

**The US-Japan alliance is mutually reinforcing as China increasingly pushes its military and political power forward.**



USAF photo by SrA. Katrina M. Brisbin

By Richard Halloran

# The US, Japan, ... and China

**T**he Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, writing 2,500 years ago, said, “to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.”

The People’s Republic of China is applying Sun Tzu’s maxim today in the East China Sea, apparently seeking to drive American forces out of bases on the Japanese island of Okinawa without going to war. China’s leaders have sought to

poke and prod without arousing an armed response from Japan and the US.

By doing so, China has been testing the half-century-old military and political alliance between Japan and the US. Officers on both sides say it’s a solid alliance, even if it requires daily maintenance due to differ-

*Top: Japan Air Self-Defense Force airmen prepare an F-2 for takeoff during the multilateral exercise Cope North 2014 at Andersen AFB, Guam. Left: Japanese MSgt. Hiroshi Moriyama, a loadmaster, guides a forklift out of a C-130 at the airport on Rota, an island in the Northern Marianas. Airmen from Japan, Australia, and the US performed a humanitarian relief mission on the island—during Cope North—when the island’s governor declared a state of emergency.*



USAF photo by SrA. Marianne Santos

ences in culture and language. Politically, though, the partnership is hampered by stagnant Japanese politics and American preoccupation with its own political and economic problems.

One step at a time, China has moved to pressure Japan. It claimed the uninhabited Japanese-held Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea—pinnacles of rock that the Chinese call Diaoyu. China has declared an air defense identification zone adjacent to Japanese islands and waters. It has sent bombers flying through those same areas and scrambled fighters to monitor Japanese and US aircraft. The Chinese have steamed coast guard vessels inside Japan's 12-mile limit and sailed warships and submarines through Japan's southern archipelago to reach the open waters of the Pacific.

Toshi Yoshihara, a scholar specializing in Chinese maritime issues at the Naval War College in Rhode Island, says China intends to "induce caution, to induce hesitation" by Japan and the US, which is obligated by treaty to help defend Japan. A naturalized US citizen, Yoshihara says China seeks to avoid a "decisive battle" with Japan and the US by forging an "incremental strategy."

The target of this strategy is evidently the Ryukyu island chain, which stretches 650 miles from the southern tip of Japan's island of Kyushu nearly to Taiwan, the self-governing island claimed by Beijing. Okinawa is the largest and most important isle in the Ryukyus and is the site of Kadena Air Base, the hub of US airpower in the western Pacific.

The Chinese Communist Party's newspaper, the *People's Daily*, laid out Beijing's objectives on the Ryukyus, asserting that the islands "were not historically part of Chinese territory" but constituted "an independent kingdom that paid tribute to China."

Japan annexed the islands in 1879 during the Meiji Restoration, which propelled the then-feudal nation into the modern world. Japan retained control of the islands after World War II ended in 1945. The *People's Daily* suggested that China would seek to revive the Kingdom of the Ryukyus, known in Chinese as Liu Chiu, and bring them once again under Beijing's controlling influence. The issue is "an unsolved historical problem," the newspaper said.

In a background conversation, a political advisor to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said last fall that Abe took the

**US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel tours China's Non-commissioned Officer Academy in Beijing, accompanied by Chinese military officers. Chinese officials were unhappy with Hagel's remarks in Japan, and let him know it.**

Chinese threat to the Ryukyus seriously and sees it as a long-term objective of Beijing. A Japanese military officer with access to intelligence assessments said his country is keenly aware of China's intentions. Both asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue. The Japanese government's most recent National Defense Program Guidelines assert that the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) would "develop full amphibious capability in order to land, recapture, and secure without delay in case of any invasion to any remote island."

### A SERIOUS COMMITMENT

Col. Marc Reese, a senior officer in the strategy, plans, and programs staff at USAF's Pacific Air Forces headquarters in Hawaii, declined to talk specifically about China's strategy but noted: "This is not new; the Chinese have done this before." With a nod to Sun Tzu, he said, "We have to be students of history."

When President Barack Obama was in Tokyo in late April, he sought to deter China by asserting that the US commitment to Japan's defense was "absolute." Noting that the US-Japan security treaty "preceded my birth," the President said it specifically covered the Senkaku islands claimed by China but administered by Japan as part of Okinawa prefecture.

Earlier that month, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel met with his Japanese counterpart, Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera, in Tokyo, offering reassurances that the US would support Japan in a conflict with China. The low-key US response to Russia's Crimean land grab in March had worried Japanese leaders. Hagel underscored his assurances by revealing plans to increase the number of Navy Aegis cruisers deployed to Japan from five to seven.

Their mission: Build up ballistic missile defenses in the western Pacific. "We take seriously America's treaty commitments," Hagel said.

Hagel's trip continued to China, where he was greeted by a testy article in Xinhua, the state news agency. "As the new Defense Secretary, Hagel has to be informed of some basic facts," Xinhua wrote. "In fact, the growing assertiveness of Japan could be partly attributed to the United States. Irresponsible remarks by some US politicians have emboldened the rightist forces in Tokyo."

Then, a vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, which governs the People's Liberation Army, told Hagel that China was "dissatisfied" with his comments in Japan. Gen. Fan Changlong contended that Hagel's remarks to "Japanese politicians were tough—and with a clear attitude." The Minister of Defense, Gen. Chang Wanquan, was even more pointed, emphasizing that "China has indisputable sovereignty" over contested islands in the East China and South China Seas. He added: "We will neither compromise on, concede, or trade on territory and sovereignty nor tolerate them being infringed on even a little bit."

Hagel, after an address at the PLA's National Defense University, was the target of questions accusing the US of taking sides with Japan against China. "You're using such issues of Diaoyu Islands and the South China Sea issue," said one officer, "to make trouble for China to hamper its development."

Joseph A. Bosco, a former China country director in the Pentagon, pointed to Beijing's moves to claim most of the South China Sea and occupy islands claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, and other nations in Southeast Asia.

DOD photo by Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo





USAF Photo by Scott M. Ash

**US Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh III (l) meets with the chief of China's air force in Beijing last September. The two generals are seated beneath an enormous painting depicting China's most advanced operational fighter, the J-10.**

Writing in *Politico*, Bosco said that “China is obviously betting that Washington will not have the means or the will to mount a sustained resistance to aggressive Chinese moves in the South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and Yellow Sea.” He argued that “China, following the teachings of Sun Tzu, thinks and plans for the long haul and prides itself on patience, perseverance, and wearing down the will of its opponents.”

Caution is needed, suggested Denny Roy, a senior research fellow at the East-West Center, an educational institute in Honolulu. “Some Chinese are talking about prying the Ryukyus away from Japan,” he said. “This is not officially announced PRC policy, but such talk naturally alarms the Japanese.”

In a wider context, Roy said many Chinese “have an inchoate desire for a degree of control over the area immediately around China.” He said this is partly due to “the sense of insecurity inculcated by the ravages of the ‘Century of Shame’” in which European powers, Japan, and the US occupied parts of China until 1949. It was also “partly because China has been the region’s dominant power through much of history and Chinese see this as the natural order.”

The Chinese concentrate military attention on Kadena because they perceive it to be the base of a prime aerial threat. Kadena is home to the 18th Wing, a large and diverse combat unit. It comprises two F-15 fighter squadrons; an air refueling squadron of KC-135s; E-3 AWACS; intelligence and communication units; rescue

and medical evacuation operators; and maintenance and civil engineer squadrons. Tenants include special operations forces. Altogether, 8,000 USAF personnel are posted to Kadena, 40 percent of all those assigned to PACAF. About 4,000 Japanese also work on the base.

In addition, combat squadrons regularly rotate to Kadena from the US for four-month deployments. In mid-January, 12 F-22 Raptors from JB Langley-Eustis, Va., flew to Kadena with 300 airmen to train with the US squadrons and Japan’s Air Self-Defense Forces. The JASDF has 20 combat aircraft stationed at the nearby Naha Air Base, which scrambles alert aircraft in response to Chinese incursions. The JASDF is planning to move four of its 13 E-2C early warning aircraft from Misawa Air Base in northeastern Japan to Naha to add patrols over the southwestern chain of islands, according to Japanese press reports.

For 10 years, USAF has been rotating B-52 and B-2 bombers and accompanying tankers through Andersen AFB, Guam, to maintain the nation’s continuous bomber presence in the Pacific. Reese said these rotations were intended not only for training but for “messaging,” to reassure allies and deter potential adversaries.

The operations of these 113 aircraft have not escaped the eyes of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force, which mounted 333 aerial patrols over the East China Sea during 2013, according to the *Liberation Daily*, an official publication of the PLA. Chinese political and military spokesmen regularly complain about USAF and JASDF

flights, especially regarding intelligence missions flown out of Kadena.

The *People’s Daily* contended that “the primary source of incursions was flights by the ferret aircraft from Kadena, which usually conducted reconnaissance in the exclusive economic zone just beyond China’s 12-nautical-mile limit. This reconnaissance was probably aimed at acquiring the operating frequency of radar stations on the coast or the offshore islands of China, as well as plotting the network of radio communication stations along the coast. It might also be intended to identify the location of some radar stations and electronic units that were not yet ready for use or had not yet entered service.”

Viewed from the perspective of a Chinese operations officer in the Nanjing Military District on China’s coast, US airpower in East Asia might be alarming. To his left front are USAF F-16s based at Osan Air Base and Kunsan Air Base in South Korea, some 600 miles from China’s capital in Beijing. The F-16s at Misawa, Japan, are 1,300 miles from Beijing. To his front would be Kadena, key to the entire array—450 miles from China’s coast and 510 miles from China’s leading port, Shanghai. To his right, but at some distance—1,850 miles—is Guam, where the Air Force and other services have gradually expanded their presence.

## FARTHER ON

US aircraft carriers operate in the seas east of Taiwan, as they have in past crises. In Southeast Asia, the US has signed an agreement with the Philippines to regain access to bases in the one-time US colony. Access has been granted by Thailand, a treaty ally. B-52 bombers have begun rotations to Darwin in northern Australia, where they are within striking distance of China’s vital shipping lanes through the South China Sea.

In Japan itself, US and Japanese officials seek to improve already effective working relations. The PACAF commander, Gen. Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle, told interviewers at an Air Force Association symposium in Los Angeles, “We are doing much closer coordination on air and missile defense with the Japanese to deal with a wider spectrum of regional threats.”

In March 2012, USAF’s 5th Air Force and the JASDF stood up adjacent air operating coordination centers at Yokota Air Base, west of Tokyo. The centers are equipped with compatible computers so that both can view a common picture. US and Japanese officers need only walk a few steps to confer. “That makes daily coordination much easier, and routine.”

said Reese, who served in Japan before coming to PACAF.

The concept was tested in December 2013. At the bilateral AOCC, 5th Air Force and the JASDF supported operation Yama Sakura, an annual weeklong exercise for ground troops in northern Japan. American and Japanese airmen were tasked to integrate intelligence, plans, operations, and airlift. A 5th Air Force report said the airmen used “real-time three-dimensional mapping” to generate tasking orders.

About the same time, the Japanese government released a policy statement noting that a national security council had been organized and a national security strategy had been established. The statement set a tone by saying: “The security environment around Japan has become increasingly severe as represented by nuclear and missile development by North Korea.” The national defense program set priorities, one of which was “ensuring maritime and air superiority” over the southwestern islands.

Subsequently, Japan’s Foreign Ministry issued updated guidelines on Japan-US defense coordination in peacetime, during an attack on Japan, and “in areas surrounding Japan,” implying North and South Korea, China, and Taiwan. The guidelines called for an increase in “information and intelligence sharing” and policy consultations on “as many levels as possible and on the broadest range of subjects.” In the event of an armed attack on Japan, such as the southwestern chain of islands, “Japan will have primary responsibility” to repel the assault. The US, the guidelines said, “will provide appropriate support to Japan.”

The guidelines, issued after close consultation with US officials, underscored the interlocking nature of US-Japan military operations. The forces of the two nations “will conduct effective joint operations” of their ground, maritime, and air services, the guidelines said.

In an apparent acknowledgement that combined US and JASDF assets in Japan may not be sufficient, the guidelines said: “The United States will introduce reinforcements in a timely manner, and Japan will establish and maintain the bases to facilitate these deployments.” Command and control will be mounted from a “bilateral coordination center” deep underground in the Defense Ministry’s Tokyo headquarters, with spaces ready for US liaison officers.

To prepare for joint operations, the training of US and Japanese aviators goes on at local, regional, and national levels, Reese said. Sometimes USF-16s train with Japanese F-2s, which are similar to F-16s. The US and Japanese pilots sometimes fly

in concert and sometimes against each other as they practice defending Japan.

Some drills have Americans flying out of Kadena to Japanese bases in Kyushu, Japan’s southern island; Honshu, Japan’s main island; or Hokkaido, Japan’s northern island. Last year, USAF invited the JASDF and the Royal Australian Air Force to fly to Guam for Cope North exercises that included both combat drills and disaster relief.

The JASDF also recently participated in a demanding Red Flag drill in Alaska. That particular exercise included pilots and aircraft from South Korea—noteworthy because the South Korean government and press in recent months have stirred up long-standing animosities toward Japan.

On the ground, Japan’s Western Army in Kyushu has been training two regiments in amphibious operations with an assist from the US Marine Corps. This has been a new venture because Japan has not had marines since World War II. The regiments comprise 1,200 to 1,500 soldiers, what Americans might call an oversized battalion. Japan’s most recent defense budget also calls for buying V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft like those the Marine Corps launches from the Navy’s amphibious ships.

The JSDF conducted a large amphibious exercise last summer called Dawn Blitz in which 1,000 Japanese soldiers were moved by ship to “invade” San Clemente Island off the coast of California. Then they boarded ships to “invade” Camp Pendleton, the US Marine base in California.

Col. Grant Newsham, a Marine Corps liaison officer, said, “The JSDF did the necessary staff planning and coordination, as well as the necessary logistics work, and conducted these operations with modest US assistance.” He said the JSDF flew four helicopters without incident off US Navy ships. The Japan Ground Self-Defense Force demonstrated an ability to coordinate naval gunfire, helicopter attacks, and mortar fire.

The biggest shortcoming of the operation was in communications, but the Maritime Self-Defense Force and the GSDF “managed to jury-rig a communications network,” Newsham said, adding that communications with US forces “needs improvement.”

In early 2014, another exercise called Iron Fist brought 250 soldiers from Japan’s Western Army to Camp Pendleton, Calif., to be paired with Marine reconnaissance teams, snipers, and amphibious trainers.

While the US and Japanese military services have been gradually moving ahead in joint training and operations, it remains to be seen whether the two nations’ political leaders will act against threats from China, North Korea, or elsewhere.

In Tokyo, political leadership has been moribund for 25 years. During that time, 17 prime ministers have held office, most for little more than a year. The exception was Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who was in office from 2001 to 2006.

Abe came to office in late 2012 promising to lead Japan out of the pacifism that has been the hallmark of his nation’s stance on security since its defeat in World War II. He pledged to revise Japanese policy so that Japan’s forces could engage in “collective security.” Under the US-Japan security treaty, the US is obligated to defend Japan, but Japan is not obliged to defend the US.

The prime minister has suggested that Japan spend more for defense. As a matter of policy—not law—defense spending has been held to one percent of gross national product for decades. Abe has indicated that he’d like to amend the constitution’s famed Article Nine, which forbids Japan from using force as an instrument of national policy. Abe has set up a national security council, patterned after that of the US, to pull together the agencies concerned with security. Obama’s national security advisor, Susan E. Rice, and Abe’s first national security advisor, Shotaro Yachi, agreed in Washington in January “to frequent regular communications” between the two staffs.

In Abe’s national security strategy, he states that since the end of World War II, “Japan has adhered to a basic policy of maintaining an exclusively national defense-oriented policy, not becoming a military power.” Further, the document declares, Japan has contributed to stability in Asia “by enhancing its alliance with the United States.”

The Abe Cabinet has also relaxed a decades-old ban on arms exports, which may give Japan a bit more clout with Asian neighbors. Even so, much remains to be done before Abe can claim to have reformed Japan’s security posture.

A key facet of Obama’s foreign policy since late 2011 has been the rebalance of focus on that region. In his State of the Union address in January, however, Obama favored his domestic agenda and gave short shrift to foreign policy and security except for a discussion of the Middle East and Iran. He barely mentioned Asia.

Japan, not at all. ■

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