

BACKGROUNDER

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U.S.–Japan Alliance Remains Insufficient Against Growing Chinese Military Threat

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Many of China's recent controversial moves have made headlines, but its efforts to intimidate Japan in the East China Sea have received scant attention.

Japan faces growing conventional military threats from China and North Korea, as well as new challenges in the cyber, space, and electromagnetic domains.

Washington needs to continue working with Tokyo to move Japan beyond its comfort zone to assume greater security roles with less restrictive rules of engagement.

China's controversial responses to the COVID-19 virus, targeting of Hong Kong democracy, and expanding territorial claims in the South China Sea have garnered countless headlines recently. But Beijing's long-standing efforts to press its claims in the East China Sea by intimidating Japan have received scant attention.

Since returning as Japanese prime minister in 2012, Shinzo Abe has been a stalwart supporter of Japan's alliance with the United States, which both countries rightly see as the "cornerstone of peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region."¹ Under his stewardship, Japan has developed many new military capabilities and expanded its external security role.² Abe has also enacted an impressive list of national security initiatives and overseen an increase in the country's defense budget.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3525>

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Yet despite Abe’s many security accomplishments, Japan maintains several self-imposed constraints that hinder its contribution to the allied response to the Chinese military threat. Even when Japan has implemented necessary defense reforms, it did so slowly and did not keep pace with escalating regional threats.

Japan’s traditional reticence has often led to charges of being a “free-riding ally.” While that is an inaccurate depiction of Japan’s contributions to the alliance—especially given the fiscal support it provides—that flawed perception has the potential to drive Washington toward decisions that will undermine U.S. national interests. The problem is not a lack of Japanese contributions to offset the cost of stationing U.S. forces, but rather Tokyo’s hesitancy in shedding postwar restrictions and assuming greater security responsibilities outside its own defense.

To effectively deal with the burgeoning and aggressive Chinese military presence, the U.S. and Japanese policymakers must bridge the disparity between Japan’s increasingly dire assessments of the threat and Tokyo’s reluctance to devote sufficient resources to counter them. A similar disparity exists with the standing threats from Iran, North Korea, and Russia.

After cancelling a major missile defense project, Tokyo announced in June 2020 that it would revise its major defense documents.³ Washington should use Japan’s upcoming strategic review to continue to press Tokyo to move beyond its comfort zone and assume greater security roles with less restrictive rules of engagement. This will also require deft diplomacy with America’s other important ally South Korea, which remains wary of any changes to Japan’s security posture.

The Looming Threat from China

Japan warns that its security environment is “changing at extremely high speeds [and] becoming more complex” far more quickly than anticipated.⁴ Japan faces traditional conventional military threats from China and North Korea, as well as new challenges in the cyber, space, and electromagnetic domains.

The Japanese Ministry of Defense warned that “gray-zone” situations, those that intentionally blur the boundaries between peace and military conflict, “harbor the risk of rapidly developing into graver situations without showing clear indications.”⁵ A gray-zone scenario involves nonmilitary actors, such as coast guards, but could quickly escalate to a military confrontation if Japan’s law enforcement agencies are overwhelmed by greater Chinese forces.

China used to be the 800-pound dragon in the room, posing the greatest long-term threat to Japan but one that Tokyo was reluctant to mention by name. However, the Abe Administration was alarmed by Beijing's surging defense expenditures, rapidly expanding and modernizing military capabilities, intensifying intimidation efforts, and increasing incursions into Japan's peripheral areas. Tokyo warned, "China engages in unilateral, coercive attempts to alter the status quo base on its own assertions that are incompatible with existing international order."⁶

Surging Defense Budget. China's military spending has risen exponentially and now ranks second highest in the world, dwarfing that of Japan. Over a 10-year period, China and Japan went from having commensurate defense budgets to Beijing spending four times as much. Between 2007 and 2018, Beijing's official military spending increased from roughly \$45 billion to \$175 billion.⁷ Japanese Defense Minister Taro Kono stated that Beijing increased its defense budget approximately 48-fold over the past three decades.⁸

Strategy of Intimidation. In recent years the United States and its democratic partners have expressed growing alarm at signs China has begun to erode the informal set of rules, principles, and norms that have fostered an extended era of peace and prosperity across the region. Chinese foreign policy has assumed a more assertive and nationalist character, and Beijing wields its growing economic leverage as a punitive extension of its foreign policy.

China bullies other nations as it pushes expansionist sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas while undermining allied abilities to respond. Beijing's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) approach seeks to prevent U.S. military forces from responding to Chinese belligerent actions.

To carry out its strategy, China has built one the world's largest navies and augmented its antiship and land-attack ballistic missiles, missile defense penetration weapons, amphibious assault capabilities, submarines, and mines. Beijing has announced it would triple the size of its naval infantry force from two brigades totaling 10,000 troops to seven brigades with 30,000 personnel.⁹

Larger and More Capable Coast Guard. China seeks to accomplish its goals while minimizing the potential for triggering armed conflict with Japan, Southeast Asian nations, and the United States. Beijing does this by using ostensibly nonmilitary organizations such as the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) to exploit the gray zone between military and non-military realms.

The CCG has increased the size of its fleet and deployed larger, more capable vessels. In 2020, China's Coast Guard is assessed to have 1,300 ships, 260 of which are capable of operating away from China's shores.¹⁰ In 2012, the CCG had 40 ships over 1,000 tons, which increased to 135 by 2019. In 2018, the CCG was resubordinated to the People's Armed Police, a paramilitary organization under the command of the Central Military Commission.¹¹

China's growing coast guard capabilities quantitatively and qualitatively dwarf those of the Japanese Coast Guard. The average size of CCG ships in the East China Sea is 3,000 tons, double the Japanese Coast Guard average of 1,500 tons.¹² This disparity in tonnage also enables China's Coast Guard to shoulder (a "gray zone" tactic) or push Japanese vessels without resorting to the use of weapons. In a crisis, it would put the onus on Tokyo to either back away or escalate by being the first to bring in a military entity—the Maritime Self-Defense Forces—to restore the status quo.

Increasing Incursions. Chinese maritime and aerial intrusions into areas surrounding Japan have risen exponentially in recent years. Defense Minister Taro Kono stated, "Chinese government ships...enter the Japanese contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands almost every day and violate its territorial waters three times a month. China is attempting to change the status quo in the East China Sea."¹³

The Japanese Ministry of Defense documented 638 Chinese aircraft incursions in 2018 compared with 138 incursions in 2017. In 2018, Chinese fighters and bombers flew over the Mikayo Strait, between Japan's Okinawa and Miyako Islands 10 times, and Chinese naval vessels passed through the strait 12 times.¹⁴

Chinese military ships and aircraft are approaching closer to the Senkaku Islands and have expanded their operations from the East China Sea to the four main Japanese islands. Improving Chinese military capabilities make reinforcing the southwestern islands more problematic.¹⁵

Developing Advanced Technologies. Beijing is also seeking to attack U.S. command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities by developing asymmetric capabilities such as satellite-killer missiles, cyberattack capabilities, the ability to interrupt the seabed network of fiberoptic cables, and electromagnetic pulse systems.¹⁶ These technologies would enhance its A2/AD counterforce strategy against the United States.

China developed the DF-21D and DF-26 anti-ship ballistic missiles to counter U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups. Beijing is also developing advanced technologies such as hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, and quantum cryptography, communications, and computing that could create unhackable networks and crack prevalent types of encryption.¹⁷

During the 2019 U.S.–Japan Security Consultative Meeting, both nations “expressed concern about rapidly evolving technological advancement in new domains, including space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum. The document articulated for the first time that “a cyberattack could, in certain circumstances, constitute an armed attack for the purposes of Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.”¹⁸ Such a determination could lead to a military response by either nation against the source of the cyberattack. But there is a need to operationalize these political pledges.

Japan’s Slowly Evolving Security Strategy

Faced with rapidly growing military and asymmetric security threats, Japan has slowly expanded Self-Defense Forces (SDF) roles, responsibilities, and authorities. This was driven, in part, by pressure from U.S. criticism of past minimalist efforts.

In December 2018, the Japanese Cabinet approved a new 10-year National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and five-year Medium Term Defense Program (MTDP) for weapons procurement. Although the last NDPG had been completed only five years previously, Prime Minister Abe called for an early update due to growing North Korean nuclear and missile threats and China’s increasing assertiveness in the East China Sea.

In the new NDPG, Japan articulated three pillars of its defense strategy—improving indigenous capabilities, strengthening the alliance with the U.S., and enhancing multilateral security cooperation with regional partners. While each pillar was mentioned in previous documents, Tokyo gave them stronger emphasis given the more challenging security environment.

The new NDPG also placed an increased priority on amphibious operations, increased mobility for remote island defense, and enhanced command and control capabilities for joint and integrated operations.

Defense of Japan’s Southwest Islands

A predominant theme in consecutive Japanese defense documents has been a shift away from static Cold War defense against a Russian invasion in the northeast toward more mobile Japanese forces needed to deter Chinese attacks on the southwest islands. Doing so required a transition from regionally deployed units with heavy equipment such as tanks to lighter units that are more easily transported.

The 2010 NDPG spoke of the need for a “dynamic defense force” of rapidly deployable forces, which evolved into an emphasis on a “dynamic

TEXT BOX 1

Improving Indigenous Capabilities

Japan has identified several initiatives to augment its defense and crisis-response capabilities across the spectrum of peacetime through gray-zone contingencies to wartime.

Increase the defense budget to \$48 billion for 2020 and \$245 billion over the next five years, an 11 percent increase over the previous MTDP.¹ Abe has consistently augmented the annual defense budget, though it has essentially kept pace with inflation.

Enhance capabilities against traditional military threats by

- Procuring RQ-4 Global Hawk UAVs and MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft;
- Purchasing additional F-35s (A and B variants) from the U.S., bringing the total to 147 (105 F-35A for the Air Self-Defense Forces and 42 F-35B short takeoff/vertical landing (STOVL) version for the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF));
- Acquiring the AGM-158B Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile-Extended Range (JASSM-ER), which has a range of 900 km, and the AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) to augment standoff attack capability for aircraft;
- Acquiring Type 12 and Type 88 surface-to-ship standoff missiles;
- Developing hypersonic guided missiles that can fly at five times the speed of sound;
- Procuring new destroyers, submarines, patrol vessels, and P-1 patrol aircraft; and

- Expanding the submarine fleet from 16 to 22 boats, increasing the number of Aegis destroyers from six to eight, and developing a new multi-role frigate for countermine and antisubmarine operations.

Augment mobility and rapid-deployment capabilities by

- Establishing a 3,000-man amphibious rapid deployment brigade;
- Converting two 19,500-ton *Izumo*-class helicopter-carrying destroyers to carry F-35B VSTOL jets to defend the southwest islands;
- Procuring C-2 transport aircraft, CH-47 JA helicopters, and V-22 Osprey to support large-scale transport and deployment operations; and
- Introducing logistics support vessels (LSV) and landing craft utilities (LCU).

Improve ballistic missile defense by

- Procuring SM-3 Block IB and IIA interceptor missiles for Aegis-equipped destroyers with upgraded PAC 3 MSE, long-range SM-6 ship-to-air missiles, and mid-range ground-to-air guided missiles.
- Develop capabilities against cyber, space, and electromagnetic security threats by
- Establishing a space domain unit by 2022–2023 to ensure superiority in the use of space at all stages from peacetime to contingencies and a cyber defense unit to disrupt opponents' use of cyberspace in its armed attack against Japan.²

1. Takeshi Iwaya, "Japan's National Defense Strategy," presentation at the Center for Security and International Defense Studies, January 16, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-national-defense-strategy> (accessed May 23, 2020).

2. Ibid.; Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2019*; Japan Ministry of Defense, "National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond," December 18, 2018, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf (accessed May 23, 2020); and Japan Ministry of Defense, "Medium Term Defense Program (FY 2019–FY 2023)," December 18, 2018, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/chuki_seibi31-35_e.pdf (accessed May 23, 2020).

joint defense force" emphasizing cross-service coordination in the 2013 document and to a "*multi-domain* defense force" stressing incorporating new warfare domains of space and cyber in the 2018 NDPG. The new force concept "emphasizes increased training, exercises, and exchanges with regional partners, the need to build partner capacity, and the importance of defense industrial cooperation."¹⁹

The 2018 MTDP indicated the GSDF will convert one division and two brigades into one rapid deployment division and two rapid deployment brigades as well as create an amphibious rapid deployment brigade, which will be strengthened by one amphibious rapid deployment regiment.²⁰

The SDF plans to enhance its defense posture in the southwest islands by acquiring new capabilities, building new facilities, deploying new and augmenting existing units, enhancing rapid-response capabilities, changing its strategy to better monitor and deter Chinese incursions and, if necessary, retaking islands.

The SDF plans to:

- **Augment existing units** by increasing the number of F-15s and E-2D early warning aircraft deployed at the Naha Air Base in Okinawa.²¹
- **Deploy new units.** This entails developing new radar sites, surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missile units, and intelligence-gathering and security units on Yonaguni, Amami Oshima, Miyako, and Ishigaki Islands. These units will bolster intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) as well as rapid-response capabilities to protect key maritime chokepoints in the Miyako and Tokara Straits.
- **Develop longer-range missiles.** The range of Type 12 surface-to-ship missile will be increased from 100 kilometers (km) to 300 km, and the range of the ASM-3 air-to-ship missile will be increased from 200 km to 400 km. Surface-to-air missiles will also be deployed to provide air defense of the islands.²²

Strengthening Japanese Coast Guard. In recent years, Japan augmented the budget, procurement, and deployed units of the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG), which is the first responder to Chinese gray-zone incursions in the southwest islands. Japan increased the JCG budget by 40 percent between 2012 and 2019, expanded the 11th Regional JCG headquarters in Naha City in Okinawa, added 21 patrol vessels between 2012 and 2018, and increased the JCG's aggregate tonnage by 50 percent between 2010 and

2016.²³ The JCG has significantly expanded its maritime and aerial patrols near the Senkaku Islands.

The JCG improved coordination with the Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) and periodically conducts joint training and exercises for maritime security operations. However, the JCG and MSDF continue to perceive gray-zone challenges differently, with the JCG acting as law enforcement and the MSDF responding with paramilitary operations. This perception gap, as well as legal restrictions, have hindered more effective joint responses.

Tokyo lacks a comprehensive strategy across organizations for responding to gray-zone scenarios. While the NDPG advocated stronger JCG-MSDF coordination, the specifics and timelines were vague, raising questions as to how quickly changes will occur.

Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade. In March 2018, the GSDF established an amphibious rapid deployment brigade (ARDB) for deployment to remote islands. The unit stood up with 2,000 troops toward its eventual full complement of 3,000. The brigade is comprised of two (to become three) amphibious regiments, one AAV-7 amphibious assault battalion, one field artillery battalion, one reconnaissance company, a signal company, an engineer company, and a logistics support battalion.²⁴

The ARDB was established to conduct amphibious operations to retake and secure remote islands seized by China. It can also respond to humanitarian disasters. It evolved from the Western Army Infantry Regiment in Sasebo, which had previously engaged in amphibious warfare training:

- The GSDF has participated in Iron Fist exercises with U.S. Marines in California since 2006;
- The MSDF joined the GSDF for the first time in Dawn Blitz exercises in California in 2013;
- The GSDF practiced regaining islands from enemy forces in August 2018. The exercise involved 2,400 troops, 80 tanks and armored vehicles, and 20 helicopters and fighter jets;
- An ARDB participated in a joint exercise with U.S. Marines in October 2018; and
- An ARDB joined U.S. Marines and Australian naval infantry in the Talisman Sabre combined joint forcible entry beach landing exercise in Australia in August 2019.

The brigade appears akin to the U.S. Marine Corps but with significant differences. The ARDB is not a separate branch of service but is subordinate to the GSDF Ground Component Command established in March 2018. Unlike the U.S. Marines, the ARDB is not expeditionary and is unable to fight far from Japanese shores.

Nor does the brigade have organic land, air, and naval assets that would enable it to operate as a Marine Air-Ground Task Force under a single commander. Instead, the brigade relies on the MSDF and Air Self-Defense Force, which do not have the equipment to rapidly transport the brigade. Unlike the U.S. Marines, the brigade cannot conduct close-in air support.

Refurbishing *Izumo*-Class for F-35s. According to the Ministry of Defense, the *Izumo*, which looks like a small aircraft carrier, is a “multi-function destroyer capable of helicopter, antisubmarine, command central, personnel and vehicle transportation, medical and other operations.”²⁵

There are few airfields in the southwest island region from which to project power against Chinese land incursions. Japan decided to convert the helicopter-carrying destroyers to handle F-35B STOVL aircraft to provide the SDF with greater firepower and mobility in an otherwise isolated region.

Japan insists that, even after the STOVL function is added to the ships, they will continue to function as multi-function destroyers with F-35s deployed only when necessitated by an air attack in time of emergency.²⁶

However, the plan has a number of shortcomings. The destroyers can carry only 10 F-35s each, hardly a major deterrent to a determined Chinese attack. Because the ships will not have a sloped deck or catapult launch system, the planes will be limited in how much fuel and ammunition they can carry. Deploying the F-35s on the *Izumo* will require displacing the seven SH-60K anti-submarine warfare and seven Agusta Westland MCM-101 mine countermeasures helicopters already onboard.

Converting the two *Izumo*-class ships will likely cost \$1 billion each with an additional \$2.8 billion to procure the F-35 aircraft—approximately 10 percent of Japan’s annual \$48 billion defense budget.²⁷

Japan Ballistic Missile Defense

Spurred by fears of the North Korean missile threat, Tokyo has invested heavily in ballistic missile defense (BMD). Japan has integrated its missile defenses with U.S. systems, enabling more effective target identification, tracking, and interception. Japan and the U.S. have also established the Bilateral Joint Operating Command Center at Yokota Air Base near Tokyo.

Japan has seven Aegis-equipped guided missile destroyers equipped with SM-3 interceptor missiles with the eighth to be deployed soon. The Patriot PAC-3 land-based system is capable of engaging short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in their terminal phase. Japan will upgrade the system to PAC-3 MSE (Missile Segment Enhancement) to enhance interception altitude from 20 km to tens of kilometers, doubling the protected area coverage.²⁸ Two AN/TPY-2 BMD radars have been deployed to Japan since 2014 and complement the national missile defense network.

In June 2020, Tokyo unexpectedly cancelled plans to build two Aegis Ashore missile defense sites that would have enhanced protection against the growing North Korean missile threat. The deployment would not have added another layer of defense but would have freed up Aegis ships for other missions, such as maritime security. The Aegis Ashore units would have provided missile defense for the entire country, unaffected by weather or staffing shortages that have affected the Aegis ships.

Defense Minister Taro Kono explained that Japan was suspending the project due to the potential for the interceptor missile's first-stage booster falling onto populated areas. However, other likely factors in the decision include the overall cost of the program, inept handling of the site-selection process, and government unwillingness to press national objectives over local resistance.

Tokyo is now considering other alternatives, such as procuring two additional Aegis ships, purchasing the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system, or deploying Aegis Ashore on "mega-floats," large floating structures that can be used as an artificial island base. Each alternative has significant shortcomings.

Having been warned of the North Korean missile threat, the Abe administration will now have to rely on defense capabilities it previously deemed insufficient.

Japan's decisions may also have consequences for its alliance with the United States. Washington saw Aegis Ashore as providing enhanced defense for the 50,000 U.S. military personnel in Japan as well as freeing up U.S. Aegis-equipped destroyers for other duties in the western Pacific.²⁹

Japan's Military: The Big Dog That Stays on the Porch

Japan has developed a formidable military by implementing significant changes to security legislation and procuring an impressive array of sophisticated weapons. Yet the SDF remains overly restricted and underutilized. Progress in altering Japan's security posture has always lagged behind faster-moving regional threats.

Japan’s postwar security framework is the subject of heated internal debate and excruciatingly slow, timid adoption of incrementally less restrictive constraints. Any change in Japan’s security posture has required an inordinate amount of time, effort, and outside pressure to overcome political and public resistance—like pulling a cart with square wheels.

Greater public acceptance of a slowly evolving SDF role was driven by “growing insecurity from the deteriorating regional threat environment, gradual erosion of anti-military feelings under conservative political leadership, positive SDF experiences in humanitarian missions, and acceptance of the need for more burden sharing.”³⁰

The Diet passed several security revisions that enable the country to theoretically take on more security responsibilities. Yet even when doing so, the overarching priority was to continue limiting Japan’s role and retaining highly restrictive rules of engagement. While the threshold for Japanese action will be lower, allowing a broader range of possible responses, doubts remain about the actual extent of implementation. As one U.S. defense expert put it, these revisions “opened the door for Japan, but will it choose to walk through it?”

Defense Budget: Large Aspirations, Small Implementation. While Japan extolled record defense spending under Prime Minister Abe, Tokyo’s defense expenditures rose only slightly in real terms, remaining below the arbitrary cap of 1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). According to the CIA World Factbook, Japan’s per capita spending on defense is 123rd in the world.³¹

Japan articulated numerous new domains, initiatives, and procurement decisions in the NDPG and MTDP, but its overall defense budget will remain fairly static. As one U.S. defense expert opined, “The NDPG is like buying a big suit for a kid that you hope someday he’ll grow into.”

Tokyo’s constrained defense expenditures hinder the country’s ability to fulfill its ambitious security plans. Japan’s defense budget has been far outpaced by the intensifying threats it is meant to defend against. China is implementing and operationalizing new weapons and capabilities faster than Japan is responding.

The defense budget displays a lack of speed and urgency. While the overall direction is good, the degree of progress is far too slow. As American humorist Will Rogers commented, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

Limited Ability to Conduct Joint and Combined Operations

U.S. officials and experts underscore that, despite the Abe Administration’s many accomplishments, significant shortcomings remain in the SDF’s

ability to conduct truly joint and combined operations. This has led to less effective battlefield awareness, targeting, combined arms operations, close air support, and an increased potential for friendly fire casualties. The situation is analogous to assessments of the South Korean military in an earlier Heritage Foundation report.³²

The military remains largely stovepiped with insufficient ability to communicate, plan, or operate across services. “As each service was established, it built its own communication systems [precluding] communicat[ion] among themselves on common voice devices.... The challenge is even more pronounced in tactical data-sharing...which impedes instantaneous shared situational awareness and targeting data”³³ between sensors and shooter units.

Japan has attempted to improve interoperability among its military services. The Joint Security Office (JSO), created in 2006, serves as policy advisor and liaison between the SDF and the political leadership. However, it does not play an action role as would a Joint SDF headquarters with an operational chairman of the joint chiefs or a joint task force commander for a specific mission, such as defense of the southwest islands.

Tokyo vowed in its most recent NDPG to remedy jointness shortfalls by strengthening the JSO. But the vague guidance did not define a new structure or a timeline for achieving it. The Ministry of Defense’s Mid-Term Defense Program vowed to study how to develop jointness, but in weak, passive language without defining a deadline for achieving it.

Japan’s inability to conduct joint operations across its own military services inhibits its capacity for combined operations with U.S. forces. After the 3/11 Triple Disaster,³⁴ U.S. Forces Japan quickly mobilized to provide support but were hindered by weak Japanese decision-making and crisis management, as well as insufficient means for bilateral coordination.

The U.S. security relationship with Japan is inherently weaker than the U.S. relationship with South Korea because it is not a mutual defense pact and there is no integrated security structure, as with the U.S.–South Korea Combined Forces Command.

U.S. Forces Japan does not have operational control of military units in Japan during wartime nor is it an operational or warfighting command.³⁵ The “lack of a joint, combined command coupled with separate chains-of-command limit interoperability.”³⁶

The 2015 U.S.–Japan Alliance Guidelines established the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) to “strengthen policy and operational coordination related to activities conducted by the SDF and the U.S. Armed Forces in all phases from peacetime to contingencies” and called

for bilateral contingency planning. The two allies emphasized the need for “seamless, robust, flexible, and effective bilateral responses, synergy across the two governments’ national security policies, and a whole-of-government alliance approach.”³⁷

The 2015 guidelines “create the potential for more integrated alliance missions, compared with the previous approach that separated forward-area and rear-area activities. The new arrangement also makes interoperability and real-time information exchange even more important for the allies.”³⁸ Prime Minister Abe created a Japanese National Security Council in 2013, which played a role in developing the 2015 Defense Guidelines and plays a coordinating role in crisis response.

The ACM improved bilateral coordination, communication, and information sharing but still cannot conduct combined planning, exercises, and operations. It may be a work in progress, but it is far weaker than the U.S.–South Korean Combined Forces Command. As a result, the U.S. and Japan still operate parallel militaries without unified command and control mechanisms.

Admiral (ret.) Denny Blair, a former Pacific Command Commander, recommended:

By 2029, the Japan SDF must be capable of operating in multi-service task forces under joint doctrine, with interoperable command, control and communications systems, with trained headquarters staffs and operational units skilled in operating with those from other services.... Forces without joint doctrine, training, communications, and attitude...can be no stronger against a joint opponent than their weakest sector.³⁹

What Washington and Tokyo Should Do

Washington and Tokyo can do several things to strengthen the U.S.–Japan Alliance against the growing Chinese threat.

Increase the Japanese Defense Budget. The Abe administration must convince the Japanese legislature and public that steadily rising threats require more than incremental adjustments to the defense budget. Although Tokyo has articulated comprehensive new strategies, missions, and ambitious procurement plans, it did not couple that with the resources needed to implement them.

An escalating threat environment requires a commensurate response by Japan to augment its defense capabilities. Japan must break through and move well above its self-imposed conceptual limit of only spending 1

percent of its GDP on defense. Japan should move to a higher level, perhaps the same 2 percent level to which NATO has committed.

Improve Jointness Across Japanese SDF Services and Coast Guard.
Tokyo should:

- **Integrate the planning, training, and command structure** for the three self-defense forces. Tokyo should also augment coordination between the SDF and Japanese Coast Guard to better coordinate gray-zone operations.
- **Create a joint task force or regional command for the southwest islands** with a unified commander. Having disparate services carrying out missions in parallel rather than in an integrated structure could prove disastrous in a conflict. The new amphibious rapid deployment brigade can be a catalyst for joint doctrine, procurement, training, and operations.
- **Synchronize air and missile defense into a single structure.** Given the range of modern air and missile defense systems, Japan should integrate the separate air and missile defense units and systems of three SDF services or ensure they are linked together in an integrated command and control system. This would also enable better coordination with U.S. air and missile systems.
- **Consider a Japanese Goldwater–Nichols Act⁴⁰** to enhance the Joint Security Office’s operational and command authority to augment SDF ability to conduct joint and combined operations.

Enhance Amphibious Capabilities. Tokyo is to be commended for creating an amphibious brigade to address the growing Chinese threat to its southwest islands. However, the brigade’s lack of joint doctrine and a designated overall joint commander for southwest island operations is worrisome.

Moreover, the brigade does not have adequate airlift and sealift to quickly move enough troops to accomplish its missions. The existing fleet of *Izumo*-class multi-function ship, *Hyuga*-class helicopter carrier, and *Osumi*-class tank landing ship appear insufficient. Only two of the planned MV-22s have arrived in Japan, and it is unclear if the brigade has a full complement of amphibious assault vehicles. If the brigade relies on already strained U.S. Marine and Navy lift, it would constrain U.S. forces during a crisis.

Augment Military Training. Behind the shiny storefront of Japanese defense procurement lies a Potemkin village of inadequate training. The limited number of training facilities and firing ranges, coupled with strong “not in my backyard” resistance by powerful local opposition, inhibits SDF large-scale unit training and long-range live-fire training. Training at sea can be restricted in scope, location, and duration by navigation of fishing vessels and merchant ships. Aircraft training areas are too small to allow full-scale training or are restricted due to noise limits or local government regulations.

High-end weapons and equipment require extensive and expansive training. Because of the lack of sufficient suitable training facilities combined with extensive training restrictions, U.S. forces in Japan often get *less* training than those in the United States. This has led U.S. as well as SDF forces to travel outside the country to conduct training in Australia, Guam, Hawaii, and Alaska.

The decades-long saga of building a replacement facility for the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station on Okinawa and efforts to initiate an airfield on Mageshima⁴¹ to enable U.S. field carrier land practice illustrate the impact of local constraints on U.S. basing and training.

Tokyo should resolutely work with local constituencies to develop new training regimens and ranges suitable for modern warfare training but push back against unreasonable restrictions. Japan wants the U.S. to address security threats but then imposes restrictions on U.S. forces. Local constraints on training and politicization of the U.S. presence in Japan undermine the benefit of having forces in the region.

Align Allied Plans to Counter China’s A2/AD Strategy. Tokyo is augmenting forces and facilities in the southwest island chain and planning to procure longer-range missiles to extend protective coverage. Japan should closely coordinate its plans with emerging U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps strategies, which may significantly alter U.S. doctrine, strategy, procurement, and deployment plans in the Indo-Pacific theater.⁴² Japanese and U.S. alliance managers should identify complementary roles and missions, not only for defense of Japan but also for a broader regional strategy including other countries in southeast Asia.

While Japan has defined the need for multi-domain operations, Tokyo is apparently again moving more slowly in defining and implementing these concepts than its U.S. counterparts. If Japan follows its habitually glacial pace of defense reform, it will find itself even further behind in the threat-response cycle.

Improve Alliance Military Coordination. The lack of a unified U.S.-Japan command inhibits combined operations. While creating a U.S.-Japan Combined Forces Command is a bridge too far, at least for the foreseeable future, Washington and Tokyo can implement several measures to enhance

military operations. The Alliance Coordination Mechanism can form the basis for greater coordination and integration, particularly in ISR, BMD, maritime security, logistics support, and counterproliferation.⁴³

The U.S. and Japan should:

- **Exercise combined contingency plans and test access to a wider range of Japanese civilian airfields and ports.** Despite decades of working alongside each other and escalating threats, doubts remain concerning access to Japanese facilities for U.N. operations on the Korean Peninsula or “if Japan’s military could play a role beyond logistical support for U.S. Forces in Japan if war broke out.”⁴⁴ Moreover, given the nature of the gray-zone challenge in the East China Sea, the Japanese Coast Guard should be included in planning and exercises.
- **Coordinate allied roles and missions in multi-domain operations.** Both nations have begun developing new technologies for space and cyber operations. A first step could be setting specific milestones at “2 plus 2” meetings⁴⁵ and then using the bilateral enterprise mechanism included in the 2015 Defense Guidelines to work together toward such projects.

Conclusion

The U.S. and Japan need to bring the full potential of their alliance on the China challenge. Right now it is underperforming. It is not that Japan lacks defense capabilities, but that Japan lacks the political willingness to employ them, even in the encompassing framework of its security alliance with the United States. Japan’s security posture evolves in fits and starts and often only in response to a shock such as a strong U.S. criticism or a catalytic event that brings about a belated response to a growing threat.

Despite Prime Minister Abe’s prodigious efforts to advance his country’s security posture, Japan remains tightly restricted to security operations that are strictly defensive in nature and based on a core national principle of pacifism. Much of the populace remains deeply suspicious of the use of the military as a policy instrument and fearful that any easing of the innumerable constraints will let slip the dogs of war.

Japan is very risk and casualty averse, which will prevent Japanese involvement in kinetic military operations outside its own defense such as U.N. or international peacekeeping operations. It will remain a middle security power that relies on a strong alliance with the U.S. while increasing its networking with regional democracies.

The challenge for U.S. policymakers and alliance managers will be to find the delicate balance of continually pushing Tokyo past its comfort zone while understanding the many constitutional, legal, budgetary, and societal restrictions that hinder Japan's ability to become a stronger alliance partner.

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