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Japan's Maritime "Gray-Zone" Security Strategy: New Trends and China's Response

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Executive Summary

As China's overall national strength continues to grow and the strategic environment in its neighborhood changes, Japan has cited maritime "gray-zone" threats to target China and has continued to conduct related activities in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. Japan's security strategy adjustment has moved beyond isolated incidents of friction in maritime law enforcement and expanded into multiple dimensions, including top-level strategic design, force deployment, discourse construction, and alliance networks. It has exhibited several new trends: new security rules are breaking down traditional boundaries between the military and law enforcement; budgetary allocations are increasing and equipment systems are being upgraded; public opinion warfare and lawfare are being employed in tandem; and alliance networks are being further deepened. These developments not only continue to narrow the space available for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests but also pose systemic challenges to China's maritime security. On the basis of an analysis of the new trends in Japan's adjustment of its maritime "gray-zone" security strategy, this article assesses the principal risks posed to China's maritime security and proposes corresponding policy recommendations.

➤ Key Points

- **The adjustment of Japan's maritime "gray-zone" security strategy is first reflected in top-level strategic restructuring.** Through institutional arrangements such as the "Three Documents," the "Control Guidelines," and the JSDF Joint Operations Command (JJOC), Japan is gradually removing, at the legal level, the command barriers between the Self-Defense Forces and the Japan Coast Guard, thereby enabling new security rules to break down traditional boundaries between the military and law enforcement.

- **Japan continues to increase its defense budget and upgrade its equipment systems.** Its defense spending has continued to rise, while its defense capabilities have been strengthened in such areas as stand-off defense capabilities, integrated air and missile defense capabilities, unmanned defense capabilities, and cross-domain operation capabilities. The development of Japan's maritime security capabilities has accelerated markedly.
- **Japan is working to construct a discursive framework that serves its maritime "gray-zone" activities.** Through the manipulation of public opinion and legal interpretation, Japan maliciously distorts China's lawful patrols and routine law-enforcement operations to safeguard its maritime rights and interests, characterizing them as attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force. It also seeks to loosen constraints on its own military activities by promoting ambiguous interpretations of the rules of the international law of the sea.
- **Japan is aligning itself more closely with the U.S.-led Western camp and promoting the formation of a multilateral maritime coalition.** With the Japan–U.S. alliance as its strategic fulcrum, Japan is expanding its cooperation network and promoting the involvement in Indo-Pacific maritime affairs of mechanisms involving the United States, Japan, India, and Australia; the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea; the United States, Japan, and the Philippines; and Japan and the European Union.
- **Japan's adjustment of its maritime security strategy is creating multiple risks for China's maritime security.** Its principal effects include the constriction of China's maritime space, escalating difficulties in safeguarding China's maritime rights and interests, and intensified geopolitical risks. It may also accelerate the regional arms race and lead to increasingly interconnected risks across the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea.

➤ Policy Recommendations

- **China should maintain strategic composure and adhere to the basic principle of engaging in competition without allowing relations to rupture.** It should clarify the hierarchy of Japan's strategic objectives, prevent localized friction from affecting the overall situation, and avoid allowing reactive tactical responses to erode China's strategic room for maneuver.

- **China should deepen diplomatic engagement and establish multilevel mechanisms for maritime dialogue and crisis management.** It should enhance strategic mutual trust with Southeast Asian countries through cooperation in non-traditional security fields and use multilateral platforms to advocate lawful efforts to safeguard maritime rights and interests in accordance with relevant rules and the principles of fairness and justice.
- **China should strengthen capability building and improve its comprehensive capacity to safeguard maritime rights and interests and respond across multiple domains.** It should improve the coordination mechanism involving the military, law-enforcement agencies, and civilian actors, strengthen maritime domain awareness, accelerate the digital and intelligent modernization of China Coast Guard equipment, and improve the preservation of evidence collected at the scene during law-enforcement operations.
- **China should improve legal support and strengthen the legal basis and application of rules for safeguarding its maritime rights and interests.** It should further develop the supporting institutional framework for the Coast Guard Law of the People's Republic of China, actively participate in rulemaking under the international law of the sea, and strengthen comparative research on the domestic maritime legislation of relevant countries.
- **China should shape its international image and strengthen its capacity for international communication and for shaping international public opinion.** It should shift from "passive defense" to proactive international communication and use think-tank reports, media engagement, multilateral forums, and other channels to reveal how Japan's maritime "gray-zone" activities infringe upon China's sovereignty and undermine regional stability.

Introduction

In recent years, China's overall national strength has increased across multiple dimensions. This has not only raised potential concerns among status quo powers such as the United States but has also been invoked by some neighboring countries as a pretext for strengthening their own military capabilities. Citing maritime "gray-zone" threats, the Japanese government has targeted China and accelerated adjustments to its security strategy across multiple dimensions, including top-level strategic design, force deployment, discourse construction, and alliance networks, displaying unprecedented new trends and characteristics. At the same time, Japan has frequently interfered with China's law-enforcement activities in waters such as the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait and has engaged in stigmatizing publicity concerning China's normal scientific research activities, seriously infringing upon China's territorial sovereignty and undermining the security environment in China's neighborhood. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing the new trends in the adjustment of Japan's maritime "gray-zone" security strategy, assessing the risks posed to China, and proposing relevant countermeasures, with the aim of providing a reference for China's efforts to optimize its maritime security strategy.

New Trends in Japan's Adjustment of Its Maritime "Gray-Zone" Security Strategy

The "gray zone" refers to a particular arena of strategic contestation situated between the binary states of war and peace and characterized primarily by competitive interaction.¹ The maritime "gray-zone" activities undertaken by Japan, as discussed in this article, refer mainly to its relevant activities in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea.

1. Top-Level Strategic Restructuring: New Security Rules Are Breaking Down Traditional Boundaries Between the Military and Law Enforcement

For a long time, constrained by Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan and Article 25 of the Japan Coast Guard Act, Japan deliberately maintained an appearance of "demilitarization"

1 Han Haojie and Jin Xin, "Alliance and Partner Coordination in U.S. Maritime 'Gray-Zone' Competition with China" [in Chinese], *Pacific Journal*, No. 12 (2025), p. 76.

in maritime law enforcement. However, as World War II recedes further into history and international competition intensifies, the Japanese government has amended a series of laws and regulations and, through institutional reinterpretation, blurred the conditions and boundaries governing its use of force. On December 16, 2022, the Kishida Cabinet adopted the National Security Strategy of Japan, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program, collectively known as the "Three Documents."² The National Security Strategy of Japan explicitly calls for the promotion of maritime security and the strengthening of maritime law-enforcement capabilities, while identifying China, North Korea, and Russia as posing security threats to Japan in the Indo-Pacific region.³ On April 28, 2023, the Japanese government finalized the "Control Guidelines," under which, in an emergency involving an armed attack against Japan by another country or a threat to Japan's survival, the prime minister may, pursuant to Article 80 of the Self-Defense Forces Act, order the minister of defense to exercise command and control over the Japan Coast Guard. This marks Japan's gradual removal, at the legal level, of the command barriers between the Self-Defense Forces and the Japan Coast Guard. Legislation establishing the JSDF Joint Operations Command (JJOC) was passed by Japan's House of Councillors in May 2024, and the command was formally inaugurated in March 2025. Its principal mission is to exercise centralized command over the operations of the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces in peacetime and to coordinate joint operations with the United States.⁴ To date, the command has conducted defense cooperation and exchanges with the United States, France, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, and other countries.

2. Strengthening Force Deployment: Increased Budgetary Allocations and Upgraded Equipment Systems

With regard to budgetary increases, the Defense Buildup Program specifies that total defense expenditure over the five fiscal years from FY2023 to FY2027 will amount to approximately 43 trillion yen, with the total value of contracts for new projects undertaken under the program reaching 43.5 trillion yen. As of the FY2026 draft budget, funding had

2 Ministry of Defense of Japan, "National Security Strategy," "National Defense Strategy," and "Defense Buildup Program" [in Japanese], <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/index.html> (accessed June 5, 2026).

3 Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, "National Security Strategy" [in Japanese], December 16, 2022, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/national_security_strategy_2022_pamphlet-ja.pdf (accessed June 5, 2026).

4 Liu Jieqiu, "Japan Approves the Establishment of a Joint Operations Command" [in Chinese], Xinhua, May 13, 2024, https://www.news.cn/mil/2024-05/13/c_1212361613.htm (accessed June 5, 2026).

been allocated for approximately 81 percent of the program.⁵ The National Security Strategy of Japan further states that Japan will, on the basis of its own judgment, take the necessary measures in FY2027 to bring the defense budget, including expenditure on the fundamental reinforcement of defense capabilities and complementary initiatives, to 2 percent of current GDP.⁶ According to a recent report by Xinhua News Agency, Japan's defense budget has successively exceeded 6 trillion, 7 trillion, 8 trillion, and 9 trillion yen since FY2023. Nevertheless, the Japanese government remains dissatisfied and intends to increase defense spending further.⁷ Of particular concern is that defense-related expenditures in Japan's FY2026 draft budget—including expenditures related to the realignment of U.S. forces and other items—amount to 9.0353 trillion yen, an increase of 3.8 percent from 8.7005 trillion yen in the previous fiscal year. The total surpassed 9 trillion yen for the first time. Japan had already achieved in FY2025, two years ahead of the original FY2027 target date, the target set out in the National Security Strategy of bringing the combined total of defense-related expenditures, the Japan Coast Guard budget, and other relevant expenditures to 2 percent of GDP.⁸

In terms of force deployment, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, and Japan Air Self-Defense Force have been widely deployed in Japan's surrounding areas, forming a relatively comprehensive coverage system. On this basis, the National Defense Strategy prioritizes the development of seven capabilities: stand-off defense capabilities, integrated air and missile defense capabilities, unmanned defense capabilities, cross-domain operation capabilities, command-and-control and intelligence-related functions, mobile deployment capabilities and civil protection, and sustainability and resiliency. These capabilities are intended to fundamentally strengthen Japan's defense

5 Ministry of Defense of Japan, "Defense Buildup Program" [in Japanese], December 16, 2022, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/plan/index.html> (accessed June 5, 2026).

6 Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, "National Security Strategy" [in Japanese], December 16, 2022, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/national_security_strategy_2022_pamphlet-ja.pdf (accessed June 5, 2026).

7 Chen Ze'an and Li Ziyue, "Japan Holds Its First Expert Meeting on Revising the 'Three Security Documents'" [in Chinese], Xinhua, April 27, 2026, <https://www.news.cn/world/20260427/3e60950a73b746399b7965e471095ff1/c.html> (accessed June 5, 2026).

8 Ministry of Finance of Japan, "FY2026 Defense-Related Budget" [in Japanese], May 2026, https://www.mof.go.jp/public_relations/finance/202605/202605g.html (accessed July 15, 2026); Ministry of Defense of Japan, "Progress in the Fundamental Reinforcement of Defense Capabilities and the Budget: Overview of the FY2026 Budget Proposal" [in Japanese], December 2025, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/budget/yosan_gaiyo/fy2026/yosan_20251226.pdf (accessed July 15, 2026).

posture.⁹ According to the Japan Coast Guard's FY2026 budget request, its requested budget totaled 317.7 billion yen. Of this amount, 197.9 billion yen was allocated to non-personnel expenditures, with new projects including the construction of two large patrol vessels and the procurement of four unmanned aircraft and one medium-sized fixed-wing jet aircraft. Personnel expenditure amounted to 119.8 billion yen, primarily covering the addition of 291 authorized personnel positions.¹⁰ Japan has also continued to introduce new equipment for maritime security. On November 15, 2024, for example, it decided to introduce MQ-9B unmanned aircraft to strengthen its maritime intelligence-gathering, warning, and surveillance capabilities.¹¹

3. Discourse Construction: Manipulating Public Opinion and Employing Lawfare to Gain the Moral and Legal High Ground

In its efforts to shape public opinion, the Japanese government's 2025 defense white paper, *Defense of Japan 2025*, makes extensive use of security concepts such as "gray-zone situations," portraying the security environment surrounding Japan as the most severe and complex since the end of World War II. The white paper sensationalizes China's lawful patrols and routine law-enforcement operations to safeguard its maritime rights and interests in waters under Chinese jurisdiction in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. It maliciously distorts these activities, characterizing them as attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force. It even treats China–Russia joint patrols as threats to Japan, deliberately casting Japan in the role of a "victim."¹²

In terms of legal interpretation, the Japanese government enacted the Act on Punishment of Acts of Piracy and Measures against Acts of Piracy in 2009. In terms of procedures for dispatching forces, the scope of protection, and the use of force, the legislation represented a substantive departure from the previous framework of Maritime Security Operations. In 2014, the Abe Cabinet reinterpreted Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan to partially lift restrictions on the exercise of the right of collective self-defense,

9 The seven capabilities listed in the original source are stand-off defense capabilities; integrated air and missile defense capabilities; unmanned asset defense capabilities; cross-domain operational capabilities; command-and-control and intelligence-related functions; rapid maneuver and deployment and civil protection; and sustainability and resilience. See Ministry of Defense of Japan, "National Defense Strategy" [in Japanese], December 16, 2022, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/strategy/index.html> (accessed June 5, 2026).

10 Japan Coast Guard, "Overview of the FY2026 Japan Coast Guard Budget Request" [in Japanese], August 2025, <https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/soubi-yosan/nyusatsu/koukoku/201502/shiyousyo/R8yosangaiyou.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2026).

11 Ministry of Defense of Japan, "Selection of the Long-Endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Model" [in Japanese], November 15, 2024, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/news/2024/11/15c.html> (accessed July 15, 2026).

12 Ministry of Defense of Japan, *Defense of Japan 2025* [in Japanese], <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/wp/wp2025/html/nk000000.html> (accessed June 6, 2026).

thereby allowing Japan to use the "minimum necessary force" under specific circumstances in which the survival of the state is threatened.¹³ On April 21, 2026, the Takaichi Cabinet revised the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology and their Implementation Guidelines. The revision abolished the restriction limiting exports of domestically produced finished products to five categories of use—rescue, transportation, vigilance, surveillance, and minesweeping—and replaced it with a binary classification of "weapons" and "non-weapons." It thereby made exports of lethal defense equipment permissible in principle to 17 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Philippines, that had concluded Agreements concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology with Japan.¹⁴ Shortly before the revision, Japan and Australia had finalized contracts for the first three upgraded Mogami-class frigates, indicating that Japan is accelerating its efforts to export major defense equipment.¹⁵ In addition, Japan deliberately preserves a degree of ambiguity in its interpretation of the relevant rules under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, thereby

13 The original passage states: "Although the wording of Article 9 appears to prohibit any 'use of force' in international relations, in light of the people's right to live in peace, as affirmed in the Preamble, and Article 13's requirement that the people's rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness receive the utmost respect in government, Article 9 cannot reasonably be interpreted as prohibiting Japan from taking the self-defense measures necessary to preserve its peace and security and ensure its survival. Such measures are permissible only as unavoidable steps to address an urgent and unjust situation in which an armed attack by a foreign state fundamentally overturns the people's rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; accordingly, the minimum necessary 'use of force' is permitted. This is the core of the government's longstanding interpretation concerning the exceptional use of force allowed under Article 9 and was clearly stated in the document 'The Relationship between the Right of Collective Self-Defense and the Constitution,' submitted by the government to the House of Councillors Audit Committee on October 14, 1972." See Government of Japan, "Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan's Survival and Protect Its People" [in Japanese], July 1, 2014, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/anpohosei.pdf> (accessed July 16, 2026).

14 National Security Council of Japan, "Implementation Guidelines for the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology" [in Japanese], partially revised April 21, 2026, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/r80421_bouei3.pdf; Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, "Review of the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology and Their Implementation Guidelines: Key Points" [in Japanese], April 21, 2026, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/r80421_boueigaiyo.pdf; and Japanese Communist Party, "Cabinet Fully Lifts the Ban on Arms Exports, Abandoning Japan's 'Peace State' Identity" [in Japanese], April 22, 2026, https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik26/2026-04-22/2026042201_01_0.php (accessed July 15, 2026).

15 Ministry of Defense of Japan, "Overview of the Japan-Australia Defense Ministers' Meeting and Related Events" [in Japanese], April 18, 2026, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2026/20260418_aus-j_a.html (accessed July 15, 2026).

expanding its discretion in conducting related activities.¹⁶ Meanwhile, through mechanisms including Japan–U.S. summit meetings and the Japan–U.S. Security Consultative Committee ("2+2"), Japan has repeatedly reaffirmed that "Article V of the Japan–U.S. Security Treaty applies to Diaoyu Dao," leveraging its alliance obligations to provide backing for its maritime activities.¹⁷

4. Deepening Alliance Networks: Tighter Alignment with the U.S.-Led Western Camp and the Construction of a Multilateral Maritime Coalition

Within the Japan–U.S. alliance, bilateral defense integration has continued to deepen. With the Japan–U.S. Security Treaty serving as their strategic foundation, the two countries have continuously strengthened their security and defense cooperation. In the field of maritime security, Japan and the United States have, on the one hand, strengthened forward military deployments and infrastructure construction, with particular emphasis on turning the Southwest Islands into "unsinkable aircraft carriers." In March 2016, Japan established a garrison on Yonaguni Island—the Japanese island closest to Taiwan, approximately 110 kilometers away—and stationed there the approximately 160-member GSDF Yonaguni Coast Observation Unit. An electronic warfare unit was added in March 2024, and Japan plans to establish the country's first "counter-air electronic warfare unit," comprising approximately 30 personnel, in FY2026. The number of personnel stationed at the garrison has increased from approximately 160 at the time of its establishment to around 240. Once a medium-range surface-to-air missile unit comprising approximately 100 personnel is fully deployed in FY2030, the total will rise to around 370, equivalent to 22 percent of the island's population of approximately 1,660.¹⁸ The Japanese government also expects a new base on Mageshima to be completed by 2030 for use in U.S. military training and Self-Defense Forces operations.¹⁹ On the other hand, Japan and the United States have repeatedly conducted joint military

16 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Current Status of China's Unilateral Resource Development in the East China Sea" [in Japanese], April 20, 2026, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/china/higashi_shina/tachiba.html (accessed July 15, 2026).

17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders' Statement (Provisional Translation)" [in Japanese], February 7, 2025, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100791692.pdf>; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Joint Statement of the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee ('2+2') (Provisional Translation)" [in Japanese], July 28, 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100704432.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2026).

18 Kyodo News, "Yonaguni Garrison Marks Its Tenth Anniversary amid Concerns over Continued Expansion" [in Chinese], March 30, 2026, <https://china.kyodonews.net/articles/-/8529> (accessed July 16, 2026).

19 Kyushu Defense Bureau, "Completion Schedule for Self-Defense Forces Facilities on Mageshima" [in Japanese], September 10, 2024, https://www.mod.go.jp/rdb/kyushu/construction_mageshima/pdf/060910oshirase.pdf (accessed July 15, 2026).

exercises, most notably the IRON FIST series. The 2026 iteration involved the largest number of locations, the broadest geographical scope, and the most advanced equipment in the exercise's history.²⁰ Japan and the United States have also cooperated on sea-based ballistic-missile defense, jointly developing the Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) Block IIA interceptor and thereby further strengthening the alliance's deterrence and response capabilities.²¹

Within other cooperative frameworks, a "minilateral" maritime security cooperation network in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain has gradually taken shape. With the Japan–U.S. alliance as its fulcrum, Japan has developed a diversified cooperation network. Its principal activities include the following. First, in September 2024, the Quad, comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, announced that it would launch the Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission in 2025.²² Second, following the 2023 Camp David summit, the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea stepped up the trilateral FREEDOM EDGE joint exercises in the East China Sea.²³ Third, Japan and the Philippines signed the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement in 2024, allowing the Self-Defense Forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines to conduct activities on each other's territory.²⁴ Fourth, in March 2025, the Japan Coast Guard, the European Union, and Thailand jointly held, for the first time, a "Seminar on the Law of the Sea" for personnel from maritime law-enforcement agencies across Southeast Asia, with the aim of addressing maritime "gray-zone" situations.²⁵

20 Wu Minwen, "What Is the Purpose of the U.S.-Japan 'Iron Fist' Military Exercise?" [in Chinese], Xinhua, February 6, 2026, <https://www.news.cn/milpro/20260206/dcc20c9ad8f949ac95908bdad9c01979/c.html> (accessed June 6, 2026).

21 Ministry of Defense of Japan, "Overview of the Japan-U.S. Defense Ministers' Meeting" [in Japanese], January 16, 2026, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/anpo/2026/0115a_usa-j.html (accessed July 15, 2026).

22 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Prime Minister Attends the Sixth Quad Leaders' Summit in Wilmington, Delaware," September 21, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dtl/38317> (accessed July 15, 2026).

23 NHK, "Japan, the United States, and South Korea to Hold a Joint Exercise from the 15th, Aiming to Demonstrate Coordination and Strengthen Deterrence" [in Japanese], September 5, 2025, <https://news.web.nhk/newsweb/na/na-k10014913791000> (accessed June 6, 2026).

24 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Signing of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement" [in Japanese], July 8, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageit_000001_00810.html (accessed June 6, 2026).

25 Japan Coast Guard, "First Japan-EU-Thailand Maritime Law Seminar for Officials of Southeast Asian Coast Guard Agencies" [in Japanese], March 27, 2025, <https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/kouhou/post-1191.html> (accessed July 16, 2026).

Assessment of the Risks to China's Maritime Security Arising from Japan's Adjustment of Its Maritime Security Strategy

1. Risk of Constriction of China's Maritime Space

In the East China Sea, Japan is expanding its military presence in an attempt to contest sea control. First, it has incorporated the waters surrounding Diaoyu Dao into its routine law-enforcement monitoring, thereby disrupting the regular patrols of China Coast Guard vessels. Second, Japan is advancing maritime enclosure on the basis of its unilaterally asserted "median line" and seeking, through sustained law-enforcement and survey activities, to turn its delimitation claims into a *fait accompli*, thereby constricting the space available for China's legitimate activities in the East China Sea. Japan's practice of "turning Okinotori Reef into an island" in the Philippine Sea in the Western Pacific likewise serves as a warning for China in safeguarding its maritime rights and interests. Third, Japan has made dense deployments of anti-ship and air-defense missiles on Miyako, Ishigaki, and other Southwest Islands, thereby constraining China's maritime and air forces.

In the Taiwan Strait, Japan intends to forcibly tie the Taiwan question to its own security. First, since 2022, Japan has substantially accelerated the militarization of the southwestern island chain centered on the Ryukyu Islands. If sustained over the long term, this deployment will create an extended blockade line along the eastern flank of Taiwan Province. Second, Japan has once again promoted the claim that "a Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency," defining a conflict in the Taiwan Strait as a direct threat and thereby providing a pretext for military intervention.²⁶ Third, the Japan–U.S. IRON FIST joint exercise is clearly oriented toward sea and air blockade and amphibious confrontation scenarios in the Taiwan Strait, while close-proximity confrontation between the two sides continues to intensify.

In the South China Sea, Japan is attempting to coordinate its extra-regional intervention with the pressure it exerts in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. First, through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Official Security Assistance (OSA), Japan ostensibly assists Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines

26 Naohisa Fujita, "Explainer: A 'Taiwan Contingency' and a 'Situation Threatening Japan's Survival' - The Need for Calm Debate" [in Japanese], *Asahi Shimbun*, November 14, 2025, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASTCD3T19TCDUTFK015M.html> (accessed June 7, 2026).

in improving their maritime law-enforcement and surveillance capabilities. In practice, however, it uses partner countries to "outsource" its military presence in order to counterbalance China. Second, citing "freedom of navigation" and joint exercises as justification, Japan conducts frequent military drills, seeking to systematically improve regional maritime domain awareness and enhance operational coordination among its allies and partners,²⁷ thereby posing a potential military threat to China. Third, Japan is actively constructing "minilateral" security mechanisms, including the U.S.-Japan-Philippines and U.S.-Japan-India-Australia frameworks, in an effort to "encircle" China in the areas of military operations and intelligence acquisition.

2. Escalating Difficulties in Safeguarding Maritime Rights and Interests

First, legal contestation continues to intensify, creating growing institutional pressure. On the one hand, Japan applies double standards in its treatment of international law: it is "lenient toward itself but exacting toward others." Between 2021 and 2025, for example, the Chinese research vessels Tan Kah Kee and Haike 001, among others, conducted normal scientific research operations in waters east of Okinotori Reef and north of Diaoyu Dao. The Japanese side not only repeatedly dispatched Japan Coast Guard vessels and aircraft to interfere with their operations at close range but also accused China of "conducting operations in Japan's exclusive economic zone without Japan's consent."²⁸ In fact, Okinotori meets the criteria set out in Article 121(3) of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea for "rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own" and should therefore not be entitled to an exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.²⁹ On the other hand, Japan has actively coordinated with its allies to strengthen its legal claims. In the G7 Foreign Ministers' Declaration on Maritime Security and Prosperity, issued in March 2025 during Canada's G7 presidency, Japan actively participated in efforts to internationalize the East China Sea and South China Sea issues and supported the use of systematic measures to address so-called "potential threats."³⁰ At the 2026 Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting involving the United States, Japan, India, and

27 Ji Cheng, "International Observation: Intensive U.S.-Japan-South Korea Military Exercises Stir Regional Security Tensions" [in Chinese], Xinhua, September 30, 2025, <https://www.news.cn/milpro/20250930/a3e0e8999b1e441bbcbf734a89704031/c.html> (accessed July 15, 2026).

28 Japan Coast Guard, "Unusual Activities of Foreign Marine Survey Vessels (2021-2025)" [in Japanese], https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/topics/files/251007_tokuikodo.pdf (accessed July 15, 2026).

29 Shen Yang, "Japan Has No Right to Interfere with the Activities of Chinese Research Vessels" [in Chinese], Guangming Online, May 27, 2025, https://m.gmw.cn/2025-05/27/content_1304045654.htm (accessed June 7, 2026).

30 World and Japan Database, "G7 Foreign Ministers' Declaration on Maritime Security and Prosperity" [in Japanese], March 14, 2025, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/summit/20250314.D2J.html> (accessed June 7, 2026).

Australia, Japan again expressed "serious concern" over developments in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.³¹

Second, an escalating media campaign continues to narrow the space available for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests. Japan disregards the historical context and complex realities of the maritime territorial and delimitation disputes between China and Japan. In various official reports, it portrays China's routine patrols and scientific research activities in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea as attacks threatening Japan's survival. Japan also uses MQ-9B unmanned aircraft and high-resolution electro-optical equipment installed on Japan Coast Guard patrol vessels to conduct sustained surveillance and collect imagery of maritime law-enforcement activities involving China and Japan. In related maritime incidents, if the Japanese side selectively extracts and edits footage of China Coast Guard law-enforcement operations and disseminates it through Japanese domestic media and international social media platforms, the background to the incidents and the law-enforcement process may be presented in a one-sided manner, thereby amplifying right-wing sentiment and anti-China public opinion within Japan and adversely affecting China's international image.

3. Intensified Geopolitical Risks

In the short term, vigilance is required against the risk that the expansion of Japan's alliance system will intensify the regional arms race. As bilateral defense cooperation between Japan and the Philippines has deepened and become increasingly embedded within the U.S.–Japan–Philippines trilateral framework, maritime military cooperation between the two countries has grown increasingly close. Between April 2019 and March 2024, the two sides held a total of 51 bilateral meetings, involving defense ministers, ministers of state, deputy defense ministers, and chiefs of staff, a frequency exceeding that of meetings between Tokyo and other Southeast Asian countries.³² According to a report released by the Japan Coast Guard, China Coast Guard vessels patrolled the contiguous zone surrounding Diaoyu Dao on 355 days in 2024, setting a new record.³³ This indicates that Japan has continuously monitored China's routine patrols over a prolonged period and has sought to use them as a pretext to systematically enhance its surveillance and

31 Kyodo News, "Detailed Report: Quad Foreign Ministers Issue a Joint Statement Confirming Stronger Critical-Mineral Supply Chains" [in Chinese], May 26, 2026, <https://china.kyodonews.net/articles/-/10840> (accessed June 7, 2026).

32 Alexandra Sakaki, "Japan in Southeast Asia: Countering China's Growing Influence," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, June 25, 2025, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/japan-in-southeast-asia-countering-chinas-growing-influence> (accessed June 7, 2026).

33 Japan Coast Guard, Japan Coast Guard Report 2025 [in Japanese], https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/books/report2025/html/honpen/3_03_chap2.html (accessed July 15, 2026).

reconnaissance capabilities, a development that warrants a high degree of vigilance.

In the medium to long term, vigilance is required against increasingly interconnected risks in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. Japan actively serves as a maritime proxy for the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy." On the one hand, it deliberately provokes tensions in the East China Sea in an attempt to divert China's attention; on the other hand, it has become deeply involved in the Taiwan question. On February 24, 2026, Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi announced a specific timetable for the first time, stating that Japan planned to deploy a unit equipped with the Type-03 Medium-Range Surface-to-Air Missile at Camp Yonaguni in FY2030—that is, by March 2031. This marked the first time that Japan had specified a concrete deployment date since announcing the plan in 2022, reflecting its strategic intention to strengthen its military deployments in the southwest and forward-deploy its interception capabilities to a location only 110 kilometers from the island of Taiwan.³⁴ Particular attention should also be paid to the fact that Japan is not a party to the South China Sea disputes, yet it has long acted as an extra-regional intervening power that fuels tensions from behind the scenes. In recent years, its security cooperation with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Cambodia has become particularly close. Moreover, if the JSDF Joint Operations Command, established in March 2025, becomes deeply integrated with the U.S. military, it will not only impose asymmetric military pressure on China but may also push China–Japan relations into a spiral of deterioration.

Policy Recommendations for China in Responding to Japan's Maritime "Gray-Zone" Threats

In response to the systemic challenges arising from Japan's adjustment of its maritime security strategy, China should construct a comprehensive response system encompassing five dimensions: strategic composure, diplomatic engagement, capability building, legal support, and international image-building.

First, China should maintain strategic composure and adhere to the basic principle of engaging in competition without allowing relations to rupture. It should strengthen relevant research and clarify the hierarchy and priorities of Japan's strategic objectives, thereby

34 Ministry of Defense of Japan, "Press Conference by the Minister of Defense" [in Japanese], February 24, 2026, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/kisha/2026/0224a.html>; and Kelly Ng and Shaimaa Khalil, "Japan to Deploy Missiles on Island Near Taiwan by 2031," BBC News, February 25, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd9gj1w2kn1o> (accessed July 15, 2026).

preventing localized friction from affecting the overall situation and avoiding reactive tactical responses that erode China's strategic room for maneuver. China should also ensure the balanced allocation of strategic resources across the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea, avoiding an excessive concentration of forces in frontline areas that would hamper its ability to respond effectively to Japan's coordinated activities across multiple maritime fronts.

Second, China should deepen diplomatic engagement and establish multilevel mechanisms for maritime dialogue and crisis management. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China should expand cooperation in non-traditional security fields such as disaster prevention and mitigation, maritime search and rescue, and joint training. Such cooperation would enhance strategic mutual trust with Southeast Asian countries and counterbalance Japan's political influence in Southeast Asia. Drawing on the Global Security Initiative, China should also use multilateral platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the Group of Twenty to advocate lawful efforts to safeguard maritime rights and interests in accordance with relevant rules and the principles of fairness and justice, while articulating Chinese proposals aimed at contributing to the development of a regional maritime order.

Third, China should strengthen capability building and improve its comprehensive capacity to safeguard maritime rights and interests and respond across multiple domains. It should improve the coordination mechanism involving the military, law-enforcement agencies, and civilian actors, formulate more flexible approaches to maritime crisis response, and establish efficient coordination in intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and incident management. China should also accelerate the digital and AI-enabled modernization of China Coast Guard equipment, including by further integrating relevant reconnaissance data from the China Coast Guard, the Chinese navy, and the PLA Information Support Force, and by strengthening technological investment in underwater unmanned systems, maritime domain awareness, and critical undersea infrastructure. In addition, China should use high-resolution law-enforcement recording devices and deploy drones to accompany vessels and record incidents from multiple angles, so as to preserve a complete evidentiary record of events at the scene; it should also release authoritative information in a timely manner.

Fourth, China should improve legal support and strengthen the legal basis and application of rules for safeguarding its maritime rights and interests. It should further develop the supporting institutional framework for the Coast Guard Law of the People's Republic of China and strengthen the legal basis for law enforcement, including by establishing standards for preserving and recording evidence throughout the entire

process of law-enforcement operations and improving procedures for coordinating maritime administrative law enforcement with military operations. China should also actively participate in rulemaking under the international law of the sea. By strengthening the coordination of positions on international law of the sea with developing countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other regions, and by strengthening the training of specialists in this field, China should promote interpretations of relevant rules that are conducive to China's interests. Furthermore, China should systematically conduct comparative research on the domestic maritime legislation of Japan, the United States, the Philippines, and other countries, thereby building a strategic knowledge base in keeping with the maxim, "Know yourself and know your adversary, and you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles."

Fifth, China should shape its international image and strengthen its capacity for international communication and for shaping international public opinion. It should shift from "passive defense" to proactive international communication, using think-tank reports, media engagement, multilateral forums, and other channels to reveal how Japan's maritime "gray-zone" activities infringe upon China's sovereignty and undermine regional stability. China should also shift from allowing others to shape its image to actively shaping its own international image. In particular, it should rely on the Belt and Road Initiative to undertake "small yet smart" livelihood projects overseas, enhance China's international image and reputation, and reduce the reach and influence of false narratives concerning China.

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