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Joint Operations Readiness: Key for Japan in Dealing with Simultaneous Threats

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific security environment has become ever more challenging in recent years, due to the increasingly combative strategies and continued military modernization of China and North Korea. Although significant attention has been devoted to the potential for planned attacks and invasions by Beijing and Pyongyang, there is also an increasing focus on gray-zone situations that have been at the center of heightening tensions in the region. Together, the multi-layered, simultaneous nature of the threats implicates the possibility of complex scenarios that are beyond the readiness of Japan, the United States (US), and other partners in the region.

To better deter and defend against the risks, Japan is pressed to significantly sharpen its defense strategies and readiness. Japan issued the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program (DBP) in December 2022. Among the various agendas pursued to boost the readiness of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF), enhancements in joint systems for cross- and multi-domain operations will be critical. But while joint operations readiness will allow the JSDF to maximize efficiency and effectiveness, as well as enhance alliance strategies and operations with the US and other partners, there are several issues that must be solved to actualize its potential.

This paper assesses the importance of joint readiness for Japan and its alliance with the US to address the evolving nature of the security risks in the Indo-Pacific. Specifically, this paper argues that Japan must continue to advance the joint systems and readiness of the JSDF for cross- and multi-domains operations which will be vital in deterring and defending against the threats posed by China, North Korea, and Russia, ranging from their gray-zone activities to worst-case scenarios such as simultaneous contingencies. While there are several constraints and issues, such efforts will significantly enhance the strategies and readiness of Japan, US, and other allies and partners to ensure security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The paper will first provide an overview of the importance of joint operations readiness. The second section will examine the fluid and tense security environment of the Indo-Pacific, including risks for a simultaneous contingency on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait. The third section will discuss the importance of joint operations readiness for Japan as the means for cross-domain operations to address these complex risks, while the fourth section will evaluate prospects and issues for the Japan-US alliance. Finally, the paper will offer policy recommendations for Japan and the US to enhance the alliance's readiness.

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

Abbreviation	Definition
A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
C4ISR	Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
DOTMLPF	Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership & Education, Personnel, Facilities, and Policy
JADC2	Joint All Domain Command and Control
JJOC	Joint Operational Command (Japan)
JSDF	Japan Self-Defense Force
JSO	Joint Staff Office
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSS	National Security Strategy
NDS	National Defense Strategy
DBP	Defense Buildup Program
ROK	Republic of Korea
US	United States
USFJ	United States Forces Japan

1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, Japan issued its National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program (DBP) with the aim of significantly enhancing the readiness of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF).[1] These developments marked a new era in Japan's defense planning since the establishment of the JSDF in July 1954. Until the 2000s, Japan's defense planning was pursued in a low-profile manner due to its self-imposed strategic, political, and legal constraints.[2] Yet due to the increasing threats posed by China, North Korea, and Russia, as well as the evolution of modern warfare, Japan has been pressed since the 2010s to significantly sharpen its defense strategies and readiness to deal with increasingly diverse and intense security challenges.[3] Through various strategic and defense doctrines and plans, Japan has worked to make fundamental changes to maximize the JSDF's readiness and deepen its partnership with the United States (US) while remaining within the boundaries of self-defense.

This paper assesses the importance of joint readiness for Japan and its alliance with the US to address the evolving nature of the security risks in the Indo-Pacific. Specifically, this paper argues that Japan must continue to advance the joint systems and readiness of the JSDF for cross- and multi-domains operations which will be vital in deterring and defending against the threats posed by China, North Korea, and Russia, ranging from their gray-zone activities to worst-case scenarios such as simultaneous contingencies. While there are several constraints and issues, such efforts will significantly enhance the strategies and readiness of Japan, US, and other allies and partners to ensure security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The paper will first provide an overview of the importance of joint operations readiness. The second section will examine the fluid and tense security environment in the Indo-Pacific that promotes the risk of a simultaneous contingency on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait. The third section will discuss the importance of joint operations readiness for Japan as a means for cross-domain operations to deal with these complex risks. The fourth section will then look at the prospects and issues for the Japan-US alliance. The final section will offer policy recommendations for Japan and the US to enhance the alliance's strategies and readiness.

[1] Government of Japan, "National Security Strategy of Japan," (Tokyo: Japan16 December 2022).; Japan Ministry of Defense, "National Defense Strategy," (Tokyo: Japan16 December 2022).; Japan Ministry of Defense, "Defense Buildup Program," (Tokyo: Japan16 December 2022).

[2] For background on Japan's rearmament and defense politics since the late 1940s, see: Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).; Akihiro Sadoh, *jieitaishi: boueiseisakuno 70nen [History of the JSDF: 70 Years of Japan's Defense Policies]* (Chikuma Shinsho, 2015).; Andrew Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[3] Yu Koizumi and Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, *2030no sensou [War in 2030]* (Tokyo, Japan: Nikkei BP, 2025).

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF JOINT OPERATIONS READINESS

Military modernization has entered a new era, where a combination of new warfighting concepts and advanced military technologies has led to the diversification of warfare now spanning across the ground, maritime, air, outer space, cyber space, and cognitive domains. Moreover, states today have moved away from the old methods of conducting attacks and invasions, relying more on hybrid warfare in the initial stages of conflict to shape the status quo to their advantage, and using armed attacks as the final strokes to achieve their strategic ends. Indeed, one can debate the extent to which the current developments have altered the fundamentals of warfare. Yet there is little doubt that military operations have become more complex, pressing defense forces to establish and operationalize joint systems.

The purpose of joint operations readiness is to synergize the capabilities of multiple branches to carry out cross-domain operations.[4] Various scholars have noted the importance of joint operations in modern warfare. For example, Milan Vego argued that joint operations readiness is critical in attaining "complementary capabilities, greater flexibility, and hence, a greater number of options…and exploitation of enemy vulnerabilities by employing one's forces asymmetrically."[5] Daniel Moran also makes an important point, arguing that joint operations readiness is about gaining a "collective advantage" over the adversary.[6] In particular, joint operations readiness is the means of synergistically boosting a defense force's ability to gain an edge over its opponent even under disadvantageous conditions.

Despite the importance of joint systems, operations, and readiness, the actual developments over the course of military history have been partial and piecemeal until the latter years of the Cold War.[7] In the US, military campaigns undermined by a lack of inter-branch coordination, combined with defense planning disconnects, led to the Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which ordered the establishment of joint systems. Developments in joint operations systems and readiness have also been enabled by technological advancements.[8] In particular, the revolutionary developments in information and communications technologies led to the emergence of advanced command, control, communication, computer, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems. The birth of C4ISR systems has been critical in advancing joint operations systems, as seen in the evolution toward "network-centric warfare" in the 1990s, and more recently, "decision-making warfare" that led to the birth of Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) in the US.[9] Through such efforts, the US to date presents the most institutionally and technologically advanced and sophisticated models of joint systems and readiness. While there are limits in emulating the scale, various states have nonetheless studied the US model to gain positive and negative lessons that will be useful in developing their own forms of joint systems and readiness.

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[4] For other definitions, see: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-0: Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 17 January 2017). p. ix.; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP-01)," (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017).

[5] Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2007). p. V-99.

[6] Daniel Moran, "Geography and Strategy," in *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, ed. John Baylis, Jeannie L. Johnson, and James J. Wirtz (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press,, 2022). p. 166.

[7] See: Roger A. Beaumont, *Joint Military Operations: A Short History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).; Stuart Griffin, *Joint Operations: A Short History* (London, UK: UK Ministry of Defence, 2005).

[8] See: Edward R. Lucas and Thomas Crosbie, "Evolution of Joint Warfare," in *Handbook of Military Sciences*, ed. Anders McD Sookermany (Springer, 2021).

[9] See: Arthur K. Cebrowski and John H. Garstka, "Network-Centric Warfare: Its Origin and Future," *Proceedings* 124, no. 1 (Jan 1998).; John R. Hoeh, "Joint All-Domain Command and Control: Background and Issues for Congres," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022).; Hideyuki Takahashi, "gunjiteki ishiketteigainennno sinkyuuhikakubunseki: beikokuno "mozaikusen" gainennno kantenkara [A Comparative Analysis of Old and New Concepts of Military Decision-Making: From the Perspective of the U.S. "Mosaic Warfare" Concept]," *kaikankousenryakukenkyuu [JMSDF Command and Staff College Review]* 10, no. 2 (Dec 2020).

While joint systems and the means of joint operational readiness come in different shapes and sizes, they nevertheless pivot on integrating the readiness of different service branches. These efforts aim to minimize surpluses, identify efficiencies, and maximize synergies, allowing states and their forces to deter and respond more effectively against threats they face.

3. GROWING RISKS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

The Indo-Pacific security environment has become more challenging in recent years, with the increasingly combative strategies and continued enhancements in the military readiness of China and North Korea. However, while much attention has been paid to the risks of planned attacks and invasions by Beijing and Pyongyang, there is also an increasing focus on the persistent gray-zone situations caused by incursions, provocative maneuvers, weapons tests, and so forth, heightening regional tensions in a manner that increases the risks of inadvertent escalation. Arguably, the latter situations are more concerning. Planned attacks and invasions are often scripted according to the opponent's operational concepts and doctrines, making it easier to predict and understand their moves. In contrast, escalations from gray-zone situations are far more complex, with more potential scenarios that could uncontrollably intensify the conflict.

3.1. Growing Threats by Anti-Status Quo States

Several factors have driven the increased complexity of Japan's security environment since the 2010s.

First, Japan's competitors have increasingly adopted more threatening postures. Above all, China is the primary security concern to Japan's security, due to Beijing's continuously assertive strategies and operations in the region, as well as the consistent modernization of its military, paramilitary, and militia forces.[10] North Korea also poses a serious threat due to its continued military modernization program, combined with the new nuclear doctrine issued in September 2022 that allowed both preemptive and preventative strikes.[11] In addition, there are also continued concerns about Russia, due to its willingness to use force, as seen in its invasion of Ukraine, but also increased activities in the Kurile Islands, including the disputed Northern Territories.[12]

The second reason for Japan's heightened security environment, related to the first, is that the growing readiness of its rivals – particularly China and North Korea – increases Japan's vulnerability. In particular, Japan is situated within China's zone of anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) and faces the risk of massed attacks across all domains, making it harder to deter and respond.

Third, China, North Korea, and Russia's efforts to change the status quo have proved to be incremental, involving not just sharpening of their readiness but also weapons tests, military exercises and training, incursions and transits, and other provocative maneuvers near or within the territorial waters and airspace of Japan and South Korea. Notable examples include the multiple incursions by Chinese military, paramilitary, and militia vessels into the waters off Japan's southwest island chain, China's large-scale military exercises near Taiwan, and North Korea's frequent missile tests. While such provocative activities fall short of attacks and invasions, they cause gray-zone situations that disrupt regional security and stability, indicating corrosion of deterrence to maintain the status quo.

Fourth, the growing levels of coordination and cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia warrant greater attention. Indeed, the three countries have empirically pursued cooperation for opportunistic convenience rather than obligatory collective defense. North Korea's recent deployment of troops to Ukraine is a case in point, where the arrangement was focused on deepening bilateral ties with Russia and gaining access to Russian military technologies. Even with

[10] See: U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024," (Washington, D.C.2024).
[11] See: Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, *Defense Planning and Readiness of North Korea: Armed to Rule* (Oxfordshire, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).
[12] Yu Koizumi, "Russian Military Modernization in the Northern Territories and Its Implications for Japanese Foreign Policy," *Sasakawa Peace Foundation International Information Network Analysis* (31 May 2021), https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/koizumi_01.html.

regard to Beijing's relations with Pyongyang, much is about ensuring the latter's survival for the former's geopolitical interests. Still, the increased interactions among the three parties indicate that there is the possibility of a trilateral pact, which would lead to further instability in the region.

3.2. Risks for Simultaneous Contingencies

The proximity of the flashpoints, combined with the efforts by China, North Korea, and Russia to change the status quo in their favor, have raised concerns about the risks of simultaneous conflicts in the Indo-Pacific. The dangers of simultaneous contingencies are indeed nothing new. Concerns over simultaneous conflict in the region have loomed since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, when two days after North Korea began its invasion of South Korea, the US mobilized to deter the eruption of broader conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Although a simultaneous war did not occur, the movements nonetheless reflect the concern over war in one theatre leading to a contingency, or at least rising tensions, in another. Today, as the military readiness of both China and North Korea have grown beyond comparison to the Cold War era, the complexity and scale of the consequences is also far greater.

There is little doubt that a simultaneous contingency in the Indo-Pacific is a worst-case scenario, with various analyses and table-top exercises in recent years suggesting that the probable risks are not low enough to be ignored.[13] Still, the more pressing problem is not so much about calculating the probability of such a crisis, but understanding the context and nature of the possible simultaneous contingency scenarios.

Broadly, simultaneous contingencies in the Indo-Pacific could be intentionally or unintentionally ignited. Intentional simultaneous contingencies could come in two forms. In one possible scenario, China or North Korea could coordinate to assist the attack or invasion campaign of the other through military provocations or limited attacks. The other possibility involves China or North Korea taking advantage of the actions of the other to achieve their own strategic goals. Although the exact scenarios vary and depend on the nature of the attacks and invasions, as well as the level of coordination, there is common ground in that both scenarios aim to distract and overwhelm the response capacity of the US, Japan, ROK, and Taiwan.

As for unintentional scenarios, simultaneous contingencies could occur as a result of concurrent or spill-over escalation of gray-zone tensions in the region, or from a war in one theatre escalating into a contingency in another. The problem with unintentional contingencies is that a constellation of scenarios could trigger them.

Although it is almost impossible to comparatively calculate the risks of intentional and unintentional simultaneous contingencies, the latter would arguably be more challenging to deter. Regarding intentional simultaneous contingencies, China and North Korea would need to carefully plan their course of action and execute them under specific conditions to attain the desired results, making it possible to devise measures to deter them. Moreover, the actual probability could be discouraged by the fact that there are also risks for the opponent, particularly for China, given that a conflict on the Korean Peninsula would increase the likelihood of North Korea's eventual defeat. Under such

[13] See: Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, "chosenhantoto taiwankaikyodeno "fukugouteki yuuji"no risuku (Risks for a "Composite Contigency" on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait)," *Gekkan Toa* (January 2025).; Markus V. Garlauskas, "The United States and its Allies Must Be Ready to Deter a Two-front War and Nuclear Attacks in East Asia," *Atlantic Council Report* (2023), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/.; Markus V. Garlauskas, Lauren D. Gilbert, and Kyoko Imai, "A Rising Nuclear Double-threat in East Asia: Insights From Our Guardian Tiger I and Ii Tabletop Exercises," (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, May 2025).; Bee Yun Jo, "Deterrence Without Borders: The Taiwan Question in ROK-US Extended Deterrence," (Albuquerque, NM: Sandia National Laboratories, September 2025).

circumstances, China would be forced to face a two-front war that would consequently undermine its efforts to take Taiwan. In the case of an unintentional simultaneous contingency, however, the situation could chaotically escalate into a constellation of scenarios due to misinterpretation, misjudgment, and miscommunication. As a result, states would react in an improvised manner beyond their planned scope of operations and deterrence measures, leading to a constellation of scenarios that leads to full-scale wars.

3.3. Implications

Simultaneous contingencies, whether intentional or unintentional, would undoubtedly have diabolical implications for regional security. Given that it is essentially two wars taking place concurrently, the most obvious would be mass destruction and casualties for states in the region. Making matters worse, there are concerns that the US and other partners may not be able to respond and mobilize their forces to both theatres in a timely manner, thereby worsening the damages to Japan, the ROK, and Taiwan.

The other major problem is the probable exhaustion of capacity for the US, Japan, the ROK, Taiwan, and other allies and partners. Given the complexity and scale of the opponent's forces and the conflicts that would ensue, the demands to deal with them are likely to go far beyond the capacity of the allies and like-minded states combined.

4. DEMAND FOR JOINT OPERATIONS READINESS

For Japan, the growing military threats posed by China, North Korea, and Russia, as well as the persistent tensions heightened by gray-zone situations, require sharper and stronger defense strategies and readiness. At the same time, these problems are compounded by Japan's chronic shortages in both human and fiscal resources, requiring more efficient means of maximizing the JSDF's readiness. The 2022 NSS, NDS, and DBP represent a significant step forward, focusing on seven capabilities including: "stand-off defense capabilities," "integrated air and missile defense capabilities," "unmanned defense capabilities," "cross-domain operation capabilities," "command and control and intelligence-related functions," "mobile deployment capabilities and civil protection," and "sustainability and resiliency."[14]

Among the seven agendas, discussions on aspects such as counterstrike capabilities and more offensive operations have gained much attention due to the distinct changes from the minimalist and self-defense-oriented posture imposed by Article 9 of the constitution.[15] Yet while capabilities such as counterstrike are undoubtedly important in enhancing Japan's and the Japan-US alliance's defense and deterrence abilities, they have overshadowed the more critical structure and processes that facilitate and execute the operations. Given the diversification of warfare domains and the simultaneous, multifaceted threats, there is a pressing demand for Japan to significantly enhance its readiness for cross-domain operations.

4.1. Rationales for Cross-Domain and Joint Operations

For Japan, joint operational readiness is critical to seamlessly deter and respond to fluid circumstances and multi-domain challenges, and to execute cross-domain operations. Despite the major advancements in the JSDF's readiness over the past few decades, the level of joint operations readiness has been nascent. For decades, joint operations were carried out via temporary joint task forces that were set up when contingencies occurred (albeit natural disasters). The problem here is that joint operations readiness and the joint command and control system are likely to be absent when gray-zone situations are taking place, undermining the JSDF's ability to deter escalation and aggression.

Establishing a joint command system is also vital to shaping the readiness of the JSDF. For decades, Japan's defense planning has largely focused on patching together the readiness agendas of the three branches, which often led to inefficiencies and disconnects. Thus, by establishing a joint system, Japan will be able to discipline itself to pursue its defense planning based on joint readiness agendas. Such a framework will prove to be critical not only in sharpening and strengthening the force's structural and operational readiness, but also in making the most of its limited resources.

4.2. Developments

Despite the need for joint operations readiness, the developments in Japan have been incremental. The Joint Staff Council in 1954 merely convened discussions among the three branches and fell far short of having any joint command functions. The lack of joint functions stemmed from not only political fears over the loss of civilian control, but also the acute cleavages among the branches over operational concepts and doctrines, as well as fears of breaches over the loss of their institutional

[14] Government of Japan, "National Security Strategy of Japan."; Japan Ministry of Defense, "National Defense Strategy."; Japan Ministry of Defense, "Defense Buildup Program."

[15] See: Masashi Murano, "Building Japan's Counterstrike Capability: Technical, Temporal and Political Challenges," *United States Studies Centre Brief* (25 March 2024), https://www.ussc.edu.au/building-japan-s-counterstrike-capability-technical-temporal-and-political-challenges.

identity and even existence.[16] Naturally, similar problems existed in many other states, where inter-branch politics undermined the momentum toward joint command systems and readiness.[17] Yet in the case of Japan, the problems were particularly pronounced, as the JSDF was still in its infancy, leading the three branches to pursue stove-piped, platform-centric developments with minimal integration

As time progressed, the need for a joint command continued to grow, as the JSDF was called on to deal with not only defense emergencies but also natural disasters. The problems were not simply about the increasing rate of response measures and mobilizations by the JSDF, but the fact that the Joint Staff was overburdened and overstretched, having both consulted the Prime Minister and Minister of Defense while also managing the JSDF's operations. Voices for a joint command system began to emerge in the 2000s, suggesting that a permanent joint command institution would be more effective than a temporary joint task force established on a per-crisis basis.

Despite the growing calls for a joint command system, there was little progress in defense strategies and plans during the 2010s. At most, the 2013 and 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines vowed to enhance jointness and integration within the JSDF for multi- and cross-domain operations, with no developments on establishing a permanent joint command structure. Yet the NDS and DBP issued in December 2022 stated that a joint command would be established to "build a system capable of seamlessly conducting cross-domain operations at all stages from peacetime to contingency."[18] Then, in September 2023, the Ministry of Defense announced that a "Permanent Joint Headquarters" would be established, followed by amendments to the Self-Defense Forces Law and Ministry of Defense Establishment Law in February 2024 to create the legal framework for its establishment. Then, in March 2025, JJOC was established, staffed with 240 personnel and headed by Lieutenant General Kenichiro Nagumo of the JASDF.

4.3. Prospects and Issues

The establishment of JJOC is, without a doubt, a major step forward for Japan. Together with the JSO, JJOC will allow Japan to pursue its defense planning in a more coherent, contextualized, and efficient manner, consequently leading to greater readiness. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that Japan and the JSDF are still in their infant stages of joint operations readiness, meaning that there are several prospects and issues going forward.

First, there is much to be seen in how the JSDF structures the command and control of its joint operations readiness. While the JJOC will serve as the central command, the JSDF will also need to establish subordinate joint commands to effectively undertake its operations, including a headquarters overseeing all affiliated units; geographic commands tasked with specific areas of responsibility; and functional commands to carry out particular tasks. Naturally, the type of joint command and control structure would vary depending on the size and structure of the forces, but also the nature of their operations.[19]

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[16] Akihiro Sadoh, *jieitai shiron: Sei-Kan-Gun-Min no 60-nen [Historical Studies on the JSDF: 60 Years of Governance, Bureaucracy, Military, Public]* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2014). p. 99.
[17] Elinor C. Sloan, *Modern Military Strategy: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2017). p. 121.; Williamson Murray, "The Evolution of Joint Warfare," *Joint Force Quarterly* 31 (Summer 2002). p. 33.
[18] Japan Ministry of Defense, "National Defense Strategy."; Japan Ministry of Defense, "Defense Buildup Program."
[19] For example, the US currently has 11 combatant commands (CCMD), with seven geographic commands (Africa, Central, European, Indo-Pacific, Northern, Southern, Space) and four functional commands (Cyber, Special Operations, Strategic, Transportation). China has five theater commands (Central, Eastern, Northern, Southern, Western). See: Edward J. Drea et al., *History of the Unified Command Plan 1946-2012* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, 2013).; Andrew Feickert, "The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2013).; Anthony H. Cordesman and Joseph Kendall, "Chinese Military Organization," in *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2016* (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2016).

For the JSDF, establishing geographic commands would allow them to operate in accordance with the needs and conditions of specific theatres. Currently, each of the JSDF branches operates in five zones of different locations, but these could be realigned into several theatres. Functional commands will also be vital to sharpen readiness for operations that work across and facilitate the geography-focused operations. Currently, the JSDF has the Cyber Defense Command, the Intelligence Security Command, and has also established the Maritime Transport Unit in March 2025, which could be expanded into a broader Transportation Command to include air and rail transportation. Moreover, Japan could consider the establishment of a Missile Defense Command to oversee integrated air and missile defense.

Second, the JSDF will also need to shape and implement its operations and readiness. Formulating the joint operations concepts and doctrines will be complex, given the constantly changing nature of the threats and modern warfare. Against this backdrop, much will come down to how the JSDF innovatively designs operations that allow them to effectively operate under disadvantageous conditions. While there are various options, one key element would be asymmetric operations and tactics to disrupt the opponent's operations and readiness.

The problem, however, is that the service branches have different interpretations and perceptions of how joint operations should be carried out. Such problems come not only from inter-branch rivalries and contrasting organizational cultures but also from the inherently different nature of their operational and tactical functions. Thus, even though the JSDF has made some progress, integrating the operations and readiness will still require much more effort due to the deep divides among the JSDF that have been inherited for decades. As one article correctly warns, "all Services must coordinate divestiture of mission sets to ensure coverage of required capability in the joint force."[20] Yet achieving this is only made possible if the service branches think first about the joint operations rather than simply trying to connect their capabilities and operations.

The other challenge is how joint operations will be instilled at the tactical levels. The key approach here would be to conform to the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) framework. For doctrines, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff issues the "JP series" that consists of various hierarchically organized doctrines that cover various aspects related to joint forces, operations, and function. Although the scale of the US forces and operations are far bigger than those of the JSDF, Tokyo will still need to formulate its own DOTMLPF model and family of doctrines to shape the force's joint operations and integrate its readiness.

Third, much also rests on how Japan will implement and translate the joint operations doctrines into readiness. Shaping and planning joint operations readiness is a challenge in itself, but implementing and operationalizing them will prove to be harder. Obviously, the JJOC and JSO will need to evaluate, plan, and implement the joint operations doctrines and readiness. Moreover, on top of shaping the right structural and procedural mechanisms to facilitate joint operations readiness, the JJOC and JSO will also need to have an adequate level of adaptability and flexibility given the fluid nature of the regional security environment and evolution of modern warfare.[21] Failure to do so will run the risk of undermining the readiness needed to deal with the threats, but also paralyze the defense planning system.

[20] Curt Butler, Phillip Henrikson, Lisa Reyn Mann, and Palmer Roberts, "Beyond a Credible Deterrent: Optimizing the Joint Force for Great Power Competition," *Joint Force Quarterly* 108 (Jan 2023). p. 57.

[21] Thomas Crosbie, for instance, correctly warns that while joint operations and functions are a "coherent framework," they are also a "paradox of stability and change" that require constant revisions and updates. See: Thomas Crosbie, "Getting the Joint Functions Right," ibid.94 (July 2019). p. 97.

5. PROSPECTS AND ISSUES FOR THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE

Since the 2010s, Japan and the US have taken significant steps to upgrade the strategies and readiness of the alliance, answering many of the demands made by both governments and interlocutors.[22] In large part, the advancements stem from Japan's efforts to sharpen and strengthen its security strategies and the JSDF's readiness. But much of the improvement also comes from the agreements and policies that have upgraded the partnership and its functions. In April 2015, the two countries signed the revised Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation that vowed greater coordination in the land, maritime, air, cyber, and outer space domains.[23] Further developments followed in 2015 with the passing of the "Legislation for Peace and Security" that allowed Japan to better deal with gray-zone situations while also partially exercising the right of collective self-defense. Combined with the 2022 NSS, NDS, and DBP – including the JSDF's joint operations readiness, there is little doubt that the Japan-US alliance will be significantly strengthened going forward. At the same time, however, there are several issues that still need to be resolved to keep pace with the constant developments in the strategies, readiness, and activities of China, North Korea, and Russia.

5.1. Prospects

The establishment of JJOC and efforts to enhance joint operations readiness will directly and indirectly enhance the Japan-US alliance by nurturing and sustaining the necessary readiness to deter and defend against threats and contingencies, including gray-zone contingencies.

First, there will be greater structural and procedural cohesion between Japan and the US. To match JJOC, the US is moving to upgrade and integrate the USFJ into a joint command-and-control system. While falling short of a combined command like the US and the ROK, the parallel but interconnected chains of command between Japan and the US will nonetheless be critical not only for enhancing coordination and interoperability but also for planning combined and coordinated operations. Moreover, the US also established the JJOC Cooperation Team in March 2025 to serve as a liaison between JJOC and USFJ. In addition, greater exchanges can be anticipated, with more personnel exchanges and mutual dispatchment of liaison officers to improve communications and coordination not just between the respective commands but also between subordinate units.

Second, dual joint commands will significantly help define, plan, and operationalize combined and coordinated missions. These missions include but are not limited to integrated air and missile defense; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; logistics and transportation; cyber defense; maritime security; counterstrike; amphibious operations; fire support; search and rescue; and others. Furthermore, the quality of training and exercises for cross-domain operations will also likely improve. While Japan and the US have increased their combined training and exercises in recent years that simulate operations in all domains, greater jointness in both forces will allow them to sharpen the quality and lethality.

Third, enhanced coordination and integration will also allow Japan and the US to link with other allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, namely Australia, ROK, India, selected Southeast Asian and Pacific Island states, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Taiwan, and others. Given that many of these states have also worked to establish and improve joint operations readiness, they should establish an expanded readiness network that takes advantage of one another's strengths while compensating for any weaknesses. Undertaking the above will enable the establishment of an

[22] For examples, see: Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia," (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2012).; Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: An Equal Alliance with a Global Agenda," (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2020).
[23] Japan Ministry of Defense, "The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation," (Tokyo: Japan: Japan Ministry of Defense, 27 April 2015).

integrated and networked kill-web that could flexibly deter and respond to the complex, fluid, multifaceted, and concurrent nature of the threats and circumstances in the Indo-Pacific region – especially the risks of simultaneous contingencies.

5.2. Challenges

Despite the developments and prospects for coordinated joint operations readiness, Japan and the US face several challenges in actualizing their potential.

First, the level of strategic coordination and clarity is showing some fragility. Although the Japan-US alliance was strong under the Abe-Trump and Kishida-Biden administrations, the strategic intentions and transactional nature of the second Trump administration have raised questions for the alliance. Indeed, Tokyo and Washington regularly communicate and exchange via various summits and dialogues, including the Security Consultative Committee and the Extended Deterrence Dialogue. Still, there are occasions where there is a lack of clarity over mutual expectations, perceptions, and visions. In particular, the US has imposed stronger demands for Japan and other US allies to clarify their commitment and role in a Taiwan contingency. As Zack Cooper correctly points out, it is difficult for US partners to do so when the US itself is still ambiguous over its own role in a Taiwan scenario.[24] The mutual lack of clarity not only creates disconnects and gaps in expectations, but also undermines assurance and credibility.

Second, there will be limitations in how the JSDF can be mobilized as long as the pacifist constitution and the stringent "three conditions for the 'use of force'" remain in place – despite the "Legislation for Peace and Security" that came into effect in 2016. Above all, the high political and legal barriers impede smooth transition from law enforcement to defense operations, creating exploitable vulnerabilities for aggressors to take decisive action in the initial phases of conflict. Constraints are also seen with regard to working with allies and partners, where the right to exercise collective self-defense is still partial and highly conditional compared to other states.[25] Thus, even with greater joint operations readiness and improved coordination and integration with the US and other partners, actualization of the potential will remain partial until major political and legal reforms take place.

Third, with the establishment and operationalization of integrated joint systems, Japan and the US will need to define their specific operations and missions. Even though much of the work may already be done, Japan and the US may encounter new options and issues as the joint systems mature, leading to updates and refinements. There may also be challenges resulting from overlaps or inefficient combinations caused by the pursuit of capabilities that may strengthen one state but not the overall alliance. For instance, while the developments in Japan's counterstrike capabilities are essential, Tokyo would play more vital roles in asymmetric operations in the maritime domain, such as mine and submarine warfare, to deny the opponent's maneuvers.

Fourth, there are outstanding issues in interoperability that need to be resolved to properly connect the joint operations of Japan, the US, and other allies and partners.[26] The three dimensions of interoperability — human, procedural, and technical — all need to be connected to ensure seamless coordination and integration.[27] Regarding the technical aspects, platforms, equipment, and

[24] Demetri Sevastopulo, "US Demands to Know What Allies Would Do in Event of War over Taiwan," *Financial Times* (13 July 2025), https://www.ft.com/content/41e272e4-5b25-47ee-807c-2b57c1316fe4.
[25] Jeffrey W. Hornung and Mike M. Mochizuki, "Japan: Still an Exceptional U.S. Ally," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2016).
[26] Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, "Why Interoperability Remains a Hurdle for Trilateral Cooperation on North Korea," *NKPro* (20 September 2023), https://www.nknews.org/pro/why-interoperability-remains-a-hurdle-for-trilateral-cooperation-on-north-korea/.
[27] See: Christopher G. Pernin, Angela O'Mahony, Gene Germanovich, and Matthew Lane, "Chasing Multinational Interoperability: Benefits, Objectives, and Strategies," in *RAND Research Reports* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020).

infrastructures could be bridged with compatible systems, albeit with some configurations needed in defense planning to move toward interchangeability to pool munitions, equipment, and other supplies. Even in the human aspects, further continuing and expanding the mutual dispatchment of personnel would help fill the gaps. Yet much work is needed in the procedural aspects, where despite establishing the connections between the joint commands of Japan and the US, there will be acute gaps due to not only doctrinal differences but also contrasting structures and procedures in the respective forces.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The complex and fluid nature of the Indo-Pacific security environment requires new measures. Considering the persistent gray-zone situations and the risks of simultaneous contingencies, Japan, the US, and other allies and partners will need to sharpen and coordinate their strategies and readiness for cross-domain operations to deter their opponents and respond to escalations. Going forward, several recommendations could be considered.

First, Japan and the US, along with other allies and partners, must **enhance their readiness for all spectrums of conflict in a cross-domain manner**, including gray-zone situations that could escalate into hot conflicts. Responding to every provocation will cause exhaustion and is neither feasible nor necessary. Yet building and sustaining the right level of readiness; shaping strategic, operational, and tactical doctrines; as well as defining the rules of engagement to effectively execute missions will make Japan, the US, and other allies and partners more effective in deterring and defending against attacks and invasions, as well as incidental escalation. To this end, Japan, the US, and other allies and partners need to enhance their coordination and cooperation in both defense and law enforcement, as well as improving interoperability and interchangeability.

Second, **joint operations should function as the filter to Japan's defense planning** to allow more comprehensive and cohesive plans and operationalization of readiness. Indeed, not all operations and missions may use multiple branches. Yet, a joint-based approach to defense planning will enable better ways of distinguishing the capabilities and roles of the individual services. In the alliance context, joint operations-based planning will also need to take into consideration readiness that enhances the alliance without creating redundancies and surpluses. While this will involve reformulating the JSDF's operations and mission sets, it will nonetheless sharpen its readiness to maximize efficiency.

Third, **the JSDF should establish geographical and functional joint commands subordinate to JJOC** to contextualize the operations. Geographical joint commands could be established along the lines of the three branches' districts, which broadly overlap with one another. Functional joint commands for particular operations should also be expanded. On top of the current Cyber Defense Command currently reporting to JJOC, the Intelligence Security Command could be added, the Maritime Transport Unit could be expanded into a Transportation Command to operate all transport modes, and a Missile Defense Command could also be considered.

Fourth, **further upgrades are needed in education and training for joint operations** – both within the JSDF and between Japan and the US. While reconfigurations are underway at the higher levels of command and control, real joint operations readiness can only be attained when it is properly instilled at the tactical levels. Thus, JSDF and USFJ must quantitatively and qualitatively increase education and training regimes with joint operations as the core ethos. Undertaking the above will not only enhance fluency, but also interoperability between Japan, the US, and other allies and partners.

While the above recommendations are by no means easy, they are nonetheless essential in enhancing cross-domain deterrence against the anti-status quo ambitions of China, North Korea, and Russia. Japan's efforts to advance joint operations readiness is a major step forward not only for the defense of the nation, but also for the Japan-US alliance and other partnerships to ensure security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

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