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USMC Force Design 2030:

An Opportunity for a New Deterrence Strategy in Japan

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Lieutenant General Isobe's views are his own and he does not speak for the JGSDF or any other part of the government of Japan.

The threat environment in East Asia is undergoing significant changes, with the Cross-Strait situation increasingly becoming a hot spot. On July 1, in President Xi Jinping's speech at the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Centennial Anniversary, he clearly said, "Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the CCP."¹ The U.S. Marine Corps Force Design 2030 outlines response to shifting dynamics in the region and globally. This force transformation has the potential to influence Japan's defense policy as Japan enters a critical time for its own transformation of its national security strategy and policies. In Force Design 2030, the following three themes are pertinent from the Japanese security perspective:

- Addressing the growing threat of precision strike capabilities,
- Shifting the USMC's focus to deterrence, and
- Back to basics: USMC as the nation's naval expeditionary force in readiness.

¹ "Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary." *The Nikkei Asia*, July 1, 2021.
<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>.

Key Themes of Force Design 2030 from a Japanese Security Perspective

Addressing the Growing Threat of Precision Strike Capabilities

Force Design 2030 coherently recognizes the emergent threat of a globally and rapidly proliferating precision strike regime. Although it is not explicitly stated by Commandant General Berger, the precision strike weapon systems referenced are most likely Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) and Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) capabilities, such as DF-21, DF-24, of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The proliferation of precision strike weapon systems has made fixed facilities and large units on the ground and large vessels at sea even more vulnerable. Therefore, the growing risk to naval task forces and large ground forces within the effective range of enemy weapons systems necessitates a change in the USMC's regional presence.

For the United States, these missiles threaten U.S. bases in Okinawa and Guam, which in turn may hinder the freedom of navigation and action of U.S. forces. For Japan, these missiles are a real threat to Japanese territory. While political considerations have kept the Japanese Government from formally acknowledging the PLA's missile capabilities, from a military perspective, it is clear these missile capabilities are a potential threat for Japan.

Shifting the Focus to Deterrence

In its future role, the Marine Corps will focus on contributing to deterrence. Commandant General Berger says, "the obvious facts of geography – the intersection of threat and U.S. interests means that our interaction with several of our most formidable challengers will largely occur within the maritime domain."²

In Force Design 2030, he made clear his belief that traditional organizational arrangements, training, and equipment must be transformed to meet new goals and insisted that the force design that the Marine Corps had previously considered to be immutable should be transformed into a smaller, more dispersed, and more survivable force. Traditional force design is based on forcible amphibious operations. Commandant General Berger argues that this

² Gen. David H. Berger, U.S. Marine Corps. "Preparing for the Future Marine Corps Support to Joint Operations in Contested Littorals." *Military Review*, Army University Press. April 2021. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Army-Press-Online-Journal/documents/2021/Berger-1.pdf>, page 2.

needs to be fundamentally reviewed—an innovation claim that departs from past beliefs about the structure and purpose of the Marine Corps.

The eye-opening photograph of Marines flying the Stars and Stripes on Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima, is an instantly recognizable icon of the Marine Corps. Yet Commandant General Berger himself insisted that the Marines should no longer rely solely on the ability to carry out assault landing operations, like that of the Battle on Iwo Jima. It is not that joint assault landing operations are anachronistic, but rather that a different approach is required in the current anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) environment. Commandant General Berger presents the direction of the future force design, claiming “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.” This differentiation is characterized by its focus on deterrence in military force design rather than on responding to forcible operations. The significance of the Marine Corps transformation is in its deterrence strategy.

Back to Basics: The Nation’s Naval Expeditionary Force in Readiness

Commandant General Berger has identified the Marine Corps’ “raison d’être” or core value as the Nation’s naval expeditionary force in readiness. United States Code Title 10 Section 5063 says, “The Marine Corps shall be organized, trained, and equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.”³

For the last two decades, the Marines have been employed in deserts or inland in the Middle East. Now, the battlefield and the adversary are completely different. The Marine Corps is going back to basics, to its origins of a true naval expeditionary force.

Implications of the USMC Transformation for Japan’s Security Policy

Japan’s Unilateral Defense Strategy

The threat perception outlined in Force Design 2030 by Commandant General Berger aligns with that of Japan’s threat perception of the Cross-Strait situation and an increasingly aggressive CCP. However, there are differences in strategic

³10 U.S.C. § 5063

objectives between the United States and Japan.

The Marine Corps' objective is to enable naval and joint forces to have freedom of navigation and operations in the vicinity of the First Island Chain. As for Japan, activities within this area are territorial defense operations. The First Island Chain is Japan's own territory, on which Japanese citizens inhabit. The JSDF's strategic objective is to preserve sovereignty, to defend these islands, and to protect its people. It is important to keep these parallel, though not twin, strategic objectives in mind to understand Japan's unilateral national security effort and the Japan-U.S. bilateral alliance effort.

U.S. forces are strengthening their stance in the great power competition with China. The U.S. approach emphasizes deterrence, to make the cost of PRC aggression so high that it forces them to give up their attempts to invade. If China and the United States fall into a full-scale military conflict, both sides will surely suffer unbearable damage, and the conflict would eventually trigger a world war. Therefore, U.S. forces are trying to establish a powerful and effective deterrent posture, which enables PRC leaders to abandon their ambitions at an earlier stage. U.S. forces are simultaneously preparing for a full-fledged military conflict, assuming the worst-case scenario.

As the USMC shifts its focus to deterrence, Japan will likewise need to adopt a comprehensive deterrence policy. The JSDF has been focusing on physical defense of the Southwestern islands by stationing GSDF troops and establishing the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARBD). These efforts have strengthened the deterrent posture of the Southwestern Islands. In addition to these efforts, considering the PLA's rapidly growing precision strike capabilities, Japan should develop its capability to deter and respond to these missile threats. PLA's missile forces have not been under the framework of the U.S.-Russia INF Treaty and include numerous ground-launched-missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km that had been subjected to the INF Treaty. In April 2018, DF-21D reportedly had "formally joined the order of battle."⁴ PLA's missile ranges cover not only the Southwest islands but also mainland Japan. The 2020 U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense Annual Report of the People's Republic of China (PRC) also pointed out that "U.S. bases in Japan are in range of a growing number of Chinese MRBMs and Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACMs)."⁵

⁴ Japan's Ministry of Defense. "2020 Defense of Japan." September 25, 2020. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_EN_Full.pdf, page 62.

⁵ Office of Secretary of Defense. "The U.S. 2020 Military and Security Developments Involving the

It is time for Japan to develop a deterrence strategy against the adversary's potential missile threat. Japan's defense policy thus far has focused on responding to respective conflict scenarios, such as a ballistic missile launch or a remote islands' invasion, rather than developing a comprehensive and coherent approach. To effectively respond to various threat scenarios, Japan needs to establish a robust deterrence strategy, addressing all levels of potential conflict: from a gray zone scenario, a missile launch scenario, a remote islands scenario, an armed conflict scenario, to nuclear threats. To make itself relevant and formidable, Japan should build a defense strategy that places more weight on deterrence.

For Japan to build a consistent deterrence strategy, the following three points are imperative. The first is to accurately conduct threat recognition in Japan. The 2020 Defense of Japan, Japan's White Paper on Defense, modestly evaluates China's military capabilities as "a matter of grave concern to the region including Japan and the international community."⁶ Without accurate threat perception, the countermeasure to it becomes blurred. The PLA's MRBMs and IRBMs are within range of Japanese territory. Japan should formally state these capabilities as potential threats.

Second, Japan should consider retaining its own countermeasures against threats. In addition to a passive defense posture of missile defense and U.S. deterrence as countermeasures, Japan should reevaluate its ability to attack adversary bases once the threat perception is clarified. In the past, there has been much debate on the legality of such action. Many have confirmed that to maintain the ability to attack adversary bases is not constitutionally forbidden. For example, in 1956, then Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama stated, "If Japan were in imminent danger of an illegal invasion, and the method of invasion was a missile attack against Japan's national territory, I simply cannot believe that the spirit of the Constitution requires that we merely sit and wait to die."⁷ Furthermore, in September 2003, then Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba stated, "[the] Constitution permits my position. Attacking North Korea after a missile attack on Japan is too late. If North Korea orders its military to send a missile to attack Japan and the missile is raised to vertical in preparation for launch, then Japan will assume that an attack has begun and has the right to attack that particular missile launch site.

People's Republic of China." <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>, page 72.

⁶ "2020 Defense of Japan." page 58.

⁷ Cabinet Committee, House of Representatives, 24th National Diet. February 29, 1956. <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=102404889X01519560229¤t=1>.

What else can the missile be used for than to attack us?⁸ Thus, when faced with the imminent danger of unlawful aggression, there is a strong argument that Japan is constitutionally permitted to attack missile facilities as an exercise of its right to self-defense. Bruce Klingner at the Heritage Foundation points out that “constitutional, legal, budgetary, technical, and social hurdles will need to be overcome” for Japan to take such measures. However, considering the future expansion of the PLA's MRBM and IRBM capabilities, debates, at least, should begin as soon as possible on the retention of adversary base strike capabilities.

Third, for Japan to strengthen its deterrence, it should build a defense posture that can effectively deal with complex scenarios. It is necessary to perform simulations and modeling to strengthen the defense posture, assuming the possibility of all situations such as gray zone incidents, invasion of remote islands, missile attacks, and cyberattacks. Closely linking Japan's defense posture with the U.S. conventional and nuclear posture is extremely important.

Bilateral Efforts

Japan and the United States should consult and cooperate to strengthen or build a new deterrence policy by aligning their respective roles, missions, and capabilities (RMCs) and by forming a bilateral command-and-control relationship.

Align Respective RMCs

Close coordination between Japan and the United States is necessary and critical for deterrence. Commandant General Berger reiterates the importance of combined efforts with allies and partner forces, as well as joint interoperability with the U.S. military.

When a Stand-In Force, a Marine Corps unit designed to generate technically disruptive, tactical stand-in engagements that confront aggressor naval forces with an array of low-signature and affordable platforms and payloads, operates along the First Island Chain, it would undoubtedly be joined would by SDF units deployed to the Southwestern Islands.

In some cases, the JSDF may deal with situations alone, while there will

⁸ “The Independent,” September 15, 2003.

⁹ Bruce Klingner. “Japanese Strike Capabilities: Security Advantages for U.S. Alliance, Challenges to Overcome.” *The Heritage Foundation*. August 16, 2021.

<https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/japanese-strike-capabilities-security-advantages-us-alliance-challenges-overcome>.

be other situations that Japan and the United States handle together. It is imperative to discuss in advance what role the U.S. military and the JSDF will assume in the event of a gray zone situation or armed conflict. If the situation is deteriorating, Stand-in-Forces may conduct Expeditionary Advance Base Operations in and around the First Island Chain. This chain extends from Japan's Mainland to the Southwestern Islands including Okinawa, then to Taiwan, and eventually to the Philippines. It means that in contingencies, the Marines' Stand-in-Forces and the JSDF's ARDB and other units are presumably operating side by side.

In his statement following the release of Force Design 2030, Commandant General Berger reiterates the importance of C5ISR-T (command, control, communication, computers, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting) and then says, "With the right investments and doctrine for our own joint and combined C5ISR-T, this capability broadens to encompass the possibility of highly resilient "kill webs" able to link available sensors and shooters even in the face of adversary disruption of the information domain."¹⁰

Both forces eventually need to align their respective roles, missions, and capabilities. Based on the current Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation Guidelines, which were developed in 2015, both forces can deepen RMC discussions. Another option is to revise the Defense Guidelines to cope with emerging security challenges in East Asia.

Bilateral Command-and-Control Relationship

In conjunction with the RMC discussions, it is also necessary to begin serious discussions on the formulation of command-and-control relationships of both forces.

For the Japanese side, the JSDF needs standing Joint Headquarters, which could become an operational counterpart of the INDOPACOM Headquarters. After the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake in March 2011, it became evident that establishing a permanent joint headquarters, separate from the Joint Staff, is necessary.

On the U.S. side, INDOPACOM headquarters could begin to consider a more desirable command-and-control structure in East Asia, especially Northeast Asia. Since the Korean War of the 1950s, the U.S. Forces' command-and-control

¹⁰ Berger, "Preparing for the Future," pg. 4. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Army-Press-Online-Journal/documents/2021/Berger-1.pdf>

structure of East Asia has remained unchanged.

Each force has similar command-and-control issues. Furthermore, both forces have bilateral issues with their command-and-control relationship. From a professional military perspective, a single commander is best suited for conducting military operations among multiple militaries. In the current command-and-control relationship, both governments agree to conduct bilateral operations under their respective chains of command. Thus, U.S.-Japan operations are described as bilateral and not combined.

To conduct well-coordinated and timely bilateral operations, both forces need to elaborate on joint planning. Questions that arise include: to what degree do both commanders delegate authority to the coordination center, or how is the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) of information or data between the two forces shared? These efforts are critically important for mission accomplishment, as our adversary would conduct joint operations under a single commander. Granted, they may have a different deficiency in command structure due to their use of dual command channels of both CCP and military command. Another area which must be addressed to ensure successful joint and bilateral operations is targeting. When conducting the USMC's EAB Operations and JSDF's territorial defense operations, targeting is surely one of the most challenging issues for both forces. Targeting must be synchronized. Concrete preparations for such joint and bilateral operations are extremely vital for success, and effective for deterrence against adversaries.

For unilateral efforts, Japan should develop its comprehensive deterrence strategy and coordinate with U.S. counterparts. Both forces should align their respective RMCs and both forces should develop an operationally ready and responsive command-and-control and targeting structure.

Conclusion

Commandant General Berger's philosophy crystallizes that the future of the U.S. Marine Corps is in a great transformation, considering the growing threat of precision strike capabilities, especially of the PLA. The Marine Corps' major anticipated area of operations will be the vicinity of the First Island Chain, which extends from Japan's Honshu Island to the Southwestern Islands, Taiwan and to the Philippines. The Japanese archipelago is situated in a geo-strategically critical position. Japan needs to strengthen its deterrent posture by the following three measures: clarifying the threat perception, exploring the strike capabilities, and

developing the more consistent deterrent posture with the coordination with the United States. To strengthen the military-to-military relationship, both forces should align their respective roles, missions, and capabilities, and establish an operationally ready, responsive bilateral command-and-control architecture.



Lieutenant General Koichi Isobe retired from active duty in August 2015, after thirty-five years of service in the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF). He currently serves as a strategic advisor for Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Ltd., as well as the JGSDF Advisor for Yamasakura Exercise. He also served as a resident senior fellow for Harvard University Asia Center from July 2017 to June 2019 and Asia Pacific Initiative from July 2017 to June 2021.

He was Commander, Eastern Army in his final two years of service. Eastern Army's area of responsibility covers the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and 10 prefectures, and almost half of the Japanese total population and GDP. During his tenure, he deployed more than one hundred thousand SDF personnel in three big disasters: October 2013's typhoon flood/landslide on Izu-Ohshima Island, February 2014's record-breaking snowfall in the Kanto region and September 2014's volcanic eruption at Mt. Ontake.

Unique among SDF general and flag officers, General Isobe experienced Joint Staff senior positions twice: Director J-5 (July 2009 - August 2011) and Vice Chief of Staff (August 2012 - August 2013). He served as a linchpin of Japan-US military coordination via Operation Tomodachi during the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 whilst serving as J-5. As Vice Chief Joint Staff, he initiated Amphibious Warfare Study Forum among the SDF three-service senior leaders.

General Isobe was born in 1958. He attended National Defense Academy (the SDF three-service joint military academy) and was commissioned as a second lieutenant of the GSDF in 1981. He was a helicopter aviator who flew OH-6 and CH-47. After graduation from Command & General Staff College, GSDF, he served at Japan-US Security Affairs Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (August 1989 - August 1991). He also served various staff appointments in Ground Staff Office, GSDF. His command positions included 9th Division Aviation Squadron, Central Readiness Force, 7th Armored Division and Eastern Army.

General Isobe earned Master of Military Studies at USMC University, Quantico in 1996. His master's paper earned the Brigadier A. W. Hammett Award. He also received Master of Science in National Resource Strategy at NDU, Fort McNair in 2003. General Isobe's awards include the Legion of Merit and the Meritorious Service Medal.