



After the Panzers, the Samurai Have Returned: Japan to Become the 3rd Country in Military Spending

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In recent years, Germany has also brought defense back to the center of the political agenda, openly speaking of a “turning point” and accelerating investments, [industrial programs](#) and [operational commitments](#) to regain readiness and strategic weight. This dynamic reflects a more unstable international climate and the perception that deterrence, after decades of caution, has returned as a political as well as military requirement. Within this global trend, however, **the most marked transformation - in speed and scope - is that of Tokyo:** Japan is recalibrating doctrine, budgets, and tools, aiming to become a leading player in spending and capabilities in the Indo-Pacific theater.

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Record Budget: Numbers, “Third in the World” Goal, and Sustainability

Japan has embarked on a rearmament trajectory that is no longer episodic, but structural. The Cabinet has approved **a record defense budget plan exceeding 9,000 billion yen** for the next fiscal year 2026, which will begin in April. **The increase is close to 10%** compared to 2025 and marks the fourth year of the five-year program designed to **bring spending to 2% of GDP.**

In the government's narrative, the maneuver is “the minimum necessary” because the country faces the most severe and complex security context since the post-war period. At the same time, the executive insists on a politically crucial point: the increase in allocations would not change Japan's identity as a “peace-loving nation.” It is a formula that seeks to hold together historical memory, constitutional constraints, and a public opinion that, although more sensitive to regional threats, remains attentive to the risk of unchecked militarization.

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The most newsworthy aspect is the international projection. If the five-year plan is confirmed and fully funded, **Tokyo is on track to become the third country in the world in military spending, behind the United States and China.** It is not just a matter of ranking: it means multiplying the ability to sustain stocks, logistics, maintenance, training, and therefore **a credible presence over time.**

However, there remains a knot that can slow the race: **economic sustainability.** To finance the growth of military spending, the government is also relying on fiscal measures, such as tax increases on corporations and tobacco and a plan to increase income tax in perspective. But in a country with demographic pressure and delicate public accounts, **political continuity and the solidity of the covers will be decisive.**

Missiles and “Counterattack”: The Doctrine Changes, Distance Matters

If the budget is the photograph, the strategy is the film. The heart of the new spending cycle is the idea of **strengthening counterattack capability** and coastal defense, focusing on cruise missiles and long-range systems. Politically, it is **a significant break**: for decades, the Japanese posture has been interpreted as strictly limited to immediate defense; the ongoing evolution, however, aims to give Tokyo the ability to **strike enemy targets at a distance** as deterrence and as an option in case of attack.

In the security strategy adopted in 2022, China is identified as the main strategic challenge, and a more incisive role for the Self-Defense Forces within the alliance with the United States is envisaged. The new budget fits into that framework: not only defending national space but doing so with tools that make an attack or coercion more costly – and therefore less likely.

Among the most concrete items is the investment for the updated Type-12 land-ship missiles, developed and enhanced nationally, with an extended range of about a thousand kilometers. Geography also matters: **deployment is accelerated in the Southwest**, an area considered strategic because it is closer to friction points in the East China Sea and maritime communication lines. **Anticipating operational deadlines** means, for Tokyo, reducing “windows of vulnerability” perceived as increasingly risky.

This step inevitably fuels an internal and international debate. On one hand, the government reiterates continuity with the pacifist and defensive line; on the other, **the availability of long-range capabilities changes the external perception of the country**, because it broadens the spectrum of military options and thus the deterrence message.

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Drones, Industry, Alliances: Deterrence is Also Built with Technology and Supply Chain

Japanese rearmament is not just about missiles. A significant part of the new posture involves unmanned systems: **air, marine, and underwater drones** intended for surveillance, reconnaissance, and coastal defense. Here two logics converge: modern warfare – increasingly based on sensors, persistence, and distributed platforms – and a structural Japanese constraint, namely the difficulty of maintaining large personnel in an aging country with declining

demographics. In this perspective, **unmanned is a multiplier**: more presence and more coverage with less personnel.

The plan foresees a “massive” deployment of drones by the next programmatic deadlines, within a system that aims to become operational in the second half of the decade. To speed up the timeline, Japan is also considering an initial phase with imports while working to strengthen production and industrial autonomy.

The geopolitical context remains the main driver. **Tensions with China have increased** amid naval exercises, carrier activities, and episodes that Tokyo interprets as highly escalatory. In Japanese political debate, the Taiwan scenario also appears more frequently: the idea that a crisis in the Strait could drag the region into a dynamic that would directly involve Japan's security interests.

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Finally, there is the industry as the third leg of the strategy. Tokyo is pushing to strengthen the defense industry, also with joint developments with allied countries and a more pragmatic approach to exports after the easing of restrictions in recent years. Among the symbolic programs is **the project with the United Kingdom and Italy for a new generation fighter expected by 2035**, accompanied by research on drones with artificial intelligence that can operate in teams with piloted aircraft. In summary, **Japan is building a “layered” deterrence**: higher budgets, long-distance capabilities, unmanned systems, industrial cooperations, and operational alliances. The challenge in the coming years will be to transform financial acceleration into real and sustainable capabilities, keeping together internal consensus, political constraints, and a regional environment that, for Tokyo, appears more competitive and less predictable each month.

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