



**SASAKAWA USA**  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# USMC Force Design 2030

*New Deterrence Strategy Views from Japan*

## Abstract

*On Tuesday, August 24, 2021, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted a virtual event, “USMC Force Design 2030: New Deterrence Strategy Views from Japan,” featuring remarks by Lieutenant General Koichi Isobe, Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) (Ret.), who served as the 37th Commander of the Eastern Army from 2013 to 2015. LtGen. Isobe was joined by commentators Lieutenant General Wallace “Chip” Gregson, United States Marine Corps (USMC) (Ret.), who was the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs from 2009 to 2011, and Lieutenant General Lawrence Nicholson, USMC (Ret.), who served as the Commanding General of III Marine Expeditionary Force from 2015 to 2018. LtGen. Isobe provided his valuable insights into how the USMC’s force transformation, with its renewed focus on great power competition and emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region, will influence Japan’s defense policy as it navigates its own critical development period. He emphasized that the JSDF and USMC should expand and deepen their cooperation in the pursuit of a powerful and effective defense posture for the region. To achieve this, both sides will need to align their roles, missions, and capabilities (RMCs) to prepare for varying levels of conflict, from grey zone to direct confrontation of aggression by adversaries.*

*This talk was presented by Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series and was held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community, U.S. military, JSDF, academia, and think tanks, along with former and current leaders of both U.S. and Japanese business and government. Introductory remarks were provided by Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President at Sasakawa USA, who also facilitated the event and moderated the Q&A discussion.*

## Key Features of the U.S. Marine Corps’ Transformation

LtGen. Isobe began his remarks by commending Commandant General David H. Berger’s ironclad resolve and vision for the transformation of the U.S. Marine Corps laid out in [Force Design 2030](#) and in General Berger’s subsequent [“Preparing for the Future”](#) article published in May 2021. LtGen. Isobe stated that this is a historic era of transformation for the USMC. He noted that Japan will take the USMC’s new direction into account as it develops its own national security strategy in response to shifting priorities in the Indo-Pacific, such as protecting freedom of navigation in the Taiwan Strait. LtGen. Isobe then highlighted three points from Force Design 2030 which, from a Japanese perspective, are key to understanding the future of USMC-JSDF cooperation: (1) the growing threat of adversaries’ precision strike capabilities; (2) the future role of the Marine Corps, focusing on deterrence; and (3) the Marine Corps’ “back to basics” return to being the nation’s naval expeditionary force in readiness.

### (1) Addressing the Growing Threat of Precision Strike Capabilities

The first key feature LtGen. Isobe identified from Force Design 2030 was that the USMC recognizes the rapid proliferation of precision strike weapons systems in this current threat environment. While the People’s Liberation Army is not explicitly named in the report, LtGen. Isobe noted that their Intermediate- and Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles, such as the DF-21 and DF-24, endanger U.S. bases in Okinawa and Guam and could hinder the free movement of U.S. maritime forces. These missile systems present an even more tangible danger to the national security of Japan. While political considerations have kept the Japanese Government from formally acknowledging the PLA’s missile capabilities, these weapons systems must be factored into the individual and cooperative defense strategies of the United States and Japan.

### (2) The USMC’s Future Focus on Deterrence

The next point LtGen. Isobe identified was that the changing nature of threats, particularly in the maritime domain, necessitates the Marine Corps’ shift toward focusing on deterrence and de-escalation efforts. He remarked that while the USMC’s role in previous conflicts has included forcible amphibious operations, a smaller, more dispersed, and more survivable force would be better suited to the current anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) environment in the Indo-Pacific. LtGen. Isobe identified a key line from Force Design 2030 which exemplifies this new approach: “We are not designing an across-the-ROMO (Range of Military

Operations) force; but rather, a force intended to prevent major conflict and deter the escalation of conflict within the ROMO.”<sup>1</sup>

### (3) The USMC as the Nation’s Naval Expeditionary Force in Readiness

The final point LtGen. Isobe highlighted was that the Marine Corps appears to be “going back to basics” in its areas of employment. He predicted that the Marine Corps will be spending less time in inland environments, and will instead pivot to the maritime domain, embracing its original role as the United States’ naval expeditionary force in readiness. In relation to Japan, this would translate into supporting naval and joint forces by ensuring their freedom of navigation in the vicinity of the First Island Chain.

## Implications for Japan’s Security Policy

After identifying these key features of the USMC’s transformation, LtGen. Isobe described two implications Japan will face as it adapts its own national security policy in response to these changes outlined in Force Design 2030.

The first implication LtGen. Isobe pointed out was that as the USMC shifts its focus to deterrence activities, Japan will likewise have to adopt a comprehensive deterrence policy which places it at the same level of readiness as its ally. The USMC’s new deterrence posture aims to strengthen the United States’ position in the great power competition with China by pursuing measures which curtail PRC aggression at an early stage before it develops into a full-fledged military conflict. Since the PLA’s missile reach extends not only to the Southwest Islands but also mainland Japan, deterring the outbreak of conflict is of critical importance to Japan’s national security. LtGen. Isobe advised that Japan’s leaders should focus on crafting a deterrence strategy which addresses Chinese aggression at all levels of potential conflict, including grey zone scenarios, remote island scenarios, an armed conflict scenario, and nuclear threats. This way, both the United States and Japan will be strategically prepared to deter and de-escalate conflicts in various environments and scenarios.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Force Design 2030,” *United States Marine Corps*, March 2020, page 4, <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460>

Secondly, if the United States and Japan are to achieve an effective and comprehensive deterrence front, then both countries should increase their channels of communication and expand cooperative efforts. LtGen. Isobe drew attention to two areas for increased cooperation: the alignment of each military’s respective RMCs, and the formation of a bilateral command and control relationship.

## (1) Alignment of Respective RMCs

As opportunities for increased partnership and joint activities arise, it is critical for U.S. and Japanese forces to discuss in advance what role each respective military will play. If the security environment deteriorates in and around the First Island Chain—which includes Japan’s mainland, Okinawa and the other Southwestern Islands, Taiwan, and the Philippines—the sheer size and complexity of geography in this region will require cooperation to restore stability. In such a case, the USMC’s Stand-in-Forces would presumably operate side-by-side with the JSDF’s Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB) and other units. While cooperative efforts may not be necessary in every scenario, close communication between the United States and Japan will continue to be essential to ensure clear understanding of when cooperation will be expected.

LtGen. Isobe continued by emphasizing that seamless cooperation between these forces will be achieved by investing in joint and combined C5ISR-T (Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Targeting). Moving forward, RMC discussions can be deepened within the current Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation Guidelines developed in 2015. Alternatively, LtGen. Isobe suggested that these Guidelines could be revised to adapt to emerging security threats in the region.

## (2) Bilateral Command and Control Relationship

In addition to aligning RMCs, LtGen. Isobe stated that both U.S. and Japanese forces should begin to formulate command and control relationships. He suggested that the JSDF could establish a standing Joint Headquarters which could operate collaboratively with U.S. INDOPACM Headquarters. He cited his personal experiences from being the Director J-5, Japan Joint Staff, during Operation Tomodachi to address the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, stating that the exemplary collaboration of U.S. and Japanese forces during this operation solidified his confidence in the success of a permanent Joint Headquarters.

On the American side, LtGen. Isobe suggested that INDOPACOM Headquarters might consider revising its command and control structure in East Asia so that the United States and Japan can conduct more well-coordinated and timely bilateral operations. He noted that Japan and the United States face similar issues in their command and control structures. He noted from a professional military perspective, it is more effective to have a true combined force in which a single commander conducts military operations among multiple militaries. Yet Japan and the United States continue to conduct bilateral operations within their respective chains of command. LtGen. Isobe stated that if the U.S. and Japan continue operating in this fashion, both sides must have detailed and thoughtful discussions on how commanders will delegate authority and how information is shared. He added that targeting must be synchronized in the USMC's Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) and the JSDF's territorial defense operations.

LtGen. Isobe concluded his remarks by expressing his deep appreciation to the Marine Corps for how they have supported the development of the JSDF Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade. He added that as Japan and the United States face a rising communist China and its formidable military, our forces must work together to deter the CCP's ambitious intentions.

## Commentary by LtGen Gregson

*LtGen Gregson's views are his own and he does not speak for the USMC or any other part of the U.S. government.*

LtGen Chip Gregson (USMC, Ret.) began by saying that LtGen. Isobe's analysis provides a solid foundation for the United States to increase the deterrent strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance and to strengthen the combat power of our collective forces. He pointed out that East Asia is first and foremost a maritime theater. Since the Korean War, the United States has relied on its Navy as the foundation of its successes and the salvation of its disasters in East Asia. With a strong naval presence, the United States was able to project power inland and could provide land forces with logistics and fire support. However, LtGen Gregson warned that the situation in the region has shifted. The United States now faces a reality in which its preponderance over the seas can no longer be taken for granted. China's industrial base supplies the country with military material which supplements its natural advantage of having a vast geographic sanctuary for ground-based weapons. LtGen Gregson affirmed that in this new security environment, U.S. forces on land cannot remain passive in a fight for control of the seas.

LtGen Gregson continued by stating that in the East Asian maritime theater, the USMC would be advised to adapt its amphibious operations to smaller units which can navigate the waters in and around the First Island Chain rapidly and dexterously. He added that in the waters surrounding Japan, the USMC’s maneuvers must be integrated closely with air and surface forces to maintain operational tempo. In this environment, the axiom “shoot, move, and communicate” will gain new importance as a guiding principle for fully integrating joint operations.

LtGen Gregson followed with a strong assertion that American bases in Japan will not be closed. He noted that the significance of these bases extends far beyond their tactical importance, remarking that “they make a profound political statement long before they make a military statement.” Of course, the practical role of these bases should not be understated. They are a critical deployment point which allows U.S. forces to move quickly in defense of our friends and allies. He concluded by stating that to maintain its agility, mobility, and strength, the United States should harden its defense of American and Japanese military bases in Japan. He suggested that the Israeli Iron Dome defense system exemplifies the kind of measures which should be considered.

## Commentary by LtGen Nicholson

Next, LtGen Lawrence Nicholson (USMC, Ret.) provided his response to the remarks by LtGen. Isobe and LtGen Gregson. He underscored the significance of the USMC’s ongoing transformation in pursuit of multidomain EABO, which he called the most significant and profound change to occur in the Marine Corps in the last century.

LtGen Nicholson noted that we should expect to see the USMC deeply engage with space and cyber assets, which are being integrated into their operations at every level. He added that today’s commanders are engaging in entirely new ways to protect resources, move assets, and provide logistics within a complex and evolving security environment. Regarding the USMC’s cooperative efforts, he stated that joint training and exercises have always been an important demonstration of the United States’ commitment to fostering robust, dynamic relationships with its partners and allies. He reminded that in the current threat environment, joint exercises cannot be superficial demonstrations of camaraderie. Joint training and exercises need to involve substantive contingency planning discussions, and should include the best and brightest from Tokyo, D.C., Hawaii, and even Sydney so that partners can become familiar with each other’s respective

strengths and vulnerabilities. He suggested that tabletop exercises should be conducted often to prepare leaders to address a variety of possible contingencies.

LtGen Nicholson concluded his remarks by emphasizing the importance of developing familiarity between Japanese and United States forces. He stated that building strong communication channels and creating opportunities for substantive cooperation in training and planning exercises will be key to ensuring the success of U.S.-Japan bilateral defense efforts.

## Q&A Discussion

### JSDF Engagement in Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO)

The Q&A discussion began with a question from Dr. Mike Mochizuki, who holds the Japan-U.S. Relations Chair at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University. Dr. Mochizuki noted that LtGen. Isobe made a distinction between the USMC EABO concept and the JSDF's focus on Japan's territorial defense. He then asked whether it is desirable for the JSDF, especially the ARDB, to engage in EABO-like operations, considering that direct threats to Japanese security are more likely to arise from regional contingencies like Taiwan rather than from isolated acts of aggression in Japanese territory.

LtGen. Isobe responded by stating that although he concurred with Dr. Mochizuki in his views that the regional contingency scenario like Taiwan is more likely than isolated acts of aggression in Japanese territory, he stated the reason why he made a distinction on Japan's territorial defense was that the JSDF should consider the protection of civilian people residing in the islands, and if necessary, the JSDF should also provide support for civilians' evacuation, in conjunction with the local government's efforts. Only after this is achieved can the JSDF move on to conduct EABO-like operations with U.S. forces. He noted that civil protection is critically important for Japan, especially in Okinawa due to its historical backgrounds.

### Modernizing U.S. Bases in Japan

The next question came from Colonel Thomas Wood, who serves as the G-5 Plans Officer of Marine Corps Installations Pacific. Colonel Wood asked how U.S. bases in Japan should be modernized to support adversity deterrence and promote allied cooperation below the threshold of conflict.

LtGen. Isobe affirmed the importance of these bases and suggested that considering the threat of missile attacks, U.S. military installations in Okinawa and on the mainland should be fortified to be resilient to missile strikes. LtGen Gregson followed by drawing attention to a recommendation from an article Colonel Wood published through the U.S. Naval Institute with Brigadier General William Bowers (USMC), Commanding General of Marine Corps Installations Pacific (MCIPAC), in which the authors argued for tactical, operational, and political hardening of the United States’ Indo-Pacific military installations. LtGen Gregson noted that while the political aspect of solidifying integrated bases presents challenges in Japan, this action would benefit both countries by making the alliance more visible to partners and adversaries alike. He added that the United States and Japan should pursue a cost-effective missile defense system to be deployed from bases. Measures should also be taken to cooperatively prepare for addressing grey zone conflicts and political warfare tactics which fall below the threshold of kinetic warfare. LtGen Nicholson echoed LtGen Gregson’s remark that closer cooperation at the U.S. bases in Japan will make a strong political statement about the state of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Okinawa, with its advantageous position in the Southwest Island region, would benefit from greater cooperation and collaboration in training.

## Coordination Between the JMSDF and U.S. Navy

Next came a question from Admiral Robert Natter (U.S. Navy, Ret.), who asked whether the JMSDF and U.S. Pacific Fleet (specifically the Seventh Fleet) are actively supporting and planning for the close coordination and mutual support required to successfully defend the First Island Chain and the Japanese homeland.

LtGen. Isobe remarked that based on his experiences observing exercises between the JMSDF and the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the close coordination that is already occurring is contributing toward Japan’s defense of its home territory and the First Island Chain. He stated that while he is not so familiar with the details of the Navy-to-Navy relationship between the United States and Japan, his impression is that relations are maintained well by both sides. LtGen Gregson added that as an outside observer of the JMSDF-Pacific Fleet relationship, he believes that these two forces have achieved the greatest level of interoperability of all the service components of the U.S.-Japan alliance. He noted that the U.S. Army and Ground Self Defense Force do share technical interoperability, as do the countries’ respective Air Forces. However, he cautioned that the recent increased cost of modernizing Japan’s F-15 fleet could push Japan to consider abandoning the effort, which would be a setback for both countries’ cooperative defense.



LtGen Nicholson offered a conclusion by stating that each day U.S. and Japanese forces are not working and training together is an opportunity lost. Encouraging both countries to capitalize on opportunities for cooperative planning and exercises, he even suggested that Australian forces could join the United States and Japan in their scenario planning efforts to achieve a more comprehensive and informed defense strategy.

## Political Obstacles to Force Design 2030

The final question came from Dr. Akimoto, who asked what kinds of domestic political obstacles Japan and the United States might face in responding to the changes laid out in Force Design 2030.

From the American perspective, LtGen Gregson stated that entering Fiscal Year 2022 with a budget under continuing resolution is a political obstacle. Continuing resolutions only delay the implementation of the United States' defense budget, which he called a gift to our adversaries. LtGen Nicholson drew attention to one of the major criticisms directed at Force Design 2030, which is that it aims to alter the legacy role of the Marine Corps. In addition, he noted that others have raised the concern that Force Design 2030 focuses too narrowly on the Pacific theater. LtGen Nicholson addressed these criticisms by pointing out that even with the pivot toward the Pacific, the United States has recently been able to move Marines fairly seamlessly into other regions, most recently in Kabul and Haiti. He concluded by saying that Commandant General Berger is right on target in preparing the nation to address its most existential threat.

LtGen. Isobe then brought up a criticism which has been raised by some Japanese media in response to the USMC plans for transformation: If the Marine Corps is shifting to become a smaller, more dispersed, mobile, and survivable force, then why does Japan need to continue hosting U.S. military installations in Okinawa? While these bases provide a great strategic and tactical advantage to the United States and Japan as they pursue cooperative defense measures in the Indo-Pacific, the benefits of the bases are less apparent to civilians whose concerns include the bases' financial cost and their impact on local communities. LtGen. Isobe stated that as the transformations in Force Design 2030 are implemented, both the United States and Japan need to consider how they will explain to the public the continued importance of these bases in supporting Japan's national defense and regional security strategies.

Dr. Akimoto closed the event by thanking LtGen. Isobe, LtGen Nicholson, and LtGen Gregson for their insightful analyses. He added that at this critical point

in time for USMC development, stability and strong political leadership in Japan will be essential for achieving the level of cooperation and coordination proposed in Force Design 2030. Dr. Akimoto expressed regret that there was not enough time to answer the high volume of questions submitted during the Q&A session but encouraged attendees to view the recording and summary of a similar event hosted by Sasakawa USA last summer, “[New Force Design for the Marine Corps and its Implications to the U.S.-Japan Alliance](#),” which featured remarks by LtGen Gregson and commentary from LtGen Nicholson and LtGen. Koichiro Bansho (JGSDF, Ret.). Finally, he thanked LtGen Nicholson for his ongoing efforts coordinating between Washington and Kabul to help Afghan friends and partners seeking safety.

---

*Sasakawa USA is grateful to LtGen. Koichi Isobe, Lt. General Wallace “Chip” Gregson, Lt. General Lawrence Nicholson, the Q&A participants, and attendees for their insightful discussion on the U.S. Marine Corps’ Force Design 2030 and the future of U.S.-Japan cooperative deterrence efforts.*

*The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.*

*For more information about Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series, click [here](#).*

---