

What to expect from the new US–Japan Defense Guidelines

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When the current Guidelines for US–Japan Defense Cooperation were released in 1997, the core strategic impulse of Washington and Tokyo was to deal with potential armed contingencies in Northeast Asia, namely regarding the Korean peninsula and Taiwan. As the US Asia strategy emphasised deterrence of and response to these contingencies, Japan reconfigured its alliance strategy from predominantly territorial defence to proactive cooperation with the US in [‘situations in areas surrounding Japan’](#)^[1].



In the 17 years since the 1997 Guidelines were established, there have been tremendous changes in the strategic environment, the state of the US–Japan alliance and Japan’s role in it. During the first decade of this century, the US and Japan expanded their [common strategic objectives](#)^[2], driven mainly by the global anti-terrorism campaign.

The emerging strategic focus in the 2010s is undoubtedly driven by the rise of China. The continued modernisation of China’s military forces, and its recent [assertive behaviour in territorial disputes](#)^[3] in the East and South China Seas, is altering the post-Cold War strategic foundation of the US–Japan alliance.

The new US–Japan Defense Guidelines, which are expected to be released by the end of 2014, are likely to encompass four new operational domains.

First, the new Guidelines will address rising ‘grey zone’ challenges: infringements of Japanese territory that do not amount to a full-scale armed attack.

As Beijing has stepped up its assertive behaviour in the East and South China Seas, it has

become increasingly apparent that the territorial status quo can be challenged without crossing the military threshold. For this reason the [Interim Report](#) ^[4] on the revision of the Guidelines, released on 8 October, emphasised cases ‘where swift and robust responses are required to secure the peace and security of Japan even when an armed attack against Japan is not involved’. The new Guidelines will stress that both governments should have a ‘seamless’ response in all phases of a conflict, including ‘grey zone’ challenges.

This is a significant clarification of US involvement in ‘grey zone’ situations. The Interim Report could have suggested a divisional role-sharing model instead, where Japan takes sole responsibility for grey zone contingencies, while the US becomes involved later in escalation control. This division of roles would have also reflected Washington’s desire to avoid entrapment.

But a lack of US involvement in grey zone conflicts in such a role-sharing approach would be inherently risky. China could encroach on disputed zones through ‘tailored coercion’, without the risk of direct US involvement. This potentially undermines the credibility of US extended deterrence.

Against this background, the decision to adopt a seamless and all phases approach signals that Japan’s coast guard, law enforcement agencies, and Air and Maritime Self-Defense Forces — which have primary responsibility in grey zone contingencies — are inseparable from the dynamics of the US–Japan alliance.

To operationalise this seamless approach, the US and Japan will further enhance joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations, [joint training and exercises](#) ^[5] in grey zone scenarios, and cooperation among all government sectors.

Second, the new Guidelines will address how to counter China’s expanding anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capability. The modernisation of China’s conventional military capabilities is increasingly placing the US forward presence and its operations at risk. The People’s Liberation Army’s short and medium-range missiles, as well as its increasingly sophisticated navy and air force are becoming more capable of denying the US the ability to generate substantial combat power from its bases in the Western Pacific.

From the Japanese perspective, the most critical element of the US security commitment is the deployment of combat-ready US troops on Japanese soil. Without in-theatre logistical and basing support, the US and Japan cannot achieve pre-planned military operations and the augmentation of US forces.

As outlined in the Interim Report, protecting military facilities, air and missile defence, as well as resiliency, hardening and damage recovering capabilities are key to countering the A2/AD environment. The new Guidelines are also likely to suggest wider dispersal options in both commercial and non-commercial Japanese airports and ports to ensure flexible operations for US forces stationed in Japan.

Third, the US–Japan Defense Guidelines will emphasise cooperation for regional security. In

2013, the Joint Statement of the [US–Japan Security Consultative Committee](#) ^[6] highlighted the importance of regional capacity building, maritime security, disaster recovery, trilateral cooperation with Australia and South Korea, and multilateral cooperation, especially with ASEAN countries.

Most symbolically, Japan and the US have already begun building the defence capacity of the Philippines. Japan has promised to provide coast guard patrol vessels to the Philippines. The Abe administration is also seeking to [reform the guidelines for official development assistance](#) ^[7] (ODA) to allow for the strategic use of ODA to build recipient countries' defence capacity. Currently, Japan's ODA guidelines do not allow it to support foreign armed forces.

The United States is also upgrading its Navy and Marine Corp's operational access to the Philippines and offering support for their defence capabilities. These two approaches will be further integrated to jointly craft a favourable balance of power in the South China Sea.

Fourth, the US–Japan Defense Guidelines will address bilateral cooperation on new technologies, space and cyberspace. The US and Japan will work to ensure the resiliency of relevant space assets, networks and systems. Japan has called for the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency to provide information to the United States. This signifies Japan's movement towards a deeper interagency approach for the national security agenda. Cooperation in cyberspace will include improvements to individual cyber capabilities, interoperability and sharing information about cyber threats.

These expected revisions to the US–Japan Defense Guidelines will provide a more effective framework for both nations to better manage the contemporary strategic environment in Northeast Asia.

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[1] situations in areas surrounding Japan:

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/guideline2.html>

[2] common strategic objectives:

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/scc/pdfs/joint0502.pdf>

[3] assertive behaviour in territorial disputes:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/10/26/china-japan-relations-creating-a-sea-of-peace-cooperation-and-friendship/>

[4] Interim Report: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/20141003_INTERIM_REPORT.pdf

[5] joint training and exercises:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/03/the-future-of-us-japan-military-exercises/>

[6] US–Japan Security Consultative Committee:

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000016028.pdf>

[7] reform the guidelines for official development assistance:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/28/abes-aid-reform-in-the-name-of-peace/>