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The State of the Indo-Pacific Region and the U.S.-Japan Alliance

A Discussion with Admiral Philip Davidson

Abstract

On Thursday, April 21, 2022, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted the virtual policy briefing, “The State of the Indo-Pacific Region and the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” Admiral Philip Davidson (U.S. Navy, Ret.), who served as the 25th Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). In this event, Admiral Davidson shared his insights on the current security environment in the Indo-Pacific, accounting for how evolving concerns such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine affect Indo-Pacific states’ relations within and beyond the region. He emphasized that the U.S.-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of peace, prosperity, and order in the Indo-Pacific and recommended greater transparency, integration, and cooperation on all fronts of the alliance (space, cyber, trade, telecommunications, energy, climate, freedom of navigation of the seas and skies) to optimally deter actors who would threaten our shared vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

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 along with members of academia, think tanks, and media, as well as current and retired members of the U.S. military and Japanese Self Defense Forces. Introductory remarks were provided by Dr.

Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President of Sasakawa USA, who also facilitated the event and moderated the Q&A discussion.

Threats to International Order from Russia and China

Admiral Davidson began by emphasizing that the U.S.-Japan alliance remains essential to maintaining peace, order, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. As the destructive capabilities of twenty-first century authoritarian powers become ever more apparent, greater cooperation between the United States and Japan, as well as with other regional like-minded partners, is required to counterbalance threats to our shared values.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an egregious example of authoritarian disregard for the rights and freedoms of another sovereign nation. The strategic warning signs for such a threat were apparent for years, beginning with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, followed by Crimea and the Donbas in 2014. Putin's long-term efforts to create leverage against sanctions using Russia's energy resources have made his intentions abundantly clear: to destroy Ukraine and shake the foundations of the NATO alliance. This conflict has demonstrated that economic incentives alone are not sufficient to deter threats to international order from illiberal actors who defy basic international norms like sovereignty and human rights. Furthermore, the preservation of order and peace in the international community is in all of our shared interest, even for countries such as the United States and Japan which are far removed from the conflict playing out on the ground in Ukraine. The alliance must treat this as a matter of serious concern to our shared security.

China has engaged in activity short of outright warfare which suggests a similar intent to Russia. The growth of its armed forces, stockpiling of rare earth metals, wolf warrior diplomacy, and cyber activities demonstrate China's tendency to use aggressive and coercive tactics to promote its strategic goals at the expense of international rules and norms. Similar to Putin's signaling regarding Ukraine, President Xi has made many of his end goals clear, particularly unification with Taiwan. This would be disastrous to the world economy, which relies on Taiwan for 92% of its most sophisticated semiconductors. This is not to mention the labor and resources supplied by China which would be withdrawn from international markets if conflict were to break out in Taiwan or the South China Sea. It will be too late to wait until the global economy is cast

into tumult; the United States and Japan must work together now to prevent these outcomes from being realized.

Defining Alliance Values: The Foundation for Cooperation

The United States and Japan benefit from strong alignment on their values and priorities in the international arena. Our shared vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific provides a common ground for establishing peaceful relations and promoting prosperity in the region. It is important to acknowledge the many facets of “freedom” encompassed by this vision: freedom to engage in trade and cooperation without coercion; freedom as a governing principle in countries’ domestic political systems; and freedom in a geopolitical sense through the preservation of sovereignty and internationally recognized borders. The other component, “openness,” translates to unfettered access to the seas and airways, transparency in agreements and trade relations, as well as the protection of intellectual properties.

It is vital that the United States and Japan hold firm on upholding these values when they are challenged. The attractiveness of this shared vision for the Indo-Pacific comes prominently from the merit of its ideals, yet the United States and Japan must proactively encourage other nations to join in this effort in the face of coercive actions by illiberal actors which seek to discourage this kind of cooperation.

What the U.S.-Japan Alliance Needs to Do

It is important for U.S. citizens to be informed of the changing dynamics of the international landscape. Two-thirds of the global economy is predicted to be centered on Asia by the end of decade. Seven of the world’s largest militaries and four of the five largest economies will be in Asia by the end of the decade. The rising power of China undermines the current security landscape, making the cost of action appear to be too high to oppose the CCP.

The following are two areas in which the U.S. and Japan can collaborate to counter adversaries:

- 1) To deliver a joint and allied force that can win through combined force integration and transparency in allied exercises and in day-to-day operations. U.S.-Japan cooperation can experiment more deeply with an allied command and control to prevent and deter conflict in the East China Sea and Taiwan strait.

- 2) To cooperate further in allied and partnered networks of information and intelligence sharing, which includes consistent and robust arms sales to Taiwan—not to deliver tools when the enemy has already attacked.

Q&A Session

There was an engaging Q&A with the audience following Admiral Davidson's remarks. Questions covered topics including: Chinese nuclear modernization, timeline of the possible invasion of Taiwan, longer-range strikes and integrated command structures, gray-zone situations and asymmetric capabilities, U.S. engagement in trade and investment in the Indo-Pacific, nuclear-sharing, protection of the Pacific Island chain, and India's role in Indo-Pacific security.

Admiral Davidson's responses to these questions included the following points:

- It is expected that China's nuclear capabilities in delivery platforms will quadruple over the course of the next decade, which would then exceed America's delivery platforms. This is of great concern to the United States' nuclear policy and that of Japan-U.S. policy as well.
- Nuclear blackmailing by any country is unacceptable. It is for this reason the United States, Japan, and others must now engage with diplomatic, economic, and military efforts to convince others—closed and authoritarian states especially—that we will not be blackmailed by pronouncements and threats.
- The United States and Japan have an obligation to plan together for potential crises that could arise. It is important to remember that there is more to focus on than just weapons. Sensing, intelligence, transparency, and sharing in command-and-control networks are all areas we need to be looking at.
- While there are separate trade considerations to account for, from a geopolitical and strategic view, it would be beneficial for the United States to join the CPTPP. As that is a heavy political lift for either party to deliver, if joining CPTPP does not happen then the U.S. needs to seriously consider other alternatives, such as multiple bilateral agreements with regional partners. It is key that trade security and energy security be reconsidered.
- In regard to the security of the Pacific Island Chain and China making deals with the Solomon Islands, it is the gravest of security concerns. The international community that

has found common ground on the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific needs to come together on developmental and economic needs to figure out approaches that will preserve freedom within the Pacific Island chain and prevent the kind of threat that potential Solomon Island bases present to the area.

- In the areas of technology, readiness, and spirit, Japan already has extraordinary capabilities at sea, in the air, and on the ground. However, if Japan were to acquire strike capability such as land-based midrange missiles, it would be a profound change; in fact, this is the most important change that could happen next. It would deepen the ability for the United States and Japan to collaborate, cooperate, and share information as we think about the challenges we face in Northeast Asia.
- Both the United States and the international community are on a long journey with India. In addition to deep diplomatic conversations, deep political interactions between the leaders of the United States, Japan, and India are needed to get where we want to go. We need to take it step by step rather than think we can jump ahead and improve the situation through hastily made agreements.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Admiral Davidson for sharing his insights on the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance amidst rising threats to international peace and order. Sasakawa USA also thanks the Q&A participants and attendees for joining us in this engaging discussion.

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](#).
