

Japanese Space Strategy: Deploying a Credible Deterrent

By

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On August 31, 1998, North Korea [fired a Taepodong 1](#) missile into Japanese airspace, taking allies and adversaries by surprise. Fifteen years later, China emerged as an even more ominous concern for Japan's security. Following the summer 1998 incident, it took another quarter of a century for Japan to emancipate itself from pacifist policies, revamp its space sector activities, outfit its military force with a space component, and consider effective deterrence in space, which is yet materialize.

The concept of a successful deterrence strategy in any domain boils down to three key requirements: a credible threat (capability to support such a threat), the will to carry out the threat, and effective communications. Part of the problem for Japan is that it failed to develop a credible capability. Furthermore, the [three non-nuclear principles](#) (not possessing, not producing, and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons on the Japanese territory) leave Japan fully dependent on the American nuclear umbrella.

For Japan's effective deterrence in all domains, mere rhetoric about threats is insufficient. As an island nation entirely dependent on maritime access, Japan needs a military capability and clear communication of its determination to achieve domain superiority and escalation dominance over adversaries.

Credibility is based on a nation's past behavior and its demonstrated willingness to respond to aggression. Clearly, Japan has baggage in its history of aggression and colonization in the Indo-Pacific. Both North Korea and China consistently frame a pacified post-war Japan as the aggressor every time Japan makes a move to survive and claim its right to defend itself in a hostile neighborhood. Japan, however, is now rearming itself.

Space, as a domain, is [no exception](#) to deterrence principles. The 2007 anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon test by China triggered Japan's review of its passive approach to space infrastructure defense. Japanese spacecraft are at risk of attack through such means as jamming, close approaches by anti-satellite vehicles, and kinetic and non-kinetic weapons that are designed to disrupt or destroy satellites. China has further demonstrated its ability to capture uncooperative spacecraft in geosynchronous Earth orbit, posing a significant concern to Japanese assets in space—and to any critical space infrastructure.

Japan's transition to a militarily sovereign posture is a protracted process. Japan began by cutting the Gordian knot of post-World War II pacifism in 2014 when it "[reinterpreted](#)" Article 9 of its constitution, rather than revising or adjusting it. That sea change operationalized Article 14 of Japan's 2008 [Basic Space Law](#), *Ensuring International Peace and Security* as well as the *National Security Strategy of Japan*, which stipulates, "The State shall take necessary measures to promote space development and use to ensure international peace and security as well as to contribute to the national security of Japan."

Over the next decade, Japan's posture evolved from a non-military use of outer space to a deterrence-oriented military capability in space. In 2018, Japan's defense policy introduced the concept of [multi-domain operations](#), emphasizing national security space capabilities as a central aspect of [Japanese strategy](#). And in 2022, Japan expanded its Space Operations Squadron into a Space Operations Group, responsible for the Japan Air Self-Defense Force's (JASDF) [space domain awareness](#) operations.

For too long Japan's space sector development was constrained to civilian aims only. Faced with existential threats, Japanese policymakers realized how vital it was to foster

civilian and military cooperation in space for economic gain and furthering national security. Japan's strategy is to develop an [Earth-orbital-cislunar ecosystem](#).

In the same vein as Japan relies on free sea lanes for communications across the Indo-Pacific, at sea and in space, Japanese-American security cooperation is paramount. The threat of attacks on commercial satellite constellations and spacecraft in orbit and cislunar space is all too certain a reality, in view of already occurring daily threats and attacks on space and cyber assets.

As space continues to be a domain of strategic importance and increasing economic value for Japan, its Space Operations Group must strengthen its space situational awareness capabilities to [track and identify](#) hostile objects in space. However, while space situational awareness is essential, Japan must ultimately develop a war-winning space force to effectively deter attacks and win conflicts in space.

The JASDF should be given the policy direction and resources to develop agile, responsive, and lethal capabilities to ensure the protection of Japanese and allied commercial and military assets in space. For that matter, [so should](#) the US Space Force.

Challenges in the Indo-Pacific region and globally [resemble](#) a gathering storm. Yet, Europe, in part due to its quasi-irreversible techno-economic entanglement with China, remains unclear on what it will do in case of a Taiwan or Japan contingency. An informal yet functional partnership between NATO and the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) is [already established](#). Yet, France, furthering its relationship with China, recently opposed the opening of a NATO liaison office in Tokyo.

On November 11, 1983, Ronald Reagan [addressed](#) the Diet in Tokyo, "I have come to Japan because we have an historic opportunity, indeed, an historic responsibility. We can become a powerful partnership for good, not just in our own countries, not just in the Pacific region but throughout the world. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my question is: Do we have the determination to meet the challenge of partnership and make it happen? My answer is without hesitation: Yes we do, and yes we will." Forty years later, the Gipper's words have not aged a bit.

In space, as on Earth, the mutual commitment of Japan and the US, as staunch allies, should ensure the Indo-Pacific region remains free and open, all the way to orbit, cislunar space, and beyond.

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