it is not clear whether the Japan-US alliance will necessarily come out on top either. Therefore, the new NDS states that "Japan will ensure that opponents fully recognize Japan's intention and capability, do not underestimate Japan, and do not overestimate their own capabilities," thereby deterring invasion against Japan.

In terms of operations, it is becoming increasingly important to keep in mind the means of fighting in the space and cyber domains and counterstriking. There has been a growing awareness of the shift from defense buildup for the sake of defense buildup to defense capability development based on operational requirements.

The new NDS talks about fundamentally strengthening the Multi-domain Defense Force set forth in the 2018 NDPG and further accelerating its efforts. This can be said to aim to clarify and effectuate the counter-threat/operation-oriented line by possessing counterstrike capabilities that were not included in the conventional Multi-domain Defense Force, securing successive combat capabilities such as ammunition and guided munitions that support defense capabilities, and backing them in terms of budget.

Of these, when it comes to counterstrike capabilities, it is difficult to perfectly intercept attacks using ballistic missile defense systems, so alongside a supplementation of this, Japan will partially assume the role of "spear," a role previously assumed to be played by the United States. In particular, the use of stand-off defense capabilities will likely give strategic depth to Japanese defense.

Moreover, the new MTDP presents a defense budget of 43 trillion yen, which is about 1.6 times the amounts of previous MTDPs. As a result, for example, about 15 trillion yen (2.5 times the previous amount) will be allocated to the area of sustainability and resilience. It is said that the defense force mobility rate is less than 50% due to a shortage of parts and such, but it is expected that this will be

corrected. Moreover, transferring the number of members of the Ground Self-Defense Force to joint units and to the Maritime and Air Self-Defense Forces in the MTDP can be said to be a measure based on operational needs, with an awareness of overall optimization rather than partial optimization.

The NDPG and the 1 % cap of GNP for defense budget were both created during the Miki administration period of the *détente* era. It was also a time when the country was deeply divided over defense. Today, on the other hand, polls show high public support for strengthening defense capabilities, so this is becoming the new “consensus.” Time has passed, and it can be said that the time has come to overcome the legacy of the past.

We need to sort out the relationship between the constitution and international law

In addition to the fundamental strengthening of defense capability itself as seen above, I would like to point out two future challenges suggested by new three documents.

Firstly, the discussion over counterstrike capabilities has clarified the importance of sorting out the relationship between the constitution and international law.

Regarding the retention of counterstrike capabilities, the new NSS states that this is “a minimum necessary measure for self-defense.” The Self-Defense Forces can be kept under Article 9 of the constitution, which stipulates the non-maintenance of “land, sea, and air force, as well as other war potential” (*senryoku*), according to the constitutional interpretation that “minimal force necessary for self-defense” is not *senryoku* (1954 government unified opinion). Therefore, when it comes to Japanese national security policy, a “line” still has to be drawn somewhere to mark “within what range the minimal is.” A typical example of this is the interpretation that draws a line between the right of individual self-defense and the right of collective self-defense, disqualifying the latter.

On the other hand, regardless of Japan’s own constitutional rules and interpretations, it is only natural that Japan should abide by international law as a member of the international community and as a member of the United Nations. Even if Japan were to launch a counterstrike, the fact is that we are limited to military objectives bound by international humanitarian law, not to mention the “minimum necessary” of the Japanese constitution. Continuous debate over counterstrike capabilities has focused on what it means to maintain Japan’s unique limitations and constraints (the right of collective self-defense is an inherent right of nations recognized in the UN charter), which are separate from international law. It seems to have been a catalyst for deepening discussions in the future.

A shared perception with the US from peacetime

Secondly, we need to strengthen cooperation with allies and like-minded countries.

To begin with, with regard to the Japan-US alliance, the new NDS states that “To conduct aligned joint response of Japan and the United States in any situation, Japan will further develop coordination functions centered on the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM).” The ACM was created based on the 2015 Guidelines (Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation), and it is expected that the Self-Defense Forces and the US military will smoothly share information and coordinate policies from peacetime. In particular, coordination between Japan and the US is expected to become increasingly important in the operation of counterstrike capabilities.

Also noteworthy in this context is the creation of the “Joint Headquarters” as specified in the NDS. The Joint Headquarters itself is intended to help “unify command of GSDF, MSDF, and ASDF” in order to

“reinforce effectiveness of joint operational posture.” On the other hand, for example, a report released by the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS) in July 2022 proposes the establishment of a “Japan-US Combined Command” and identifies the establishment of a joint headquarters on the Japanese side as a prerequisite for such an arrangement.

Unlike NATO and the US-South Korea alliance, the Japan-US alliance does not have a combined command but has a system of coordination based on the premise of command “parallelism.” Even if a Japan-US combined command is not established, the “Joint Headquarters” on the Japanese side will serve as a counterpart to the US Indo-Pacific Command (Hawaii) and other institutions, playing a role in further strengthening the coordination mechanisms between the US and Japan as well as the existing coordination between US and Japanese command organizations.

The NDS also mentions that Japan and the US will “align their respective strategies.” Strategies that should be reconciled between Japan and the US include an “exit strategy” in case of an emergency. In this regard, the new NSS specifies for the first time that “If by any chance a threat should reach Japan, Japan will disrupt and defeat the threat and minimize the damage caused,” followed by “and bring it to an end in a manner favorable to protecting its national interests.”

However, even within the same camp, it is not easy to share exit strategies. Even in the Russian-Ukrainian war, it has been pointed out that the level of enthusiasm differs between Ukraine’s backers. In the Korean and Vietnam Wars, too, in the final stages of the wars, there was a disagreement between South Korea and South Vietnam, who insisted on completely defeating their opponents, and the US, who shifted toward an armistice. What will Japan and the US defend during an emergency, and how much are they willing to sacrifice to achieve it? A shared perception on this point from peacetime is needed.

Strengthening trilateral cooperation between Japan, the US, and South Korea is essential

Next is cooperation between Japan and the US as well as South Korea. The Japan-US Alliance and the US-South Korea Alliance have historically been extremely closely related through the “Far East Clause” of the Japan-US Security Treaty and other factors. The NSS reaffirms South Korea’s “geopolitical” importance, also mentioned in the former NSS. In response to this, the defense strategy calls for strengthening cooperation among Japan, the US, and South Korea through joint exercises among the three.

At the same time, South Korea’s reaction to the three documents has been mixed. South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that prior consultation and agreement with South Korea is necessary if Japan exercises counterstrike capabilities in a way that has a significant impact on the security of the Korean Peninsula or South Korea’s national interests. However, in an emergency situation where Japan is forced to exercise counterstrike capabilities against North Korea, for example, there is a possibility that the response will not be in time if we suddenly hold prior consultations and reach an agreement with South Korea. On the other hand, cooperation between Japan, the US, and South Korea in this phase is important. Therefore, the “Joint Headquarters” is expected to build relationships not only with Hawaii but also with the US-South Korean sides.

It is the NSS’s current perspective that “[we are now] standing at the crossroads of ushering in either a world of hope or a world of adversity and distrust.” It is no exaggeration to say that the extent to which the national security policy can be practically transformed in the next five to ten years will determine the future of Japan.

(The views expressed here are the author's own and do not represent or reflect those of the National Institute for Defense Studies.)

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CHUJIWA Yasuaki, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, National Institute for Defense Studies

Completed doctoral course at Osaka University Graduate School and earned his Ph.D. in International Public Policy from the University. After serving as Assistant Councilor, Cabinet Secretariat (National Security and Crisis Management), he assumed his current position. During this time, he was a visiting scholar at Columbia University. His publications include *Taishitachi no Sengo Nichibei Kankei* (Ambassadors' postwar Japan-U.S. relations), *Senso wa Ikani Shuketsushitaka* (How Wars Ended, winner of Ishibashi Tanzan Prize) and *Sengo Nihon no Anzenhoshō* (Postwar Japan's national security)
