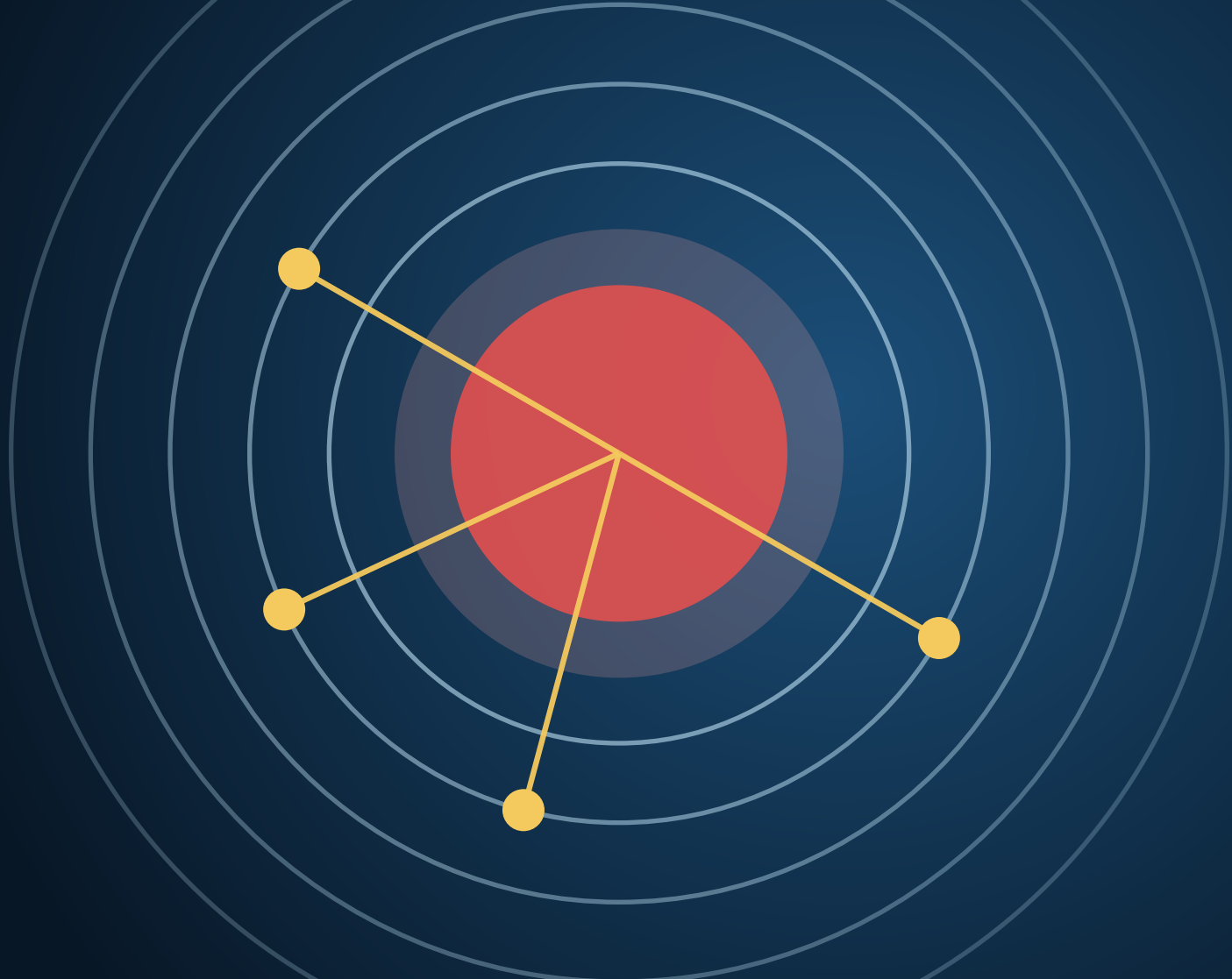




Japan's Defense Strategy in a Changing Security Environment: A Conversation with Vice-Minister Taro Yamato

Taro Yamato, Administrative Vice-Minister of Defense

This interview was conducted in January 2026.

Fletcher Security Review (FSR): Mr. Yamato, it's our great pleasure to welcome a distinguished Fletcher graduate like you to *The Fletcher Security Review*. For our readers, could you please outline the roles and responsibilities of your current job?

Taro Yamato: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with *The Fletcher Security Review*. As a proud Fletcher alumnus, I'm honored to share my thoughts with those preparing to lead on the global stage.

The Ministry of Defense, under its mission to secure Japan's peace and independence as well as to ensure the security of the nation, is entrusted with a wide range of responsibilities. These include the planning of defense policy, the operation of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), and the promotion of international security cooperation. My duties involve leading the development of defense policies that respond to changes in the international security environment and emerging threats, as well as advancing the maintenance and strengthening of defense capabilities necessary to protect Japan's sovereignty, peace, and the lives and daily life of its people. In addition, I am engaged in organizational management, personnel development, and equipment

improvement to ensure that the SDF can smoothly and effectively carry out diverse missions both domestically and internationally.

Furthermore, the Ministry promotes bilateral and multilateral security cooperation centered on the Japan-U.S. Alliance, while contributing to regional and global peace and stability. We are working to strengthen partnerships with regional actors and to advance cooperation toward the realization of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." In addition, we strive to clearly communicate the objectives and context of defense policy to the public and the international community, ensuring transparency in policy implementation and fostering understanding and trust.

In this manner, the Ministry of Defense plays a fundamental role in Japan's security. As the senior official responsible for the administrative organization, I am committed to ensuring the effectiveness of policies and to exercising leadership in fulfilling these vital responsibilities.

FSR: The theme of our 2026 edition is "Hello World: Security in a Multipolar World." Could you share your views on the current global security environment?

Taro Yamato: The existing order of world peace is being seriously challenged, and

Japan finds itself in the most severe and complex security environment of the post-war era. First, challenges to a free and open international order based on the rule of law are intensifying. Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine — now in its fifth year — shakes the very foundations of the international order. Despite being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Russia continues its aggression while repeatedly engaging in behavior that amounts to nuclear intimidation.

Second, in the Indo-Pacific, China and North Korea are accelerating military buildups, while strengthened cooperation between

China and Russia, and between Russia and North Korea. China continues to increase its defense spending at a high rate, lacking sufficient transparency, and is rapidly enhancing its military capabilities. It has also been intensifying unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas, including repeated intrusions into Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands. North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons and missiles, repeatedly launching new types of missiles — including intercontinental-class ballistic missiles — and missiles with irregular trajectories to evade interception. It is also strengthening its conventional forces.



Adm. Steve Koehler, commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet, and Gen. Yoshihide Yoshida, chief of staff, Joint Staff, Japan Self-Defense Forces, answer questions during a Keen Sword 25 press conference in Sasebo, Japan, Oct. 22, 2024. | U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chase Stephens (public domain)

Meanwhile, China-Russia cooperation is deepening through expanded joint exercises. Russia-North Korea cooperation

has also intensified significantly, with North Korea reinforcing military ties in unprecedented ways, such as by supporting

Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Japan is gravely concerned about the potential for any transfer of nuclear or missile-related technology from Russia to North Korea. Recent developments, including Chinese military parades, highlight growing solidarity among China, Russia, and North Korea.

Third, drawing lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, so many countries are accelerating preparations for "new ways of warfare," including the mass employment of unmanned systems, and for the demands of protracted conflict. The specific operational methods — such as massed, large-scale employment and complex, combined strikes — offer lessons that could be applied to Japan's own defense concepts. Moreover, the war has seen extensive use of electronic warfare, artificial intelligence (AI), space, cyber, and information warfare by both sides. The expanding role of AI on the battlefield is remarkable, and hybrid warfare that integrates these elements is becoming increasingly sophisticated. In addition, equipment and tactics are being updated on extremely short cycles compared to the past, making rapid and flexible technological innovation ever more important.

The Ukraine invasion has also shown that Russia possesses a degree of resilience to economic sanctions, and the aggression has extended beyond four years. In long wars, the reality is that all types of equipment and munitions are consumed in large quantities. This underscores the growing importance of ensuring sufficient wartime endurance: building peacetime stockpiles and further strengthening the defense production and technology base responsible for the development,

production, sustainment, and maintenance of equipment. Ensuring adequate attrition-resistant capacity is becoming increasingly vital. In short, Japan's security environment is undergoing accelerated changes.

FSR: Do you think the world is becoming more multipolar? What are several emerging risks that could unsettle the existing international order?

Taro Yamato: Today's international community is becoming increasingly diverse as power balances shift and competition among states intensifies, while the growing presence of the "Global South" adds further complexity to the landscape. There are various ways to describe the structure of global "poles," but what is most important is that we avoid falling into geopolitical confrontation and instead work toward a world in which diverse nations can coexist and prosper under an international order based on the rule of law.

Several emerging risks could unsettle the existing international order. These include unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force, the rapid modernization of military capabilities without transparency, and actions that undermine the principles that have supported global stability for decades. To safeguard Japan's security against such challenges, it is essential that we strengthen cooperation not only with our ally, the United States, but also with as many partners as possible.

Going forward, while maintaining the Japan-U.S. Alliance as the central pillar of our security policy, we will continue to advance multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation with like-minded countries. By taking regional

characteristics into account and the unique circumstances of each partner, we aim to promote sustained defense exchanges that contribute to regional peace and reinforce the rules-based international order.

FSR: Japan is set to reach its defense budget target of two percent of GDP in fiscal year 2025, two years earlier than originally planned. What motivates Japan to increase its defense budget? What capabilities does Japan prioritize when increasing its defense budget and strengthening its capabilities?

Taro Yamato: Compared to December 2022, when Japan formulated its current "Three Strategic Documents," the security environment is changing at an accelerating pace across multiple domains, as I mentioned above.

In this context, Prime Minister Takaichi has directed the government to take decisive action. To strengthen Japan's defense posture proactively, we will accelerate current efforts and, through the supplementary budget, achieve the defense spending target of two percent of GDP within fiscal year 2025, two years ahead of schedule. Furthermore, to respond appropriately to these rapid changes and to safeguard Japan's independence, peace, and the lives and livelihoods of its people, the government will begin discussions to revise the National Security Strategy and related documents this year.

When considering priorities for strengthening capabilities, Japan will adopt bold and innovative approaches. While specific details will be discussed in due course, several areas are clear:

- * "New ways of warfare," including the use of unmanned systems and resilience for protracted conflicts.

- * Sustainment and endurance, through robust defense industrial and technological bases for development, production, and maintenance.

In a rapidly evolving security environment, there is no such thing as acting "too early" when it comes to transforming defense capabilities — only "too late." Japan will continue to examine all possible options to ensure its independence, peace, and the security of its people.

"There is no such thing as acting 'too early' when it comes to transforming defense capabilities — only 'too late.'"

FSR: Technology has shaped warfare and unsettled the international order throughout history. It continues to be an influential factor in shaping the character of the twenty-first century defense landscape. Throughout your career, how has technological development affected Japan's defense policy? In which technological domains has Japan prioritized its defense policy recently, and what is the future trajectory?

Taro Yamato: Advancements in science and technology have brought significant economic and social development to Japan, while also exerting a profound influence on our security environment and transforming the nature of warfare. For example, in the ongoing response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a wide range of commercial products and civilian technologies have been utilized on the

battlefield, and rapidly advancing unmanned aerial vehicle technologies have

had a substantial impact on the course of combat.



Japan Ground Self-Defense Force and U.S. Army paratroopers conduct close quarters battle training during Northern Trilogy 2026, the first Multinational Airborne Exercise held in Japan, Sendai, Japan, Jan. 18, 2026. | U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Austin Salazar (public domain)

Until now, Japan has steadily developed equipment systems such as tanks, naval vessels, and fighter aircraft. However, with the rapid evolution of technology, neighboring countries are increasingly employing new equipment that applies cutting-edge technologies, including drones, as well as emerging forms of warfare that combine multiple tools such as deepfake-enabled information manipulation. In such an environment, enhancement of the capabilities of traditional equipment will no longer be sufficient to address these new challenges. There is a growing risk that Japan may become unable to protect its peace and independence or safeguard national security.

To address the increasingly severe security environment, Japan must promote "spinning on" from its science, technology and innovation capabilities to maximize national security and defense purposes, while also promoting "spinning off" the outcomes of defense research and development for the prosperity of society.

To ensure that Japan continues to defend itself through technological advantage in the years ahead, we will advance efforts based on the following pillars:

- * Rapidly develop and field the functions and equipment necessary to protect Japan, directly linked to future forms of warfare, and achieve early deployment — within

five years or, in principle, within approximately ten years.

* With a view to the period beyond the next ten years, expand the community of defense-related research and development through public-private collaboration. By harnessing Japan's scientific and technological strengths and innovation capabilities, we will continually generate groundbreaking functions and capabilities. This will not only fundamentally strengthen Japan's defense posture but also deliver defense-driven innovation that can transform society itself, ensuring Japan's long-term technological superiority and enabling the realization of advanced capabilities ahead of other nations.

We will pursue these initiatives as core components of our effort to secure Japan's defense through technology into the future.

FSR: Some neighboring states, especially China, express concern that the recent rise in Japan's defense budget symbolizes a resurgence of Japanese militarism. Is this budget increase signaling a shift in Japanese defense policy away from its historical pacifist stance?

Taro Yamato: The scale of Japan's defense budget is the result of extensive considerations conducted to determine what capabilities are necessary to protect the lives of our citizens in the face of the most severe and complex security environment Japan has faced in the postwar era. These capabilities are strictly for the purpose of safeguarding the Japanese people and their peaceful way of life, and they remain fully within the bounds of the Constitution and international law, firmly upholding our exclusively defense-oriented policy.

Therefore, this increase in defense spending does not alter Japan's longstanding commitment to being a peace-loving nation in any way.

At the same time, it is important to clearly explain our security policies to other countries, ensuring transparency, and building trust. Japan has consistently pursued its security policy with transparency and has engaged in confidence-building efforts with the international community. We will continue to actively promote these efforts going forward.

FSR: The U.S.-Japan Alliance is also a key part of Japanese defense policy. How would you assess the current U.S.-Japan Alliance from Tokyo? Is there any evolution you would like to see?

Taro Yamato: The Japan-U.S. Alliance is the cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policy and plays an indispensable role in ensuring peace and stability in the international community, including the Indo-Pacific region. We will continue to work closely with the Trump administration to further strengthen the Alliance's deterrence and response capabilities. Through repeated opportunities, including Japan-U.S. summit meetings, we have reaffirmed the United States' defense commitments to Japan under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. We have full confidence that the United States will fulfill its treaty obligations by employing the full range of its capabilities, including nuclear capabilities.

We intend to continue enhancing and transforming Japan's own defense capabilities, while also maintaining close communication with the United States to

further reinforce the deterrence and response posture of the Alliance. As Japan faces its most severe and complex security environment throughout the postwar era, strengthening our own defense capabilities is of paramount importance. However, ensuring regional peace and stability cannot be achieved by any single nation alone. Alongside bolstering Japan's own defense capabilities, it is critically important that we build multilayered networks of cooperation with our ally and like-minded partners in order to enhance collective deterrence and response capabilities.

FSR: As you just mentioned, multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation is also a key component of Japan's security policy, as is strengthening the U.S.-Japan Alliance. What is the path for Japan to broaden its security cooperation with other countries along with the United States? Would Japan focus on the Indo-Pacific, or take a more global approach?

Taro Yamato: Multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation has become more important than ever as Japan faces an increasingly severe security environment. To maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, it is essential that Japan deepen cooperation with its allies and like-minded partners. In particular, while further strengthening the deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, Japan seeks to enhance collaboration — centered on the Japan-U.S. partnership — with key partners such as Australia, the Republic of Korea, and the Philippines.

Through frameworks such as Japan-U.S.-Australia, Japan-U.S.-ROK, and Japan-U.S.-

Australia-Philippines, we have held various dialogues to address shared regional challenges and expand areas of cooperation. We have also improved interoperability through joint exercises and training. In addition to working closely with our ally, the United States, we intend to advance a wide range of defense cooperation and exchanges with like-minded partners toward the realization of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Through these efforts, Japan seeks to contribute to the peace and stability of both the region and the international community.

FSR: Japan has made a variety of commitments in the development of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This includes providing defense capacity building to Southeast Asian countries. The Japanese government announced the "New Plan for a FOIP" in 2023, stating that it will further promote efforts toward realizing FOIP through an expansion of this capacity building. What role do you think the Ministry of Defense will be expected to play in realizing FOIP going forward?

Taro Yamato: The Indo-Pacific region is home to half of the world's population and serves as a central driver of global vitality. Ensuring that this region remains a free and open "international public good" is essential for maintaining peace and prosperity across the wider region. At the same time, as we see rapid military modernization and increasingly active military operations by certain countries — including those around Japan — there are many challenges that must be addressed to realize a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Against this backdrop, the "New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," announced in

2023 by then-Prime Minister Kishida, set out four pillars for FOIP cooperation: Principles for peace and rules for prosperity, Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way, Multi-layered connectivity, Extending efforts for security and safe use of "Sea" to the "Air."

For our part, the Ministry of Defense has long pursued defense cooperation and exchanges with partners across the region. This includes high-level dialogues, working-level consultations, participation in multilateral conferences, joint exercises and training, capacity building, and defense equipment and technology cooperation. Going forward, while taking regional characteristics into account and the circumstances of each partner country, we intend to further advance multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation. This includes strengthening institutional frameworks such as Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements, Reciprocal Access Agreements, and Agreements concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. Through these efforts, we hope to contribute to the realization of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

FSR: Mr. Yamato, I would like to thank you again for your thought-provoking answers. Before we leave, I would like to ask you one more question. It has been almost thirty years since you graduated from Fletcher. Could you share how your time at Fletcher has shaped your career and provide any advice you may have to the future policymakers at Fletcher?

Taro Yamato: Thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to participate in this interview. It has indeed been almost thirty years since I graduated from

Fletcher, but the experiences I gained there continue to shape my career every day. Fletcher offered me a truly international environment — one where talented individuals from around the world came together to discuss global challenges from diverse perspectives. That exposure fundamentally broadened my own outlook and provided me with the analytical tools needed to navigate complex security and diplomatic issues.

What I remember most is the spirit of open and constructive debate. My classmates came from government, international organizations, the private sector, and academia. Engaging with people who held different assumptions and values forced me to question my own thinking and, ultimately, to strengthen it. In my current role, where decisions often require balancing multiple national interests and strategic considerations, that habit of viewing issues from various angles has been invaluable.

To future policymakers studying at Fletcher, my advice would be this: take full advantage of the diversity around you. Listen carefully to others, especially when you disagree. Build friendships and networks that cross borders, cultures, and disciplines. The challenges you will face in the future — whether in security, economics, climate, or technology — will not fit neatly into one field. Fletcher is one of the best places in the world to learn how to approach such complexity with both intellectual rigor and an open mind.

And finally, please cherish your curiosity. The world is always changing, and policymakers must continue learning throughout their careers. Fletcher

cultivates that mindset. Curiosity serves
you well wherever your path leads.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taro Yamato is Administrative Vice-Minister of Defense at the Japan Ministry of Defense. He joined the Japan Defense Agency in 1990 and is a 1997 graduate of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Throughout his career, Mr. Yamato has held numerous key leadership positions central to Japan's security policy, including Director of the Strategic Planning Office, Director of the Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation Division, and Director of the Defense Policy Division. He subsequently served in high-level executive roles, including Deputy Director General of the International Peace Cooperation Headquarters at the Cabinet Office and Director General of the Local Cooperation Bureau. Prior to assuming his current position, he served as Director General of the Defense Policy Bureau, where he played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's defense strategy.

