

## **US-Japan Defense Guidelines – well done, but only half done** by Grant Newsham

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The US-Japan Defense Guidelines agreed to in April are well written and a timely nod to reality. Japan's implicit promise to operate more closely with – and possibly even fight alongside – US forces injects a dose of equality into the bilateral relationship that potentially reduces Japan's over-dependence on the United States and charges of 'free-riding' that threaten the relationship.

The negotiators deserve a moment of self-congratulation, but one might ask, 'what now?' An unnamed Japanese official suggested there's no need to worry about difficult things like hardware and money since improved personal relationships between US and Japanese officers will strengthen the defense relationship.

Japanese officialdom has long preferred doing (and spending) the bare minimum for the services of the world's most powerful military. However, cordial relationships don't prevent or win wars. The Guidelines offer a rare opportunity to reshape US-Japan defense capabilities in practical terms and set precedents that allow even more progress in the future.

Prime Minister Abe did jump the gun in making a political commitment to the United States before passing corresponding legislation in the Diet. Although his security bills are expected to pass, it has proven far more contentious than he expected. Taking advantage of the Guidelines will require a deft hand, clear explanations to the Japanese public, and moving quickly.

### **Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM)**

The Guidelines describe an ACM as the linking mechanism for improved defense ties, but don't explain what it will look like. Hopefully, this will be more than a phone-tree list at US and Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) headquarters. JSDF and US forces can't just 'wing it' in the event of trouble – as happened during *Operation Tomodachi* (the response to the March 11, 2011 triple disaster) with near disastrous results.

One option is a 'PACOM forward' in Tokyo with the mission of creating genuine operational linkages between US and Japanese forces. 'PACOM forward' would also be powerful evidence of commitment – both to Japan and the Indo-Pacific writ large. Japan also needs a counterpart organization, such as a Joint Force Headquarters.

Regardless of the ACM's ultimate form, the test will be whether it makes US and JSDF forces better able to operate

together, and is not merely a place to pass messages and arrange key-leader visits.

### **US-Japan interoperability and integration**

The Guidelines call for a more integrated relationship between the two nations' militaries. The US Navy and the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) have been integrated for the last 50 years and show what's possible. Other services have too often operated in parallel, however, conducting an exercise routine in which both sides do their own thing followed by barbecues at which the forces are declared best of friends.

To better integrate, US-Japan forces need to plan like it matters – i.e., they are going to operate as one force – for a wider range of regional contingencies. Beyond general promises of support, US commanders need to be certain JSDF will provide specific resources and vice versa.

Besides planning, get out and do fully integrated joint operations. USN and MSDF again show how to do this – typified last fall when a Japanese destroyer seamlessly linked up with a 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet squadron in SE Asia. Do more of this. In particular, increased joint US-Japan patrols and exercises in the East China Sea and South China Sea – including ground and air forces – will give more substance to the relationship and have operational benefits, not to mention the political and deterrent effects of US and Japanese forces operating together.

Additionally, capitalize on Japan's nascent amphibious capability and insert a Japanese amphibious ship with GSDF embarked into a 31<sup>st</sup> MEU/ARG patrol. Linked amphibious forces can be used for HA/DR training and actual humanitarian contingencies. Nothing builds a military relationship like shared operational experience and the joint nature of amphibious operations is the equivalent of 'cross fit' training, exercising sea, ground, and air capabilities simultaneously. An 'amphibious RIMPAC' exercise in the vicinity of Guam is also a useful longer term objective.

As the Guidelines recommend, look beyond the bilateral relationship. US forces and JSDF working together with partner nations such as Australia, India, Vietnam, ASEAN states, and others improves capabilities and operational relationships. The *Talisman Sabre* exercise is a good start. The *Malabar* exercises involving (for now) India, Japan, and the US are another useful opportunity. And one should always remember the political benefits of this sort of multilateral training.

Other areas for practical improvements in line with the Guidelines include:

*Communications.* If you can't talk to each other it's hard to be interoperable or even real allies. JSDF must first fix itself since the JSDF services can barely communicate with each

other. And except for the two navies (as usual), bilateral communications capabilities between US and Japanese forces are astonishingly rudimentary.

*Joint basing.* The Futenma Replacement Facility at Henoko – if it is ever built – should be a joint base – or at least have a permanent GSDF presence. This is in line with the Guidelines’ spirit and will strengthen JSDF relationships with US forces – and have a favorable political effect.

*Joint equipment development.* Such joint development tends to change the way countries and militaries look at each other, especially if done with an eye toward operational benefits rather than just ensuring one’s defense industries get a share of the loot. One attractive opportunity is joint US-Japan cooperation on developing the next generation Amphibious Assault Vehicle.

*Changed mindsets.* As much as anything, changed mindsets are needed. Both sides must see each other as real allies and equals. The Japanese are too often standoffish and should open up fully to the US. Japan might note that these days Americans are as leery of being dragged into Japan’s wars as they are of being entrapped in US conflicts. Meanwhile, Americans need to regard the Japanese as genuine partners, the way they do the Australians, the British, and the Canadians.

### **Japan Spends More**

Any commentary about Japan’s defense needs to stress that Japan must spend more for defense. \$5 billion a year for five years will get things about right. Japan can afford it, and if it won’t spend money it ultimately is not serious unless one believes improved relationships between Japanese and US officers are enough to defend Japanese and US interests in East Asia.

The US and Japanese Guidelines negotiating teams did a fine job. US and Japanese military staffs – and civilian leadership – now need to produce concrete improvements. If a year from now there is little or nothing to show, heads should roll for squandering a golden opportunity.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*