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AN AMPHIBIOUS CAPABILITY IN JAPAN'S SELF-DEFENSE FORCE

Operationalizing Dynamic Defense

Justin Goldman

Today the Japanese face an increasingly complex regional-security environment, particularly along the southwestern islands, where incursions by Chinese government vessels are increasingly occurring in what Japan claims as its territorial waters. The security of offshore islands has developed as an area of focus within Japanese defense planning, and Japan has begun building up modest island-defense capabilities.¹ Although the nature and range of threats faced have evolved, a core focus of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) remains the same—the requirement to protect the nation from an amphibious invasion.² While the JSDF has developed some robust platforms, its current state also reflects the constraints placed on its development under the 1947 constitution, enacted during the occupation following World War II.

Response to this increased regional tension and the current challenge of island defense make it important for Japan to develop a unified amphibious capability. The reasons begin in the current defense thinking in Japan. Shortly after a

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Chinese trawler collided with a Japan Coast Guard (JCG) vessel in October 2010, the government released the current National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG). A robust amphibious force would help meet that document's requirement that the future defense force possess "readiness, mobility, flexibility, sustainability, and versatility." Japan has confronted challenging conditions in recent years during times of domestic political uncertainty, ranging from the 11 March 2011 triple

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disaster—a magnitude 9 earthquake generating 40.5-meter tsunami waves and causing reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima nuclear power plant—to the government’s decision in September 2012 to purchase three of the Senkaku Islands from their private owner. The Senkaku Islands are a group of five islands at the southernmost tip of the archipelago, referred to as Japan’s “southwestern islands,” that extends downward from Kyushu and effectively divides the East China Sea from the Pacific. While the Japanese hold that there is no territorial sovereignty issue, the Chinese, who refer to the group as the Diaoyu Islands, also lay claim to them.

The 2011 white paper *Defense of Japan* states explicitly that “in the case of crises enveloping one or more of Japan’s offshore islands, it is vital that Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Force units carry out joint operations rapidly and flexibly.”³ Following his December 2012 election, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe ordered the existing NDPG—that of 2010—frozen and directed Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera to review and revise the guidelines. Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has expressed its desire to increase defense spending and to strengthen the nation’s defense posture in response to growing Chinese assertiveness in the East China Sea, making an amphibious capability increasingly relevant.⁴

Japanese defense thinking naturally leads to the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the development of a Japanese amphibious capability presents an excellent opportunity for both partners. The U.S. Marine Corps, in partnership with the U.S. Navy, has the doctrine and experience to support the JSDF in developing this capability. As the United States “rebalances” toward Asia, enhanced cooperation will bolster the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance in defending Japan and ensuring regional stability. This article concludes by considering the impact of such a capability for Japanese decision makers. Amphibious forces will enhance Japan’s ability to contend with China’s active maritime presence, especially to defend the Senkaku Islands. Today’s crises and future complex contingencies will allow less advance warning than in the past to those responsible for policy decisions.⁵ With Chinese and Japanese forces operating in proximity within these waters, the risk of escalation arises, and Japan must ensure it maintains the readiness to respond.⁶ Ultimately, an amphibious capability comprising elements of all three services within the JSDF would ensure that the necessary air assets and sealift are available to bring a combined-arms force to bear in an unfolding crisis.

DEVELOPMENTS TOWARD A DYNAMIC DEFENSE FORCE

The 2010 NDPG reflected Japan’s recognition of the need to enhance its defense posture in the East China Sea and along the southern Ryukyu island chain to contend with China’s assertive military modernization. The following sections

will look at the increasing Ministry of Defense (MOD) attention placed on joint operations in the SDF; the enhancement of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance highlighted in Japanese defense thinking; and the need for greater deterrence. The heart of a recent initiative known as “the Dynamic Defense Force”—calling for active use of the SDF during normal conditions to provide deterrence and stabilization, particularly along the southwestern islands—is operational readiness for crisis response. In the case of amphibious forces, this is a joint pursuit, integrating efforts of all three services.⁷ This concept builds on actions taken in recent years by Japanese decision makers to move “from an SDF that simply exists to an SDF that actually works,” as former defense minister Shigeru Ishiba stated in the foreword of the 2004 defense white paper.⁸

The relatively limited strategic lift and the short range of key capabilities central to amphibious operations, such as ship-to-shore connectors, reflect the constraints of Japan's postwar constitution. The 1957 Basic Policy for National Defense established the priorities of the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) as waging antisubmarine warfare, protecting sea lines of communication, and defending against an invasion from the sea.⁹ The MSDF was allowed to employ limited numbers of tank landing ships (LSTs) to transport reinforcements to Hokkaido to meet an anticipated Soviet invasion, but a 1960 proposal for a helicopter carrier for antisubmarine warfare, initially planned at six thousand tons and revised up to eleven thousand, was ultimately rejected, owing to the continuing aversion to military matters in Japan.¹⁰ While the strategy Japan has built taking these constraints into account has held for decades, the intensifying security situation around the southwestern islands brings it into question. The security environment Japan now faces was exacerbated by the January 2013 incident where a Chinese frigate reportedly locked fire-control radar on an MSDF destroyer in the East China Sea, 180 kilometers north of the Senkaku Islands.¹¹ In late April 2013 Prime Minister Abe told the Diet that the country would act decisively against attempts to enter its territorial waters and make a landing on the islands.¹²

JOINT MOBILITY

The operational utility of the SDF in responding to a crisis depends on its capacity for rapid maneuver of forces to the scene, particularly in the southwestern islands. “The 2004 NDPG directed the SDF toward a multirole, flexible force. Current efforts build on this recognizing the need to have a more active force, rather than our static past,” according to Dr. Tomohiko Satake, of the National Institute for Defense Studies.¹³ Amphibious operations are expeditionary in nature, and in the defense of the nation the forces involved must be capable of immediate deployment in an integrated manner. Rapid maneuver along the littoral of

the southwestern islands is essential to an ability to dictate the tempo in a crisis. “Our President,” says Satake, referring to the head of his institute, “has argued that the Dynamic Defense Force concept should be characterized by being swift, seamless, and sustainable. I think this concept is quite relevant to today’s Japanese situation, especially in terms of the defense of offshore islands.”¹⁴

The effectiveness of forces deployed to the southwestern islands, in turn, will depend on adequate early warning. The *Mid-term Defense Program (FY 2011–2015)* captures this point in its guidance to the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF). It directs the GSDF to stand up in the southwestern islands a new coastal surveillance unit that will monitor developments and gather intelligence.¹⁵ Ideally, such assets, permanently stationed there, will build an accurate picture of the operational environment, detect threats, grasp adversary intentions, and report, all in a timely enough way that amphibious task forces, for instance, can respond rapidly to contingencies.¹⁶

The three services within the SDF do not have a long history of training and operating together, a situation that critically needs to be addressed. “The Dynamic Defense Force concept is important and relevant, but all three services and MOD officials have different ideas about it and there is little effort at coordination going on; each of the services are analyzing and training to the concept independently,” observes a research fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.¹⁷ A 1998 joint exercise on Iwo Jima marked the first time the SDF had conducted a triservice training evolution under a single command.¹⁸ An amphibious capability for rapid island defense is inherently joint. The 2006 establishment of the Joint Staff Office created an entity focused on operations, while the staff offices of the three services concentrated on maintenance and training; such a mechanism was critical to the dispatching of a joint task force in response to the 11 March triple disaster.¹⁹ “Under Dynamic Defense Force we are now considering cross-domain capabilities including sea-air, sea-land, and air-land. Cross-domain is very important and challenging for us. The biggest issue we face is mobility,” explains a senior MOD strategic planner.²⁰

In the 2010 NDPG’s section on priorities in SDF organization, equipment, and force disposition, the first area of emphasis is the “strengthening of joint operations,” followed by the “response to attacks on off-shore islands.”²¹ For both, transport capacity is described as key. Although some associate the Dynamic Defense Force strictly with mobility—the point has caused confusion—in fact the concept goes beyond lift to the issue of response to unclear contingencies.²² The GSDF is becoming lighter and more mobile, phasing out armor designed for Cold War scenarios and incorporating the new, lighter, Type 10 tanks, which can be fitted with modular armor for a variety of threat levels.²³ During the Cold War the GSDF had 1,200 tanks; that number is now down to around 760, and

further planned reductions will produce an armored force of four hundred tanks by 2020.²⁴

Along with more effective fire support from armor, the movement of ground combat forces continues to receive vital attention. Since their introduction in 2001, over 1,500 four-by-four light armored vehicles (LAVs) have been brought into service in the GSDF to increase mobility.²⁵ Development of an eight-by-eight Mobile Combat Vehicle is under way, an effort to combine high road mobility with air transportability and so to shorten response time; fiscal year 2016 is the target for this vehicle's introduction.²⁶ In addition to transporting troops, mobile combat vehicles can perform in command-and-control and reconnaissance roles. The MSDF currently possesses other essential platforms that an amphibious capability would require and is developing more. The two *Hyuga*-class helicopter destroyers—*Hyuga*, which entered service in March 2009, and *Ise*, which did so in March 2011—lack a well deck, but offer the potential for ship-to-objective maneuver from the air. At 197 meters in length, the eighteen-thousand-ton vessels have four spots on the flight deck to accommodate three SH-60 Seahawks and an MH-53E Sea Stallion.²⁷

The SDF does possess a limited capability to move landing forces ashore over the water, but key upgrades are needed. Each of the three *Osumi* LSTs possesses a well deck that can embark either two Landing Craft, Air Cushion (LCACs, which in turn can carry multiple LAVs) or one of the GSDF's heavy tanks. The LCAC and the utility landing craft currently in the MSDF inventory offer a range of uses; at the low end of the spectrum, two of the latter perform port-service tasks.²⁸ According to a recent Marine Forces Pacific liaison officer to the GSDF, neither platform is well suited for forcible entry, a limitation that also impacts their utility for humanitarian assistance; the GSDF will need, for ship-to-objective maneuver in a contested landing, a vehicle that can carry out operations once ashore.²⁹ In the fiscal year beginning in April 2013, the GSDF initially planned to acquire four amphibious assault vehicles (AAV-7s), the craft currently in service with the U.S. Marine Corps, but there are indications this number may be reduced to three.³⁰ The MSDF is developing two helicopter destroyers of a new class that will be known as "22DDH," with greater length and displacement that will allow nine helicopters to be embarked.³¹

Through disaster-relief operations, many SDF personnel have gained critical experience with respect to embarking personnel and essential equipment. In response to the 11 March triple disaster, the dock landing ship USS *Tortuga* (LSD 46) got under way from Sasebo, embarked over ninety SDF vehicles and around three hundred SDF personnel, and carried them to northern Honshu, where *Tortuga* served as a forward service base afloat for helicopter operations.³²

PERSISTENT AWARENESS AND PRESENCE

The 2010 NDPG also identified the need to enhance situational awareness. The 2011 white paper explains, “It is extremely important to carry out activities on a daily basis in order to ascertain the movements of other countries’ forces and detect any warning signs of potential contingency.”³³ Domain awareness in the southwestern islands must be enhanced by intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Establishing a presence to conduct surveillance is important operationally, but it also sends a political signal of Japanese intent to defend the territory. According to one Japanese academic and analyst, the process is on track: “Dynamic Defense Force is embedded into the Self-Defense Force development plans. The importance of Southwestern Islands defense is understood.”³⁴ The 2013 defense budget provides funding for a surveillance station on Yonaguni Island, at the southern end of the island chain, well over a thousand kilometers from Japan’s home islands; the 15th Brigade will base between one and two hundred personnel there.³⁵ Increasing situational awareness is a positive development, but it must be complemented by a capability that can rapidly respond if Japanese territory is threatened.

The argument for a military presence of personnel and equipment south of Japan’s four main islands is not a new one, and it is important to keep in mind that an absence of presence might be interpreted as unwillingness to defend expressed territorial interests.³⁶ “Sea control and control of the airspace in the Southwest Islands are vital in peacetime,” says a scholar at the National Defense Academy.³⁷ It is sound to begin with small deployments; mayors of Miyako, Ishigaki, and Yonaguni Islands have thus far supported military presences—but this willingness cannot be taken for granted in the future.³⁸ The presence of a rapidly deployable, combined-arms force—while likely not based in the island chain itself—is essential to dissuading a would-be aggressor from challenging the status quo. “In this age deterrence is most important and Japan needs to actively display the capabilities of the SDF. To implement this strategy they must actively train, identify shortcomings, and retrain to address these concerns,” argues a research fellow at the Ocean Policy Research Foundation.³⁹

It will take sustained effort to develop an understanding of the operational implications of geography. For instance, 47 percent of the SDF’s total training area is located on Hokkaido, the northernmost and second largest of Japan’s four main islands.⁴⁰ In 2010 the SDF started an “area group”-sized field training exercise series in the vicinity of the offshore islands, involving all three services, to improve deployment capabilities that would be needed to contend with a range of scenarios. In the mid-2000s a contingent of foreign military officers visited a GSDF unit in Kyushu having responsibilities for southern-islands defense. They discovered a lack of doctrine and planning for operations in the region. The

briefing officer candidly admitted that the unit had no means of lift and that in case of an emergency he would have to call his air and maritime counterparts to see what they had available.⁴¹ Increased, sustained attention to Japan's southwestern islands is needed from its political and military leadership.

U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE OPPORTUNITY

Cooperation between Japan and the United States is essential to realizing an amphibious capability in the SDF, and it offers a real chance for the alliance to bolster the security of Japan's southwestern islands. When former defense minister Satoshi Morimoto took up his post in June 2012, he made explicit his focus on the alliance relationship: "The most important task for people who think about Japan's national security and build its policy is making the alliance even more reliable."⁴² Morimoto, who brought experience in the Air Self-Defense Force to the post, emphasized the importance of enhancing the force posture in the southwestern islands: "Japan has 6,800 islands, and territory that stretches over three thousand kilometers; it's necessary to have troops at its southwestern end to beef up our warning and surveillance capability."⁴³

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has signaled how strengthening the alliance will be prioritized during his time in office. Securing the southwestern islands is a shared objective and a task that has grown more urgent as tension has escalated in 2013. While he will certainly govern differently from his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) predecessors, both parties agree on the need to place greater emphasis on defense of the southwestern islands and on the need to enhance the ability to respond to contingencies there.⁴⁴ Prime Minister Abe and the LDP feel the United States should be pleased that they have returned to government after DPJ missteps within the alliance, the most telling being Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's failed promise to relocate the Futenma Air Station off Okinawa and the resulting damage to his credibility.⁴⁵ However, some Americans disagree with him on the overall state of the alliance under the DPJ, with some pointing to the 2010 NDPG, which allocated, for the first time since the end of World War II, more defense resources to western Japan.⁴⁶ It is important to maintain momentum, particularly the progress made under Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda (also DPJ, 2011–12). Alliance managers must address such differences in perspective to ensure that the progress made toward a "Dynamic Defense Force" in recent years is not lost. Developing a Japanese amphibious capability is a way to build on this and refresh cooperation in connection with a strategic concern.

INTEROPERABILITY

The evolving security environment in Japan's periphery has led to calls for an updated roles, missions, and capabilities review, as the most recent one was done

in the 1990s. The often-applied analogy in past years of “sword and shield” does not accurately reflect present dynamics or Japan’s need for offensive capabilities for its own defense.⁴⁷ While Japan has long possessed robust platforms that can be employed offensively, the issue returned to the forefront in February 2013 as Prime Minister Abe reconvened the advisory panel that he had set up in 2007 (during his earlier term as prime minister) to tackle the issue of Japan’s right to collective self-defense.⁴⁸ “With respect to Article 9 [of the Japanese constitution, renouncing war], anything that has to do with territorial defense is acceptable. Strengthening Southwest Islands defense through an amphibious capability is legally well within Article 9,” according to one scholar of international studies.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, forward-based and rotationally deployed U.S. forces will continue to have essential roles in the defense of Japan. The 2012 Armitage-Nye Report on the alliance calls for integrated operational competence eventually leading to a Japanese-U.S. combined task force for contingency response.⁵⁰

Bolstering Japanese capability with respect to the defense of offshore islands should be seen in the broader context of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The final months of 2010 saw the deterioration of China-Japan relations when a Chinese fishing-boat captain was arrested following a collision with a JCG cutter. At the height of the resulting tension, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that “with respect to the Senkaku Islands, the United States has never taken a position on sovereignty, but we have made it very clear that the islands are part of our mutual treaty obligations, and the obligation to defend Japan.”⁵¹ That is, the goal of improving Japan’s ability to defend its offshore islands and conduct amphibious operations specifically envisions a JSDF that can operate more effectively and efficiently with American counterparts.⁵² After a period of drift in the alliance, new cooperation and interoperability are essential to reinvigorate it. The 2010 NDPG calls for development and deepening of the alliance to adapt to evolving security conditions as well as operational cooperation in areas surrounding Japan.⁵³

The U.S. contribution to alliance operations goes beyond forces deployed in Japan. However, access is no longer as assured as it once was, potentially undercutting American commitments to allies, such as Japan, within range of the precision weapons of potential regional opponents.⁵⁴ The U.S.-Japan alliance is predicated on strategic mobility.⁵⁵ It was the aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN 76), diverted from a planned exercise near South Korea, that responded to the 11 March triple disaster (as part of Operation TOMODACHI), not the forward-deployed *George Washington* (CVN 73) from its home port at Yokosuka. *Reagan* supported the flight operations of JSDF and JCG helicopters, a task facilitated by years of combined training and the interoperability of assets.⁵⁶ To reassure regional allies, the U.S. Senate has approved an amendment to the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act reaffirming that the Senkaku Islands are

administratively controlled by Japan and that they fall under the United States–Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.⁵⁷

GROUND SELF-DEFENSE FORCE/MARINE CORPS COOPERATION

The U.S. Marine Corps, working closely with the U.S. Navy, possesses the experience and institutional knowledge that would be needed to support the JSDF in developing amphibious capability. Synergy at the level displayed during TOMODACHI is a realistic objective. In the 27 April 2012 “2 + 2” statement, Japanese and American officials emphasized combined training in the territories of Guam and the Northern Marianas. Just months later, a group of forty soldiers from the GSDF's Western Army Infantry Regiment began a first-ever, month-long series of training events focused on amphibious operations with U.S. Marines. The exercises culminated in a landing on Guam simulating an attempt to retake an island. Marine lieutenant general Kenneth Gluek observed, “It takes many, many training evolutions to develop and maintain your proficiency, but over the next year, I believe they should be able to develop a very credible capability.”⁵⁸ An SDF capability to conduct amphibious operations is receiving more attention from senior leadership. The chief of staff of the GSDF, General Eiji Kimizuka, who observed the training on Guam, has stressed the importance of preparing equipment and conducting training toward an amphibious capability so that the GSDF can perform the functions of marines.⁵⁹

This increased emphasis builds on existing efforts, especially Exercise IRON FIST, a bilateral amphibious exercise conducted annually in California since 2006. An infantry company from the Western Army Infantry Regiment trains there in amphibious maneuver, the securing of beachheads, and preparation for follow-on forces.⁶⁰ “The task to defend or retake offshore islands is becoming the main mission for the GSDF, but the lack of experience in carrying out a landing mission from the sea is a key challenge. Training exercises such as IRON FIST with the Marines are particularly valuable for our unit commanders,” according to a senior MOD official.⁶¹ Such combined (IRON FIST involved USS *Boxer* [LHD 4]) and joint training evolutions have grown in complexity and advance the degree of interoperability that could be relied on should both alliance partners be called on to respond to a crisis in tandem.

Shortly after taking office for his present term in 2012, Prime Minister Abe announced that the government would introduce a bill that would set the conditions for when Japan can exercise collective self-defense after the elections to the House of Councillors (the upper house of the Diet) in July 2013. While discussions of constitutional revision are ongoing, much attention has been placed on the scenarios in which Japan can exercise collective self-defense.⁶² A December 2012 survey conducted by the *Mainichi Shimbun* following the election that

brought Abe to power found that 72 percent of lawmakers in Japan's lower house believed the constitutional interpretation on collective self-defense should be revised.⁶³

This focus on the direction of Japanese capability development comes at a crucial juncture for the U.S. Marine Corps as well. As the United States carries out the "rebalancing" to the Asia-Pacific region, the Marines have a critical role, as they possess the ability to insert decisive military force rapidly and sustain operations ashore.⁶⁴ A key asset is the MV-22 Osprey, which can transport expeditionary forces at greater range and speed, and operate with supply ships like the T-AKE dry cargo ship.⁶⁵ Okinawa-based Osprey aircraft took part in the November 2012 Exercise FORAGER FURY, transporting personnel and equipment to Tinian, a 1,500-mile transit beyond the range of the CH-46 helicopters that the MV-22 replaces.⁶⁶ Notwithstanding local opposition to the stationing of the Osprey on Okinawa, ultimately its forward deployment strengthens the alliance. During his April 2013 meeting with Secretary of Defense Charles T. "Chuck" Hagel, Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera confirmed that a second squadron of MV-22 Ospreys would deploy to Japan in the months ahead.⁶⁷

Working together to build a Japanese amphibious capability offers an opportunity to rearticulate the critical role of forward-deployed U.S. forces for regional security. The 2011 defense white paper explains that "the stationing of U.S. forces in Okinawa—including the U.S. Marine Corps, which has high mobility and readiness and is in charge of first response for a variety of contingencies— . . . contributes greatly not only to the security of Japan but also to the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region."⁶⁸ Increased integration between U.S. Marines and their Japanese counterparts could also lead to a more politically sustainable U.S. force posture. The present constant interaction between Japanese and American naval personnel is an important example to emulate; it has led to increasingly critical roles for the MSDF in U.S.-led multilateral exercises. During RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) 2012, MSDF rear admiral Fumiyuki Kitagawa served as the deputy commander of a joint task force comprising some forty-eight ships and submarines, two hundred aircraft, and over twenty-five thousand personnel from twenty-two nations.⁶⁹

The December 2010 NDPG calls for Japan to engage in multilayered security cooperation. "The Japan-US Alliance has evolved over time, but what hasn't changed fundamentally, and what will not change, is the fact that the alliance plays an extremely important role in promoting peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region," according to former defense minister Morimoto.⁷⁰ Developing a capacity for amphibious operations not only would help meet the NDPG requirement for a "Dynamic Defense Force" but also would potentially produce cooperation with a number of Asia-Pacific partners. The Armitage-Nye report

highlights expeditionary capabilities as a growing focus not only of Japan and of the United States but also of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Korea.⁷¹ Australia would be a natural partner for training, being the first country other than the United States with which Japan has signed a joint declaration on security matters. U.S. Marine rotations to Darwin are growing, and the 2nd Royal Australian Regiment is training to become the ground component of a future Australian amphibious capability.⁷² The three nations have a mechanism for defense cooperation in place, presenting favorable circumstances for trilateral amphibious training.⁷³

As for China, while Japan must weigh broad issues as it manages that complicated bilateral relationship, dissuasion through security cooperation is important to consider. The impact could be clearly seen in Beijing's response to the expansion in 2007 of MALABAR, an annual Indian-U.S. naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal, to include the navies of Australia, Japan, and Singapore.⁷⁴ Such considerations caused an abrupt shift in the conduct in November 2012 of the KEEN SWORD exercise, which involved over forty-seven thousand Japanese and U.S. personnel. The scenario called for the Western Army Infantry Regiment and U.S. Marines stationed on Okinawa to retake by amphibious assault an island held by an enemy force. The exercise was to have been carried out on Irisunajima Island as part of KEEN SWORD, and it would have been the first of its kind in Japan. Japanese officials decided in October to cancel it as too provocative, as it would have taken place during the Chinese Communist Party's Eighteenth Party Congress.

The development of Japan's amphibious capability must continue to move forward, and such choices will certainly arise again. In this case the decision to cancel the amphibious assault did nothing to limit the Chinese response to the overall exercise, which took place as planned. Beijing condemned it and Japanese efforts to woo "extraterritorial nations for joint military drills that only increase regional tensions." Meanwhile, marines of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) continue to conduct exercises in which they retake contested islands.⁷⁵ It is, therefore, a positive step that Japan sent around a thousand personnel from all three services to take part in DAWN BLITZ, a training exercise in June 2013 with the U.S. Marines in California that focused on a large-scale amphibious assault.⁷⁶ A few hundred GSDF personnel with helicopters embarked on three MSDF ships, including *Hyuga*, gaining familiarity with the vessels during the transit from Japan, and on arrival took part in their most ambitious amphibious training thus far.⁷⁷

During DAWN BLITZ MSDF and GSDF planned and executed complex components of an amphibious operation including fires, communications, supply, ship-to-shore movement, and air operations.⁷⁸ There remain, certainly, elements to be enhanced, such as joint communications and the controlling of aircraft,

but this is an impressive effort for what is essentially their first joint evolution of this scale. The Japanese showed a good understanding of the necessary aspects to execute complicated amphibious and heli-borne landings.⁷⁹ As former foreign minister Koichiro Gemba has emphasized, the concern that China might dispatch vessels to upset through coercion the status quo in such areas as the Senkaku Islands is very real.⁸⁰ Engagement between the GSDF and the Marines is directly relevant to such security challenges.

OPERATIONAL APPLICABILITY AND RESOLVE

The most critical reason for Japan to develop an amphibious capability is to provide its political leaders with options, both to shape the security environment and to respond to crisis. In early January 2013 Prime Minister Abe ordered Defense Minister Onodera to bolster surveillance around the Senkaku Islands, where Chinese government vessels were actively operating. Following the completion of a PLAN exercise in the western Pacific in early December 2012, two guided-missile destroyers and two missile frigates of the North Sea Fleet had patrolled the waters around the disputed islands for several hours.⁸¹ This was the second time PLAN vessels had done so since Japan's nationalization of the islands in September 2012. The mid-October episode marked a departure from the usual Chinese pattern of presence patrols by civilian vessels; Beijing was sending a strong message.⁸² In March 2010 China enforced a Law on Island Protection that covers its claim to territorial rights on the Senkaku Islands as well as on the continental shelf in the waters off Okinawa, asserting this law as its legal basis for patrolling these waters.⁸³ The territorial disputes in the East China Sea will not likely be resolved in the near term. Chinese strategic culture urges the sustained application of multiple instruments of power to pursue national interests; China has indicated, for instance, that it will survey the disputed islands in 2013 as part of a larger project of island and reef mapping.⁸⁴

As the tension has grown in the East China Sea, the Chinese have continued to develop their forces relevant to contesting control of islands. For example, *Kunlun Shan*, a Type 071 Yuzhao-class landing platform dock (hull number 998), entered service in 2008 as the PLAN's first modern amphibious assault ship. It is capable of lifting and supporting a reinforced battalion of four hundred to eight hundred marines with landing craft and midsize helicopters.⁸⁵ PLAN marines spend four months each year, including two months at sea, training in tasks related to landing operations.⁸⁶

Of the sixteen major straits and channels critical to China's oceanic access, eleven are situated along the Japanese-controlled southwestern islands.⁸⁷ Certainly, Japanese control over these islands, combined with robust alliance forces

on station, represents a defensive barrier against Chinese maritime ambitions beyond the island chain. The United States has been clear that the United States–Japan Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands. However, these unoccupied islands are themselves of questionable strategic value to the United States. Understandably the Japanese continue to seek reassurance as to how the United States would respond to a Chinese attempt to change unilaterally the status quo.

Plans are in place for a GSDF presence in the far southwestern islands. Currently, however, the approximately ten thousand Japanese who reside on the four Sakishima Islands have seen little military presence beyond the Air Self-Defense Force ground-based air-surveillance radar site on Miyako.⁸⁸ Forces stationed on the islands would require support. On the positive side, Okinawa Island could become a transport hub for forces transiting from Kyushu to the Sakishimas.⁸⁹ But an adequate military presence would not come without risk. One would anticipate a Chinese response comparable to that of Lieutenant General Ren Haiquan, who took part in an October 2012 conference organized by the Australian army, where he warned Australia against cooperating more closely with a “fascist” Japan that had once bombed Darwin.⁹⁰

REGIONAL UTILITY

Japan must push back against such characterizations; the Japan of today is not the Japan of the 1930s and early 1940s.⁹¹ With respect to hardware, the MSDF's new 22DDH, which will be able to embark nine helicopters, displaces 19,500 tons, while China's expected Type 081 amphibious assault ship (landing helicopter dock) will displace twenty-two thousand tons.⁹² The perspectives on Japan from other regional countries have also evolved; MSDF vessels now call in nations that previously expressed fear of a Japanese military resurgence.⁹³ In December 2012, just days before Japan's lower-house election, the Philippine government took the unusual step of stating that it would strongly support a decision in Tokyo to rearm, notwithstanding the constraints of its pacifist constitution, as a counterweight to China.⁹⁴ In late May 2012, during a Philippines standoff with China over the Scarborough Shoal, three MSDF vessels called on Manila Bay on a goodwill visit.

In the present environment, therefore, Japan can bolster its defenses in the southwestern islands through an amphibious capability and yet avoid actions that Beijing would seize on as a return of “militarism” in Japan. But the Abe government, with increased Japanese defense spending for the first time in eleven years, must avoid rhetoric that plays into the hands of potential opponents. The commandant of the JCG, Takashi Kitamura, captured this balance well in a December 2012 speech. The Japanese, he declared, are prepared to respond to a growing

Chinese presence but at the same time are willing to reduce patrols around the disputed islands if the Chinese cut back on their own maritime activity in the vicinity.⁹⁵

Amphibious forces are most associated with forcible entry, and in Japan's current context, planning must take place for operations at the high end of the spectrum to retake offshore islands. However, of the more than a hundred amphibious operations carried out by the U.S. Marines since the end of the Cold War, very few were combat missions.⁹⁶ With adequate ship-to-shore connectors, doctrine (especially cross domain), and training (particularly in the integration of ground and maritime forces), the JSDF could conduct advanced amphibious missions ranging from raids and offshore-island scenarios to humanitarian assistance and the extraction of nationals.

A combined-arms force could respond rapidly to domestic disasters. Following the 11 March triple disaster, *Hyuga* quickly got under way and steamed to the Tohoku region. Its four helicopters flew urgent search and rescue missions, and its extensive command-and-control suite was essential in directing the multivesel operation.⁹⁷ The MSDF moved relief supplies ashore via LCAC from *Osumi* LSTs in the proximity of Ishinomaki, whose harbor had been destroyed by the tsunami.⁹⁸ Japan has responded in support of numerous international disaster-relief situations, and on the seismically active Pacific Ring of Fire, such tragedies must be expected to continue.

Indonesia requested Japanese transport support following the December 2004 tsunami, which struck the coast of Aceh. Three MSDF ships deployed with three CH-47, two UH-60, and three SH-60 helicopters to deliver relief supplies. Their LCACs, which carried engineering vehicles used to reestablish the road network, were cited as of particular value to local authorities.⁹⁹ The heavy lift of the CH-47s is of key utility in disaster relief operations; the GSDF's 1st Helicopter Brigade's dropped approximately thirty tons of seawater on the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station's Unit 3 during the 11 March disaster.¹⁰⁰ Operation from a sea base of amphibious ships allows commanders to task-organize a force that will go ashore to meet the specific needs of local authorities.

These employments, especially that of *Hyuga*, suggest what an amphibious capability could bring Japan. The SDF has limited experience operating jointly, and developing an amphibious capability should increase its proficiency, in that joint command and control is implemented early in an expeditionary operation.¹⁰¹

These capabilities are critical also to Japan's role beyond the Asia-Pacific region. When a massive earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010, the United Nations Security Council expanded its stabilization mission in that country. The preparations for such United Nations peacekeeping missions typically take months, but in this case the majority of the detachment came from the GSDF

Central Readiness Force, which deployed approximately two weeks after the order was given.¹⁰² SDF engineering capabilities again added value, moving a tremendous amount of rubble. Haiti also offered a valuable lesson that could inform Japanese planning—how Spain, with a modest capability of four amphibious ships, made a considerable contribution to relief operations, having previously made sustained efforts to integrate its three services to realize the capabilities needed for a contested landing.¹⁰³ The four Spanish ships got under way promptly after the disaster struck and, Haiti's port facilities being inoperable, moved their operations ashore with helicopters and amphibious craft.

Initial signals from Prime Minister Abe suggest recognition of the importance of reinforcing relationships in Southeast Asia. Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida's first trip included the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and Australia; the prime minister then traveled to Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia.¹⁰⁴ An amphibious capability is a sound platform for engaging regional partners; for Japan it would complement the Overseas Training Cruise, which has been conducted for nearly six decades. Such a capability would significantly improve readiness to contend with threats to the southwestern islands, where challenges show no sign of abating. To the contrary, the growing presence and intensity of actions from Chinese maritime forces in regional waters increase the urgency of the need for a Japanese amphibious capability.

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