

The 2022 Revision of Japan's Three Security Documents in the Context of Postwar History*

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Abstract

This study examines Japan's "Three Security Documents" formulated in 2022 in the context of Japan's postwar national security policy history.

In the context of postwar Japanese history, the Three Security Documents represent the clarification of a counter-threat approach that emphasizes operations. The Basic Defense Force Concept, introduced in the 1976 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and maintained until its abolition in the 2010 NDPG, emphasized the "beyond-the-threat theory" to counter downward pressure on defense capabilities during the détente and post-Cold War periods, although it could be interpreted as a low threat-based approach. Moreover, one of its key components—repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance—reflected an emphasis on defense buildup itself rather than actual operations.

In contrast, the 2022 Three Security Documents explicitly state that Japan will possess counterstrike capabilities not included in the previous Multi-Domain Defense Force and secure the ability to sustain combat operations through adequate stockpiles of ammunition and guided missiles, with budgetary backing for these capabilities. This represents both the clarification and implementation of a counter-threat approach that emphasizes operations.

Introduction

This study examines the revision of the so-called "Three Security Documents," approved by the cabinet on December 16, 2022, within the context of postwar security policy history.

The Three Security Documents comprise the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program. The National Security Strategy is the highest-level document among the three and establishes the basic policy for national security, centering on diplomatic and defense policies. Based on the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy sets forth defense objectives and the approaches and means to achieve them. This document was formerly known as the NDPG until the 2022 revision. The Defense Buildup Program is a medium- to long-term plan to achieve the required level of defense capabilities under the National Defense Strategy. This document was also renamed from the former Medium Term Defense Program. The policies outlined in the Three Security Documents are ultimately

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implemented as concrete programs in annual budgets.

The Three Security Documents are significant both for establishing sound civil-military relations and as declaratory policy toward the international community.

While one approach to studying defense policy history might involve examining details within a limited time frame (or through a single volume for comprehensive histories), this study draws on relevant previous research¹ to present broad trajectories from a comprehensive historical perspective—trajectories that tend to be overlooked in detailed examinations—and clarifies how the Three Security Documents relate to these trajectories.

This study first examines the characteristics of postwar security policy history as revealed by the process through which the Three Security Documents system was established. It then analyzes the meaning of the phrase in the 2022 National Security Strategy (hereinafter, document names are indicated with their year of formulation) describing how “the strategic guidance and policies under this Strategy will dramatically transform Japan’s national security policy after the end of WWII from the aspect of its execution” within the context of postwar defense debates.² Specifically, this involves two directions: first, from “beyond-the-threat theory” to “counter-threat theory,” and second, from emphasizing defense buildup to emphasizing operations.

By examining the revision of the Three Security Documents within this historical context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the issues involved and clarifies their position in postwar history.

1. Characteristics of Postwar Security Policy History as Seen in the Process of Establishing the Three Security Documents System

(1) Pre-History of the Three Security Documents

The Three Security Documents can be explained systematically as described above. To reiterate: the National Security Strategy establishes the basic policy for national security; based on this, the National Defense Strategy sets forth defense objectives; the Defense Buildup Program is then created to achieve these objectives; and the content is ultimately realized as concrete programs in annual budgets.

However, the Three Security Documents did not exist from the beginning as a systematized three-piece set. In fact, the first to be created was the former National Defense Program Guidelines (formulated on October 29, 1976). The former Medium Term Defense Program came next, nine years after the first NDPG (September 18, 1985). The National Security Strategy was created last, a further 28 years after the first Medium Term Defense Program (December 17, 2013). Notably, then, the Three Security Documents were established in reverse hierarchical order: first the middle-level document, then the lower-level document, and finally—considerably later—the upper-level document. What does this unusual sequence reveal? Let us examine this by reviewing postwar

¹ Sanada Naotaka, “*Taikoku*” *Nihon no Boei Seisaku: Boei Taiko ni Itaru Katei 1968-1976 nen* [The Defense Policy of “Great Power” Japan : The Process of Completing National Defense Program Guidelines, 1968-1976] (Tokyo: Yoshida Shoten [Yoshida Publishing], 2021); Chijiwa Yasuaki, *Anzen Hoshō to Boeiryoku no Sengo Shi 1971-2010: “Kiban teki Boeiryoku Koso” no Jidai* [Unintended Consensus: A History of Postwar Japan’s Defense Concept] (Tokyo: Chikura Shobo [Chikura Publishing Company], 2021).

² Naikaku Kanbo [Cabinet Secretariat], *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Senryaku* [National Security Strategy], published December 16, 2022, last updated June 23, 2023, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryō/221216anzenhoshō/nss-j.pdf>, p. 5.

security policy history.

Defeated in the Second World War, Japan was disarmed by the Allied Powers. However, with the onset of the Cold War, the victorious United States diametrically changed its policy and strongly pressed Japan to rearm. Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru responded with a light armament and economy-first approach known as the “Yoshida Doctrine.” When the Yoshida Liberal Party administration fell to minority government status in the House of Representatives election on April 19, 1953, the opposition Kaishinto (Reform Party), which advocated independent defense through constitutional revision and full-scale rearmament, gained influence. On September 27 of that year, Yoshida met with Shigemitsu Mamoru, president of the Kaishinto, and agreed to formulate a long-term defense buildup plan.

The Defense Agency Establishment Act, enacted on June 9, 1954, designated the Basic Policy on National Defense and the national defense program guidelines as matters for consultation with the National Defense Council (a ministerial-level collegial body chaired by the prime minister that deliberates on important defense matters; now the National Security Council (NSC)). On May 20, 1957, during the Kishi Nobusuke administration, the Basic Policy on National Defense and the First Defense Buildup Program (First Defense Program) were formulated.

The Basic Policy on National Defense can certainly be considered a predecessor to the National Security Strategy. However, its content was abstract and lacked clear priorities—supporting UN activities, establishing foundations for national security, progressively building defense capabilities to the extent necessary for self-defense, and basing policy on the Japan-U.S. security system—hardly what could be called a “strategy.”

The First Defense Program was created about one month after the Basic Policy on National Defense (June 14). Thereafter, five-year defense buildup programs (the First Defense Program alone was a three-year plan) were formulated four times through the Fourth Defense Program (October 9, 1972).³ After the Fourth Defense Program's plan period ended, no “Fifth Defense Program” was formulated, and the system shifted to the NDPG format. In fact, what the Defense Agency Establishment Act called the national defense program guidelines Guidelines was originally treated as a common noun. The five-year defense buildup programs through the Fourth Defense Program were what originally corresponded to the national defense program guidelines as a common noun.⁴

(2) The “One-Document” Era: The Former NDPG

Entering the 1970s, however, defense buildup based on five-year plans faced its limits. U.S.-Soviet détente and the economic recession following the First Oil Crisis (1973) led to increasingly critical scrutiny of defense buildup practices in which budgets had doubled with each plan formulation. The required expenses for the Fourth Defense Program were in fact reduced by approximately 600 billion yen from the original plan, and the program ended with more than one-quarter of Maritime

³ On February 8, only the “outline” of the Fourth Defense Program was formulated in advance, and in October, the “situation assessment and defense concept” and “major items” of the Fourth Defense Program were formulated.

⁴ “Maruyama Ko shi Intabyu” [Interview with Maruyama Ko], 1996, U.S.-Japan Project, Oral History Program, National Security Archive (Washington, D.C.), last updated January 15, 2013, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/japan/maruyama.pdf>, pp. 5-6.

Self-Defense Force's vessels and other items remaining unbuilt.⁵

It was at this point that the “Basic Defense Force Concept” emerged. The defense concept through the Fourth Defense Program had been the so-called “required defense force concept,” based on the “counter-threat theory.” In contrast, the Basic Defense Force Concept held that: (1) in peacetime, various functions necessary for defense should be maintained with functional and geographical balance; (2) Japan's defense capabilities need only be sufficient to deal “without external assistance” with “limited and small-scale aggression”; and (3) if international tensions rise, defense capabilities can be expanded. The Basic Defense Force Concept is often said to be based on the “beyond-the-threat theory” advocated by Kubo Takuya, who served as Administrative Vice-Minister of Defense—the idea of not making defense capabilities responsive to threats the goal of buildup.⁶

Based on this Basic Defense Force Concept, the first NDPG were formulated in 1976 during the Miki Takeo administration. The NDPG consisted of the defense concept and an Appendix Table that specified the quantities for achievement targets in force structure and equipment procurement. Around the same time, the 1 percent of GNP ceiling for the defense budget was established (November 5). The NDPG were subsequently formulated six times through the 2018 NDPG.

Thus, excluding the Basic Policy on National Defense and the five-year defense buildup programs through the Fourth Defense Program, there existed a “one-document” era consisting solely of the former NDPG as the security policy document directly leading to the later Three Security Documents.

(3) The “Two-Document” Era: The Former Medium Term Defense Program

That said, the NDPG did not stand alone. Under the 1976 NDPG, the Medium Term Estimate was created on July 17, 1979. This document estimated major Self-Defense Forces operations to be implemented over five years and served as a reference for creating annual work plans and budget estimate requests (new estimates were prepared every three years). The Medium Term Estimate, however, was merely a reference document internal to the Defense Agency, not an official government plan like the NDPG.

The transition from “one document” to “two documents” occurred when the Medium Term Estimate was upgraded to an official government plan and became the Medium Term Defense Program in 1985 during the Nakasone Yasuhiro administration. While the NDPG had no fixed

⁵ *Asahi Shimbun* [Asahi Newspaper], December 28, 1975.

⁶ Uemura Hideki, *Jieitai wa Dare no Mono ka* [The Self-Defense Forces: To Whom Do They Belong?] (Tokyo: Kodansha [Kodansha, Publisher], 2002), pp. 126-127; Sado Akihiro, *Sengo Nihon no Boei to Seiji* [Defense and Politics of Postwar Japan] (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan [Yoshikawa Kobunkan, Publisher], 2003), pp. 260, 284; Takeda Yu, “*Keizai Taikoku*” *Nihon no Tai Bei Kyocho: Anpo Keizai Genshiryoku wo Meguru Shiko Sakugo, 1975-1981 nen* [“Economic Power” Japan's Cooperation with the United States: Trial and Error over Security, Economy, and Nuclear Power, 1975-1981] (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo [Minerva Shobo, Publisher], 2015), pp. 35-36, 39; Tanaka Akihiko, *Anzen Hoshō: Sengo 50 nen no Mosaku* [National Security: Exploration 50 Years After the War] (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbun [Yomiuri Newspaper], 1997), pp. 244-264; Hiwatari Yumi, *Senshu Boei Kokufuku no Senryaku: Nihon no Anzen Hoshō wo Do Toraeru ka* [Strategy to Overcome Exclusively Defensive Posture: A View on Japan's National Security] (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo [Minerva Shobo, Publisher], 2012), pp. 65-66; Muroyama Yoshimasa, *Nichi Bei Anpo Taisei (Ge): Nikuson Dokutorin kara Wangan Senso made* [Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements (vol.2): From Nixon Doctrine to Gulf War] (Tokyo: Yuhikaku [Yuhikaku Publishing], 1992), p. 363; Kawasaki Tsuyoshi, “Postclassical Realism and Japanese Security Policy,” *Pacific Review* 14: 2, 2001, p. 225.

plan period and were not tied to budgets, the Medium Term Defense Program was a five-year plan that also specified required expenses. It has been formulated eight times through the 2019 Medium Term Defense Program, created alongside the 2018 NDPG.

Behind the formulation of the Medium Term Defense Program lay changes in the international environment since the 1976 NDPG. When the Soviet military suddenly invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979, the end of détente and the arrival of a U.S.-Soviet “Second Cold War” were widely proclaimed. In Northeast Asia, the deployment of the aircraft carrier Minsk, the supersonic long-range bomber Backfire, the intermediate-range ballistic missile SS-20, and other weapons confirmed the growing Soviet threat.

In response, calls emerged—centered on the LDP's defense tribe and others—for reviewing defense buildup approaches to address the Second Cold War. Amid Japan-U.S. economic friction, the U.S. government also demanded that Japan strengthen its defense capabilities.⁷ At the 13th Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee (SSC) held in Hawaii from June 10 to 12, 1981, Francis J. West, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, declared the NDPG as “out of date” and pressed Japan for greater defense efforts.⁸ The reinstatement of a five-year plan with the 1985 Medium Term Defense Program largely driven by the shift from a context where defense capability increases were infeasible—as had been the case during the 1976 NDPG's formulation—to one where such increases were required. The 1985 Medium Term Defense Program secured a budget of 18.4 trillion yen.

Under the 1985 Medium Term Defense Program, improvements in sea lane defense capabilities (anti-submarine operations and ship protection operations) and other defense buildup that exceeded the quantitative framework of the Basic Defense Force Concept came to be accepted.⁹ Thus, from the late 1970s through the 1980s, the Medium Term Defense Program and the preceding Medium Term Estimate effectively led defense policy more than the NDPG themselves. Ito Keiichi, who served as director of the Defense Bureau when the 1976 NDPG were formulated and as director-general of the National Defense Council Secretariat from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, observed: “To put it in extreme terms, I feel the NDPG were set aside while the Medium Term Estimate became the operative driver of policy.”¹⁰ On January 24, 1987, the 1 percent of GNP ceiling, established around the same time as the 1976 NDPG, was also abolished.

No upper-level strategic document to oversee both the NDPG and the Medium Term Defense Program was formulated, however. The focus of Japan's security policy during the Cold War was to promote progressive defense buildup under the Japan-U.S. security system. Under such circumstances, there was little need for Japan to articulate a “security strategy.” Conversely, domestic circumstances meant that using terms like “strategy” risked being labeled as “militarism revival.”

⁷ Sebata Takao, *Boei Keikaku no Taiko to Nichi Bei Gaidorain* [The NDPO and the Guidelines for Japan-United States Defense Cooperation] (Tokyo: Bokutakusha [Bokutakusha, Publisher], 1998), pp. 154, 204.

⁸ “Boeikyokucho Memo” (6.15), Omura Joji Kankei Bunsho [Omura Joji Related Documents] (III-1-4-4) (Archived in Center for Modern Japanese Legal and Political Documents, University of Tokyo).

⁹ Sado, *Sengo Nihon no Boei to Seiji*, p. 278; Sebata, *Boei Keikaku no Taiko to Nichi Bei Gaidorain*, p. 154.

¹⁰ Seisaku Kenkyu Daigakuin Daigaku COE Oraru Seisaku Kenkyu Purojekuto [National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies COE Oral Policy Research Project] (ed.), *Ito Keiichi Oraru Hisutorii* [Ito Keiichi Oral History] (Vol. 2) (Tokyo: Seisaku Kenkyu Daigakuin Daigaku [National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies], 2003), p. 153.

(4) Toward the “Three-Document” Era: The National Security Strategy

With the end of the Cold War, however, this situation gradually changed. The liberal international order formed under American leadership based on rules and institutions grounded in values such as freedom and democracy began to show signs of instability. Particularly in recent years, as Japan’s security environment has grown increasingly severe—with China’s military rise and North Korea’s improved nuclear capabilities—and facing the long-term trend of U.S. retrenchment from international engagement, maintaining merely the abstract and all-encompassing Basic Policy on National Defense came to be seen as insufficient. The limitations of a “reactive” posture centered on defense buildup came to be recognized. The government as a whole needed to identify Japan’s national interests from a long-term perspective and chart a course in the international community.

Thus, in 2013 during the second Abe Shinzo administration, Japan’s first postwar National Security Strategy was formulated. This National Security Strategy was characterized by articulating “‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ based on the principle of international cooperation” as its guiding principle.¹¹ This represented a posture of actively working from Japan to create an international order desirable for both Japan and the world. The Abe administration indeed led the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) vision, which sought to realize an order based on the rule of law from the Asia-Pacific through the Indian Ocean to Africa, bringing prosperity and peace. Almost simultaneously with the National Security Strategy’s formulation, the NSC was established on December 4, 2013, as the “control tower” for security policy.

With this, the Three Security Documents—the National Security Strategy, the NDPG, and the Medium Term Defense Program—were fully assembled. By tracing the chronologically peculiar process through which the Three Security Documents were established, we can actually gain insight into the essence of Japan’s security policy.

Table 1. Brief History of the Three Security Documents

Upper Level	(Basic Policy on National Defense)									2013 National Security Strategy		2022 National Security Strategy	
										Proactive Contribution to Peace			
Middle Level	(First Defense Program)	(Second Defense Program)	(Third Defense Program)	(Fourth Defense Program)	1976 National Defense Program Guidelines		1995 National Defense Program Guidelines		2004 National Defense Program Guidelines	2010 National Defense Program Guidelines	2013 National Defense Program Guidelines	2018 National Defense Program Guidelines	2022 National Defense Strategy
	(Required Defense Force)				Basic Defense Force					Multi-functional, Flexible, and Effective Defense Force	Dynamic Defense Force	Dynamic Joint Defense Force	Multi-Domain Defense Force
Lower Level					1986 Medium Term Defense Program	1991 Medium Term Defense Program	1996 Medium Term Defense Program	2001 Medium Term Defense Program	2005 Medium Term Defense Program	2011 Medium Term Defense Program	2014 Medium Term Defense Program	2019 Medium Term Defense Program	2022 Defense Buildup Program

(Source) Created by the author based on various materials

¹¹ Naikaku Kanbo, Kokka Anzen Hoshō Senryaku [National Security Strategy], published December 17, 2013/ last updated June 23, 2023, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-j.pdf>, p. 1.

After the Three Security Documents were formulated in 2013, geopolitical competition among major powers intensified further. In East Asia, concerns about a Taiwan contingency have been spreading. At the Chinese Communist Party Congress held on October 16, 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping demonstrated a hardline stance, stating that to achieve Taiwan unification, China would “never renounce the use of force and reserve the option to take all necessary measures.”¹² In Eastern Europe, on February 24 of the same year, Russia began its invasion of Ukraine in violation of international law. The 2013 National Security Strategy had positioned Russia as a partner for cooperation in the context of emphasizing response to China; even this point alone would have made revision of the National Security Strategy unavoidable (the NDPG and Medium Term Defense Program were revised on December 18, 2018).

Moreover, in addition to issues such as counterstrike capabilities (Self-Defense Forces capabilities utilizing stand-off defense capability and other means to enable Japan to deliver effective counterstrikes in adversary territory in the event of ballistic missile attacks against Japan) and defense budget increases (the 2022 Defense Buildup Program presented a figure of 43 trillion yen, approximately 1.6 times previous Medium Term Defense Programs), upgrades were being demanded across a wide range of measures including the so-called “new domains” of space, cyber, and electromagnetic spectrum, as well as new technologies, maritime security capabilities, intelligence, climate change, defense production and technology base, defense equipment transfers, arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, and protection of the people.

The 2022 revision of the Three Security Documents represented the first simultaneous revision. Even with changes in leadership, the mechanism of systematizing policy documents with strategy at the top will continue to be maintained, and the significance of demonstrating both domestically and internationally the commitment to updating content in a timely manner should not be underestimated.

2. From Beyond-the-Threat to Counter-Threat

(1) The Basic Defense Force Concept as “Beyond-the-Threat Theory”

Regarding the character of the Three Security Documents, the 2022 National Security Strategy states, as mentioned above, that “the strategic guidance and policies under this Strategy will dramatically transform Japan’s national security policy after the end of WWII from the aspect of its execution.” What follows examines the meaning of this transformation by situating it within postwar defense debates, without delving deeply into the specific measures proposed by the Three Security Documents. Specifically, this involves two directions: first, from “beyond-the-threat theory” to “counter-threat theory,” and second, from emphasizing defense buildup to emphasizing operations.

Let us begin by examining threat theory. As mentioned above, the Basic Defense Force Concept was adopted in the 1976 NDPG. The Basic Defense Force Concept is often understood as beyond-the-threat theory. In reality, however, within the Defense Agency there was also a strong interpretation that even when called the Basic Defense Force Concept, it was a “low threat-based approach” that lowered the level of assumed threats and remained fundamentally a type of counter-

¹² *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* [Nikkei Newspaper], October 16, 2022.

threat.¹³ For example, according to minutes from the Defense Agency's extraordinary counselors' meeting held on May 6, 1977, discussions included statements such as "[the NDPG are] not necessarily fundamentally beyond-the-threat" (Maruyama Ko, Administrative Vice-Minister of Defense) and "as an approach to force levels, should we take a peacetime approach [beyond-the-threat] or start from a counter-threat [approach]" (Natsume Haruo, Defense Councilor).¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is true that the image as beyond-the-threat theory is strong, and indeed this aspect has been emphasized.

The general understanding of the Basic Defense Force Concept would be as follows: Looking ahead to the post-Fourth Defense Program, Kubo Takuya advocated the beyond-the-threat theory. Under Defense Agency Director-General Sakata Michita, it was decided to introduce the Basic Defense Force Concept embodying beyond-the-threat theory in order to "build national consensus on defense policy." This eliminated the need to show the process toward defense buildup goals to counter threats as in the required defense force concept era, so the new format of the NDPG was adopted, and the five-year plan was abolished.¹⁵

Historical documents and testimonies from those involved, however, reveal a different reality. What the departments responsible for the post-Fourth Defense Program, such as the Internal Bureau's Defense Division at the time, emphasized was nothing other than avoiding a repeat of the Fourth Defense Program's failure. If a "Fifth Defense Program" were created, there was a risk it would meet the same fate as the Fourth Defense Program.

To avoid this, an idea emerged to create a new post-Fourth Defense Program defense buildup plan that would escape Ministry of Finance scrutiny by not specifying the plan period or required expenses, unlike conventional five-year plans. Nishihiro Seiki, director of the Internal Bureau's Defense Division responsible for the post-Fourth Defense Program, thought that "if my predecessor [Natsume Haruo] tried to create [a "Fifth Defense Program"], it would be too miserable and he couldn't create it," and "rather than a five-year plan, let's get by with something like a sutra."¹⁶ In other words, the emphasis would be on showing the rationale regarding the nature of defense capabilities while removing specific periods and required expenses from the plan. It was the NDPG as a proper noun that embodied this idea.¹⁷

However, even if the new document called the NDPG were to be formulated, it was thought that specifying a plan period would be unavoidable as long as one maintained the conventional required defense force concept. Among those involved, it came to be understood that if a long-term plan without a clear time limit were to be created, the required defense force concept—which

¹³ Boeikyoku Boeika [Defense Bureau, Defense Division], "Jiki Bo no Tomen no Kadai to Hoshin (An)" [Current Issues and Policy for the Next Defense Program (Draft)] (December 12, 1974), Hoshuyama Noboru Kankei Bunsho [Hoshuyama Noboru Related Documents] (9-2), pp. 5-8 (held at the National Diet Library, Constitutional Government Documents Room).

¹⁴ "Sanjikan Kaigi Gijiroku" [Minutes of the Counselors' Meeting] (May 6, 1977), Boeicho Boeichoshishitsu [Defense Agency History Office, Defense Agency], Sanjikan Kaigi Giji Yoroku (Showa 52 nen) 1/2 [Summary Minutes of Counselors' Meeting (1977) 1/2] (Honkan-4A-034-00, Hei 17 Boei 01214100), pp. 306, 314, 305, 309, 312, 314, 310 (held at the National Archives of Japan).

¹⁵ *Boei Hakusho* [Defense of Japan: White Paper], 1976 edition.

¹⁶ "Intabyu (1) Nishihiro Seiki shi," [Interview (1) with Nishihiro Seiki], 1995, U.S.-Japan Project, Oral History Program, National Security Archive (Washington, D.C.), last updated February 7, 2024, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/japan/nishihiro.pdf>, p. 9.

¹⁷ "Maruyama Ko shi Intabyu," pp. 5-6.

must constantly take into account fluctuations in neighboring countries' military forces—would not be suitable.¹⁸ Here, the beyond-the-threat theory gained significance. In other words, contrary to Kubo's true intentions, there was an aspect in which the Basic Defense Force Concept was used to justify avoiding the “Fifth Defense Program” and formulating a new “ultra-long-term” (more than 10 years) plan called the NDPG.

After the Cold War ended, the 1976 NDPG were revised for the first time in 19 years, and the 1995 NDPG (November 28) were formulated. The 1995 NDPG defined the Basic Defense Force Concept as “possessing the minimum necessary defense capability for an independent nation so that [Japan] would not become a source of instability in the surrounding region by creating a vacuum of power rather than building a capability directly linked to a military threat to Japan.” This definition had not appeared in the 1976 NDPG. There is a reason why the 1995 NDPG followed the Basic Defense Force Concept of the Cold War era and emphasized beyond-the-threat theory. The Cold War's end, with the decline of the Soviet-Russian threat, was an event that strengthened downward pressure on defense capabilities. Against such downward pressure, the beyond-the-threat theory remained useful as logic to defend existing defense capabilities, as it had during détente. This is because it could be argued that Japan's defense capabilities were not fundamentally linked to threats.

Takamizawa Nobushige, who was deeply involved as a planning officer in the Director-General's Secretariat of the Defense Agency in the 1995 NDPG formulation process, testified regarding the description in the 1992 edition of the Defense White Paper that became the basis for the definition of the Basic Defense Force Concept in the NDPG: “The ‘power vacuum’ in the Heisei 4 [1992] White Paper meant a ‘power vacuum’ in the sense that it would be problematic if basic defense capabilities declined when forces that could be directed against Japan declined. It was called ‘bedrock’ defense capabilities rather than basic defense capabilities.”¹⁹ Thus, beyond-the-threat had long been advocated regarding the nature of Japan's defense capabilities.

(2) Toward Counter-Threat

It is true that the 2010 NDPG (formulated on December 17) proclaimed “departure” from the Basic Defense Force Concept. Nevertheless, some ambiguity remained regarding threat theory. In contrast, the Council of Experts on Comprehensively Considering Defense Capabilities as National Power, established prior to the revision of the Three Security Documents, recommended in its report submitted on November 22, 2022, that “there is a need for a strategic approach to build defense capabilities that can deter, prevent, and eliminate aggression by other countries by focusing on capabilities that pose concrete threats and anticipating ways of fighting five or ten years hence.”²⁰ The actual 2022 National Defense Strategy also clearly stated that in “the most severe and complex security environment since the end of WWII, Japan needs to squarely face the

¹⁸ Kousa Noboru, “Meikaku ka saretā ‘Kiban teki Boeiryoku Koso’: ‘Boei Keikaku no Taiko’ no Tokuchō to Kadai,” [Clarified ‘Basic Defense Force Concept’ – Characteristics and Challenges of the NDPO] *Kokubo* [National Defense] 26:1 (January 1977), p. 40.

¹⁹ Author's interview with Takamizawa Nobushige (January 13, 2012, Tokyo).

²⁰ Naikaku Kanbo, “‘Kokuryoku to shite no Boeiryoku wo Sogo teki ni Kangaeru Yushikisha Kaigi’ Hokokusho,” [Report of the “Council of Experts on Comprehensively Considering Defense Capabilities as National Power”], November 22, 2022/last updated June 12, 2023, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/boueiryoku_kaigi/pdf/20221122_houkokusyo.pdf, p. 4.

grim reality and fundamentally reinforce Japan's defense capabilities, with a focus on opponent capabilities and new ways of warfare, to protect the lives and peaceful livelihood of Japanese nationals."²¹ This represents a true departure from beyond-the-threat and a clarification of the counter-threat approach that had been advancing.

Even when it comes to counter-threat, however, China's defense budget is said to be approximately four times that of Japan, making it impossible for Japan alone to gain superiority over China's military power, and even with the Japan-U.S. alliance, whether superiority can be achieved remains doubtful. Therefore, the 2022 National Defense Strategy adopts the approach of "ensur[ing] that opponent[s] fully recognize Japan's intention and capability, do not underestimate Japan, and do not overestimate their own capabilities, thereby deterring invasion against Japan."²²

3. From Emphasizing Defense Buildup to Emphasizing Operations

(1) The Basic Defense Force Concept as an Approach Emphasizing Defense Buildup

Second is the direction from emphasizing defense buildup to emphasizing operations.

One of the pillars of the Basic Defense Force Concept was the idea of repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance. Limited and small-scale aggression is explained as "referring to small-scale aggression among 'limited aggression.' Such aggression is generally carried out by surprise without major preparations so that the 'intent' of aggression is not detected in advance, and aims to create a fait accompli in a short period of time."²³

However, repelling this without external assistance does not mean that limited and small-scale aggression is highly probable, or that operations for repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance are actually prepared. Rather, this is a goal for "defense buildup"—in a different dimension from "operations"—to create defense capabilities that can address situations on the level of limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance from U.S. forces.

Shiota Akira, who served as Defense Councilor in the late 1970s, stated: "The 'NDPG' states that 'against limited and small-scale aggressions, the Self-Defense Forces will fight without external assistance.' It says that, but that doesn't mean they will actually fight. That's not an operational plan for actual combat. Because it's a defense buildup plan, it's only saying we want to build capabilities to the extent that we could fight. But because the NDPG's language states, 'Against limited and small-scale enemies, the Self-Defense Forces will fight without external assistance. If that becomes impossible, they will await U.S. assistance and repel the enemy,' anyone reading it will say, 'So the Self-Defense Forces will go it alone until the U.S. arrives, right?' I don't know how much I struggled with that phrasing in the NDPG. 'That's not what it means. It's not an operational plan.'"²⁴

Thus, postwar Japan tended toward an approach of defense buildup for the sake of defense

²¹ Naikaku Kanbo, Kokka Boei Senryaku [National Defense Strategy], published December 16, 2022/last updated June 12, 2023, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou/boueisenryaki.pdf>, p. 1.

²² Ibid., p. 9.

²³ *Boei Hakusho*, 1977 edition, p. 55.

²⁴ Kindai Nihon Shiryo Kenkyukai [Modern Japanese Historical Documents Study Group] (ed.), *Shiota Akira Oraru Hisutorii* [Shiota Akira Oral History] (Tokyo: Kindai Nihon Shiryo Kenkyukai [Modern Japanese Historical Documents Study Group], 2006), p. 118.

buildup, in a different dimension from operations. Operational discussions about how to actually use the built-up defense capabilities were difficult to reach.

(2) Toward Emphasizing Operations

Subsequently, however, through successive progress in defense buildup based on the Medium Term Estimate and Medium Term Defense Program after the 1976 NDPG, and the clarification of roles between the Self-Defense Forces and U.S. forces since the formulation of the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation (1978 Guidelines, November 27), it became possible to think about operations with greater realism than before. Moreover, participation in the Cambodia PKO had begun from September 1992 onward.

Therefore, the 1995 NDPG deleted the idea of repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance. The concept of repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance—a concept for defense buildup completely divorced from actual operations—was removed.

Akiyama Masahiro, who led the formulation of the 1995 NDPG as director of the Defense Bureau, recalled: “To put it in extreme terms, at any small-scale level, if there is an armed invasion from a foreign country, based on the Japan-U.S. military alliance and considering that a considerable scale of U.S. forces are stationed in Japan, regardless of whether U.S. forces immediately engage in frontline combat, Japan and the United States will almost inevitably cooperate in response from the outset. It doesn’t become a matter of saying, ‘This is limited and small-scale, so we’ll do it alone,’ or ‘It seems a bit large, so shall we do it together?’ I thought we should not put forth a concept completely divorced from actual operations.”²⁵

The trend toward emphasizing operations strengthened when the subsequent 2004 NDPG (formulated on December 10) put forth the concept of “Multi-functional, Flexible, and Effective Defense Force” while succeeding the Basic Defense Force Concept. Behind this lay growing demands for responses to new threats and diverse situations such as terrorism (the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks occurred in the United States) and North Korean ballistic missiles, as well as engagement in international peace cooperation activities.

In the 2010 NDPG, the concept of “Dynamic Defense Force” was adopted in place of the Basic Defense Force Concept. This can be characterized as a defense concept aimed at counter-threat and emphasizing operations, including seamless response to diverse situations such as “gray zone” situations as an intermediate state between peacetime and wartime. This concept, through the “Dynamic Joint Defense Force” in the 2013 NDPG, was upgraded in the 2018 NDPG to the concept of “Multi-Domain Defense Force,” with responses to new domains in mind.

In the 2022 Three Security Documents, with battles in new domains and other matters in mind, and including means such as counterstrikes that had been considered impermissible until now, there is strong awareness of the shift to defense buildup based on operational requirements.

Among these, counterstrike capabilities complement the fact that perfect interception by ballistic missile defense systems has become difficult due to the emergence of hypersonic missiles and other weapons with improved missile-related technology, while also involving Japan partially

²⁵ Akiyama Masahiro, *Nichi Bei no Senryaku Taiwa ga Hajimatta: Anpo Saiteigi no Butaiura* [Strategic Dialogues Between Japan and the U.S. Have Started: Behind-the-Scenes of Redefining Japan-U.S. Security Partnership] (Tokyo: Aki Shobo [Akishobo Inc.], 2002), p. 104.

assuming the role of the “spear” that had been considered the U.S. side’s responsibility. The utilization of stand-off defense capability and other means, in particular, will add strategic depth to Japan’s defense.

In Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichiro’s answer on February 29, 1956, it was stated that attacks on enemy bases, if there are no other means, are included in the scope of self-defense and are legally possible, but the Japanese government has held that as a policy decision it would not possess such capabilities. Here, consistency between counterstrike capabilities and the “exclusively defense-oriented policy” (the posture of exercising force only after being attacked by an adversary, and even then limiting the use of force to the minimum necessary) is often discussed, but two distinct issues are conflated here: the propriety of possessing counterstrike capabilities themselves, and the timing of their use if possessed.

First, before the issue of timing, it is necessary to confirm that counterstrike capabilities can serve as means to stop repeated attacks after the first strike from an adversary. Moreover, if the commencement of an adversary’s attack is also included, this is not thought to necessarily deviate from the spirit of the exclusively defense-oriented policy. In the first place, the purpose of Article 9 of the Constitution is not to engage in wars of aggression and to limit the forces that Japan possesses to the minimum necessary for self-defense. Whether, by excessively emphasizing the point of “only after being attacked by an adversary,” one can definitively conclude that counterstrike capabilities “exceed the minimum necessary force for self-defense” remains open to debate.

It should be noted that the 2022 National Defense Strategy does not introduce a new designation for defense capabilities. Rather, it states that “Japan will fundamentally reinforce the current Multi-Domain Defense Force through further accelerated efforts.”²⁶ This suggests that the Cold War-era controversies surrounding the ideal nature of defense capabilities—specifically, the debates over whether to pursue a required defense force based on counter-threat theory or a basic defense force based on beyond-the-threat theory, and over whether to pursue defense buildup for its own sake or defense buildup driven by operational requirements—have now faded. Given the emerging consensus on pursuing a direction of counter-threat and prioritizing operations, there was likely little significance in altering the designation of defense capabilities.

Conclusion

This study has examined the meaning of how the 2022 National Security Strategy “will dramatically transform Japan’s national security policy after the end of WWII from the aspect of its execution” by taking a bird’s-eye view of history.

The fact that postwar Japan did not have a strategic document on national security for an extended period was likely related to the long era in which Japan’s contribution to the Western camp was sufficiently met through providing bases to the United States. The foundation of Japan’s security policy was to advance the reconstruction of defense capabilities following post-defeat disarmament—that is, to promote defense buildup. The guideline for this was, in practical terms, the Medium Term Defense Program from the 1980s onward. The NDPG were expected to play a role in resisting downward pressure on defense capabilities that arose during the détente period and subsequently the post-Cold War period.

²⁶ Kokka Boei Senryaku, December 16, 2022, p. 8.

In the first place, the NDPG were born under circumstances unique to the 1970s—the Fourth Defense Program had faltered and there were concerns that a “Fifth Defense Program” would meet the same fate. The NDPG were to remain unchanged for an extended period. Indeed, the 1976 NDPG were maintained for 19 years. In recent years, however, with rapid changes in circumstances and dramatic advances in science and technology, flexible review of the nature of defense capabilities has come to be required. Although bearing the same name of NDPG, the role itself that was required of them had changed considerably over time.

The change from the NDPG to the National Defense Strategy is explained as being “to comprehensively present Japan’s defense objectives, approaches and means by which Japan accomplishes those objectives,” replacing “the NDPG, which have served as Japan’s basic guidelines for development, sustainment and operation of defense capability with the Self-Defense Forces... as its core.”²⁷ The Appendix Table in the former NDPG was removed from the National Defense Strategy and incorporated into the Defense Buildup Program. The mechanism of the NDPG—which served as a bottom line for defense capabilities but simultaneously imposed a long-term cap—had likely become difficult to sustain.

In any event, the transformation of the security environment surrounding Japan prompted the creation of strategies that clarified principles and issues of national security and approaches to them, as well as changes to lower-level documents to bring them into conformity with the times. The 2022 Three Security Documents can be said to systematize these strategic and planning needs for security.

In the context of postwar security policy history, the content of the Three Security Documents can be summarized as the clarification of a counter-threat approach that emphasizes operations. The Basic Defense Force Concept, introduced in the 1976 NDPG and maintained until its abolition in the 2010 NDPG, emphasized the beyond-the-threat theory to counter downward pressure on defense capabilities during the détente and subsequently the post-Cold War periods, although it could be interpreted as a low threat-based approach. Moreover, one of its key components—repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance—reflected an emphasis on defense buildup itself rather than actual operations.

In contrast, the 2022 National Defense Strategy explicitly states the possession of counterstrike capabilities not included in the previous Multi-Domain Defense Force and the securing of the ability to sustain combat operations through adequate stockpiles of ammunition and guided missiles, with budgetary backing for these capabilities. This represents both the clarification and implementation of a counter-threat approach that emphasizes operations.

Both the NDPG and the 1 percent of GNP ceiling for the defense budget were mechanisms created during the Miki administration in the détente period. At that time, the nation was also deeply divided over defense. In contrast, in today’s era of geopolitical competition, support for strengthening defense capabilities is high even in public opinion polls, becoming a new consensus. Times have changed, demonstrating that the moment has arrived to move beyond the legacy of the détente period.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

