

Kishida's Maritime Turn: Japan's Defensive Defense and Gray-Zone Balancing in the East China Sea

Aspin Nur Arifin Rivai¹ , Dian Putri Pratiwi²

¹Department of International Relations, Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia

²Department of International Relations, Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: aspin.arifin@uin-alauddin.ac.id

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Abstract: Japan's postwar defensive orientation has been recast into a more active maritime strategy under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Existing studies have traced Japan's broader security normalization, alliance strengthening, and legal-institutional change, yet they have given less sustained attention to the maritime operational logic through which those shifts were translated into balancing in the East China Sea. This article examines how Japan's maritime defense policy evolved in response to persistent Chinese gray-zone coercion around the Senkaku Islands. Using a qualitative single-case design, it draws on Japanese strategic documents, defense reports, maritime-security data, and relevant academic literature. The analysis combines William D. Coplin's decision-making framework with Ariel González Levaggi's maritime-strategy typology. The article finds that Japan's policy shift was driven by the interaction of three variables, external pressure from China, growing domestic acceptance of defense strengthening, and the fiscal-technological capacity to implement strategic change. These conditions produced a layered defensive-defense posture expressed through coastal defense, sea denial, selective sea control, and limited regional power projection. Kishida inherited an earlier trajectory of reform, then accelerated its maritime consolidation and anchored it in an East China Sea strategy suited to prolonged gray-zone competition under constitutional restraint.

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INTRODUCTION

Japan's postwar security identity has long been associated with constitutional pacifism. Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution states that the Japanese people renounce war and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes, while its second paragraph declares that land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will not be maintained (Government of Japan, 1947). Yet this pacifist constitutional identity has always coexisted with a maritime structural reality. Japan is an island state whose economic survival, energy security, trade flows, and territorial defense depend on the sea. Maritime security, therefore, cannot be treated as a secondary issue in Japanese defense policy. Bito (2025) notes that maritime

transportation accounted for 99.6% of Japan's trade volume in 2023, showing that the security of sea lines of communication is not simply a strategic preference but a national necessity.

This tension between constitutional pacifism and strategic maritime vulnerability has sharpened in the contemporary Indo-Pacific security environment (Pajon, 2017; Koga, 2020; Hanssen & Hagström, 2016). Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy and subsequent defense policy overviews state that the country faces the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II. In that assessment, China is identified as an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge to Japan's peace and security. The East China Sea, particularly the waters around the Senkaku Islands, has become one of the clearest arenas in which this challenge is expressed. As a result, the central question in debates on Japanese defense policy is no longer confined to whether Japan remains pacifist in principle, but extends to how far it can adjust its defense posture in practice while still operating within the language of self-defense and constitutional restraint (Government of Japan, 2022a; Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024a).

The urgency of the East China Sea issue is reinforced by Japanese official data. A 2024 Ministry of Defense (MOD) overview comparing the security situation before 2013 with that of 2024 states that Chinese maritime law-enforcement vessels entered the contiguous waters around the Senkaku Islands on as many as 352 days per year, compared with 79 days in earlier years. In parallel, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports that, since 2012, Chinese government vessels have entered Japan's contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands almost every day except during stormy weather and have intruded into Japanese territorial waters several times each month. MOFA further describes these activities as persistent unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion, including approaches to Japanese fishing vessels and the presence of vessels armed with artillery (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026). The issue in the East China Sea is therefore not episodic. It is structural, sustained, and increasingly gray-zone in character.

Japan's response to this worsening environment, however, did not begin under Fumio Kishida. The policy trajectory had already been evolving for more than a decade. The 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines introduced the concept of a "Dynamic Defense Force," emphasizing readiness, mobility, flexibility, sustainability, and continuous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance as key elements of deterrence (Government of Japan, 2010). The 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines extended this logic into a "Dynamic Joint Defense Force," placing greater emphasis on joint operations, gray-zone responses, maritime supremacy, air superiority, and seamless whole-of-government coordination (Government of Japan, 2013). Under Shinzo Abe, this trajectory was further reinforced through legal and institutional reinterpretation, especially in the 2014 Cabinet Decision on seamless security legislation and the wider security-legislation process (Liff, 2017; Fukushima & Samuels, 2018; Takenaka, 2021). Japan's contemporary defense transformation is therefore better understood as a cumulative process of doctrinal revision, legal reinterpretation, and institutional adaptation than as either a simple abandonment of pacifism or a completed constitutional amendment (Takenaka, 2021; Schulze, 2018).

Within this longer trajectory, the Kishida administration is better understood as an accelerator than as the originator of change. Official records show that Kishida served as prime minister from 2021 to 2024, and during this period his government adopted the most consequential package of security documents in decades, namely the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program, all approved on 16 December 2022 (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2024; Government of Japan, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). These documents matter because they bring diplomacy, defense, economic security, technology, cyber, maritime, space, intelligence, official development assistance, and energy into a single strategic framework. Kishida's contribution, then, was not limited to increasing military spending. It lay in embedding defense reform within a broader conception of comprehensive national power (Singh, 2024; Tamel, 2025; Liff & Lipsky, 2024).

The maritime implications of this shift are substantial. Official MOD overviews state that, by fiscal year 2027, Japan will take the necessary measures to make its budget for the fundamental reinforcement of defense capabilities, together with complementary initiatives, reach 2% of current GDP. The same materials also emphasize stronger coordination and cooperation between the Self-Defense Forces and the Japan Coast Guard, including the possibility that the Minister of Defense could assume control of the JCG in the event of a

contingency (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024a). In capability terms, the Kishida administration concluded a Letter of Offer and Acceptance with the United States in January 2024 for the acquisition of Tomahawk missiles and related equipment, while MOD budget materials show that Japan is prioritizing stand-off defense capabilities, integrated air and missile defense, and the construction of two Aegis System Equipped Vessels beginning in FY2024, with early commissioning targeted for JFY 2027 and JFY 2028 (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024b, 2024d). These measures show that Kishida's maritime defense posture moved beyond rhetoric into procurement, force planning, and operational architecture.

Kishida's maritime defense posture also depended heavily on alliance coordination and operational signaling. MOD exercise documents state that Japan conducts bilateral and multilateral exercises in the East China Sea and remote-island defense missions to improve tactical capabilities and demonstrate its commitment to defending Japan's territory, waters, airspace, and island areas (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024c). This operational logic is reinforced diplomatically by alliance assurances. In the July 2024 Japan-U.S. "2+2," the United States reaffirmed that Article V of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands, while both sides highlighted progress in stand-off defense capabilities, counterstrike cooperation, and the strengthening of bilateral presence in Japan's southwest islands (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024e). Japan's maritime strategy under Kishida, then, cannot be reduced to domestic defense reform alone. It also needs to be read as alliance-based deterrence and regional balancing.

Recent scholarship has little difficulty showing that the Kishida years belong to a broader reworking of Japan's security posture. Hughes (2022) reads that shift in terms of growing military capability and tighter alliance integration. Matsuda (2023) shows more specifically that the 2022 strategic documents are transformational because they deepen military and institutional integration with the United States, while Watanabe (2023) argues that the same set of documents expands Japan's response capacity and improves alliance interoperability. Liff (2023), for his part, is persuasive in treating Kishida less as a break with the past than as the political figure who accelerated a trajectory already underway after Abe. Heginbotham and Samuels (2023) similarly interpret the 2022 package as a major advance in Japanese defense policy, though still one embedded in alliance-centered deterrence and continuity with core postwar constraints. Read together, these works establish an important point. The Kishida administration did not initiate Japan's security transformation from scratch, but it did move that transformation into a more ambitious and operational phase.

At the same time, the closer the literature moves toward this larger story of defense transformation, the easier the maritime setting itself slips from the center of analysis. Much of the existing work addresses doctrine, alliance politics, legal change, or budget expansion at the macro level. Those studies are valuable, but they do not always dwell on the specifically maritime logic through which balancing is now being worked out in the East China Sea. This matters because the East China Sea is not simply one theater among others. It is the place where sovereignty disputes, gray-zone coercion, coast-guard operations, remote-island defense, and alliance signaling meet in a particularly dense form. Bito's (2025) intervention is especially suggestive here, since it points to the unfinished problem of strategic communication and institutional integration in Japan's maritime domain, especially between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Japan Coast Guard. That observation helps sharpen the present study's point of departure. The issue is not whether Japan is changing. It is how that change has been translated into a maritime defense strategy under Kishida, and what kind of strategic pattern has emerged from that process.

This article takes up that problem by bringing foreign-policy decision-making analysis into closer conversation with maritime-strategy analysis. Coplin's framework is useful because it directs attention to the interaction among international pressure, domestic political conditions, and state capabilities. In this study, that means examining how Chinese coercion around the Senkaku Islands and wider Indo-Pacific instability interacted with cabinet leadership, LDP preferences, public debate, constitutional limits, fiscal resources, technological development, alliance access, and maritime force structure (Coplin & Rochester, 1971). Levaggi's framework complements this analysis by distinguishing among coastal defense, sea denial, sea control, and power projection (González Levaggi, 2023). Taken together, these approaches make it possible to explain not only why Japan adopted particular defense choices under Kishida, but also how those choices can be classified in maritime strategic terms.

The empirical focus of this study is therefore deliberately bounded. Rather than discussing Japanese security policy only in general terms, it examines Japan's maritime defense strategy during the Kishida administration as a specific case. Particular attention is given to the East China Sea, the Senkaku Islands, maritime gray-zone coercion, coast-guard coordination, stand-off capabilities, and remote-island defense. This focus allows the article to move beyond broad claims about military modernization or security normalization and to identify the concrete maritime forms through which Japan's defense transformation has been operationalized. In that respect, the article does not depart from the existing literature so much as it narrows and reworks its field of vision.

Based on this background, the main research question of this study is as follows: How did the Kishida administration reformulate Japan's maritime defense strategy in response to China's coercive behavior in the East China Sea? The subsidiary questions are: What domestic, external, and capability factors made such reformulation possible, and what maritime strategic pattern emerged from those decisions? This study hypothesizes that growing Chinese gray-zone pressure in the East China Sea, combined with supportive domestic-political alignment and enhanced defense capabilities, pushed Japan under Kishida from a relatively restrained maritime defense posture toward a more active balancing strategy that combines coastal defense, sea denial, selective sea control, and limited regional power projection. The policy relevance of this topic remains high even after Kishida's tenure, as the 2025 Defense of Japan continues to emphasize the ongoing reinforcement of Japan's defense capabilities and the maritime setting in which those capabilities are expected to operate.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with the qualitative single-case design and process-tracing strategy outlined in the method section, the findings are presented in two connected layers. The first identifies the determinants of Japan's maritime defense policy under Fumio Kishida by tracing the interaction among external threat pressure, domestic political authorization, and capability factors. The second examines how those determinants were translated into concrete maritime strategic forms: regional power projection, sea denial, sea control, and coastal defense. Read together, the evidence suggests that the Kishida administration did not abandon Japan's postwar defensive identity. Instead, it reworked that identity into a more active, layered, and maritime-centered balancing posture in response to sustained Chinese gray-zone coercion in the East China Sea. This finding is consistent with the study's hypothesis and with the combined analytical use of Coplin's decision-making approach and González Levaggi's maritime-strategy typology (Coplin & Rochester, 1971; González Levaggi, 2023).

The East China Sea as The Operational Trigger of Policy Change

The East China Sea is the most important operational theater for understanding why maritime defense became so central during the Kishida period. In the 2022 National Security Strategy, Japan states that it faces the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II, and official MOD explanatory material characterizes China's behavior as "an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge" to Japan's peace and security. That designation matters because it raises Chinese behavior from a bilateral territorial irritant to a structural security challenge requiring a whole-of-government response. For the purposes of this study, the East China Sea is therefore not merely a disputed maritime space; it is the arena in which external threat perception, sovereignty concerns, and maritime strategy converge (Government of Japan, 2022a; Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024a).

Operational pressure is most visible around the Senkaku Islands. MOFA states that, since September 2012, Chinese government vessels have entered Japan's contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands almost every day except during rough weather and have intruded into Japanese territorial waters several times each month (Kotani, 2020; Fravel, 2016; Jie, 2023). MOFA further notes that China's 2021 Coast Guard Law contains problematic provisions, including ambiguous definitions of applicable sea areas and authorization for the use of weapons, while Chinese Coast Guard ships continue unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion, including approaches to Japanese fishing vessels and operations by ships armed with artillery. This is precisely the kind of gray-zone pattern that blurs the line between peacetime law-enforcement pressure and coercive strategic signaling (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026).

Table 1. Selected indicators of Chinese coercive maritime presence around the Senkaku Islands

Indicator	Pre-2013	2019	2024
Days with confirmed Chinese government-vessel presence in the contiguous zone	79	282	355
Longest consecutive days of confirmed presence	—	64	215
Chinese Coast Guard vessels 1,000 tons and over	40	—	157
Incidents of approach to Japanese fishing boats	—	—	18
JCG patrol posture	—	Day and night	24/7/365

Source: Author's processing from Japan Ministry of Defense, *Overview of the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program*; Japan Coast Guard, *Guarding Territorial Waters and EEZ*; and *Japan Coast Guard Report 2025*.

Table 1 shows that the East China Sea issue has entered a more sustained phase. The increase from 79 to 355 days of confirmed Chinese government-vessel presence suggests that what had once appeared as intermittent intrusion has become a regular form of operational pressure. The longest continuous streak is equally telling, since it leaves Tokyo with less room to treat each incident as isolated or exceptional. The growing number of large China Coast Guard vessels points to a stronger capacity for endurance and intimidation, while repeated approaches to Japanese fishing boats show that coercion is working its way into the routines of everyday maritime activity, not only into formal disputes over sovereignty. Seen in this light, external pressure in the East China Sea was neither incidental nor symbolic. It was sustained enough to shape Japanese policy in a direct way. In Coplin's terms, this was the kind of environment in which decision-makers were more likely to regard stronger defense adaptation as increasingly necessary. It also helps explain why that adaptation took a maritime form. Because the challenge unfolded through coast-guard presence, repeated intrusions, gray-zone coercion, and vulnerabilities around remote islands, Japan's response moved toward maritime surveillance, closer coast-guard coordination, remote-island defense, stand-off deterrence, and the protection of surrounding sea lanes rather than toward a posture centered mainly on land-based defense (Coplin & Rochester, 1971; Childs, 2023).

Domestic Factors

External pressure alone did not automatically produce defense reform. The crucial domestic change under Kishida was the consolidation of political and societal legitimacy for stronger defense measures (Park, 2025; Kagotani, 2015). Official MOD summaries of the 2022 strategic documents show that Japan's response centered on strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance, reinforcing defense capabilities, acquiring counterstrike capabilities within legal limits, reaching around 2 percent of current GDP in defense-related outlays by FY2027, and strengthening coordination between the Self-Defense Forces and the Japan Coast Guard, including potential control over the JCG by the Minister of Defense in contingencies. Kishida's government did not simply diagnose a worsening security environment. It translated that diagnosis into an explicit national-security program with identifiable institutional and fiscal consequences (Government of Japan, 2022a; Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024a).

Kishida's threat framing was central to this process. Recent scholarship argues that the 2022 strategic documents marked a historic step change in Japan's defense policy while also emphasizing that the shift remained embedded in alliance-centered deterrence and continuity with core postwar constraints (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2023; Bochorodycz, 2023; Hughes, 2024). Liff (2023) calls Kishida an "accelerator" of Japan's defense evolution after Abe rather than a rupture with earlier change; Ward and Koshino (2023) likewise describe the 2022 documents as a historic break in policy ambition while noting serious implementation challenges. This interpretation fits the empirical pattern. Kishida's government used the language of urgency more sharply and more consistently, but it did so in a way that framed defense reform as necessary to preserve the rules-based order, Japan's sovereignty, and domestic peace rather than to legitimize offensive military revisionism (Liff, 2023; Ward & Koshino, 2023; Watanabe, 2023).

Domestic coalition politics also shaped the form of reform. In its English-language editorial of September 2022, Komeito explicitly rejected treating 2 percent of GDP as an automatic goal and argued that any budget increase should first be justified by actual defense

needs and remain faithful to Article 9 and Japan's defense-oriented mandate. Yet the same editorial also accepted the need to review and reassess defense capabilities in light of ballistic missiles, unmanned threats, and challenges in space, cyber, and the electromagnetic domain. Analytically, this matters because it shows that coalition politics under Kishida did not eliminate reform. Instead, coalition bargaining operated as a mechanism of calibration: stronger capabilities were accepted, but they were justified within a constitutional and defense-oriented framework (Komeito, 2022).

Table 2. Selected domestic opinion indicators relevant to Kishida's defense reforms

Indicator	Result	Year
Respondents favoring stronger defense capabilities	71.0%	2022
Respondents supporting strengthening SDF size and capabilities	45.2%	2025
Respondents supporting maintaining current SDF level	49.8%	2025
Respondents citing China's military power and regional activities as a defense concern	68.1%	2025

Source: Author's processing from Yomiuri survey reporting and Cabinet Office-related survey reporting summarized by Nippon.com.

Table 2 points to a domestic environment that had become more permissive toward defense reform under Kishida. The 71 percent figure in 2022 shows that support for stronger defense capabilities was already substantial when the new strategic documents were being prepared. The 2025 data sharpen that picture. Support for strengthening the SDF reached its highest recorded level, while nearly half of respondents still preferred maintaining the current level. This suggests that the debate had shifted from whether reinforcement was necessary to how far it could proceed within Japan's political and constitutional limits. The 68.1 percent concern about China is especially important because it ties public receptiveness to a concrete threat perception rather than to diffuse nationalism. In Coplin's terms, this domestic setting mattered because external pressure could shape policy only when it became politically legitimate at home. Under Kishida, that space was available. Public opinion gave the government a broader margin to present defense reform as prudent and necessary. It also reduced the political risk of linking maritime pressure in the East China Sea to longer-term changes in force posture. Coalition politics still imposed caution, especially in relation to constitutional limits and the scope of military expansion. Even so, the available data suggest that caution no longer translated into paralysis. Domestic support was strong enough to sustain policy movement, even if it did not amount to a blank check for unlimited defense growth. This helps explain why Kishida's reforms could advance within the language of defensive defense while still producing more substantial institutional and strategic change.

Capability Factors

The third explanatory variable is capability. Japan's response under Kishida was feasible only because the country possessed sufficient economic, industrial, and administrative resources to translate threat perception and domestic legitimacy into actual force development. This matters especially because Japan's relationship with China is not one of clean strategic separation (Tamel, 2025; Govella, 2021; Vidal López et al 2024; Liff, 2019). MOFA states that China remains Japan's largest trading partner and one of the largest investment destinations for Japanese companies. Economic interdependence thus remains deep. Yet that same context has reinforced rather than weakened the need for maritime security, since Japan's prosperity, sea lines of communication, and strategic autonomy depend on stable access to surrounding waters and nearby maritime routes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025).

The clearest material indicator of capability is the rapid rise in defense-related spending. Official MOD budget documents show that Japan's defense-related expenditures rose from ¥50,688 hundred million in FY2020 to ¥51,235 hundred million in FY2021 and ¥54,797 hundred million in FY2022. The increase then accelerated sharply under the Defense Buildup Program to ¥66,001 hundred million in FY2023, ¥77,249 hundred million in FY2024, and ¥84,748 hundred million in FY2025. Expressed more simply, that is an increase from about ¥5.07 trillion in FY2020 to about ¥8.47 trillion in FY2025. FY2025 budget material further notes that, together with FY2023 and FY2024 appropriations, 62 percent of the five-year DBP total of ¥43.5 trillion had already been allocated. These figures show that Kishida's shift was backed not just by

rhetoric but by sustained fiscal implementation (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2022, 2024b, 2025a).

Table 3. Japan's defense-related budget trajectory

Fiscal year	Defense-related expenditures	Approx. in trillion yen
2020	¥50,688 hundred million	¥5.07 tn
2021	¥51,235 hundred million	¥5.12 tn
2022	¥54,797 hundred million	¥5.48 tn
2023	¥66,001 hundred million	¥6.60 tn
2024	¥77,249 hundred million	¥7.72 tn
2025	¥84,748 hundred million	¥8.47 tn

Source: Author's processing from official MOD budget documents.

External comparison reinforces this point. SIPRI estimates that Japan spent USD 55.3 billion on the military in 2024, an increase of 21 percent over 2023, while China spent USD 314 billion. IISS's 2025 defense-spending comparison places Japan at USD 53.0 billion and China at USD 242.4 billion at market exchange rates, while also showing that a purchasing-power-parity estimate would place China's defense budget at USD 476.7 billion. These figures illustrate both sides of Japan's position. Kishida presided over a major increase in Japanese military expenditure, but Japan still faces a substantial spending asymmetry relative to China. That imbalance helps explain why Tokyo's maritime strategy emphasizes quality, stand-off capability, missile defense, ISR, and alliance integration rather than a mirror-image competition in numbers (IISS, 2025; SIPRI, 2025).

Table 4. Japan–China defense spending comparison, 2024

Source	Japan (USD bn)	China (USD bn)	China:Japan ratio
SIPRI	55.3	314.0	5.7:1
IISS (market exchange rates)	53.0	242.4	4.6:1
IISS (PPP estimate for China)	53.0	476.7	9.0:1

Source: Author's calculations from SIPRI and IISS reported 2024 values.

Under Kishida, capability became meaningful not simply through larger budgets or new acquisitions, but through the effort to draw doctrine, procurement, operational planning, and frontline maritime enforcement into a more connected strategic framework. This point is especially important in the East China Sea, where gray-zone pressure rarely unfolds in a clean sequence from law enforcement to military response. What Japan faced there was a pattern of sustained coast-guard presence, repeated intrusions, and calibrated coercion that tested whether different state institutions could act with speed and continuity in the same operational space. In that setting, capability depended not only on what the state possessed, but on how far it could connect the JCG, the SDF, ISR, logistics, and command arrangements without leaving institutional gaps that could be exploited. The significance of stronger SDF–JCG coordination therefore lies in more than administrative efficiency. It speaks to Japan's effort to build a maritime-security architecture able to move from peacetime monitoring to contingency management and, if necessary, to defense response with greater coherence. Read in this way, institutional coordination was not a secondary supplement to force development. It was part of force development itself, because the practical value of new resources depended on whether they could be integrated into a single operational logic. That is also why Bito's call for a more unified national maritime strategy becomes relevant here. The issue was not merely the separate capabilities of the JMSDF and the JCG, but the extent to which their roles could be aligned within a shared strategic design.

Japan's Defensive Defense Pattern

The dependent variable of this study, Japan's maritime defense strategy under Kishida, can now be specified more concretely. Using Levaggi's framework, the evidence suggests that Japan's current posture is best understood as a layered defensive-defense strategy composed of regional power projection, sea denial, sea control, and coastal defense. These four elements

do not operate in isolation. Coastal defense holds the frontline against gray-zone encroachment, sea denial raises the costs of coercive movement, sea control preserves operational freedom in vital nearby waters, and regional power projection extends Japan's ability to shape the theater through presence and alliance-backed operations. This overall posture is more active than Japan's traditional minimalist interpretation of self-defense, but it is still framed politically as necessary, defensive, and stabilizing rather than openly revisionist (González Levaggi, 2023; Hughes, 2022; Liff, 2023).

Regional power projection in the Japanese case should be understood as limited, alliance-enabled, and theater-focused. SIPRI and IISS both show that Japan's higher defense spending under Kishida does not erase the quantitative gap with China. That gap helps explain why Japan's outward-facing maritime posture depends on deployability, interoperability, and maritime-air integration rather than numerical parity. The IISS reconstruction of Japan's 2022 Defense Buildup Program shows that the new plan rose to USD 334.84 billion from USD 126.93 billion in the previous plan, with especially large allocations for cross-domain operational capabilities (USD 62.30 billion), stand-off defense (USD 38.93 billion), and integrated air and missile defense (USD 23.36 billion). The same IISS figure lists force elements associated with this buildup, including 12 destroyers, 5 submarines, 10 patrol vessels, 19 P-1 fixed-wing patrol aircraft, 40 F-35A fighters, and 25 F-35B fighters. These are quantitative indicators of a state preparing not only to defend fixed territory but also to operate persistently across a broader maritime theater (IISS, 2023a).

IISS's maritime-capability assessment points in the same direction. It notes that the rapid series production of the Mogami-class frigates will further strengthen the surface fleet and that the class is expected eventually to number about 22 vessels, while the JMSDF submarine force has reached its target of 22 operational boats. The same assessment notes that Japan already fields eight Aegis-equipped ballistic-missile-defense cruisers and destroyers, with at least ten planned. In practical terms, this gives Japan greater capacity to maintain presence, escort operations, protect maritime approaches, and support allied activity in the East China Sea and adjacent waters. Regional power projection under Kishida, therefore, is not an open-ended blue-water offensive posture; it is a stronger ability to generate visible, sustainable, and allied maritime presence beyond the immediate coastline (Childs, 2023).

Table 5. IISS quantitative profile of Japan's Defense Buildup Program

Capability category	Previous plan (USD bn)	New plan (USD bn)
Stand-off defense	1.56	38.93
Integrated air and missile defense	7.79	23.36
Uncrewed defense	0.78	7.79
Cross-domain operations	23.36	62.30
Mobile deployment / protection of civilians	2.34	15.57
C2 / intelligence-related capability	2.34	7.79
Sustainability / resilience	46.72	116.80
Defense production base / R&D	7.79	10.90
Base measures	18.69	20.25
Education, training, fuel costs	15.57	31.15

Source: Reconstructed from IISS, *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2023*, Chapter 5.

Operationally, this expanded reach is reinforced by more intensive exercises. MOD material on major East China Sea and remote-island defense exercises emphasizes bilateral and multilateral training designed to improve tactical capability and demonstrate Japan's commitment to defending its territory, waters, airspace, and island areas. JMSDF reporting on ANNUAL Exercise 2023 indicates that the exercise involved about 30 ships and more than 40 aircraft from the JMSDF, the U.S. Navy, Australian forces, and Canadian forces, with scenarios ranging from gray-zone contingencies to armed-attack situations. These figures matter because they show that regional power projection is not just a procurement effect. It is also being practiced and embedded in coalition operations. Kishida's Japan is not seeking unconstrained expeditionary warfare, but it is building the capacity to project maritime and air power across its near region in an alliance-centered form (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024c).

Sea denial is the most direct and strategically revealing element of Kishida's maritime balancing. For an island state facing a larger naval and missile power, sea denial offers a way

to impose costs without requiring comprehensive command of the sea. The IISS Defense Buildup Program profile shows how sharply this element has expanded. Stand-off defense rose from only USD 1.56 billion in the previous plan to USD 38.93 billion in the new one, while uncrewed defense rose from USD 0.78 billion to USD 7.79 billion. This is one of the clearest numerical signs that Kishida's strategy has moved beyond static territorial defense toward a denial-based posture intended to complicate hostile operations in the approaches to the Nansei island chain and the East China Sea (IISS, 2023a).

Japanese official implementation data confirm that this is not merely a planning figure. MOD FY2025 budget-progress material reports that the acquisition of Tomahawk missiles was moved forward from FY2026 to FY2025, that deployment of the upgraded Type-12 surface-to-ship missile was also brought forward by one year, that introductory training for Tomahawk operation was conducted from March to October 2024, and that HVGP and upgraded Type-12 testing proceeded during 2024. The same document records the establishment of the Ground Self-Defense Force's 7th Surface-to-Ship Missile Regiment at Katsuren in March 2024. Kishida's sea-denial posture, then, was not only budgeted; it was increasingly institutionalized, trained, and tested (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2025a).

IISS analysis provides further context for this shift. One IISS assessment notes that Japan reportedly seeks around 1,500 missiles, while a U.S. Department of Defense estimate cited in the same analysis assessed that China possessed around 2,000 ballistic and cruise missiles capable of striking Japan. Another IISS discussion notes that the upgraded Type-12 missile is intended to extend its range from around 200 km to 900 km. These figures reinforce the logic of asymmetrical balancing. Japan cannot match China missile for missile, but it can improve range, dispersal, and readiness in ways that make coercive action against the southwest islands riskier and less predictable (IISS, 2022; IISS, 2023b).

Table 6. Selected sea-denial indicators under Kishida

Indicator	Quantitative evidence
IISS stand-off defense allocation in new DBP	USD 38.93 bn
IISS uncrewed defense allocation in new DBP	USD 7.79 bn
Reported Japanese missile requirement (IISS discussion)	~1,500 missiles
Chinese ballistic/cruise missiles capable of striking Japan (IISS-cited estimate)	~2,000
Upgraded Type-12 range goal (IISS discussion)	~900 km
Tomahawk acquisition	Rescheduled from FY2026 to FY2025
Upgraded Type-12 deployment	Rescheduled from FY2026 to FY2025
7th Surface-to-Ship Missile Regiment	Established March 2024

Source: Author's processing from IISS analysis and MOD FY2025 progress material.

Sea denial alone would be insufficient for Japan because the country's security and prosperity depend on functioning sea lines of communication and continued operational access to nearby waters. This is why sea control remains the second core maritime pillar under Kishida. Here again, the IISS data are revealing. Japan's Maya-class Aegis destroyer carries 96 vertical-launch cells, compared with 112 on China's Type-055. Individually, the gap is real but not overwhelming; collectively, Japan's position is strengthened by a broader force structure that includes eight Aegis-equipped ballistic-missile-defense cruisers and destroyers already in service, at least ten planned, and a rapidly growing Mogami-class fleet expected to reach 22 ships. Combined with 22 operational submarines, this is the force structure of a state seeking selective local sea control in critical nearby waters, not one retreating into narrow coastal passivity (Childs, 2023).

The IISS Defense Buildup Program figures further show that integrated air and missile defense rose from USD 7.79 billion in the previous plan to USD 23.36 billion in the new plan, while C2 and intelligence-related capability rose from USD 2.34 billion to USD 7.79 billion. The associated capability list includes 5 E-2D airborne early-warning aircraft, 14 Type-03 medium-range surface-to-air missile systems, SM-3 Block IIA and PAC-3 MSE missiles, SM-6 missiles, 2 Aegis-equipped destroyers, and 3 RC-2 electronic-intelligence aircraft. Operationally, this is the architecture of localized sea control in a missile-dense theater: ships, airborne warning,

missile defense, ISR, and command networks working together to preserve a favorable balance around maritime approaches vital to Japan's defense (IISS, 2023a).

The strategic rationale becomes clearer when set against the wider regional naval balance. IISS notes that China's navy had a "battle force" of about 340 vessels and was expected to grow to 400 ships by 2025 and 440 by 2030. The same chapter stresses that any assessment of Beijing's maritime power must also include the China Coast Guard—the largest force of its kind in the world—and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia. Against that backdrop, Japan cannot realistically aim for comprehensive command of the sea across the western Pacific. Kishida's more plausible objective is selective sea control in the East China Sea and the approaches to the southwest islands, supported by ISR, missile defense, submarines, and alliance-enabled interoperability. That is what the emerging force structure suggests (Childs, 2023).

Table 7. Selected IISS maritime-force indicators relevant to sea control

Indicator	Quantitative value
Maya-class VLS cells	96
China Type-055 VLS cells	112
Aegis-equipped BMD destroyers/cruisers in service (Japan)	8
Aegis-equipped ships planned (Japan)	At least 10
Mogami-class frigates planned	22
Operational submarines (Japan)	22
PLAN battle-force size	~340 ships
PLAN projected size	400 by 2025; 440 by 2030

Source: Author's processing from IISS maritime-capability assessment.

Coastal defense remains the most immediate and politically indispensable layer of Japan's maritime strategy because the frontline challenge around the Senkaku Islands is usually not fleet battle but gray-zone encroachment. In methodological terms, SIPRI and IISS are most useful for the structural side of the analysis, while MOFA and JCG are indispensable for the operational side. IISS characterizes the Asia-Pacific not only as the main theater for potential high-intensity conflict but also as the main "gray zone" of competition short of armed conflict. It also emphasizes that the China Coast Guard is numerically the largest force of its kind in the world. That broader regional assessment helps clarify why Japanese coastal defense should be understood as more than shoreline protection, it is a hybrid response to constabulary coercion, maritime militia activity, and administrative encroachment (Childs, 2023).

On the Japanese side, the Defense Buildup Program profile shows major increases in categories directly relevant to coastal defense and remote-island sustainment. Mobile deployment and protection of civilians rose from USD 2.34 billion in the previous plan to USD 15.57 billion in the new plan; C2 and intelligence-related capability rose from USD 2.34 billion to USD 7.79 billion; and sustainability and resilience rose from USD 46.72 billion to USD 116.80 billion, the largest single category in the new plan. The same IISS figure lists 34 CH-47J/JA heavy transport helicopters, 77 UH-2 helicopters, 6 C-2 medium transport aircraft, 10 tanker/transport aircraft, 8 transport vessels, and 3 RC-2 aircraft. These figures matter because the southwest-islands problem is not just about intercepting intrusions. It also involves moving forces, sustaining them, distributing logistics, and maintaining situational awareness over time (IISS, 2023a).

MOFA and JCG data show why this coastal-defense investment is necessary. MOFA states that Chinese government vessels enter the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands almost every day except during rough weather and intrude into Japanese territorial waters several times each month. JCG's 2025 report adds that the annual number of confirmed days in the contiguous zone reached 355 in 2024, that the longest continuous streak reached 215 days, and that the number of incidents in which Chinese Coast Guard vessels attempted to approach Japanese fishing boats reached 18. The same report notes that the territorial sea around the Senkaku Islands is approximately 4,740 square kilometers and that the JCG maintains constant patrols by ships and aircraft, day and night. Coastal defense, then, is the first active layer of Kishida's maritime strategy rather than a passive last resort (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026; Japan Coast Guard, 2025).

The Kishida administration's distinctive contribution here lies in integration. Official MOD explanatory material explicitly calls for stronger coordination and cooperation between the SDF and the JCG, including possible control of the JCG by the Minister of Defense during contingencies. Bito (2025) argues that Japan needs a unified national maritime strategy that integrates the capabilities of the JMSDF and the JCG through shared "ends, ways, and means." The empirical pattern under Kishida suggests movement in that direction. The JCG remains the primary frontline actor in the Senkaku gray zone, but it is increasingly backed by deeper layers of ISR, missile defense, stand-off capability, and contingency planning. Coastal defense, in this sense, functions as the hinge connecting law enforcement, deterrence, and military reinforcement (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024a; Bito, 2025).

Table 8. Coastal-defense and gray-zone pressure indicators

Indicator	2019	2024
Days with confirmed Chinese government-vessel presence in contiguous zone	282	355
Longest continuous streak of confirmed presence	64	215
Incidents of approach to Japanese fishing boats	—	18
Territorial sea around Senkaku Islands	Approx. 4,740 km ²	Approx. 4,740 km ²
JCG patrol posture	Day and night	24/7/365

Source: Author's processing from Japan Coast Guard mission brief and *Japan Coast Guard Report 2025*.

The strategic pattern that emerged under Kishida becomes clearer when its main elements are read in relation to the different demands of Japan's maritime defense posture. First, what took shape under Kishida was not a series of disconnected adjustments, but a maritime posture in which each element answered a different part of the same strategic problem. Regional power projection mattered because Japan needed a more visible presence across the surrounding theater and a stronger alliance-backed signal that pressure in the East China Sea would not be managed in isolation. Second, sea denial became central because Japan was operating under clear material asymmetry *vis-à-vis* China, which meant that the most realistic objective was not numerical parity, but the ability to complicate hostile movement and raise the costs of coercive action. Third, sea control was pursued in a more limited and selective sense. The issue was not command of the wider maritime domain as such, but the preservation of operational freedom in the waters most directly tied to Japan's security, especially around the East China Sea and the southwest islands. Fourth, coastal defense remained the indispensable base of the entire posture, since this was the level at which gray-zone pressure was experienced most consistently through patrol competition, repeated incursions, and sovereignty challenges around the Senkaku Islands. These four layers therefore need to be read together. Regional power projection extended strategic reach, sea denial imposed costs, sea control preserved room for maneuver, and coastal defense held the frontline against daily coercion. What Kishida consolidated was a defense posture in which those layers no longer stood apart as separate policy tracks, but worked in a more integrated way. This is why the period should not be read simply as one of higher spending or faster procurement. The more important shift lay in the effort to turn fiscal expansion, force development, and operational planning into a maritime-centered defensive-defense strategy suited to prolonged gray-zone pressure. In that sense, Japan did not move beyond the language of self-defense, but gave that language a denser and more operational meaning in practice.

CONCLUSION

Kishida's maritime turn came from a change in strategic judgment about the East China Sea. Once Chinese gray-zone pressure was treated as a durable condition rather than a recurring irritation, the logic of policy adjustment followed. Budget growth, stand-off missiles, remote-island mobility, Aegis expansion, and tighter SDF-JCG coordination belonged to the same shift. They gave Japan a denser and more credible maritime posture while keeping the language of defensive-defense intact. Kishida's significance lies here. He inherited a trajectory

already in motion, then moved it into a more operational phase and tied it closely to the problem of prolonged coercion around the Senkaku Islands.

The broader implication extends beyond one administration. So long as pressure in the East China Sea continues through routine presence, law-enforcement coercion, and calibrated intrusion, Japan will have to preserve the seam between constabulary action and military reinforcement. The next stage therefore turns on harder institutional work, faster ISR fusion between the JCG and the SDF, more reliable logistics for the southwest islands, clearer contingency arrangements for gray-zone escalation, and steadier coordination with the United States and other partners in the surrounding theater. Where those links remain uneven, capability growth will outpace strategic integration. Where they are connected, Japan's maritime defense posture will remain durable well beyond the Kishida years.

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