

Coastal Defense in Japan's Southwestern Islands: Force Posture Options for Securing Japan's Southern Flank

BY ERIC SAYERS

Largely as a response to the growing military capabilities and focus of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Japan's 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) put the Nation's southwestern islands at the center of its strategic focus.ⁱ "It has now become the highest priority . . . to figure out how to reinforce the defense of Japan's southwestern region along this first island chain," Japanese Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto said in a recent interview.ⁱⁱ One's typical mental map of Japan is challenged to visualize the islands, more specifically known as the Ryukyus, as stretching southward beyond Okinawa. In fact, there are twenty islands that lie south of Okinawa, known as the Sakishimas, that pepper the waters of the East China Sea for roughly three hundred nautical miles to within a hundred miles of the coast of Taiwan. Governed as part of Okinawa Prefecture, the Sakishimas include the contested Senkaku Islands (also known as the Diaoyu in the PRC) and the main islands of Miyako, Ishigaki, Iriomote, and Yonaguni.ⁱⁱⁱ

How Japan chooses to adapt its forces in the Ryukyus and East China Sea to the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) actions in these waters is a central question for defense planners in Tokyo in the decade ahead.^{iv} While the defense investments called for in the Mid-Term Defense Program (2011-2015) budget have initiated this process, the specific defense posture Japan will choose to adopt for this task remains unresolved. Is permanently stationing first-response Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) units on one or several of the islands sufficient? Can Japan rely on its planned fleet to conduct sea-control deterrence missions in its territorial waters? If the PRC continues to become more assertive in the East China Sea, what shape would a more muscular Self-Defense Force (SDF)

posture take in the Ryukyus? What role will the U.S.-Japan alliance have in this effort? In short, given the PRC's focus on these islands, Japan cannot afford to stand still; Tokyo must adopt a balanced strategy that can provide an effective level of deterrence while also taking into consideration the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance in this effort and the limitations of its own budget realities.

For answers to these questions, we turn to naval theorist Geoffrey Till and his work *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty First Century*. Till outlines the various options available to states for defending their coastal territories against maritime power projection. Specifically, Till identifies four elements that he considers to be interlinked, and argues that most nations have used a combination of them for littoral defense.^v The first is deterrence. Command of the sea, a state's first line of defense, often also works as a deterrent against an invasion force. "Few would try to send major invasion forces through waters commanded by the defending fleet," Till argues. A second element of a coastal defense is an indirect forward defense.

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Because true command of the sea is elusive, this approach recommends building an accurate picture of the maritime environment to detect an approaching enemy, discover the enemy's intentions, and reserve the ability to take offensive action. Till calls his third element

Eric Sayers is the Defense Policy Advisor to a U.S. Congressman on the House Armed Services Committee. He previously was an SPF Fellow for U.S.-Japan relations at the Pacific Forum CSIS. The views expressed here are his alone. The author thanks Abraham Denmark and Michael Auslin for their thoughtful review of this piece.

direct offshore defense. If a fleet or small force is able to approach a coastline, “it is necessary to have a final line of defense, just off the coast” comprised of both maritime and land forces to repel an amphibious operation. Some characteristics of such a defense include coordinated strikes by fast attack craft, air strikes, and mine warfare. The final element is direct defense ashore. Till argues that even the strongest naval power may still feel compelled to guard its shorelines with coastal fortifications, guns, and reserve land forces behind them.

Based on Till’s approaches, this paper hypothesizes three strategies for organizing Japan’s security policy and posturing its defense capabilities along its Ryukyu archipelago. Each approach differs in its financial costs, domestic and regional political implications, reliance on the U.S.-Japan alliance, and balance between Japan’s capacity to conduct sea-control and littoral defense. No single element is a panacea for Japan’s challenges. The course Tokyo chooses will likely reflect a variation of these three strategies. This paper neither advocates for nor seeks to rule out any particular approach. Rather, this exercise has been initiated in the hope of instigating a more public discussion about the difficult defense policy choices Japan must confront as it turns its strategic gaze southward.

The “Trip-Wire” Deterrence Strategy

The first approach Tokyo may choose to adopt is a modest one that would emphasize a continued focus on sea-control and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities for Till’s “indirect forward defense” and a small number of island-deployed ground units armed with surface-to-ship missiles for “direct defense ashore.” This option, therefore, would largely have Tokyo proceed along the trajectory of defense planning already called for in the 2010 NDPG. Specifically, the NDPG directs the SDF to “permanently station the minimum

necessary (author emphasis) units on off-shore islands where the SDF is not currently stationed. Also, the SDF would enhance its capability to respond to attacks on those islands and ensure the security of the surrounding sea and air space by securing bases, mobility, transport capacity and effective countermeasures necessary for conducting operations against such attacks.”^{vi}

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The minimal nature of this approach was summarized by one senior-level bureaucrat at the Japanese Ministry of Defense (MOD), who described the planned deployment of GSDF units to Yonaguni island in the near-term as a “political” message designed to signal Tokyo’s commitment to defending the islands, while retaining the ability to slowly build up its capacity as events warranted.^{vii} The deployment of GSDF units to Yonaguni, therefore, appears to be fashioned more as a “trip-wire” deterrent so that hostile forces cannot sneak in the back door of Japan’s archipelago without encountering resistance. This approach, therefore, would have

Japan continue to rely heavily on the U.S.-Japan alliance, both during peacetime to provide a level of deterrence and in a conflict escalation scenario.

No new U.S. defense capabilities would likely be called for under a “Trip Wire” strategy. However, a review of the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation that focuses on “China’s maritime activities,” as is now being considered, would help to strengthen deterrence.^{viii} Joint

exercises that focus on coastal defense and amphibious operations would also likely be a major focus.



Is such an approach achievable? More than anything, the modest steps proposed in the NDPG provide a necessary intellectual thrust for Japanese defense planning and signal to the PRC and other states Japan’s seriousness about defending the Ryukyus. Resourcing this strategy is also within the bounds of Tokyo’s recent defense spending rate over the past several decades, making it both affordable and less provocative. Moreover, the more modest expenditure of resources called for would give Japan the flexibility to continue its focus on other international efforts, including its counter-piracy mission off the Horn of Africa. Finally, this approach would allow Tokyo to cultivate internal political support for a military presence on the islands while carefully giving Japan the flexibility to adjust to the PRC’s buildup.

At the same time, a “trip-wire” deterrent may not be sufficient given the PRC’s expanding capabilities and more aggressive behavior. First, by only deploying a small contingent of GSDF forces to Yonaguni Island, and not taking steps to build up defenses on the larger islands of Miyako or Ishigaki, Japan may not be going far enough. This is compounded by the fact that Tokyo currently has a very limited sea/air lift capability that could prevent it from rapidly moving GSDF troops around the islands in a crisis. Second, the ability of Japan’s Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) to conduct sea control missions with its bulky fleet of destroyers against, for instance, a



larger surface fleet of PLA Navy destroyers and stealthy Houbei-class fast attack ship armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, may be in doubt. Finally, Tokyo’s limited (and undefended) ISR and defense emplacements in the Ryukyus are exposed to strikes from the PRC’s short- and

medium-range ballistic missiles (SRBM, MRBM respectively). In short, while Tokyo may be signaling its intention to defend the Ryukyus, a minimal commitment of capabilities to this effort could raise questions about the credibility of this approach as PRC capabilities and activity in these waters continue to expand.

The Asymmetric “Mosquito Fleet” Strategy

A second approach would have the Japan MOD harness asymmetric military advantages that could target and impose further costs on PLA forces operating in the Ryukyu littorals. Such a posture combines Till’s “direct offshore defense” and “direct defense ashore” approaches. This options takes inspiration from the writings of Britain’s First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jacky Fisher, who wrote about the asymmetric advantages of the diesel submarine, and the Soviet Union’s so-called “New School” of naval thinking from the 1920s, which emphasized diffusing Russian naval strength from a few larger units to a host of smaller ones.^{ix}

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A coastal defense strategy of this nature emphasizes spreading force structure across a diverse array of smaller platforms. With modern technology, Japan could construct a sort of “mosquito fleet,” with an integrated network of fast attack craft armed with missiles, mine warfare capabilities, diesel attack submarines, shore-launched missiles, and attack helicopters and/or tactical aircraft. For instance, a modern fleet of fast attack craft armed with anti-ship missiles, similar to Japan’s Hayabusa-class fast attack craft, and diesel attack submarines could operate out of ports in Miyako or Ishigaki. Ashore, deployed GSDF troops with surface-to-surface missiles (such as Japan’s mobile Type-88^x) and surface-to-air missiles could operate alongside attack helicopters like the AH-64D Apache Longbow or tactical aircraft with vertical

and/or short take-off and landing (VTOL) as part of a layered defense. Japan’s Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) could also provide fixed wing aircraft, operating from Okinawa, to conduct air supremacy and maritime strike missions.

A SDF mosquito fleet could unleash intensive, multi-dimensional attacks against hostile PLA Navy expeditionary forces, giving Japan a distinct advantage inside the “green waters” of the Ryukyu littorals and contributing a potentially greater deterrent effect.^{xi} This strategy would also allow Japan to avoid the hefty costs of seeking to match PLA Navy investments, instead focusing on procuring a distinct set of relatively cheaper asymmetric platforms for the littorals. The net effect of this could be for the U.S. and Japan to create a bifurcated set of missions for Ryukyu defense, where the U.S. is tasked with Till’s “indirect forward defense,” and contributing ISR and sea-control platforms, and Japan diverts its attention and resources towards a mosquito fleet in the littorals.

A mosquito fleet approach would also present a number of challenges for SDF forces. First, to be effective, it would demand close integration between the Maritime, Ground, and Air Self-Defense Forces. Japan, like all other modern militaries, has struggled to develop unity of command across its services. A mosquito fleet would call on the ASDF and MSDF to transport GSDF soldiers between islands or GSDF soldiers to coordinate strikes with the MSDF against surface combatants, for instance. The 2010 NDPG seeks to begin the process to remedy this shortfall, emphasizing a need to build a “structure which is capable of integrated and effective response by three services in countering attacks against island areas [...]” In April 2011 the SDF stood up a Joint Task Force to help begin to address this objective. However, the process of building a joint culture will be an arduous one that will take years if not decades to realize. Second, a mosquito fleet represents an unorthodox approach to defense planning that would challenge the MSDF’s cultural affinity for large surface combatants. Although the MSDF remains cognizant of the role smaller assets could play—evidenced by Japan’s development of fast attack craft to counteract North Korean

spy craft in the late 1990s—a reorientation of this magnitude would require strong leadership within the MSDF and Japan’s maritime community if it were to be successful.^{xii} Third, because this approach would divert resources towards the specific platforms called for earlier, it would leave fewer resources for Japan to keep pace with the PRC’s heavier, sea-control platforms. This prioritization of investments

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would place Japanese forces at a disadvantage as they wrestle for sea-control along the sea lanes of the East China Sea and in the broader maritime domains of northeast Asia. A potential outcome could be an integrated U.S.-Japan strategy with distinct missions, where the U.S. bears responsibility for Till’s “indirect forward defense” and contributing ISR and sea-control platforms, and Japan diverts its attention and resources towards a mosquito fleet in the littorals. Finally, the quiet islands of the Ryukyus, made up mostly of fishers, farmers, and a tourism industry, could oppose such a focused buildup of capabilities. While mayors from Miyako, Ishigaki, and Yonaguni have thus far been favorable to a military presence, these elected officials could change their stance if a buildup has a large impact on the daily life of the island’s inhabitants.



The Comprehensive “Area-Denial” Strategy

A final option available to Japan is a more comprehensive strategy aimed at constructing an area-denial (AD) zone in the Ryukyu island chain. This robust option would emphasize all four of Till’s coastal defense approaches while also seeking to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance. Specifically, a Japanese AD strategy in the Ryukyus would be able to detect and hold at risk mobile targets in the oceanic “blue water” approaches to the islands while also defending against amphibious maneuvers in the “green water” of the littorals. In short, this would require both a powerful fleet for sea-control missions as well as a capability akin to the mosquito fleet in the littorals.

A Japanese area-denial strategy would look first to control the surrounding sea and air space of the East China Sea. This would necessitate building accurate maritime domain awareness and retaining the capacity to conduct sea-control operations. The Mid-Term Defense Program gives priority to expanding steady-state ISR capabilities. The U.S. could be called on to play a large role in providing ISR through both deployment of the Broad Area Maritime Surveillance (BAMS) platform and perhaps also a squad of P-8 Poseidon multimission maritime aircraft to Okinawa. Alongside this effort, Japan would have to make further efforts to deploy both active defense, like the Patriot PAC-3, and enhance passive defenses, such as the hardening of runways and hangars, to defend against Chinese SRBM and MRBM strikes in Okinawa and the Sakishimas. To sustain an effective sea control fleet, Tokyo would need to be able, as Mahan recommends, to “fight, with reasonable chances of success, the largest force likely to be brought against it” in the region. Therefore, in addition to the planned procurement of destroyers, submarines, and maritime patrol aircraft, and extending the life of other platforms, Japan would also need to consider further actions. This could mean procuring additional advanced Atago-class destroyers, a new generation of attack submarines, or outfitting its future 22DDH helicopter destroyer with the F-35B short takeoff and landing (STOVL) fighter for maritime strike operations. If it desired to go

further, Tokyo could consider procuring land attack cruise missile (LACM), similar to the Taiwanese Hsiung-Feng (“Brave Wind”), capable of striking the PLA Navy’s East Sea Fleet. It might also consider unmanned vehicles that could provide more range and persistence for both ISR and strike missions.

The second tier of a Ryukyu area-denial strategy rests in the green waters of the littorals where Japan aims to defend against hostile naval patrols and amphibious maneuvers that could threaten its territory. Some Japanese defense analysts have referred to the theoretical idea to construct a “no-go” zone along the Ryukyus as building a “South-Western Wall.” Like the mosquito fleet strategy, an AD strategy to build a “South-Western Wall” would deploy a diffused array of platforms that could strike PRC forces along multiple axes. First, procurement consideration could be given to a modern Fast Missile Craft (FMC). One FMC Japan could consider is being built for the Egyptian Navy by Halter Marine in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The Ambassador Mk III has a stealth signature and is designed to perform coastal patrol, surveillance, interdiction, surface strike and battle group support missions. Second, an air asset such as an attack helicopter armed with hellfire missiles would offer another means for striking amphibious maritime targets operating from the littoral. Third, a premium would have to be placed on air and sea mobility for resupply and reinforcement. Additional CH-47J Chinooks supported by V-22 Ospreys could rapidly help to build up combat power throughout the islands. Tokyo might also consider the Joint High Speed Vessels (JHSV) as an affordable option for quickly moving troops and supplies around the Ryukyus. Enhanced mobility is an area the U.S.-Japan alliance could also place a greater emphasis on in terms of both force structure and future training exercises. Fourth, Tokyo could deploy an array of fixed and mobile Coastal Defense Cruise Missiles (CDCM) like the Type-88 along the archipelago. In the future, Japan might also consider the rotational deployment of U.S. Army units to the Ryukyu islands outfitted with theater-missile defense capabilities and/or mobile CDCMs. Finally, Tokyo could consider offensive mine warfare (MiW) capabilities for

blocking access to the Ryukyu straits and frustrating the advance of PLA forces.

An AD strategy's greatest strength is the layered support it provides to Ryukyu defense in both the blue and green waters. PLA Navy combatants would have to contend with a powerful SDF "no-go" zone that would only grow more lethal as PLA forces approached the Ryukyus. This would be supported by an integrated U.S. partner that could contribute in traditional ways like ISR and sea-control, or more robust ways such as deploying U.S. Army forces along the archipelago. The area-denial strategy would significantly enhance deterrence in the island chain.

However, the procurement cost of this approach would be substantial. At the least, it would go beyond Japan's commitment to investing only one percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in its defense. Whether Japan would be able to sustain such levels of funding or keep pace with PLA modernization is also in question. It appears that it would take a substantial shift in Tokyo's threat perception to initiate an increase of one or two percent of its GDP in defense spending. Moreover, it would force Japan to "get back to basics" in defense planning, as some have argued, and focus its attention on its home waters instead of contributing to international peacekeeping, counter-piracy, and other missions outside Northeast Asia, which Japan has increasingly prioritized in the past decade.^{xiii} Like with the mosquito fleet approach, Tokyo would also be pressed to consider the impact a long-term military presence could have on the Ryukyu population. Barring a consistent and visible threat from PRC forces, could a long-term military presence be sustained? Finally, a buildup of this nature would likely raise concerns in Beijing or amongst Japan's neighbors, creating diplomatic challenges for Tokyo and deflecting attention away from other international efforts.

Conclusion

The Trip Wire, Mosquito Fleet, and Area-Denial strategies offer Tokyo a range of options that balance defense postures and federal

expenditures. Which strategy or combination of strategies Japan ultimately chooses will depend on a series of variables, including the domestic political situation in Japan, the degree of Beijing's assertiveness in the East China Sea, and Japan's fiscal outlook, among others.

Japan's defense budget limitations, its competing national security priorities, and the continued presence of U.S. forces should all act to restrain a sudden comprehensive Japanese defense buildup. Thus far, Japan has set itself on a modest course to begin to slowly build up its island-defense capabilities while retaining its blue water strength and continuing to rely heavily on the U.S.-Japan alliance. In the near-term, this will allow Tokyo to carefully adjust to its "defense vacuum" in the Ryukyus in a manner that is both fiscally and diplomatically prudent. But should the PRC's capabilities and assertive posture continue to grow, including, for instance, more regular patrols through the Sakashimas, Tokyo may seek to bolster its capabilities further. Japan's first and most probable response to growing Chinese assertiveness would be to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance and its focus on the Ryukyus. If Tokyo were to take further steps to supplement its defensive capabilities, it appears most likely it would do so by investing in a balanced set of capabilities that would enhance deterrence while remaining affordable. This could include ISR assets like unmanned vehicles, mobility assets like Chinooks or the JHSV, and more asymmetric capabilities like CDCMs and missile defense batteries in places like Miyako and Ishigaki. Robust defense expenditures appear only likely in the event of a considerable shift in Tokyo's security outlook. In such a case, Japan could look to acquire offensive mine warfare (MiW) capabilities, a new fast attack craft, and/or cruise missiles for anti-ship and land attack strike missions.

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What is clear is that the 2010 NDPG, much like the Obama administration talk of a “pivot/rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific, has served to focus the time, energy, and resources of the Japanese bureaucracy on a particular set of questions. This is a positive first step in the process of evaluating security needs and determining appropriate adaptive measures. Japanese decision-makers, defense planners, and strategic thinkers must now weigh the strategic variables they are faced with in an effort to carefully build a “South-Western Wall” of deterrence that is both credible and affordable.

Notes

ⁱ Government of Japan, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2011 and Beyond* (Tokyo: Security Council and Cabinet, 17 December 2010). Government of Japan documents refer to these islands as “offshore islands” or, more specifically, the “southwestern islands.” Also see Eric Sayers, “Defending Japan’s Southern Flank,” *Defense News*, 7 February 2011. Also see Eric Sayers, “The ‘Consequent Interest’ of Japan’s Southwestern Islands: A Mahanian Appraisal of the Ryukyu Archipelago,” *Naval War College Review*, Spring 2013 (forthcoming).

ⁱⁱ Chico Harlan, “With China’s rise, Japan shifts to the right,” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ The author traveled to Miyako-jima in December 2010; see Eric Sayers, “A Day Trip to Miyako-jima,” *Information Dissemination*, 18 January 2011, www.informationdissemination.net.

^{iv} The author is indebted to the previous work of Dr. James Holmes and Dr. Toshi Yoshihara on the general subject. See James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “The Japanese Archipelago through Chinese Eyes,” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, no. 16 (5 August 2010), and Holmes and Yoshihara, “Ryukyu Chain in China’s Island Strategy,” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 10, no. 19 (10 September 2010).

^v Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide to the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 204-208.

^{vi} *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2011 and Beyond*.

^{vii} Japan Ministry of Defense officials, author interviews, Tokyo, Japan, December 2010.

^{viii} Koji Sonoda, “Japan, US agree to look at revising defense pact.” *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 11, 2012.

^{ix} Till, pp.206-207.

^x Japan reportedly has 4 Type-88 regiments. Each regiment has 4 mobile launchers that can carry 6 surface-to-ship missiles. Each missile has a range of approximately 150 kilometers.

^{xi} For a maritime classification of “blue,” “green,” and “brown” water see Robert Rubel, “Talking About Sea Control,” *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2010, pp. 44-46.

^{xii} Leadership of this nature has become more readily apparent in Taiwan (formally known as the Republic of China or ROC) as the symmetrical balance between the PRC and ROC has shifted dramatically in the past decade. ROC officials are now more inclined to frame defense decisions in

terms of their “asymmetric” advantage. Procurement decisions also appear to have been affected, as is evidenced by the decision to develop the *Hsin-Hai* “Swift Sea” Missile Corvettes. Also see James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Defending the Strait: Taiwan's Naval Strategy in the 21st Century* (The Jamestown Foundation, 2011).

^{xiii} 17th annual Japan-U.S. Security Seminar, San Francisco, California, Japan Institute for International Affairs and Pacific Forum CSIS, March 25-26, 2011.