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The Publication of Japan's 2023 Defense White Paper and South Korea's Response

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Japan released *the 2023 Defense of Japan* (Defense White Paper) through a cabinet decision on July 28, 2023. *The 2023 Defense White Paper* introduced Japan's assessment on the current state of affairs in the region and proposed the direction for strengthening self-defense capabilities based on the following three strategic documents published in late 2022: *the National Security Strategy* (NSS), *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), and *the Defense Buildup Program* (DBP). The features of *the 2023 Defense White Paper* are as follows. First, it clearly demonstrated Japan's perspective that a unilateral revision of the status quo through the use of force driven by China's strengthened military capabilities would not be tolerated. Second, *the 2023 Defense White Paper* highlighted Europe's importance as a security partner in accordance with Japan's vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Third, the Defense White Paper proposed methods to enhance self-defense capabilities in response to new trends in warfare, such as possessing counterstrike capabilities and preparing for information warfare. The South Korean government needs to acknowledge Japan's perception of international relations and its responses to new types of warfare. Furthermore, South Korea has to seek ways to cooperate with Japan on the North Korea issue from the perspective of the FOIP strategies presented by the two countries, while promoting cooperation on new security areas such as information and cognitive warfare.

Perception of the Changing International Security Environment and Countering China

The Kishida administration approved *the 2023 Defense of Japan* (Defense White Paper, hereafter the 2023 White Paper) during a cabinet meeting held on July 28, 2023. In particular, *the 2023 White Paper* clearly highlights a transition of Japan's national security policy as it is the first white paper to be published since the following three strategic documents were released during a cabinet meeting in late 2022: the *National Security Strategy* (NSS), *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), and the *Defense Buildup Program* (DBP).

First, *the 2023 White Paper* notes that “the international community is facing its greatest trial since World War II (WWII)” due to Russia's unilateral attempt to change the status quo, including its invasion of Ukraine. *The 2023 White Paper* expresses “grave concern” about joint military activities by Chinese and Russian forces in areas near Japan and displays a strong sense of alert. In addition, it defines China's recent trend of increasing pressure on Taiwan by opaquely raising defense spending and rapidly improving its military capabilities as “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge.” Furthermore, *the 2023 White Paper* assesses that amid the intensifying military and economic competition between the two countries, changes in the balance of power between the U.S. and China are highly likely to impact peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

In particular, *the 2023 White Paper* states that the military balance between China and Taiwan over the Taiwan situation is “changing in a manner that is rapidly becoming more advantageous to China,” thereby expressing concern in a stronger tone compared to the previous year's white paper. In response, Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) have deployed surveillance units and missile forces to the Ryukyu Islands in order to prevent an unilateral attempt to change the status quo through the use of force, including a military crisis in Taiwan. In addition, the SDF is also preparing plans to secure the safety of the people on the Ryukyu Islands and to swiftly evacuate them in the event of an emergency in Taiwan. Due to the geographical proximity between the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan, Japan perceives Taiwan as a major issue that can directly affect Japan's national security, a similar mentality found in former Prime Minister Abe's past statement that “a military crisis in Taiwan is a crisis for Japan.”

Responding to North Korea's Threat and the Importance of Europe as Security Partner

The 2023 White Paper analyzed North Korea and its unprecedented high frequency of missile launches as “accelerating provocations in a way that resembles a war-like situation,” thereby declaring the threat as “more grave and imminent than ever before.” Moreover, *the 2023 White Paper* states that North Korea’s development of missiles is “pursuing the practical use of long-range cruise missiles with the objective of mounting tactical nuclear weapons.” So far, North Korea has fired ballistic missiles 12 times in 2023 including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), a situation that made Japan continue to define North Korea as a major threat along with threats posed by China and Russia.

To respond to such threats posed by North Korea, *the 2023 White Paper* stressed the importance of cooperation between the military officials of South Korea and of Japan, particularly to tackle North Korea’s nuclear and missile development. The prior year’s white paper included the fact that South Korea had unilaterally notified the termination of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), an agreement on sharing intelligence between South Korea and Japan. In contrast, *the 2023 White Paper* stated how relations between the two countries had vastly improved following the bilateral South Korea-Japan summit held in March 2023, highlighting how military officials of the two countries were promoting close communication and specifying the normalization of the GSOMIA.

Until 2018, South Korea had been the second most important partner for technology and security cooperation in Japan’s white papers, following the U.S.-Japan alliance. However, for the first time in 2019, the white paper said South Korea was ranked fourth following Australia, India, and ASEAN in that order. The part describing Korea’s technology was also decreased. Korea’s ranking had been maintained until 2022, which reflects tense bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan due to various issues such as Japan’s export controls on three core semiconductor materials and South Korea’s decision to terminate GSOMIA in return, Japanese naval vessels raising the rising sun flag during a military review, and the controversy over a Japanese maritime patrol aircraft conducting unusually low-altitude flybys over South Korean warships. *The 2023 White Paper* still maintains South Korea’s ranking among security partners, but what stands out in the paper is that the three most important

security partners are not Australia, India, and ASEAN, as found in previous documents, but Australia, India, and Europe.

The fact that Europe is placed third indicates how Europe's importance as a security partner for Japan is being stressed in relation to Japan's concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)." Considering countries such as France, the Netherlands, and Germany have announced their respective reports on Indo-Pacific strategy in the past 2-3 years, and joint military exercises with European countries such as Great Britain, France, and Germany have been actively conducted, it is fair to say that in response to the rise of China, the joint military cooperation between Japan and European countries has strengthened in accordance with Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy and Europe's Indo-Pacific strategy.

While the mood for security cooperation between South Korea and Japan has been elevated with improved bilateral relations between the two countries, it appears that Japan has decided to prioritize security cooperation with Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) member states and European countries, which it believes can jointly promote the FOIP concept over with South Korea.

Another point worth noting is that the parts describing Japan's defense exchanges with China and Russia have considerably reduced. In line with *the 2022 White Paper*, the part detailing Japan's defense exchange with Russia is not lengthy in this year's paper since little exchange between the two has happened in the wake up of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The part outlining Japan's defense exchange with China, in contrast, dramatically reduced compared to the same part found in the previous white paper. Additionally, 31 pages from *the 2023 White Paper* were dedicated to describe China's military policy, a volume allocated more than any other country, including the U.S., in a bid to emphasize a military and security threat posed by China. This means that although the Kishida government has maintained its diplomatic policy on China to manage the bilateral relationship, it intends to stress the graveness of the military and security threat posed by China, with a lack of substantive military and security exchange with its counterpart.

Counterstrike Capabilities and the Preparedness for Information Warfare

As the first paper published since the adoption of the three strategic documents including the NSS in 2022, *the 2023 White Paper* has a section that explains these documents in detail including ways to fundamentally strengthen Japan's self-defense capabilities. *The 2023 White Paper* argues that the cause of Russia's invasion of Ukraine lies in lack of deterrence and advocates for the "need to establish self-defense capabilities that can counter the opponent's capabilities," with China's threat in mind. In other words, *the 2023 White Paper* calls for improving self-defense abilities to effectively respond to the aforementioned threats.

In particular, *the 2023 White Paper* seeks for an understanding of the need to possess "counterstrike capabilities" by defining missile attacks against Japan as "actual threats" that are "becoming more difficult to fully respond with the existing missile defense network alone." Put differently, *the 2023 White Paper* claims that counterstrike capabilities that target points of missile launches are "at the core of deterring invasions." Furthermore, *the 2023 White Paper* argues that the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities is necessary to prevent further attacks while defending against incoming missiles through Japan's missile defense network. Currently, Japan will not only first import 400 U.S.-made Tomahawk cruise missiles with a range of more than 1,600km but also seek to enhance the range of its independent type 12 surface-to-ship missiles to more than 1,000km in the mid- to long run. Nevertheless, Japan argues that counterstrike capabilities will be used as a necessary and minimum measure of self-defense based on its "three (new) conditions for use of force."¹⁾

Meanwhile, *the 2023 White Paper* created a new section on measures to counter the spread of disinformation. *The 2023 White Paper* states that "concerns over information

¹⁾ These are the conditions laid out on July 1, 2014 during the Abe administration to specify when the SDF are allowed to exercise self-defense, along with a reinterpretation of the Japanese Constitution regarding the right to exercise collective self-defense. The three conditions are as follows: (1) when an armed attack against Japan occurs or when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan's survival poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people's right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness; (2) when there is no other appropriate means available to repel the attack and ensure Japan's survival and protects its people; and (3) use of force limited to the minimum extent necessary.

warfare are increasing,” citing the dissemination of fake information by Russia during its invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, *the 2023 White Paper* also introduced an announcement by the Taiwan government that China had performed “cognitive warfare” by spreading disinformation intended to stoke insecurity among the people of Taiwan and to tarnish the authority of the Taiwanese government during the Chinese military exercise in August 2022. *The 2023 White Paper* also talks about a possibility that issues regarding cognitive warfare are “likely to become much more serious” due to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to spread fake information, which will aid in breaking down language barriers.

Against the backdrop, information warfare can lead to more intense cyber-psychological warfare such as cognitive warfare, signaling an upgraded convergence. Information warfare is becoming an extremely effective new weapon for countries which face hard economic conditions such as North Korea, a situation which could give birth to new security paradigms or be a game changer. Assuming war scenarios, Japan has stressed the importance of practical responses to new types of warfare that include strengthening its capabilities to fight a protracted war, evacuating its citizens in the event of emergency, and highlighting the importance of information warfare in the context of a hybrid war.

Implications for South Korea and Possible Responses

Until recently, Japan has considered China’s strengthening of military capabilities as well as North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats as major security threats. With the Russo-Ukraine war and adding Russia to the list of security threats, Japan now sees a scenario in which China launches an attack on Taiwan and Japan is directly impacted by such situation as the most serious security threat.

As described in the NSS, Japan’s security strategy places the U.S.-Japan alliance at the core while emphasizing the expansion of security networks such as the FOIP and strengthening self-defense capabilities. These three security strategies point to China as the greatest threat to Japan, which may explain why the parts describing the South Korea-Japan security cooperation and the South Korea-U.S. alliance in the white paper are relatively short. *The 2023 White Paper* mentioned the need for the South Korea-U.S.-Japan security cooperation on the back of recent improvement in South Korea-Japan relations. However, it is disappointing that it does not specify how to deepen the trilateral cooperation.

Given all this, implications for South Korea and possible responses to Japan's 2023 White Paper can be proposed as follows. First, Japan views preparing responses to joint military exercises between China and Russia as well as to China's advancement of military capabilities as top military and security priorities since the start of Ukraine war. This automatically puts responding to the threat posed by North Korea as the second priority. Strengthening security cooperation with Europe as part of heightened response to China's military capabilities is a reasonable option for Japan whose intention is to promote the FOIP. Therefore, in order to increase security cooperation between South Korea and Japan regarding North Korea, there is a need to first promote stronger deterrence against North Korea through institutionalizing the South Korea-U.S.-Japan security cooperation, and then from an Indo-Pacific strategy point of view, South Korea and Japan can put their heads together to find ways to respond to threats posed by North Korea. In addition to the three countries, a wider range of security partners, which can help provide a solution to the North Korean issue, should be included. In this regard, there is a need for South Korea to take the initiative in creating a multilateral security consultative group that includes countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand that have monitored North Korea's illegal transshipment activities at sea, which are in violation of UN Security Council Resolutions.

Second, Japan's participation in the South Korea-U.S.-Japan security cooperation needs to be encouraged, with South Korea-U.S. committed to maintaining ironclad alliance at the center. Japan's current security strategy focuses on the Indo-Pacific region rather than the Korean Peninsula. Japan's engagement for the Korean security includes support monitoring North Korea's transshipment activities, trilateral exercises in response to North Korea's submarine and missile-related activities, and providing a rear base for the UN Command (the UNC). In the face of the armistice on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea has responded to North Korea's threat through the South Korea-U.S. alliance as well as the UNC, a multilateral military network joined by those who sent troops or provide help to South Korea during the Korean War. In this context, Japan functions as a rear base for the UN forces and provides rear support for UN troops in the event of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, it is important to explain to the public why we need Japan when seeking support not only from the U.S. but from the UNC members in case of a crisis on the Korean Peninsula. It is equally important to persuade those concerned about a possibility of Japan becoming one of military super powers that such a case can be effectively deterred within the South Korea-U.S.-Japan security cooperation.

Third, responses to new forms of threats as well as wars must be made swiftly. Japan is actively responding to the threats driven by changes in the international situation since the war in Ukraine while playing a key role in the bloc of liberal countries led by the U.S. Since the publication of the 2018 National Defense Program Guideline (NPDG), Japan has strengthened its response to three new domains: cyber, space, and electronic. In addition, influenced by the war in Ukraine, Japan has actively pursued the development of unmanned drones while adopting a “proactive cyber defense” concept that preemptively responds to signs of a cyber attack in order to prepare for a new form of cyber war that combines information warfare with cognitive one. Seriously recognizing dangerous aspects of the spread of disinformation by Russia in Ukraine and by China in Taiwan, the Japanese government plans to install a system under the Cabinet Secretariat to respond against an information warfare. Security cooperation and exchanges are being promoted in various areas as we see positive signs for more security cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Against this backdrop, information sharing and cooperation activities between the two countries in such areas as information warfare (cognitive and cyber warfare) have to be promoted in a speedy manner, both of which used to be counted as less important when it comes to the South Korea–Japan security cooperation.

Fourth, the Korean government needs to constantly demand Japan of revising its repeated statements about the territorial status of Dokdo Island. Japan yet again declared that the Dokdo Island (Takeshima) is an inherent territory of Japan in *the 2023 White Paper*. This claim is a stubborn and unreasonable argument that has continued for 19 years since 2005. In response, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Ministry of National Defense (MND) made a strong complaint by summoning the acting deputy chief of mission at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul and the Military Attaché, and this was a natural reaction to unequivocally claim South Korea’s territorial sovereignty over Dokdo. Despite the fact that Dokdo issue and controversy surrounding Japan’s history textbooks surface repeatedly each year, continuing to issue official complaints at the government level while sticking to the principle of “quiet diplomacy” in response to Japan’s provocative statements in Japan’s white papers will only solidify South Korea’s effective control over Dokdo Island. ©KINU 2023

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