



## **US-Japan Task Force on Command Relationships for New Challenges** *Opening Dialogue Summary, prepared by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA*

*On Thursday, September 22, 2022, Sasakawa USA's US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative convened a US-only dialogue focusing on important drivers of change in the East Asian security environment and evaluating current strengths and weaknesses of US-Japan military command relationships. They also considered a range of possible adjustments to help improve effectiveness amid evolving security threats, likely future advancements in Japanese military capabilities, and technological change. This not-for-attribution hybrid event (in person and via video conference) involved 19 experts from US government offices, the US military, think tanks, universities, and former government officials and military officers. Mr. Jim Schoff, Senior Director of Sasakawa USA's "US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative" moderated the dialogue, which was the start of a longer-term series of mostly bilateral discussions planned by NEXT for 2022-23. These meetings are being coordinated informally with Mr. Chris Johnstone, Japan Chair at CSIS, which has its own project planned on this topic. Each project is distinct, but this coordination aims to maximize value and efficiency for government participants. The projects have no pre-conceived notions of what should be pursued. They aim to facilitate dialogue.*

### **Background and Introduction**

This Task Force project was launched in 2022 by NEXT on the premise that two trends are working to complicate current US-Japan command and control (C2) arrangements in ways that could undermine their effectiveness, while a third is creating opportunities for closer bilateral security cooperation. The first trend involves a shifting regional military balance that makes integration of allied forces more vital to sustaining deterrence or repelling any attack. The second trend includes a combination of technological advances and operational needs that are driving toward more integrated and combined force concepts, characterized generally as "cross domain operations." These go beyond "multi-domain" models of operating in parallel and lead to a deeply interconnected operating system influenced by digital transformation. Additionally, Japan's own consideration of new capabilities, including long-range precision strike, will call into question the longstanding alliance division of labor in roles and missions—the so-called shield and spear construct—and mandate a reconsideration of alliance C2. At the same time, Japan is focused on improving military "jointness" and could create in 2023 a permanent joint headquarters for the Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

All this suggests that a reexamination of US-Japan command relationships is needed, to consider practical and useful adjustments to SDF connections with US Forces Japan (USFJ) and US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) so that bilateral arrangements can align effectively with national reforms. It can also help with timely decision making on defense policy and deployment issues, as Japanese territory (and US bases therein) are more connected with regional military operations.

The purpose of the Task Force is to engage the US and Japanese defense communities in discussions about the dual challenge to the existing command structures (described above), and to consider elements in potential design of a more integrated alliance C2 system that offers the operational benefits of a more unified command while respecting Japan's legal and political limits. We began with a small US-only group to test the project premise and chart a course for the remainder of research and dialogue.



**Opening Remarks:**

A retired senior US military officer with command experience in Japan and the Indo-Pacific region opened the discussion with a look at alliance evolution over the years and the way that it has responded to a changing regional security environment. He concluded that today's rapidly emerging technologies demand fundamental changes in the art and science of deterrence and defense, noting that the newer domains of warfare – space, cyberspace, electromagnetic spectrum – complicate and reinforce traditional earthly domains of air, land, and sea where humans live, and fight.

He hypothesized that commercial satellite networks tied to artificial intelligence processing tools mean that we are approaching a period of constant surveillance with visual, infrared, and electromagnetic sensors as well as synthetic aperture radar. Forces at sea, in the air and on the ground can each now decisively affect forces - and populations - in the other domains far more than ever before. He concluded with the following observations and suggestions:

- 1) Integrating across all alliance forces demands well understood objectives, an awareness of national caveats, anticipation of a range of contingencies and responses, and substantial planning, rehearsal, testing through simulation.
- 2) Trust must develop across the alliance through constant personal contact and interaction as we work through the challenges.
- 3) Command and control means must be capable of being widely distributed and networked, not massed in one place, to deny the enemy an easy attack on a mission-critical node.
- 4) All sensors and shooters must be linked in real time through a network aided by artificial intelligence and automation to ensure instant passage of target quality data from sensor to the most advantageous shooter for instant response.
- 5) Japan and the US must create dedicated operational staffs to work through the operational and force integration factors across the alliance while ensuring adherence to sovereignty requirements and national objectives.
- 6) Sea denial, from Northern Hokkaido through the Malacca Strait, may be an appropriate early objective, involving allied forces in all domains exploiting the natural advantage of forces in the defense.

Another retired senior US military officer with command experience in Japan and the Indo-Pacific region followed with his observations of the alliance environment within which current C2 relationships operate and offered considerations for their adaptation. First, he noted that significant cultural differences exist between the US and Japanese approaches to warfare,



resulting in significantly different force designs that will impact the ability to act jointly as an alliance (both militarily, especially in areas of mobility, information sharing, and sustainment, and from a government decision-making perspective). Additionally, US forces have much more combat experience than the SDF and greater familiarity with navigating different rules of engagement that make them a highly credible deterrent force as a coalition partner.

In a conflict with a peer competitor in the region, this retired officer expressed his belief that a combined warfighting approach would be preferable to a coalition approach, even though this would put greater stress on the alliance C2 framework. One advantage that the allies have is a high degree of hardware and software commonalities (and human connections) between US and Japanese forces, especially on the maritime side.

In pursuing more effective C2 arrangements for the future, he reminded the group that C2 (command and control) is often used as a single phrase, but they are actually two words with different meanings. He described “control” as the mechanisms that allow forces to execute a commander’s orders. One challenge for the alliance is that its lines of communication will largely be exterior in a coalition or combined fight, while the opponent’s lines will be interior during a conflict. Still, he said that the “control” portion should be easier to accomplish in an alliance context compared to the “command” piece, which involves different types of judgement, assessment, perceptions of national interest, and political decision making.

He closed by noting that this kind of alliance C2 dialogue and experimentation is not entirely new, referencing some alliance discussions about planning, roles and missions dating back to soon after the Senkaku crisis of 2010. The allies also learned a great deal about combined operations under pressure during the Great East Japan Earthquake response, Operation TOMODACHI, and consequence management of 2011 and beyond. Still, the challenges that the alliance faces today in the form of North Korea and China have raised the stakes for a more effective combined response to evolving threats.

### **Theme 1: Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Arrangements**

Among the strengths of current C2 alliance arrangements, workshop participants highlighted close relationships as among the most important. Even though one sometimes has to be in a small room together to leverage those relationships while navigating certain policy differences, they are a vital strength of the current structure that should be maintained (and possibly enhanced).

Also, from a US perspective at least, the current parallel C2 structure preserves US flexibility and independence for decision making and action when desired. In areas where we have seen some closer integration of C2, such as in sea-based missile defense, US commanders have noticed that US military assets based in and around Japan can become “sticky” for those Japan-related



missions (i.e., having to remain available or on-station for defense-of-Japan deployments). A similar view (of the value of domestic flexibility) could easily hold in Tokyo as well, so even though this feature will diminish to some degree as a result of more combined operations, both sides might see certain benefits to retaining some elements of independence and flexibility with command and control. Also, from a US perspective, any C2 changes in Northeast Asia might need to be considered in a broader regional context, so that assets are sufficiently deployable across all of INDOPACOM's area of responsibility.

At a tactical level, the allies have made valuable gains in effective combined control over the years with regard to missile defense and utilizing Aegis systems at sea. Even though the command piece still lags on missile defense, in part due to different levels of risk tolerance, advances on the control front can be a useful model for other missions. Moreover, the allies continue to make advances in developing new tools for integrated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) augmented by networked communication and real-time translation software that make increasingly feasible the sharing a common intelligence picture and weighing response options collaboratively. Some of these have already been experimented with in recent bilateral exercises.

Regarding current weaknesses, a workshop participant highlighted a lack of "agile decision making," or, in many cases, even a lack of agile decision execution (i.e., the "control" function mentioned earlier). There was general agreement that the current parallel structure would not be sufficient in the future, and that we will need something more integrated. The "control" function should be an easier place to start, although one government participant highlighted the limits currently in place for connecting alliance C2 systems, often because of cyber security incompatibilities. Overcoming cyber security gaps will be critical to improving decision execution and fostering integrated control.

Such efforts should be supplemented by more realistic bilateral military exercises that push plans, procedures, and alliance systems to the point of failure (or, as one participant described in a more politically encouraging way, "breakdowns that highlight opportunities for future improvement"). Another participant noted that exercising to failure can also help overcome weaknesses in coordinated command activities, because they reveal important gaps in perceptions, priorities, and decision making.

Using the example of Japan's Ground SDF taking on a sea lane protection mission in the Southwest Islands utilizing anti-ship missiles, one participant added that another current weakness involves a lack of US understanding of (and connection to) SDF efforts at enhancing jointness of forces. Although the US-Japan service-to-service relationships are quite strong, we are less confident across services. When a US Navy ship, for example, needs to communicate with a GSDF anti-ship missile detachment to make sure that US forces in the area are not mistaken for an enemy (especially during a chaotic and confusing battle scenario), this communication should happen directly without having to use Japan's Maritime SDF as a go-between.



Overall, across a spectrum where two countries' forces are considered to be compatible in a very basic way on up to the most sophisticated and tight integration, one set of terminology could begin with "deconflicted," and then move up to "coordinated," "integrated," and "unified." One retired military officer described the US and Japan at a highly coordinated level but short of integrated.

So, while current arrangements—in both a military and whole-of-government sense—are generally effective and adequate, new challenges are likely to test the allies in the command function the most. This applies not only to post-outbreak of conflict military operations themselves, but also to Phase Zero political decision making surrounding the deployment and training of troops, freedom of navigation activities and other presence operations, political signaling utilizing integrated forces, and responding to gray zone tactics. The best opportunity for improvement with integration lies in the control function, domain by domain, mission by mission, although this will require advances in information sharing confidence.

## **Theme 2: Options and Considerations Going Forward**

The group generally agreed that relatively smaller scale steps with a bottom-up approach might be the best way to begin exploring new C2 enhancements. This could be small in a geographical sense, such as starting with a Joint Task Force (JTF)-like structure around the Southwest Islands focused on US support for Japan-led defense-of-Japan missions in that region. It could also be small in a mission or domain sense, either as a single mission experiment or a small collection of related missions. Most participants agreed that whatever approach was taken, it should be accompanied by robust exercises that help the allies identify and fix weaknesses as swiftly and constructively as possible. New alliance investments via the most recent host-nation support agreement (e.g., Live Virtual Construct) dedicated to joint training technology and simulations could be leveraged to this end.

Participants recognized that the political environment in Japan has never been more conducive to exploring new models of C2, but the US side would have to be sensitive to legal and political limitations on Japan's part.<sup>1</sup> We would also both have to recognize (and accommodate) the differences in warfighting cultures, force structures, and other aspects highlighted by one of the opening speakers. It will be important to ask the Japan side what it hopes to accomplish in the future in terms of possible C2 adaptations, and it might be useful for Washington to be able to describe different options that offer a wide range of alternatives.

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, on September 29, 2022 Japan's Nikkei newspaper reported that a former defense minister (during LDP meeting on defense policy) suggested the establishment of a "joint command in Okinawa for the SDF to coordinate with US forces." See Ryo Nemoto, "Lack of NATO-style command in focus as Japan reviews security strategy," *Nikkei Asia*, September 29, 2022 at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Lack-of-NATO-style-command-in-focus-as-Japan-reviews-security-strategy>



In terms of possible options, the US-South Korea Combined Forces Command (CFC) is often cited, although that contains many historical and threat-based elements that are notably different for Japan, and Japan's legal situation is different as well. In this case, some workshop participants thought that simply copying the CFC structure in Japan would not be appropriate, but some of the processes could be applicable. Another participant noted the US and UK model from 1942 as potentially useful, as could be the Combined Task Force (CTF) approach to the US-Australia Talisman Sabre exercise, which allows for independent movement of forces under combined direction. The allied experience with Operation TOMODACHI in 2011 was also deemed worthy of further study.

On the issue of information sharing, participants agreed that it was a high priority for improvement, but on the question of whether adding Japan to existing "Five Eyes" arrangements was advisable, a few participants said that it would likely be more trouble than it was worth (and be unnecessarily complicated by involving the other four nations in what are primarily bilateral US-Japan C2 challenges). Instead, one participant with experience in this area recommended looking at the US-Israeli model for information sharing, suggesting that it would be more suitable.

Given that close personal relationships were viewed as a current alliance strength, participants suggested early integration of any new Japanese command structures that are created out of the current defense strategy review. This could be as simple as including US liaison officers or making other modest efforts to expand "eyeball-to-eyeball" collaboration within C2 components. They do not need to be labeled as "combined" or "integrated," and they can start at a small scale. But some integration from the beginning can be useful for the future, and the alliance can benefit from investing in the ability to increase scale later on when necessary. One participant used the US-South Korea example of command facilities that can accommodate a surge of personnel co-located from each other's side during emergencies including national equipment (and "laying cable") for US-only or Korea-only communications back to their own commands back home. Installing some C2 infrastructure early on is cheaper and easier than trying to add later, and one former military officer noted that many low-cost, high-value opportunities have been missed in the past because they fall into the seams between operational and Title X funding (and the J1/J6). He cited the new MSDF fleet headquarters in Funakoshi as one example, believing that it has less combined capability than the old structure.

### **Next Steps**

The project sees a need for additional background research on different C2 models (current and historical) mentioned in this first meeting, and to draft a workable glossary of C2 terms with Japanese equivalents. The results of this research could be shared with one final US-only meeting within the next two months or so, and that meeting could refine these options and definitions ahead of a series of bilateral meetings with Japanese colleagues. By this time the Japan side will



**US-Japan Task Force on Command Relationships for New Challenges**  
*Opening Dialogue Summary, prepared by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA*

be finalizing its revised strategic documents, and together we can consider what these all mean for each other going forward. We plan to carry on this bilateral conversation leading up to a 2-day bilateral Track 1.5 workshop in Japan in March 2023.

---

*Please note that this summary is not a consensus document of the Task Force. It is a summary prepared by Jim Schoff based on notes taken by Sasakawa Peace Foundation staff during the dialogue and on subsequent follow-up discussions with dialogue participants. If you have any comments or questions regarding this summary, please contact Jim Schoff at [jschoff@spfusa.org](mailto:jschoff@spfusa.org)*

---

*The **US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative** is a forum for bilateral dialogue, networking, and the development of joint recommendations involving a wide range of policy and technical specialists (in and out of government) to stimulate new alliance connections across foreign, security, and technology policy areas. Established by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA with support from the Nippon Foundation, the goal is to help improve the alliance and how it serves shared interests, preparing it for emerging challenges within an increasingly complex and dynamic geostrategic environment. Launched in 2021, the Initiative includes two overlapping lines of effort: 1) Foreign & Security Policy, and 2) Technology & Innovation Connections. The Initiative is led by Sr. Director Jim Schoff.*

---