



US-Japan Task Force on Command Relationships for New Challenges *Dialogue Summary #4, prepared by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA*

The NEXT Alliance Initiative hosted a virtual bilateral roundtable dialogue on “Command Relationships for New Challenges” facing the US-Japan alliance on May 18, 2023. This not-for-attribution event was attended by 22 participants including government officials, active military, think tank representatives, and retired US and Japanese military personnel. Jim Schoff, Senior Director of Sasakawa USA’s “US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative” moderated the dialogue, the fourth in a series of C2 roundtables in the past year, not including the NEXT Alliance Conference (NAC) held in Tokyo in early March.¹ The May roundtable featured CSIS senior fellow and NAC participant John Schaus, who presented a new alliance C2 concept building upon conference discussions. The virtual roundtable debated Mr. Schaus’ proposed C2 modernization concepts, and a not-for-attribution summary of the ensuing dialogue is provided below.

Taks Force Background and Introduction

Two trends are complicating current US-Japan command and control (C2) arrangements in ways that could undermine their effectiveness, while another is creating opportunities for closer bilateral security cooperation. The first involves a shifting regional military balance that makes integration of allied forces more vital. The second trend involves a combination of technological advances and operational needs driving toward more integrated and combined force concepts. These go beyond “multi-domain” models of operating in parallel and lead to an interconnected operating system influenced by digital transformation. At the same time, Japan is improving military “jointness,” creating a permanent joint headquarters for its Self-Defense Forces (SDF), and fielding standoff and counterstrike capabilities.

All of this suggests that US-Japan C2 modernization is needed, to consider practical and useful adjustments to the SDF’s connections with US Forces Japan (USFJ) and US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), so that bilateral arrangements can align with national reforms. It could also help with timely decision making on defense policy and deployment issues, as Japanese territory (and US bases therein) become more closely associated with regional military operations.

Opening remarks

CSIS Sr. Fellow John Schaus began by highlighting the agenda of his presentation:

- Current Operating Environment and Regional Risks
- Current US Concept of C2 in (and with) Japan
- Limitations—and Risks—of Current US C2 Concepts
- Principles for Enhancing US C2 in (and with) Japan
- New Proposed C2 Concept

¹ For a summary of the NEXT Alliance Conference on C2 issues, see James L. Schoff, “Modernizing US-Japan Command & Control Relationships for New Challenges,” May 2023, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, available at <https://spfusa.org/publications/modernizing-us-japan-command-control-relationships-for-new-challenges-next-alliance-conference-summary-tokyo-2023/>



Schaus prefaced his remarks by saying that the purpose of the brief was to propose a US-Japan C2 modernization concept building upon the NAC dialogue and explore the degree of alignment on perceived risks, an optimal approach to deal with those risks, and limitations for pursuing that approach. He outlined four obstacles that the US must consider in terms of C2 formation:

- 1) China's regional approach and military modernization are stimulating tension and creating worries among regional states. The risks of potential conflict are growing, underscoring both the need to act and the sensitivity surrounding that action.
- 2) The US does not have dominance within any domain across the region over time, and moving assets into theater will be difficult after conflict starts.
- 3) We are not operating from sanctuary, and all US units in theater can be threatened.
- 4) The tyranny of distance. The US mainland and Hawaii are more than eight hours away from Japan by air and much farther by sea, which will hinder response and communications. Time is critical for force survivability and mission success.

Schaus then described the current US C2 model for an East Asia regional war-fight as being led from Hawaii by INDOPACOM, most likely with a 4-star component commander (probably US Pacific Fleet or PACFLEET) named as a Joint Task Force (JTF) commander to lead US forces and coordinate with Japan's SDF at the same time. The JTF commander would be designated either just before or soon after conflict erupts ("near-to-bang"), and depending on Japan's role the JTF Command element could deploy to Japan, lead from Hawaii, or utilize a mobile deployment until resolution of the conflict or later restructuring the command.

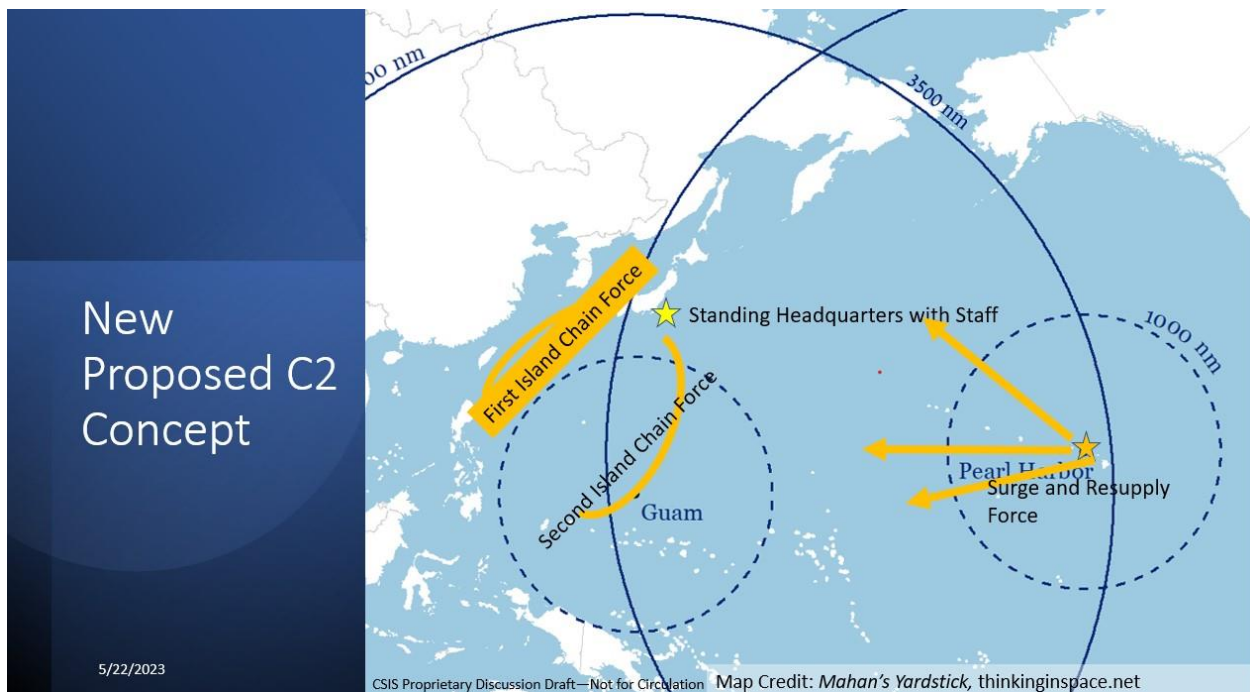
On limitations, Schaus first noted the drawback that until a commander is seconded to the position as JTF commander, it will not be clear exactly how operations will run. He expressed skepticism over the dual-hatted commander approach (i.e., both a component and a JTF commander), because he/she would not have spent enough time within Japan to develop adequate trust needed to lead the effort. He noted that for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq there was a consistent, resident commander with a command element dedicated to each fight (i.e., it was not the US Central Command (CENTCOM) commander or a dual-hatted component commander). In this sense, the current East Asia war-fight command concept seems to assume that any conflict would be short-lived, but this is a debatable premise. As such, the US seems at risk of under-scaling its C2 model if it thinks a seconded component commander as a JTF lead will be enough for a possible regional conflict.

He added that each service has slightly different operating concepts on how it would approach an East Asian-area fight (based on its own capabilities and service perspective), and while this can be a strength for the United States overall, putting one component in the lead of an East Asia JTF could disrupt that balance. There could be "service baggage" from a seconded commander

who might favor a specific force’s plan as opposed to pursuing true joint force orchestration. He cautioned that without this orchestration the US would risk suboptimizing its force.

Schaus then outlined proposed principles for enhancing alliance C2. These include not expecting a US-South Korea-style Combined Forces Command approach in Japan given legal and political limitations as Japan works to fully implement its new defense capabilities and their implications, but underscoring that bilateral planning is best done in person and continuously. He added that US commanders need to be able to “fight tonight” with forces already in the Joint Operational Area (JOA) for some period of time, and that while redundancy will be important, it should radiate from Japan across the region, rather than from Hawaii or the US mainland toward East Asia and Japan. Planners must have the personnel they will need in place at the moment of conflict, without relying in the short term on reserves, who would take more than one month to be ready to contribute.

Based on all of these considerations, Schaus proposed a new C2 concept for the United States to enhance its coordination with Japan for regional contingencies and the defense of Japan, starting with a new standing US operational headquarters and staff in Japan. The headquarters might be led by a 3-star-level commander and be responsible for 1) integrated US planning for regional contingencies, 2) coordinating US planning with Japanese planning, and 3) leading US operations in Northeast Asia under the direction of INDOPACOM.



In this concept, the new Japan-based US headquarters would have three separate forces to conduct operations, with a first island chain force on the frontline (possibly led by the 3rd Marine



Expeditionary Force (III MEF) commander), a second island chain force offering long range strike support (possibly made up largely of the 7th fleet, the 5th and 7th air forces, and what can be introduced from the US West Coast), and a “surge and resupply force” (possibly led out of US Army Pacific). This plan gives a US headquarters element in Japan an opportunity to engage day-to-day with Japanese counterparts on issues related to how best to leverage their respective joint forces around the region to deal with various contingencies, as well as giving each of the services a chance to think about its preferred operating concepts in ways that integrate across all services and domains.

Discussion Theme 1: Areas of Endorsement and Key Questions

A US participant kicked-off the discussion portion of the roundtable by posing two overarching observations and questions to the group: 1) that while the proposal seems well-designed (“more realistic”) for a major conflict in the region, it is equally plausible that we never have a large-scale war in East Asia, so what is the proper balance and scale for this concept to be effective if needed, but not wasteful or provocative during peacetime; and 2) if the US does create a standing headquarters in Japan supported by three separate forces, should US Forces Japan (USFJ) be reconfigured to be that US headquarters, or should a new HQ element be introduced from outside or “attached” to USFJ so that USFJ can continue carrying out its duties as before?

Building upon this, a Japanese participant added another consideration to the mix regarding nuclear weapons and how US Strategic Command fits into this regional command concept, given that any serious conflict in East Asia is likely to play out under a “nuclear shadow” if Russia, North Korea, or China are involved. How would the functional and regional command elements be integrated, and who would be Japan’s counterpart for the nuclear aspect (noting recent US-South Korea agreement to step up their level of nuclear policy consultations to involve forward command components)? This “functional-regional” question might also extend to other functional components related to cyber or space.

A retired US military officer endorsed the proposed concept because it addresses what he sees as a major shortcoming of current arrangements, namely a lack of detailed and consistent US and bilateral planning for regional contingencies involving Japan. He noted that when it came to a plan for a Korean Peninsula contingency, he knew details about how to respond with forces under his command in Japan in support of US Forces Korea (USFK), but the same is not true for an East China Sea scenario or some other contingency involving Japan as a partner. Another retired American military officer agreed with the need to improve bilateral planning, carry out more realistic exercises, and have more assets deployed in the region to help overcome the tyranny of distance during a crisis.



The second retired officer also agreed that the Army would likely play an important role in surge and resupply, as it is the likely candidate to be the executive agent for Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) by being the theater sustainment command. The Army might also have responsibility for Homeland Security, which could include Guam and the Marianas Islands in the Second Island Chain, depending on the contingency.

Other US participants emphasized that it is important for US forces and the SDF to be together addressing issues and developing plans in person, as often as possible, even weekly, to develop the trust needed to promote cohesion and seamless interoperability. A Japanese participant also suggested consideration of an additional remote C2 arrangement to allow both sides to familiarize themselves with their JTF (or subordinated force) counterparts, so that in a crisis their forces can operate more seamlessly in the field. He referenced the likely creation of a few new Japanese JTFs under a new Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) in the next year or two, and these might benefit from some US-Japan connectivity.

Overall, there was a general agreement that the security environment in East Asia has changed, and that the allies could not afford to assume that the ways of thinking and operating of the past are suitable for today. Especially in light of the defense investments and policy changes underway in Japan, a US participant emphasized that the US response to Japan's establishment of a PJHQ cannot be simply "business as usual," without recognizing the important step that Japan is taking. China, Russia, North Korea are regional actors that make the environment around Japan a "bad neighborhood," as another participant put it, and while the concept proposed at the roundtable might be most appropriate for an actual war fight, some participants underscored its potential benefits in terms of deterrence.

Discussion Theme 2: Other Considerations

In addition to voices of support for the newly proposed C2 concept, there were some dissenting views on certain aspects. An American participant questioned whether the C2 infrastructure really needed to be located within the JOA, suggesting that it would be more realistic (and better) for the US regional HQ to remain in Hawaii where the warfighting architecture already exists to support several hundred dedicated staff. He argued that the best location for such C2 is where the commander can exercise the most effective command and control by connecting to all relevant players, including Washington.

He thought that a component command like PACLFEEET could be made more joint in a proactive way by "adding different color uniforms, volunteer reservists and augments from the mainland." This would help the existing C2 architecture in Hawaii be better prepared to lead a joint force across the spectrum from competition through crisis and into conflict with the forces that are



there. However, another American questioned whether such a “sprinkling” of other services into a component command addresses the joint imperative sufficiently.

A different American participant agreed with the idea that duplicating an HQ command and staff in Tokyo is unnecessary and added the greater risk to the command being forward deployed and in the range of missiles. A different participant noted that USFJ is not a JTF, and that building a JTF out of it would be more difficult than augmenting INDOPACOM to handle the responsibility.

An American participant said that it is important to clarify what kind of missions this C2 plan was being designed for, such as an Article 5 response (i.e., defense of Japan) or regional contingencies (e.g., a Taiwan or North Korean scenario) or both, as the C2 approach is rarely a one-size-fits-all situation. He outlined key factors for designing C2 to a given situation and pursuing unity of effort, namely: 1) simplicity, 2) span of control, 3) interoperability, and 4) preserving unit integrity. As a reference, he recommended the group review Joint Publication 3-16 on Multinational Operations (especially Chapter 2 on Command and Coordination Relationships) to consider the Joint Staff’s guidance on this front.²

A Japanese participant added that there remains a great deal of ambiguity with regard to how each partner (the US and Japan) plan to modernize their C2 structures in the region (independently and together), not only in the pure military realm but also adding other relevant government agencies and even private sector participants to the process. So, he encouraged closer bilateral collaboration and exchanges as these reforms are being considered so that we can develop a more harmonized approach and develop complementary leadership training practices and horizontal communication procedures. He suggested the US and Japan could create a think tank similar to the NATO C2 Center of Excellence that specializes in leadership, training and organizing tabletop exercises and simulations. In addition, some collaboration between them could address comments made related to multilateral engagement (see Discussion Theme 3 below).

A Japanese participant appreciated the presentation but stressed that the allies should not think of contingencies in the region exclusively as a dichotomy, in that they are either a defense of Japan situation or a regional contingency. They could easily be connected (or in danger of one triggering the other), and either way there would be strong efforts by Japan in a regional contingency to find the right balance between bolstering deterrence to avoid an armed attack against Japan without provoking one. Similarly, US C2 enhancements in Japan need not be all or nothing, in that it could be possible to strengthen US and alliance C2 to a certain level of contingency above where they are at today, but not necessarily prepare to replicate INDOPACOM’s capabilities in Japan for a larger scale and long-enduring conflict. In this case, a US command element based in Japan could migrate back to Hawaii, perhaps, if a conflict escalated

² US Joint Staff, “Joint Publication 3-16 Multinational Operations,” validated on February 12, 2021 at https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_16.pdf



or carried on for a long time. An American added that if we do think in terms of mobility and transition for the HQ element, depending on how a conflict develops, it would be easier to start in Japan and flow back to Hawaii, rather than the other way around.

Several roundtable participants raised the issue of multilateral coordination with regard to C2 modernization, believing that several different countries (like Australia, the Philippines, South Korea, etc.) could be involved in a regional contingency, and that this should be facilitated by the new concept. One Japanese participant suggested that multilateral connectivity should be designed into any upgrade of US-Japan alliance C2 arrangements. Another Japanese participant highlighted the importance of Australia in this regard, and he reminded the group of last October's update to the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation that included a mutual pledge to consult each other regarding regional security contingencies and consider coordinated action. An American participant added that although previously South Korea was unlikely to be involved in a Taiwan scenario, the Yoon administration seemed more open to engagement on this front, depending on the circumstances. Australia and Canada were also mentioned with regard to possible North Korea scenarios, given their status as "sending states" in support of the UN Command there.

Other dimensions offered by participants for considerations ranged from a Japanese participant urging consideration of a role for US and Japan Coast Guards, to another Japanese participant considering political and bureaucratic obstacles that may stymie C2 modernization. Another Japanese participant offered the model of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which if the allies established with other partners in the region could also support complicated C2 and coordination challenges.

Reflecting on the roundtable dialogue toward the end of the discussion, a US participant said that he became convinced of the importance of two aspects of this debate that are in tension with each other. These are the need to strengthen and make more permanent in Japan an empowered US joint planning and C2 capacity on one hand (to strengthen bilateral bonds and alliance readiness), and on the other hand avoid the replication of an INDOPACOM function in Japan, saying that "we should not want or need to fight the Taiwan fight from Japan." He added that his impression from many of the Japanese comments in the discussion was that they are looking for a US counterpart to Japan's new PJHQ that is closer to Japan than Hawaii.

This led him to conclude that the US will need to develop some sort of new command structure forward, and that perhaps the key question is what the scope of the mission is. And if the mission scope can be scaled down to primarily assisting with defense of Japan and activity in and around Japan's Southwest Islands, then that might make it easier to find the "sweet spot" amidst that tension referenced earlier. He suggested that perhaps building up and reconfiguring USFJ would be a way to accomplish some of the key aspects of the proposed C2 concept without making as large of an investment. However, a retired US military officer stressed that he did not think even a



reconfigured USFJ could serve as the kind of US JTF for a regional contingency that the alliance would likely need and that something new should be considered.

Next Steps

The project will convene additional roundtable discussions throughout 2023 to cover other aspects of US-Japan C2 modernization not yet covered in detail (e.g., unique opportunities and challenges vis-à-vis a North Korean contingency or how to factor-in nuclear weapons and extended deterrence considerations). The group will also convene at a 2-day bilateral Track 1.5 conference in Annapolis, MD in the Fall of 2023, with a final project report planned for spring 2024.

Please note that this summary is not a consensus document of the Task Force. It is a summary prepared by Erim Gulum and Jim Schoff based on notes from the dialogue and from subsequent follow-up discussions with participants. If you have any comments or questions regarding this summary, please contact Erim Gulum at egulum@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.*
