The Japan Self-Defense Forces' "Southwest Shift" and Escalating Japan-US Military Exercises in the East China Sea

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The Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) began their "Southwest Shift" in 2016 with the opening of Camp Yonaguni in Okinawa Prefecture. Yonaguni Island lies just 110 kilometers from Taiwan. On an island that previously lacked military facilities, the JSDF installed a radar system to provide constant surveillance of vessels and aircraft in the surrounding waters and airspace, and stationed a Coastal Observation Unit of about 160 personnel there. Yonaguni Island's population stood at 1,489 in 2015. After JSDF personnel and their families relocated, the population rose to 1,686 in 2016 and 1,712 in 2017. However, by 2025, the population had dropped to 1,665. One reason for this decline is the increasing number of JSDF personnel who took up posts without their families. Underlying this issue is a severe lack of infrastructure, including a shortage of childcare staff that limits how many children local facilities can accept. While tax money is poured into military expansion, essential living infrastructure development is neglected.

Camp Amami in Kagoshima Prefecture was established three years later, in 2019. Amami Oshima, covering 712 square kilometers, is the second-largest island in the region after Okinawa Island. It has a population of 59,000. The camp was equipped with Type 03 surface-to-air missiles with an approximate range of 60 kilometers. At the same time, Vice-Camp Setouchi, opened in the western part of the island, was equipped with Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles with an approximate range of 200 kilometers. Massive ammunition depots have been built near the vice-camp one after another, and construction continues to this day. While the Ministry of Defense has never explicitly explained the roles of these camps, Amami Oshima appears to be positioned as an ammunition supply hub.

Missile deployment on Miyako Island in Okinawa Prefecture did not proceed smoothly. It was revealed that the "storage warehouse" the Ministry of Defense described during public information meetings was actually an ammunition depot. Short-range missiles had been stored there. After extensive media coverage, the defense minister at the time ordered the munitions removed.

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In March 2021, two ammunition depots were completed at the Bora Training Area in southern Miyako Island. In November of that year, the *Shimokita*—a large landing ship based at the Kure Naval Base in Hiroshima Prefecture—loaded Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles in Kumamoto and transported them to Miyako Island. Later, they built a third ammunition depot and a small-arms firing range. Such a deployment brought the total number of JSDF facilities on Miyako Island to three, including the Japan Air Self-Defense Force's Miyako Island Sub Base. The Sub Base itself underwent major renovations in 2010 and was equipped with ground-based radio monitoring systems to gather signals intelligence on the Chinese military.

Ishigaki Camp in Okinawa Prefecture opened in March 2023. The following month, the US delivered surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missiles to the site. That year, U.S. military vessels began repeatedly calling at the port of Ishigaki Island. In 2023, a U.S. Navy minesweeper from its Sasebo base in Nagasaki Prefecture docked at the island. In 2024, an Aegis ship based in Yokosuka in Kanagawa Prefecture tried to enter the port but had to anchor offshore because the quay was too shallow. The crew was then ferried ashore via tugboats and other small craft. In February 2025, an amphibious transport dock from Sasebo arrived at the port. This large vessel (209 meters long and with a full-load displacement of 25,300 tons) can transport 699 U.S. Marines and their equipment. The JSDF training support vessel *Kurobe* (2,200 tons) also entered the port at the same time. In September of that year, two Combatant Craft Assault (CCA) vessels, small combat boats operated by the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Group, arrived at the port. These vessels are equipped with machine guns and grenade launchers. Reports indicate that a high-speed inflatable boat from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) led the CCA into the port, suggesting possible Japan-U.S. joint training at sea. The way Ishigaki Port is being utilized can only be described as extraordinary. It seems they intend to turn it into a base for U.S. Navy and Marine Corps amphibious operations.

In hindsight, none of the newly established JSDF camps discussed above underwent an environmental impact assessment during construction. At the time, Okinawa Prefecture's environmental assessment regulations only applied to projects involving the alteration of 50 hectares of land or more. Consequently, the Ministry of Defense designed the bases to cover slightly less than that — around 47 hectares — thereby bypassing the assessment process and rushing construction. Previously, the standard approach had been to deploy a coastal surveillance unit to Yonaguni and equip other bases with Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles and Type 03 surface-

to-air missiles for defense. The underlying scenario was to intercept vessels from a continuously expanding Chinese Navy should they approach Japan.

Construction of the Camp Ishigaki was expected to mark the completion of the Ministry of Defense's planned base network. However, several developments occurred between 2021 and 2022. 1) In March 2021, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command chief Davidson suggested that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan could occur within six years. This statement drew a strong reaction from the Japanese government and public. 2) In September 2021, the AUKUS alliance—comprising the U.S., the U.K., and Australia—was formed, and a decision was made to develop nuclear-powered submarines jointly. That same month, the British aircraft carrier *Queen Elizabeth* docked at Yokosuka, and the U.S. Navy deployed two nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and conducted repeated large-scale military exercises spanning the area from the East China Sea to the South China Sea. 3) In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, marking the start of the war. 4) China commissioned eight large, high-performance warships (Type 055) with Aegis-like air-defense capabilities, at least six of which had entered service by 2022. They are reported to have a power output of 150,000 horsepower, surpassing the 69,000 horsepower of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces' *Maya*-class Aegis destroyers and the 100,000 horsepower of U.S. Navy vessels. A third aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, has been constructed.

Amidst these developments, the revision of the three key security documents (the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program) was pushed through in December 2022 via a Cabinet decision, bypassing parliamentary debate. The Defense Buildup Program included measures to strengthen the JSDF's cross-domain operational capabilities, which span space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum in addition to land, sea, and air. These measures align with the U.S. military's Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concept.

The JSDF's "Shift to the Southwest" Following the Revision of the Three Security Documents

The revision of these three documents brought significant changes to the JSDF's operations. In July 2024, the destroyer *Suzutsuki* entered Chinese territorial waters off the coast of Zhejiang Province. Chinese naval vessels were conducting live-fire exercises at the time, and the *Suzutsuki*—a high-performance ship equipped with X-band radar—is believed to have entered

the area to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance. Subsequently, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) began regularly transiting the Taiwan Strait, something it had previously avoided. These transits occurred in September 2024, February and June 2025, and April 2026. In March 2026, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) deployed long-range missiles to Camp Kengun in Kumamoto Prefecture and Camp Fuji in Shizuoka Prefecture. Regarding the annual Balikatan exercises held in the waters around Palawan Island in the Philippines, the JSDF upgraded its involvement from observer status, maintained until 2024, to full participation starting in 2025. In 2026, the JGSDF brought surface-to-ship missiles to the Philippines for live-fire training, while Chinese naval forces were also deployed to waters east of Luzon Island.

As the Self-Defense Forces shift toward the southwest, the JGSDF's 15th Brigade in Okinawa (currently numbering about 2,300 personnel) is set to expand to about 3,900. Plans are underway to organize a reconnaissance combat battalion and deploy Type 16 Mobile Combat Vehicles—wheeled vehicles functioning like tanks—to Okinawa for the first time. Expansion work at Camp Ishigaki is ongoing, with plans to deploy an electronic warfare unit there as well. While an electronic warfare unit has already been deployed to Yonaguni Island, the next step is to deploy an anti-air electronic warfare unit designed to jam the detection and targeting capabilities of adversary airborne early-warning aircraft. This is explicitly stated in materials the Ministry of Defense distributed to the town of Yonaguni.

On Amami Oshima Island, plans are underway to establish a new transport and supply hub by reclaiming land at Koniya Port to construct facilities such as unit headquarters, fuel tanks, and supply depots. The plan includes deploying transport vessels (35 meters in length, 200 tons) belonging to the Maritime Transport Group—a joint JSDF unit—with one vessel scheduled for deployment in FY2026 and three in FY2027. The JSDF held a briefing for local residents in January 2026 and submitted an application to the Governor of Kagoshima Prefecture on June 17 under the Public Waters Reclamation Act.

Prioritizing Negotiations with the Chinese Government Over Joint Japan-US Exercises

Joint Japan-US exercises are also intensifying. Field training with the US Marine Corps (Resolute Dragon 26)—conducted since 2021—took place from June 20 to 30, primarily across Kyushu and Okinawa. While primarily a field exercise involving the US Marine Corps and the Ground Self-

Defense Force, this iteration included the US Army's 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force, which deployed from Hawaii.

Resolute Dragon 25 took place from September 11 to 25, 2025. The NMESIS—an unmanned anti-ship missile system—was brought onto Ishigaki Island, while the Typhon missile system was deployed from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni in Yamaguchi Prefecture. The relocation from Iwakuni to Kanoya in Kagoshima Prefecture placed the system about 900 kilometers from Shanghai, a major Chinese city. This year's Resolute Dragon exercise was conducted about three months earlier than usual. Some argue that the JSDF would be subject to U.S. military command in the event of a Taiwan contingency. However, the JSDF cannot simply respond to any situation based on sudden orders from the U.S. military. I believe such a response only becomes possible through repeated joint exercises that simulate various combat scenarios, divide mission responsibilities, and validate procedures.

A distinctive feature of Resolute Dragon 26 was the maritime transport of ammunition. Briefing materials provided by the Ministry of Defense to the local community read "At Naze Port (Kagoshima Prfecture), vehicles loaded with ammunition—transported by sea from Taniyama Port (Kagoshima Prefecture) by the JSDF Maritime Transport Group's small vessel *Nihonbare*—were offloaded for transport training to the Setouchi Sub-base," and "approximately 90 containers (carrying supplies and ammunition) transported by the medium-sized vessel *Yoko* were moved to Vice-Camp Setouchi and Camp Amami."

Around the same time, the multilateral joint exercise Valiant Shield 2026 was held from June 22 to July 1. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command—the higher-level headquarters for U.S. forces in Japan—hosted the exercise, which involved the Japan Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces. The training took place nationwide and includes: (1) joint anti-air combat training (Chitose, Okushiri Island, Shariki); (2) joint anti-ship combat training (Camp Amami, Amami Oshima Sub-base, Amami Oshima, Kanoya); (3) joint airborne drop training (Hokkaido Grand Maneuver Area, Chitose, Iruma, Minami-Eniwa, Narashino); (4) joint runway repair training; and (5) joint medical training (Matsushima, Yokota, Iruma, Yokosuka, Iwakuni, etc.). Additionally, the US Air Force used C-17 transport aircraft to airlift the Typhon missile system to the JMSDF's Kanoya Air Base in Kagoshima Prefecture. The joint anti-ship combat training warrants particular attention. At Camp Amami, "Japan-U.S. joint intelligence-gathering training and non-live-fire anti-ship combat training" were conducted.

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While the Japanese government is extremely enthusiastic about military exercises, it is neglecting dialogue with the Chinese government. Shouldn't we initiate continuous consultations to curb mutual military activities in the East China Sea? What is needed is not stronger combat capabilities, but rather continued diplomatic negotiation.

About the Author



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