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Allied Against Natural Disaster?

The Need for Exceptional Disaster Relief Policy for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

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Abstract

The U.S. military response to the March 2011 triple disaster, known as Operation TOMODACHI, proved to be a watershed event for the U.S.-Japan alliance by providing needed assistance to Japan's domestic disaster relief efforts, and by demonstrating to the Japanese public the value of hosting U.S. forces in Japan. Owing to lessons learned from the 2011 disaster, U.S.-Japan alliance managers took steps to improve cooperation in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. Significant progress was made through increased exercise participation, institutionalization of disaster relief functions, and establishment of a standing Alliance Coordination Mechanism. However, U.S. military support to Japan Self-Defense Force relief operations following major earthquakes in Kumamoto prefecture in April 2016 revealed lingering deficiencies centered on three things: money, authorities, and process. Failure to remedy those deficiencies contributed to an absence of U.S. military involvement in response to floods and landslides that claimed over two hundred lives and caused billions of yen worth of damage throughout portions of Kyūshū, Honshū, and Shikoku in July 2018. This article brings those deficiencies to light and offers recommendations for rectifying them.

In July 2018, Japan experienced its worst natural disaster since the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Torrential rains caused landslides and floods across western Japan, leaving over a hundred dead, many missing, and billions of yen worth of damage. Over 74,000 Self-Defense Force (SDF), firefighters, police, and Coast Guard members executed relief and recovery operations. Noticeably absent from those operations was U.S. military support--something present in responses to both the triple disaster in 2011 and the Kumamoto earthquakes of 2016. The absence of U.S. military involvement in the July 2018 disaster relief operations reflected lingering gaps in an alliance framework that was meant to incorporate lessons learned from the U.S. military response to the March 2011 triple disaster known as Operation TOMODACHI.

Although the U.S. and Japanese governments made progress institutionalizing the lessons from 3/11, further action is necessary. Unilaterally, the U.S. government maintains a foreign disaster relief policy that is ill-suited for supporting a country that hosts over 100,000 of its defense personnel and family members. Meanwhile, the Japanese government lacks clarity on how best to employ U.S. military support. All the progress made on military-to-military disaster relief cooperation will have little meaning until policymakers in the United States and Japan take coordinated steps towards crafting exceptional disaster relief policy for the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Progress since 3/11

The response to the triple disaster on 3/11 identified the need for the following: (1) preparation for major disasters by conducting bilateral exercises; (2) establishment of guidelines and mechanisms to improve alliance coordination on disaster response; (3) the Japanese government to communicate clear requirements and requests for U.S. support; and (4) the U.S. military to take measured action related to those requests. The intervening seven years have seen much progress based on lessons learned.

Exercises

The U.S. military has been expanding its involvement in national and local disaster relief exercises. Importantly, it steadily increased its participation in Japan's annual large-force disaster relief exercise, "Joint Exercise Rescue," or JXR.¹ It started with U.S. observers and "white cell"² members, and now Headquarters U.S. Forces, Japan and each of the

¹ The hub for the exercise is Japan's Joint Staff Office and the Ministry of Defense, but there are participants from up to 15 other ministries and agencies including the Japan Coast Guard and the Fire and Disaster Management Agency.

² "White cell" exercise participants are not principal players in an exercise, but provide input related to the exercise scenario. In the case of JXR, U.S. white cell members simulate responses and activities from the U.S. government to provide realistic inputs for exercise participants.

component forces (Air Force, Army, Marines, and Navy) engage with Japanese interagency partners in multiple coordination centers throughout Japan. Additionally, prefectures across the country began inviting U.S. military units to join their disaster readiness exercises.³

Guidelines and Mechanisms

At the time of Operation TOMODACHI, there was no institutional framework for disaster relief cooperation between the allies, but this gap was closed with the 2015 Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation.⁴ For the first time in the sixty-plus year history of the security partnership, the United States and Japan formally included domestic and international humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) operations as alliance mission sets. The guidelines also set the stage for the establishment of the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) on November 3, 2015. The new ACM incorporated lessons learned from Operation TOMODACHI, operating as a standing mechanism (meaning no requirement for cabinet-level “activation”) available for use in response to disasters and any other emergencies.⁵

Requests and Measured Action: Real World Response in Kumamoto

In April 2016, a series of earthquakes struck Kumamoto prefecture, causing major damage and leaving tens of thousands without food, water, or electricity. Almost immediately, coordination within the ACM took place, with the Japanese side narrowing the scope of its requests to actionable options and the U.S. side communicating available assets. The product was a swift and effective Japan-led operation through JTF *Chinzei* with U.S. forces providing a measured but meaningful support role in the effort.⁶

Deficiencies

Although the alliance response in Kumamoto was important, it highlighted remaining policy deficiencies in disaster relief cooperation. Those deficiencies come down to three areas: money, authorities, and process.

³ Shizuoka, Wakayama, Kochi, and Miyagi prefectures are just a few that have included U.S. forces in their drills since 3/11.

⁴ Hereafter referred to as the “Defense Guidelines” or simply, “the Guidelines”; available at <http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/20150427--guidelines-for-us-japan-defense-cooperation-final&clean.pdf>.

⁵ For more information on the ACM and its structure, see MOFA, “Dōmei Chōsei Mekanizumu no Kōsei,” <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000108947.pdf>.

⁶ U.S. forces provided C-130s and UC-135s for airlift to regional disaster relief hubs and CV-22s for delivery of assets directly to disaster-affected areas; see the Ministry of Defense’s recap for additional details (<http://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/news/2016/04/17a.html>).

Money

Who finances U.S. military disaster relief operations in Japan? Conventional units are not budgeted for HADR operations. Instead, money for foreign disaster relief falls under the purview of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). However, USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance has a limited budget and prioritizes support for poorer nations. It also uses the military sparingly since military operations are expensive to fund and other organizations are specifically trained and equipped to deal with disaster relief.⁷ Subsequently, the question emerges: should the Japanese government foot the bill?

In Kumamoto, the two countries split the cost, but that solution proved suboptimal. U.S. forces provided 72 hours of support using its standard operating budget and covered the rest through transactions with the SDF using the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA).⁸ This disaster revealed three problems. First, ACSA transactions are expensive. The cost of multi-day operations can exceed millions of dollars in ACSA payments. Second, there was no negotiation of cost beforehand. The U.S. military provided disaster relief services and then essentially handed the Japanese government a non-negotiable invoice. Third, there is the potential for misunderstanding in pledging support only to demand repayment for the costs of providing such support later. Put another way, it comes down to the difference between *aid* and *contracting*. In the end, the “sticker shock” from the costs of U.S. help in Kumamoto and hesitancy to be saddled with a hefty, unnegotiated bill now factor into the Japanese government's decision-making on whether to request U.S. support for disaster relief.

Authorities

As a function of sovereignty, militaries cannot execute disaster relief operations in a foreign country without a formal request. Even when that request comes, established policy dictates that the U.S. Ambassador and USAID are the clearing houses, not the Department of Defense. In lieu of State Department or USAID blessings, the U.S. military must employ a workaround, as it did in Kumamoto. Exercising “immediate response authority,”⁹ the former Pacific Command authorized U.S. forces in Japan to provide up to 72 hours of support before transitioning to ACSA-funded activities. This decision was vetted through the Office of the Secretary of Defense and did not seek exceptional clearance from USAID or the State Department, since no funding would come from either of those organizations.

⁷ When the U.S. military *is* employed, it is typically for capabilities that are not specific to disaster relief; for example, OFDA may utilize military airlift for rapid deployment and delivery of goods to remote locations.

⁸ The Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, or ACSA, is the legal basis for exchange of goods and services between militaries.

⁹ Department of Defense Directive 5100.46 authorizes military commanders to provide life-saving support for 72 hours before requiring further direction from the Department of State/USAID.

The workaround was expedient, but this method is flawed as a model for future disaster relief operations. First, it drives the requirement for Japan to pay for sustained U.S. disaster relief operations. It also has the potential to cause inefficiencies in overall U.S. efforts, especially in situations like 3/11 where USAID and the State Department must play a greater role in response. Finally, ad hoc methods rarely survive changes in administration or personnel. Established policy is necessary.

Process

The established process creates barriers to effective application of U.S. support to Japanese natural disasters. One important question is whether the U.S. government should first provide a menu of actionable options for support, or whether the Japanese government should initiate the process by issuing requests first. Formally, the request is supposed to come before an offer of support, but there are three interrelated reasons why this step is difficult for the Japanese government. First, issuing a request to foreign governments may present the appearance of weak leadership or an inadequate administration. This politicizes the decision and complicates the disaster relief coordination process. Second, the Japanese government will hesitate to issue a request for assistance when it is uncertain of a positive response. For example, Japan will not request airlift from the United States if it turns out there are insufficient U.S. assets available to satisfy that request. Third, the government will hesitate to request support without knowing the cost it must ultimately finance.

Recommendations

At the heart of these three issues is the fact that both countries' existing disaster relief policies are generic—built for third countries, not for a disaster inside Japan, which hosts over 100,000 U.S. military personnel and dependents. There are significant differences between circumstances when U.S. forces *deploy* to a location¹⁰ and when the disaster is in their *host country*. There are differences even among Japan and other host nations because the allies agreed that domestic disaster relief is a function under the Defense Guidelines. Therefore, exceptional policy is necessary to catch up with progress made these past seven years.

United States

The lion's share of responsibility in rectifying these deficiencies falls to the United States government and military. The first step is to clarify the government's policy for support to Japanese domestic disasters. If the government decides that supporting Japanese disasters

¹⁰ Examples include Operation Sahayogi Haat in Nepal in 2015 and Operation Damayan in the Philippines in 2013.

is not a priority, that needs to be clear in its policy designs. In 2011 and 2016, U.S. government organizations believed that action to support Japan was necessary, and if that is still the case, those same organizations must update regulations and directives or produce new ones that are specific to the exceptional circumstances in Japan.

The first issue to resolve is that of money. The best option for solving this problem starts with identifying the most appropriate in-country assets for disaster relief support; e.g. C-130 transport aircraft out of Yokota, HH-60 Search and Rescue Helicopters and P-3 Reconnaissance aircraft from Kadena, CV-22 rotary airlift from Futenma, etc. Once those specific units are identified, it becomes easier to determine the appropriate way ahead for funding disaster relief operations, if necessary. That, in turn, will help shape subsequent policy decisions to ensure not only an appropriate response, but one that does not require delivering an invoice for reimbursement to the Japanese government.

Japan

The Japanese government must recognize the limitations on the U.S. military's role in disaster relief and the realistic options available for employment in disaster scenarios. There are always capabilities that U.S. forces in Japan could provide for disaster relief, and those are codified in the Defense Guidelines: search and rescue, transportation, supply, medical services, incident awareness, etc. The Japanese government should engage its American partners in creating a clear assessment of what in-country U.S. capabilities exist and which would be most helpful to Japan in disaster scenarios. Once that assessment is complete, it can serve as the basis for continued discourse with the U.S. government and for inputs in disaster relief exercises. The key is consistency, feasibility, and a focus on *in-country* U.S. military capabilities.

Alliance

As these unilateral steps are taken, the two governments must engage in policy-level discussions about disaster relief. The three deficiencies--money, authorities, and process--will not be fixed without continued discourse. From there, the two governments can come to an understanding on what types of response are appropriate and actionable, and this will inform real world operations, training exercises, and Japan's future planning for domestic disaster relief.

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