How to Upgrade U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation

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SUMMARY

The U.S. and Japanese governments have launched a yearlong initiative to rewrite their guidelines for bilateral defense cooperation, a step undertaken only twice before in over a half-century. Current high levels of mutual suspicion and military competition in East Asia add drama to the effort and raise the stakes. If this initiative is not managed effectively, either an operationally or politically weaker alliance could emerge or regional misunderstanding could make conflict more likely.

U.S. and Japanese policymakers need an overarching concept for defense guideline revision that allows the allies to improve their ability to respond to security challenges without exacerbating regional tensions or undermining domestic political support for the alliance in Japan. A front office/back office concept that keeps the overall division of labor intact—but with deeper integration in certain support functions—could thread this needle.

The Front Office/Back Office Concept

- Similar to the way a retail store leverages the entire company to maximize productivity at the point of sale, Japan’s “back office” support functions could be better integrated with U.S. “front office” activities.
- Functions would be determined more by each force's capabilities than by geography or mission, which is the current method.
- Japanese capabilities in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), maritime force protection, or space situational awareness, for example, could be linked more directly to U.S. or multilateral forward operations when Japan's national security is involved.

Keys to Deepening Front Office/Back Office Integration

- Incorporate functional working groups into scenario-based planning as part of the guideline revision process. Each scenario should include teams with expertise in certain areas—such as ISR and cyberspace—to identify functions that can be linked across different missions.
- Include a working group focused on bilateral coordination to ensure that complex operational communication and political accountability issues are managed effectively.
- Emphasize interagency coordination throughout the process given the large number of involved parties.
- Reach out to other countries in Asia to maximize transparency.
HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY FOR THE U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE

Washington and Tokyo first developed bilateral defense guidelines in 1978, against a backdrop of expanding Soviet naval power in East Asia and Japanese economic growth. By then Japan had improved its ability to contribute to shared security interests, and the United States wanted allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defense. This resulted in Japan protecting sea lines of communication out to 1,000 nautical miles, while the concept of the United States as the alliance’s offensive “spear” and Japan as defensive “shield” was solidified.

Two decades later, North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons increased the potential for conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Accordingly, the allies rewrote their defense guidelines in 1997 to allow for more direct Japanese “rear-area support” to U.S. forces in “situations in areas surrounding Japan.” But Japan interprets its constitution restrictively, which means that Japan’s support cannot directly enable U.S. combat operations that are disconnected from its own self-defense. Japan must also avoid operating where a battle might occur, and none of this rear-area support is automatic because Japanese legislative approval is required. Thus, Japan’s alliance contributions are strictly limited by mission (noncombat support) and by geography (rear-area operations).

Another two decades later, the allies are poised to adjust again in response to North Korea’s nuclear and missile advances, China’s growing military capabilities, and the introduction of new domains—cyberspace and outer space—to the potential battlefield.

For most of 2013, the United States and Japan reviewed their defense guidelines in light of these new dynamics, and by October the two countries agreed that a new round of revision was warranted. The “2+2” joint statement issued by the U.S. secretaries of defense and state and the Japanese ministers of foreign affairs and defense instructed alliance managers to recommend changes to accomplish several objectives beyond the core mission of responding to a possible armed attack against Japan. The aims include:

1. expanding the scope of bilateral cooperation,
2. promoting security cooperation with other regional partners,
3. enhancing bilateral consultation and coordination mechanisms,
4. describing the appropriate role sharing within bilateral defense cooperation, and
5. evaluating bilateral defense cooperation in emerging strategic domains.

The allies will pursue these objectives amid other evolving Japanese defense reforms, stimulated by regional developments and quiet concern in Tokyo about U.S. staying power in the region. These reforms include establishing a new National Security Council—to improve strategic decisionmaking and crisis management—and possibly loosening restrictions on Japan’s ability to participate in collective self-defense, which could change how the allies cooperate in a North Korean crisis or a United Nations–authorized peace enforcement operation.

Washington and Tokyo must also navigate historical comparisons to past guideline revisions. If the first two were largely about growing threats from the Soviet Union and North Korea, respectively, many assume—
misparkedly—that this time it must be all about China.

Any given security cooperation mission involves an overlapping cycle of activity that runs continuously through information gathering, assessment and analysis, decision-making, planning, mobilization, execution, and back to information gathering, assessment, and so on. The goal of this revision effort should be to help Japan become a more meaningful and reliable partner in many of these activities, bilaterally with the United States as well as in broader coalitions. Exploring these opportunities concretely and then taking the steps necessary to operationalize the most promising should be the primary objective of the defense guideline revision process. This will be ambitious and complex—given the need to bring together subject-matter experts from each country who have rarely worked together before—but this is the task assigned by the 2+2.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR GUIDELINE REVISION**

Developing an overarching concept to guide this new era of alliance cooperation will help the allies navigate the complex revision process. A conceptual framework similar to the spear/shield and forward area/rear area mantras of the past is necessary to describe—for both internal and external audiences—the purpose, value, and limits of alliance cooperation. It should serve as a bridge between the two nations’ defense planning documents, and it will shape how each military perceives its role and manages the procurement and training associated with their cooperation. Without a clear concept, alliance ties can weaken, defense planning can lose focus, and neighbors are more likely to misinterpret alliance intentions.

Designing this framework begins with the underlying goal of the 2+2 joint statement that the United States and Japan should “be full partners in a more balanced and effective Alliance” in which they “can jointly and ably rise to meet the regional and global challenges of the 21st century.” Connectivity and interoperability are key enablers for any such “jointness,” and they are also highlighted in Japan’s new National Security Strategy and National Defense Program Guidelines released in December 2013. The challenge is both to improve alliance capabilities and encourage broader security cooperation with other nations to enhance regional stability, while discouraging military rivalry.

To accomplish this, the alliance should pursue a capabilities-based (or functional) approach to cooperation that can apply to different situations. A functional approach can enhance alliance flexibility and better integrate alliance cooperation than the current approach without carving out new—potentially politically sensitive—overseas missions for Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF). This approach can be applied to the core alliance mission (responding to armed attack against Japan), as well as to wider regional/global security cooperation scenarios in both bilateral and multilateral contexts.

The new approach stands in contrast to the location- and mission-oriented nature of past and current guidelines. The current defense guidelines from the 1990s make a distinction between forward-area and rear-area activities, and they identify specific missions that Japan’s SDF can carry out on its own. This means that Washington and Tokyo do not fully leverage alliance potential because an “I’ll do this here, while you do that there” dynamic leads to inefficiencies when resources are not shared. Japanese ISR to support its own minesweeping...
or search and rescue, for example, could be applied technically to U.S. forward operations (and vice versa), but the current guidelines constrain this potential synergy.

With adjustments to Japan’s interpretation of its right to exercise collective self-defense pending, it might be possible to replace the forward area/rear area concept with a front office/back office framework that fosters security cooperation without overemphasizing where it takes place. Even without major adjustments to collective self-defense, North Korean nuclear, missile, and cyberwarfare advances have arguably made “rear area” distinctions irrelevant, so defense-of-Japan planning can take advantage of this new concept as well. After all, if North Korea can attack Japanese assets or territory at will, then any location is a potential battlefield and tighter offense-defense alliance coordination is required to prepare for these contingencies.

**THE FRONT OFFICE/BACK OFFICE CONCEPT**

Using the example of a retail store, under current defense guidelines U.S. forces carry out all activities that take place at the store—that is, in the forward area. This includes staffing and supplying the store, inventory management, accounting, information technology (IT), store security, store-related customer and product research, and other functions. Everything directly connected to store operations is handled by the United States.

In this analogy, Japan tentatively offers to support certain store operations from a physical distance, possibly maintaining a supply depot offsite, providing a location for store personnel to live or receive training, helping employees if they get sick, and even producing and supplying some select items for the store. Japan does not deliver supplies all the way to the store site, bringing them instead to a nearby location for final pickup by the United States or another retail partner—for example, Australia or the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea). Operations are inefficient in this arrangement, and Japanese involvement in alliance activity is invariably at a junior or subcontracted status. Japan is not considered an equal partner in store operations.

Under the new concept, the United States would still be in charge of front-office functions (that is, handling operations in the store), but Japan could be more deeply involved in back-office functions that link directly to activities in the store. In the store analogy, this could include accounting, market research, IT, store security, and supply and logistics.

The store’s accounting team, for example, is physically located at headquarters, not at the storefront, but it is intimately involved in the development and maintenance of the point-of-sale system. Information from the store is sent to accounting in real time and is shared with other departments like market research and logistics. This makes it possible for cash flow and billing to be managed, market strategy to be adjusted to take advantage of trending data, and the supply chain to be managed as efficiently as possible.

Translating this into the defense alliance, these back-office responsibilities might be analogous to ISR and domain awareness; more collaborative planning; cybersecurity; electronic warfare; antisubmarine warfare; missile defense; and more direct logistical support. So as Japan invests in new ISR capabilities, such as surveillance drones and X-band communications satellites, it could become a more vital partner in the area of
domain awareness and information management, especially if these systems are fully compatible with U.S. assets.

Focusing on back-office functions would not relegate Japan to rear-area missions only, since those activities are more directly related to what actually happens “in the store,” and carrying out their roles effectively requires close cooperation with U.S. or coalition forces at the front. Japan could assist with forward-area reconnaissance (including underwater), for example, or develop complementary electronic warfare capabilities that protect against GPS jamming or interfere with enemy communications. There are a variety of options, depending on what is politically sustainable in Japan and acceptable around the region.

**BENEFITS OF THE CONCEPT**

Adopting a front office/back office approach would increase alliance productivity. Even if Japan spends most of its time in the rear area, lessons are learned as a team and this helps the allies make quicker adjustments for improvement in the heat of battle.

The alliance would also benefit from a more collaborative structure. In the corporate hierarchy, back-office leaders are on the same level as other executives, and they are closely involved in strategic planning for any new initiative. They are considered integral to business operations, and this collaboration maximizes efficiency and productivity.

A front office/back office construct is one way to upgrade bilateral defense cooperation in a meaningful but more politically acceptable way—not only within Japan, but also for other nations in the region, particularly the ROK. Domestically speaking, forward deployment of Japan’s SDF into hostile areas will be almost impossible in most bilateral or multilateral coalition operations due to political resistance and lingering legal restraints, despite Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s defense reform efforts. Most Japanese cherish their “peace constitution” and rarely support SDF dispatch to areas of potential conflict. The physical concept of “rear area” will be hard to break among the Japanese public, which has only recently become comfortable with overseas deployments to noncombat zones. The front office/back office concept is an incremental evolution of alliance cooperation in this regard, since Japan for the most part would connect to forward operations by technical means without a physical forward presence.

A limit on Japanese forward presence, which this concept would provide, should receive a positive response in the region. The ROK has been wary of Japan’s defense reform agenda, in part for fear that it could lead to deployment of Japanese forces onto the Korean Peninsula in a North Korean contingency, however remote a possibility. In this sense, a front office/back office approach can help reassure Seoul that it can gain the operational benefit of more effective U.S.-Japan support without the political problems associated with Japanese “boots” on Korean ground. In addition, closer U.S.-Japan coordination will be more reassuring to neighbors compared to the alternative, which could be a Japan that develops greater military independence from the United States.

Moreover, a functional approach to guideline revision would focus less on specific threats and the location of alliance cooperation, which would help counter the assumption that defense guideline revision is simply a reaction to China’s military rise. China’s muscle flexing is a factor, of course, but defense guideline
revision has just as much to do with the technological evolution of warfare, North Korea’s development of nuclear armed missiles, and the need to extract more productivity from tight alliance defense budgets. Putting the focus on capabilities and not threats would be consistent with U.S. statements that the alliance is designed to deal with more than just China contingencies, though deep Chinese suspicion of the alliance means that Washington and Tokyo should seek to reassure Beijing of their peaceful intent even as they maintain a posture of deterrence in the East China Sea.

The functional approach can also be an opportunity to strengthen regional security cooperation by enhancing the capacity of regional coalitions to address common security challenges. The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, for example, essentially utilize a front office/back office concept, with different countries taking the lead depending on the situation. The United States led in Afghanistan, while European nations led the enforcement of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 to impose a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011. Many East Asian nations are also doing this in the Gulf of Aden through coordinated counterpiracy operations, for example, and this framework could be extended in Asia to counter illicit weapons proliferation, respond to large-scale natural disasters, or deploy more capable peacekeeping and peace-building teams.

**SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS OF FRONT OFFICE/BACK OFFICE TO THE ALLIANCE**

The bilateral discussion about guideline revision will use specific scenario-based workshops to inform deliberations. Breaking down the associated missions into their components or functions could help guide the scenario-driven process more productively. Ideally, Japan would be able to play certain roles that cut across various mission sets—to enhance cooperation and efficiency—though it might take years before this is fully realized in the field. Tokyo’s plan to allow the country to exercise its right of collective self-defense will be important in this regard, since it would allow these functions to be applied to a wider range of missions under a wider range of circumstances than is currently the case.

Enabling front office success must be the overarching goal. If involving Japan more substantively in these back-office functions does not improve upon what the United States can already do alone, then it is not worthwhile. This should not be a political exercise.

As for how front office/back office might manifest itself in the alliance, the best examples are in the areas of ISR (including the use of space), cybersecurity, research and development, force protection and missile defense, consequence management, interdiction and maritime security, antisubmarine and electronic warfare, and more comprehensive logistical support. This would be in addition to Japanese forces’ existing support of activities in areas surrounding Japan, including search and rescue, refugee assistance, rear-area supply and medical services, and others.

Protecting sea lines of communication has long been an important coordinated alliance function, and this information-sharing effort is increasingly applicable to space. The allies are already taking steps to exchange space situational awareness information to protect space lines of communication, and this could develop a defense component as well.

The back-office functions can be applied to ground or maritime operations, and the
focus can be on domain awareness, upgrading coordinated (or at times, joint) analysis and decisionmaking, and timely response and supply-line sustainability.

Finally, Japan’s new National Defense Program Guidelines and National Security Strategy emphasize the need for Tokyo to strengthen its ability to protect remote islands from encroachment by China, with a particular emphasis on the uninhabited Senkaku Islands. Japanese defense planners pay a lot of attention to potential “gray zone” conflict (neither peace nor war), featuring some kind of low-level military or paramilitary incident in the East China Sea that threatens to escalate. Japan has primary responsibility to respond in situations where its assets are threatened, but the United States pledges to help Japan as necessary. In these situations, the front office/back office roles could be reversed, with the United States providing operational (and political) support for Japan’s front-office operation.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEEPENING ALLIANCE INTEGRATION**

As U.S. and Japanese alliance managers and defense planners engage in deliberations and carry out their 2+2 homework in a series of meetings scattered throughout 2014, they should take steps to further integrate the alliance. These steps will help support a front office/back office approach to defense guideline revision that will benefit both the allies and the region.

**INCORPORATE FUNCTIONAL WORKING GROUPS INTO SCENARIO-BASED PLANNING GROUPS.** When organizing national delegations of bureaucrats and military officers to conduct scenario-based dialogues, the allies should include capabilities-based working groups that are consistent throughout the different scenarios. In this way, scenarios will involve teams with expertise in key areas, such as ISR, space, cyberspace, logistics, maritime force protection, and missile defense, among others. The working groups will look for ways to link certain functions across various missions and better network them within the alliance.

**INCLUDE A SPECIFIC WORKING GROUP FOCUSED ON BILATERAL CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION MECHANISMS IN THE REVISION PROCESS.** Too often in the past such cooperation has been an afterthought. A bilateral coordination mechanism was called for in the 1997 guidelines, for example, but it was never properly exercised or activated. The 2+2 joint statement also encouraged bilateral coordination, and it will be even more important in a front office/back office framework. Effective operational communication, information-reporting procedures, and overall accountability issues will be more complex and crucial in this construct than in the past. They should be factored in from the beginning.

**CAREFULLY MANAGE INTERAGENCY COORDINATION IN THE UNITED STATES.** A large number of stakeholders have an interest in this process, including the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, Pacific Command, U.S. Forces Japan, U.S. Forces Korea, the Joint Staff and each branch of the armed forces, the National Security Council, and Congress. Coordinating those interested parties will be critical to ensuring a better-integrated alliance, but it will be unwieldy.

To coordinate these bodies, attention at the assistant secretary (also known as 3-star) level to the guideline revision is important, even if most of the day-to-day deliberations and negotiations are conducted at lower levels. It
is necessary for 3-star leaders of relevant agencies to review progress in guideline revision as a group and provide coordinated guidance for the negotiating team. Higher-level attention will be required at key junctures.

AVOID OVEREMPHASIZING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GUIDELINE REVISION AND POSSIBLE JAPANESE CHANGES TO COLLECTIVE SELF-DEFENSE. These adjustments might take six months or longer to clarify, and the revision process could be nearly over before a decision is made. Of course, Japan’s self-defense stance should still be factored into the revision process. The front office/back office concept can be constructively examined using a defense-of-Japan scenario and a North Korean scenario that includes an early North Korean attack on Japanese ships or a U.S. base in Japan, thus putting Japan in self-defense mode.

ENSURE THAT THE U.S.-JAPAN EXTENDED DETERRENCE DIALOGUE IS SUFFICIENTLY LINKED TO DEFENSE GUIDELINE REVISION. Japan and the United States are engaged in official biannual alliance meetings, dubbed the Extended Deterrence Dialogue, to consider nuclear deterrence and issues related to escalation control and signaling to adversaries. These topics are closely linked to guideline revision, because the way the allies choose to deploy their capabilities will prompt reaction by others. Especially in a North Korea scenario, low-level conflict that triggers an alliance response could escalate to nuclear war if not carefully managed.

ACTIVELY EXPLAIN GUIDELINE REVISION PROGRESS TO JAPAN’S NEIGHBORS. At times, the allies should explain the process in broad terms to other interested parties and seek feedback. The ROK and Australia are particularly important to keep informed because they are potential security coalition partners, along with other countries in Southeast Asia or Europe. China and Russia should also be included to maximize transparency and build confidence (especially in the context of North Korea) and to demonstrate alliance resolve in relation to a possible East China Sea scenario.

RETAIN THE OPTION OF U.S. UNILATERAL ACTION. The allies must remember that any Japanese defense role will ultimately require legislative approval in Tokyo, so U.S. operations cannot be wholly dependent on Japan’s contribution as described in the revised guidelines. Joint action should represent an improvement over unilateral operations by the United States, but unilateral action must remain feasible when necessary.

UPGRADES TAKE TIME

The United States and Japan are pursuing a December 2014 deadline to conclude the revision process, but they should not be bound by that target. It might be necessary—politically or logistically—to carry discussions into 2015. This does not represent failure. It simply reflects the complexity and gravity of this initiative. Japan’s decision on collective self-defense, the health of regional relations, and U.S. budget politics are all key variables that can affect this process. The important thing is to stay focused on the opportunity to qualitatively upgrade alliance defense cooperation for the benefit of each nation and for the region.