

Pacifist Japan is quietly arming itself to the teeth, with China in its sights

Sunday 28 November 2021, by [NEWMAN Neil](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2021).

- **Post-war Japan has amassed a considerable pile of armaments while flying under the radar. It already has more aircraft carriers than China - it just dumbs them down as 'helicopter carriers'**
- **With all eyes on Taiwan, Tokyo's rising military spending may be contributing to the escalating arms race in the region in more ways than one**

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From a very young age, I have had a fascination with aircraft. And before my swerve into finance, after years spent gluing balsa wood planes together to crash in the park, I got very serious about becoming an aeronautical engineer.

IT'S CLASSIFIED

On a visit to British Aerospace in Preston in 1979, I and a bunch of wide-eyed university students almost got into the Tornado F2 hangar where the brand new fighter jets were being assembled for the Royal Air Force. We were blocked by the engineering team because some "super-secret" AI.24 Foxhunter radar equipment was being installed. Many years later I found out that the F2s just had concrete ballast in the nose, internally nicknamed "Blue Circle" radar, until GEC-Marconi got the real thing to work.

Fast forward to 2021 and the UK is partnering with [Japan](#) to work on highly sophisticated fighter aircraft radar in a post-[Brexit](#) partnership that marks a step away from France and Germany, Britain's traditional partners for cost-sharing military development. Clearly, the British have discovered Japan possesses some very valuable technology, and as we all know everything works in Japan - without rough bits of concrete in place of real technological breakthroughs.

[Hong Kong](#) sits in the middle of the most heavily armed part of the globe. And tensions have been rising over the past 20 years, with [North Korea](#) preferring to spend on the military rather than food, [China](#) rapidly accumulating advanced weaponry, and the 7th Fleet, Royal Navy, French Navy and Royal Australian Navy all parading their best equipment up and down the waterways. Yet all this time, Japan has not rubbed anyone's noses in the fact that it has quietly accumulated remarkable amounts of military hardware - there are no military parades or showing-off.

Take aircraft carriers, for example, the core of a navy where forward attack strategies can be employed – that’s why they are called “carrier strike groups”. The Americans, of course, have more than anyone, with 11 ships. Britain, Italy and China have two each, and France, [India](#), Russia, Spain and [Thailand](#) have one each. It’s not really obvious, but Japan has three, cunningly disguised as timid “helicopter carriers”. Now, two of them are being officially refitted for F-35B multirole fighters, a trick the [South Koreans](#) have also cottoned onto.

Given that any war that might break out in Asia would likely be a sophisticated one fought at sea and in the air with aircraft carrier strike groups, destroyers and frigates, stealth submarines and naval aircraft, this puts Japan somewhat out in front when considering the air and sea power is bundled together as the Japan Self-Defence Force or JSDF.

MAVERICK? DID YOUR MOTHER NOT LIKE YOU OR SOMETHING?

Arguably, the Japanese air force is one of the most capable in the region, largely from the combination of American aircraft designs and its own formidable domestic development of aeronautical electronics. Japanese fighters are equipped with the best avionics, radars and missiles. And the older stuff, fifty or so Phantom II F-4s with hardly a scratch on them, are well looked-after and generally in good working order, so still fine for reconnaissance. These will be replaced in time with brand new F-35As – yes, they are buying both kinds, having ordered 147 aircraft in total, three times that of the UK.

To face off with potential airborne enemies, Japan has about 260 fighters, mostly re-engineered American F-15C Eagles manufactured locally by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) – the firm that built the A6M “Zero”. Japan is the only country in the world that has been allowed to do this: manufacture under licence, modify and install homegrown radar warning systems and electronic countermeasure suites.

The Japanese have also developed helmet-mounted eye-tracking missile targeting systems that let pilots lock onto targets just by looking at them. These upgraded missile systems have electronics from NEC Corporation’s fingerprints all over them, and by contract value it is now the military’s fourth largest supplier, just ahead of computer maker Fujitsu with MHI, Melco and Kawasaki Heavy rounding off the top five.

YOU CAN BE MY WINGMAN ANYTIME

Although there have been few complete homegrown aircraft in its post-war period, Japan has recently stepped up its game and developed a stealth platform demonstrator known as the X-2 Shinshin, in response to the US’s unwillingness to export its F-22 Raptor. It first flew in 2016, and Lockheed soon reversed its F-22 rebuff to offer an updated version of the top-notch fighter. The X-2’s development and successful demonstration makes Japan the fourth nation to have developed stealth fighters, after the [United States](#), [Russia](#) and China. The next X prototype is expected to roll out of the hangar in 2024, escorted by a fully autonomous drone scout known as a “loyal wingman” that will carry aloft sensors and extra missiles.

At sea the Japanese Marine Self Defence Force has over 150 vessels, including 19 submarines – some with stealth capabilities – 26 destroyers with escorts, 10 frigates with just under 350 of their own aircraft. And the coastguard, though civilian and not military, has about 450 vessels, over half of which are armed patrol ships – including some very sizable vessels.

I FEEL THE NEED, THE NEED FOR SPEED

Japan currently spends about US\$49 billion on its military, making it the ninth biggest spender in the world. That's a little less than France and Germany, and significantly more than [Australia](#) and Italy. However, at 1 per cent of GDP, Japan is a relative minnow when it comes to military spending – and the leadership knows it. Other Nato members convinced Germany to up its spending from 1.4 per cent nearer to 2 per cent, about the spending level of the UK, France and Australia. Though not a Nato member, Japan has an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme with the defence bloc. Yet few governments, perhaps apart from the US, are leaning on Japan to spend more, as for a pacifist nation it is armed to the teeth and has been disciplined in its use of force.

The American viewpoint is that Japan's defence budget is too small and that US taxpayers fund far too much of Japan's defence. And given that China clearly wants the US out of the neighbourhood, sticking around will get more expensive. Still, the US has obligations to Japan and South Korea, and seems likely to want to protect its interests in [Taiwan](#).

The Americans will be glad that Japan is nudging its defence budget for fiscal year 2021 a bit higher – to a record, in fact. The government's reasoning is that China is poking around Japanese territory. In the new budget, military R&D expenditure is ramped up significantly to invest in technologies that are at the cutting edge of modern warfare, including crewless aircraft flown by artificial intelligence, stealthy fighters, hypersonic missiles that fly into space, and cyberspace warfare. Add into the mix more missile systems for ships – homegrown of course – and the placement of missile units on its remote islands where mainland China, Taiwan and South Korea have all sniffed around, and defence is once again a top priority of the Liberal Democratic Party.

YOU'VE LOST THAT LOVIN' FEELIN'

With Beijing embarking on a maritime expansion south, making clear its intentions to take Taiwan if it doesn't reunite peacefully, and repeatedly taking an unhealthy look at disputed islands near Japan, some nervousness may be understandable. This has played perfectly into the hands of Japanese politicians, and although Japan has long been on the back foot as far as global military involvement goes, it is now starting to make its presence felt with "asset protection" missions. The JSDF is becoming increasingly more proactive and assertive, drawing closer to the [Aukus](#) alliance that outraged Beijing as evidenced by the recent destroyer escort provided for an Australian frigate south of Shikoku.

Japan's new Prime Minister [Fumio Kishida](#) is still settling into his new office, but he has shifted notably to a hawkish position on China, and has in principle backed the LDPs plan to double defence spending on a GDP basis to about 2 per cent.

With the Japanese now getting their hands on F-35A and F-35B aircraft and getting to work on enhancing these next-generation designs, as well as tweaking their helicopter carriers, one wonders if they might be contributing to the escalating arms race in the region in more ways than just as a buyer of equipment. A more pressing concern still is in which direction the normally indifferent population may be led should China make a move on Taiwan or disputed islands.

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P.S.

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