

MOD/SDF in the Heisei Era: A Look Back on Activities over the Past 30 Years

April of this year marked the end of the Heisei era (the imperial era that lasted from 1989 through 2019). The Defense White Paper for the first year of the new Reiwa era introduces the history of the MOD/SDF during the Heisei era.

Early Heisei period (1989–1997)

Beginning of the Heisei era and the start of the post-Cold War world

Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)



[AFP/Jiji]

Local people rejoicing at the fall of the Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall, which had been a symbolic marker of the Cold War between the East and West fell. Subsequently, the end of the Cold War was declared between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Gulf War (1991)



[dpa/Jiji Press Photo]

Abandoned tank near a burning Kuwaiti oil well

Iraq invaded Kuwait. The multinational forces decided to use armed forces in order to evict Iraqi troops from Kuwait and restore peace and stability in the Gulf region, and the Gulf War started.

Dispatch of minesweeper units to the Persian Gulf (1991)



A diver attaching an explosive to dispose of a sea mine

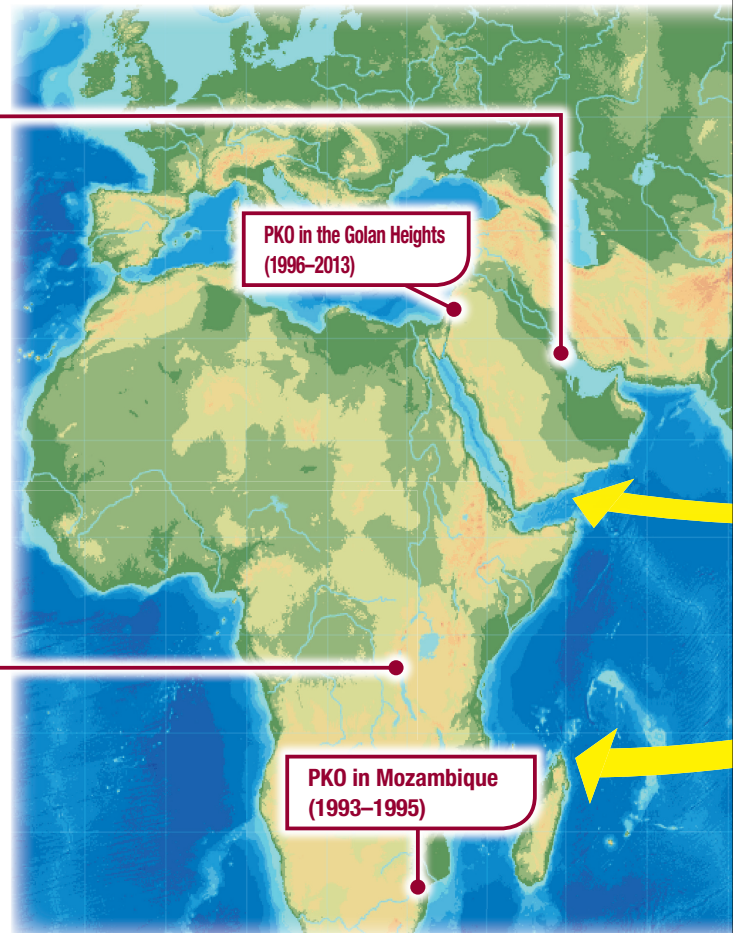
After the Gulf War, a large number of mines laid by Iraqi troops remained in the Persian Gulf. In order to secure the safe navigation of Japanese vessels, a minesweeper unit of the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) was dispatched. This was the SDF's first international cooperation since its establishment.

Relief operation for Rwandan refugees (1994)



At the camp

The SDF engaged in such operations as medical care, disease control, water supply, and airlift in order to provide relief to refugees resulting from civil war in Rwanda. This was Japan's first international humanitarian relief activity.



I Security environment and the SDF's initiatives

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Cold War, which lasted for more than 40 years, ended. The conventional structure of the East-West military confrontation centering on the United States and the Soviet Union was dissolved and the international situation took a significant turn. Under such circumstances, the SDF responded to large-scale disasters, such as the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, and also engaged in international peace cooperation activities, such as PKO activities in Cambodia. The SDF increased its reputation in and outside Japan and the roles of its defense capabilities expanded.

Peacekeeping operations (PKO) in Cambodia (1992–1993)



GSDF personnel constructing a new bridge over a river where a bridge was destroyed

The SDF conducted activities in Cambodia as its first United Nations peacekeeping operations. The activities included repair of roads and bridges and ceasefire monitoring. The SDF's repairs amounted to a total of about 100 km of roads and about 40 bridges.

Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (1995)



GSDF personnel engaged in search operations

Up to about 19,000 SDF personnel per day engaged in disaster relief operations over a period of approximately 100 days from the occurrence of the earthquake. Based on the lessons learned through this activity, the disaster relief readiness was enhanced through measures including amendment of various laws and strengthening of coordination with local governments.

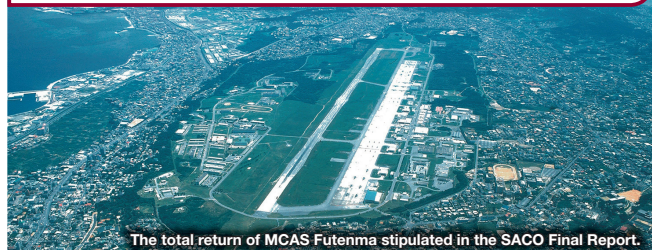
Tokyo subway sarin gas attack (1995)



GSDF personnel conducting decontamination work in a subway train

An indiscriminate murder case using sarin gas in Tokyo subway stations and subway trains occurred. Chemical protection units of the GSDF were dispatched to detect and decontaminate the toxic gas at Kasumigaseki and Hibiya stations.

Establishment of Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) (1995)



The total return of MCAS Futenma stipulated in the SACO Final Report.

The Japanese and U.S. governments agreed to establish the SACO in order to discuss various issues concerning the facilities and areas of the United States Forces in Japan (USFJ) located in Okinawa Prefecture.

SACO compiled the final report in 1996, and agreed to return approximately 21% of the facilities and areas of the USFJ located in Okinawa Prefecture at the time.

Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security (1996)



[Jiji]

Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security (April 1996)

The Japanese and U.S. governments had close discussions on the significance and roles of the post-Cold War Japan-U.S. Alliance, and announced the Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security as the result of the discussions.

In response to this, in 1997, the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation providing for expanded cooperation to responses in situations in areas surrounding Japan (the 1997 Guidelines) were formulated.

Becoming an SDF that actively conducts operations in the international community

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Mid-Heisei period (1998–2007)

Ballistic missiles and international terrorism —heightening of new threats

North Korea's ballistic missile firing (1998)



[AFP/Jiji]

Missile presumed to be Taepodong-1

North Korea fired a ballistic missile (presumed to be Taepodong-1) without advance warning. A part of the missile flew over Japan and fell in to the Sanriku offshore waters. This fact revealed that North Korea had gained the technology to manufacture missiles capable of reaching every part of Japan.

9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States (2001)



[EPA/Jiji]

World Trade Center tower in flames

The 9/11 terrorist attacks that occurred in the United States in the wake of the 21st century produced a tremendous shock throughout the world.

Suspicious Boat Incidents off Noto Peninsula (1999)



A suspicious boat that appeared off the coast of the Noto Peninsula

In order to deal with two suspicious boats discovered in Japan's territorial waters, an order for Maritime Security Operations was issued for the first time. MSDF destroyers gave orders to halt and fired warning shots, and P-3C aircraft dropped bombs as a warning. Later, the suspicious boats were concluded to be North Korea's spy boats.

Activities to support actions against terrorism (2001–2007)



Supply ship JS "Hamana" (left) replenishing a U.S. Naval ship at sea.

In order to respond to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and to contribute to initiatives of the international community to prevent and eradicate international terrorism, the SDF's replenishment ships and destroyers were dispatched. The dispatched units engaged in activities such as replenishing U.S. Navy vessels.

Activities for humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in Iraq (2003–2009)



SDF personnel supervising a local contractor's road repair work

The SDF was dispatched to Iraq following the collapse of the Hussein administration to provide relief for war victims and conduct reconstruction support activities, and engaged in activities such as providing medical care and water supply.

I Security environment and the SDF's initiatives

In the mid-Heisei era, dramatic changes occurred to Japan's security environment. In particular, activities of international terrorist organizations became serious, as represented by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In addition, weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles became proliferated more widely, and response to new threats and diverse situations posed challenges.

The SDF conducted replenishment activities on the Indian Ocean in order to deal with international terrorism as a member of the international community. The SDF also engaged in activities for humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in Iraq, and international peace cooperation activities came to be positioned as one of the SDF's inherent duties along with the defense of Japan and the sustaining of public order.

In response to the threat of ballistic missiles, the SDF launched development of the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system.

Enactment of laws under the armed attack situation response law (2003–2004)



GSDF personnel participating in a civil protection exercise (Fukui Prefecture)

As legislation necessary for responding to armed attacks against Japan, three laws related to emergency legislation, including the armed attack situation response law, which has the character of a fundamental law, were established in 2003, and seven laws related to emergency legislation, including civil protection law, were established in 2004.

Japan-U.S. "2+2" Meeting (2005)



Japanese and U.S. ministers at a Japan-U.S. "2+2" meeting

The Japanese and U.S. governments indicated the concrete direction concerning the roles, missions, and capabilities of Japan and the United States for accomplishing the common strategic objectives of the two countries, and agreed to locate the MCAS Futenma replacement facilities to an area off the coast of Camp Schwab.

Decision to introduce the BMD (2003)



Firing moment of SM-3



PAC-3 deployed at the Iruma Air Base (Saitama Prefecture)

In light of the increased proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, Japan's original ballistic missile defense system was put in place as a result of the start of deployment of Patriot PAC-3 units and the success in the Standard Missile (SM-3) launch tests by Aegis destroyers in 2007.

North Korea's nuclear test (2006)



The ASDF's T-4 training aircraft collecting floating dust in the air in response to the nuclear test

North Korea fired seven ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan and announced that it had conducted its first nuclear test. In order to respond to such new threats, actions were taken to establish a response framework including development of the BMD system.

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Late Heisei period (2008–2019)

The SDF's operations continuing to increase, with military activities of surrounding countries becoming increasingly active and disasters of an unprecedented scale hitting Japan

Counter-piracy operations (2009–present)



Destroyer JS "Sawagiri" escorting a private vessel in the Gulf of Aden

Piracy incidents were frequent and surging in waters off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. In order to protect Japan-affiliated vessels from piracy, an order for Maritime Security Operations was issued, and MSDF destroyers and aircraft were dispatched. After that, the Anti-Piracy Measures Act was established, and not only Japanese vessels, but also foreign vessels became subject to protection.

Developments concerning areas surrounding the Senkaku Islands becoming active (2012–present)

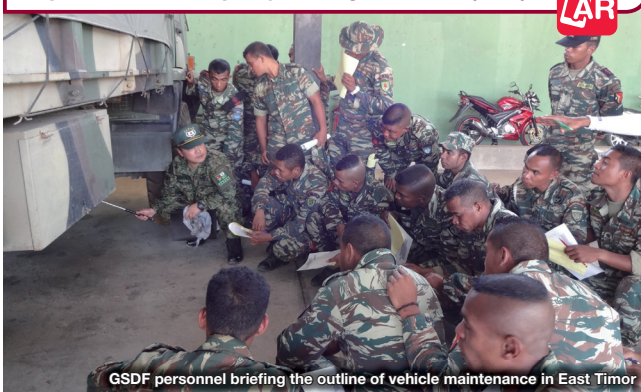


[Photo: Japan Coast Guard]

Chinese government vessels intruding into Japan's territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands

Following the Japanese government's acquisition of ownership of three Senkaku islands, activities of Chinese military vessels and government vessels rapidly expanded and became active, such as Chinese government vessels intermittently intruding into Japan's territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands.

Implementation of capacity building assistance (2012)



GSDF personnel briefing the outline of vehicle maintenance in East Timor

The MOD/SDF started initiatives to provide capacity building assistance for facilitating the recipient country's military to appropriately perform its roles for international peace and regional stability, and for creating a desirable security environment for Japan.

Great East Japan Earthquake (2011)



GSDF personnel engaged in search operations



U.S. Forces personnel conducting disaster relief activities with GSDF personnel

The Great East Japan Earthquake caused devastating damage in a vast area centering on coastal areas in the Tohoku region. The MOD/SDF engaged in activities including lifesaving operations, livelihood support, and response to nuclear disaster, with more than 100,000 personnel at the peak.

At that time, the U.S. Forces conducted large-scale support activities, mobilizing up to about 16,000 personnel. ("Operation Tomodachi")

Establishment of the National Security Council (2013)



[Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office]

A National Security Council meeting

The National Security Council was established as the control tower for Japan's diplomatic and defense policies. In addition, Japan formulated a National Security Strategy for the first time as its basic policy concerning national security.

I Security environment and the SDF's initiatives

In the late Heisei era, Japan's security environment became increasingly severe due to changes in the balance of power associated with the growth of China and India, and other reasons. Subsequently, various security issues and destabilizing factors became more visible and aggravated. As China's military activities became active, and North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles progressed, the SDF came to prepare against unexpected contingencies by conducting persistent warning and surveillance activities in the waters and airspace around Japan, and deploying ballistic missile defense units.

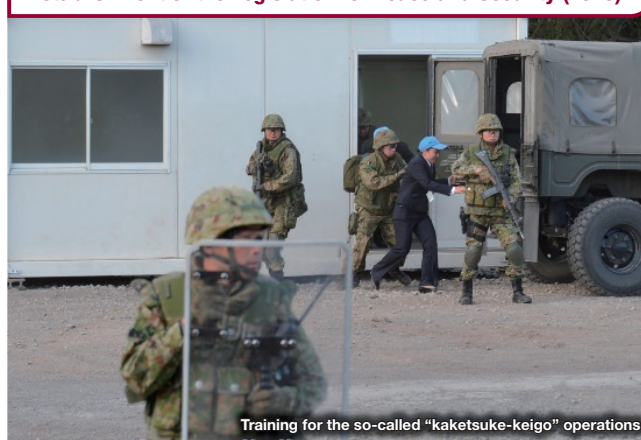
In addition, in order to respond to global issues that are difficult to address by a single country alone, the SDF also began to carry out international activities, such as dispatching counter-piracy units and providing capacity building assistance to other countries' military. On the other hand, inside Japan, large-scale disasters, including the Great East Japan Earthquake, occurred in succession, and the SDF engaged in rescue operations and livelihood support for victims.

Announcement of new Guidelines (2015)



At the Japan-U.S. "2+2" meeting held in the year marking 70 years after World War II, new "Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation" (new Guidelines) reflecting the changes in the security environment and reinforcement of Japan-U.S. coordination in the field of security and defense was announced.

Establishment of the Legislation for Peace and Security (2015)



Training for the so-called "kaketsuke-keigo" operations

With the establishment of the Legislation for Peace and Security, "survival-threatening situation" was newly added to the situations to which Japan is to respond, and provisions were introduced to enable "rescue of Japanese nationals overseas," "protection of weapons and other equipment of the units of the U.S. Forces and the armed forces of other foreign countries," and the so-called "kaketsuke-keigo."

Progress of North Korea's nuclear and missile development (2016–2017)

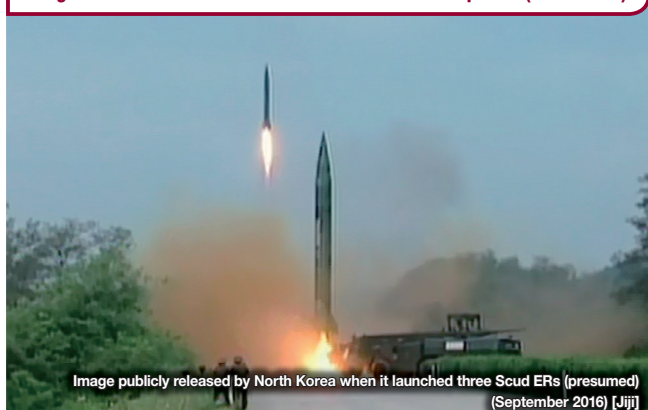


Image publicly released by North Korea when it launched three Scud ERs (presumed) (September 2016) [Jiji]

North Korea conducted three nuclear tests and launched as many as 40 ballistic missiles from 2016 to 2017.

Events indicating expansion and intensification of the Chinese military's activities (2017–2018)



Chinese submarine navigating within the contiguous zone

Chinese fighter advancing into the airspace over the Sea of Japan for the first time

Aircraft carrier "Liaoning" conducting takeoff and landing of aircraft presumed to be a carrier-based fighter for the first time on the Pacific Ocean

A submerged submarine of the Chinese Navy entered the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands. The Chinese Navy's vessels and air force are expanding and intensifying their military activities in the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan.

In December 2018, in order to respond to the new era, the "National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2019 and beyond (2018 NDPG)" was formulated as new guidelines defining how Japan's national defense ought to be to form the foundation of Japan's future.

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Regarding the National Defense Program Guidelines for FY1996 and beyond (1995 NDPG; approved by the Security Council and the Cabinet on November 28, 1995)

1995 NDPG :

In light of the post-Cold War situation, achieving more compact and higher-quality defense capabilities, and adding new roles

- Japan formulated its first NDPG in 1976. The 1976 NDPG adopted the concept of the Basic Defense Force, which aimed to maintain a minimum-necessary defense force as an independent nation, preventing a power vacuum that would destabilize the region surrounding Japan, under the Cold War structure.
- Although the Cold War ended in the beginning of the Heisei era, the international situation was still fraught with factors of instability and uncertainty, and public expectations for international cooperation and disaster relief also grew. Based on such background, the 1995 NDPG were formulated.
- While basically following the concept of the Basic Defense Force, the 1995 NDPG aimed to promote more rational, efficient, and compact defense capabilities, and to achieve enhancement of necessary functions and qualitative improvement of defense capabilities. In addition, “dealing with various contingencies such as major disasters” and “contributing to building a more stable security environment” were added to the roles of defense capabilities alongside the “defense of Japan.”

Key measures for developing the SDF's structure



Introduction of support fighter F-2 (first deployed in October 2000)



Renewal of a helicopter destroyer (DDH) (March 2009; Destroyer JS "Hyuga" entering service)



Training of Ready Reserve Personnel
Reducing the GSDF quota and introducing Ready Reserve Personnel (March 1998)



Reorganization into brigades
(starting in March 1999)



Training of candidates
for SDF Reserve Personnel
Introduction of the system of candidates for SDF Reserve Personnel (March 2002)



Establishment of the Defense Intelligence Headquarters
(January 1997)



Establishment of the Special Forces Group (March 2004); reorganization into the NBC Weapon Defense Unit (March 2007; first reorganization)

Special Forces Group establishment ceremony

Regarding the National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2005 and beyond (2004 NDPG; approved by the Security Council and the Cabinet on December 10, 2004)

2004 NDPG :

Shift from deterrence-oriented policy to a policy emphasizing response capabilities in order to deal with new threats and diverse situations

- The 2004 NDPG were formulated in view of the need to respond to the progress in proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, activities of international terrorist organizations and other new threats, and diverse situations, as represented by the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States and North Korea's ballistic missile development.
- The 2004 NDPG shifted from the conventional policy attaching importance to the deterrence effect to a policy emphasizing response capabilities. The Guidelines set forth that a "multifunctional, flexible, effective defense force" would be built in order to be able to effectively respond to new threats and diverse situations and engage in international peace cooperation activities independently and proactively. Meanwhile, the Guidelines maintained effective aspects of the concept of Basic Defense Capability.



Equipping an Aegis destroyer with ballistic missile response capabilities (November 2008; Destroyer JS "Chokai")



Introduction of surface-to-air missile PAC-3 (first deployed in March 2007)

Development of a Ballistic Missile Defense system



Introduction of Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles (first deployed in August 2016)



Introduction of patrol aircraft P-1 (first deployed in March 2013)



Establishment of the Aerial Refueling/Transport Unit (March 2009)



Establishment of the Joint Staff Office (March 2006)



Shift from the Japan Defense Agency to the Ministry of Defense (January 2007)



Establishment of the Central Readiness Force; establishment of the International Peace Cooperation Activities Training Unit (March 2007)

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Regarding the National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2011 and beyond (2010 NDPG; approved by the Security Council and the Cabinet on December 17, 2010)

2010 NDPG :

Developing a Dynamic Defense Force with focus on “operation” of defense capabilities based on the new security environment

- The 2010 NDPG were formulated based on the new security environment in which changes were occurring to the global balance of power, with countries such as China gaining national strength, and in which the military situation in the region surrounding Japan, including the military movements of North Korea and China, were becoming ever more complicated.
- Rather than the conventional concept of the Basic Defense Force, which emphasized deterrence based on the existence of the defense force, the 2010 NDPG aimed to develop a Dynamic Defense Force focusing on “dynamic deterrence” whereby the State’s will and high defense capabilities are indicated by conducting various activities in an appropriate and timely manner in peacetime. In that process, drastic efficiency improvement and rationalization were to be achieved through fundamental review of equipment, personnel, organization, deployment, etc.

Key measures for developing the SDF's structure



Introduction of F-35A (first deployed in January 2018)



[Photo: Mitsubishi Heavy Industries/Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency]

Construction of an X-Band communications satellite network (satellite “Kirameki 2” launched in January 2017)



Establishment of a security unit on Miyakojima Island (March 2019)

Establishment of the Yonaguni coast observation unit (March 2016)



Relocation of the ASDF Air Defense Command to Yokota (March 2012)

Defense posture buildup in the southwestern region

Establishment of one airborne early warning squadron (April 2014)

Relocation of one airborne squadron to Naha; establishment of the 9th Air Wing (January 2016)



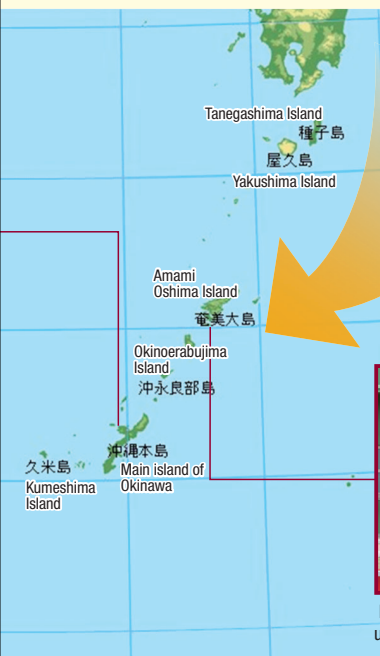
Increase in the number of submarines (16 → 22 submarines [target])

Regarding the National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2014 and beyond (2013 NDPG; approved by the National Security Council and the Cabinet on December 17, 2013)

2013 NDPG :

Developing dynamic defense capabilities through joint operations, in light of the increasingly severe security environment

- The 2013 NDPG were formulated along with Japan's first National Security Strategy in light of Japan's increasingly severe security environment, with North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles posing a serious and imminent threat, and China's military activities expanding and intensifying, and based on the lessons learned from the experience of the Great East Japan Earthquake.
- The 2013 NDPG aims to build a Dynamic Joint Defense Force, which enables conducting activities to be seamless as well as dynamic and adapting to situations as they demand through joint operations, by developing defense capabilities adequate both in quantity and quality that underpin various activities, such as securing maritime supremacy and air superiority, and by also enhancing the logistic support foundation.



Introduction of amphibious vehicles; establishment of the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (March 2018)



Reorganization into rapid deployment divisions/brigades; introduction of mobile combat vehicles (starting in March 2018)



Establishment of a security unit and surface-to-ship missile units on Amami Oshima Island, and relocation of the surface-to-air missile units (March 2019)



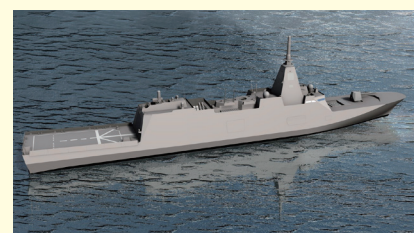
Introduction of long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle Global Hawk (to be deployed in FY2021) (photo: a model of the same type)



Establishment of the Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (October 2015)



Establishment of the Ground Component Command (March 2018)



Introduction of new destroyers (to enter into service in FY2021)