

## US Rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific and Japan-US Dynamic Defense Cooperation

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### Introduction

In its *Strategic Guidance* published in January 2012, the US Department of Defense announced that the United States would “of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region,” which has been increasingly important for US interests. Based on this doctrine, the Obama administration has comprehensively strengthened its political, military, and diplomatic engagement with the Asia-Pacific region. This paper aims to clarify the meaning of the US rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific, especially in its military terms, and its implication for the US-Japan alliance. In so doing, this paper particularly focuses upon the dynamic defense cooperation (DDC), which has been recently promoted by Japan and the United States.

### America’s Rebalancing and its Policies toward Allies and Friends

At the IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La dialogue) held on June 2012, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta emphasized that the United States would modernize and strengthen its alliances and partnerships in this region as one of four principles of its rebalance policy. Secretary Panetta emphasized that the United States would enhance its relationship not only with its traditional allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, but also with its regional friends like India, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

In fact, while Washington maintains its traditional presence in Northeast Asia based on the US-Japan and the US-ROK alliances, it also announced several security measures such as the US marines’ rotational deployment to Darwin in the northern part of Australia and the US military’s greater access to this part of the region; the deployment of Littoral Combatant Ships (LCS) to Singapore; and the enhancement of its military relationship with the Philippines, potentially including the rotational deployment of US Marines to the country. Furthermore, the United States has attempted to restore its military ties with New Zealand, as well as further enhancing its engagement with Pacific countries.

It goes without saying that China, which has rapidly increased its influence in the region, is the driving factor that promoted this new US strategy. Nevertheless, it is unclear to what extent measures like the rotational deployment of about two thousand Marines in Australia or a small number of LCS in Singapore are important in terms of US military strategy towards China. Rather, what is significant for the United States, and its allies and partners is that the US military’s presence has been enhanced in a visible and costly manner, at a time when discourses like the “power shift” or the “decline of US power” have been increasingly popular in international society. The enhanced US presence in the region may refute such discourses by demonstrating America’s *commitment* to its regional allies and partners, while *signaling* to China by showing its resolve to keep engaging with regional security matters.

Another important issue is that, although the United States is refocusing on Asia-Pacific, this will not necessarily lead to a significant increase of its forward deployed presence in this region. Rather, it is probable that the United States would even *decrease* such a presence in this region, depending on how much the defense budget will be cut in the future. Meanwhile, the US military

has sought to establish more mobile, flexible and adaptive capabilities with minimum costs through such innovative approaches as rotational deployment. It also stresses advanced technologies like cyber or unmanned air vehicles (UAV) in order to sustain the US presence. In sum, faced with the new reality of the rise of China as well as the reduction of the defense budget, the United States has sought to establish a new form of presence that focuses upon not just the scale of its military, but its level of advancement or operations.

At the same time, the United States has emphasized the expanded roles of its allies and friends in its new defense strategy more than ever before. Rather than simply providing security for regional allies and friends, the United States has aimed to build these countries' capacity to respond to regional security issues more autonomously by increasing opportunities for multilateral training and exercises with regional allies and friends. The United States has also attempted to encourage greater roles by regional allies by promoting intra-allied cooperation such as Japan-South Korea or Japan-Australia security partnerships. In short, while the United States has strengthened regional engagement under the banner of rebalancing, it calls at the same time for greater burden-sharing by regional allies and friends in order to sustain the stability of the region through various means including capacity-building in these countries.

It is from this context that some scholars or experts, such as Texas A&M University professor Christopher Layne, argue that America's rebalancing is the beginning of its offshore balancing strategy—a strategy in which the United States withdraws its forward deployed forces from the region and shifts the responsibility of the maintenance of balance of power to regional countries. To be sure, the United States has significantly decreased (or plans to decrease) the number of ground forces in Europe and the Middle East. Although the reduction scale will be much less than in Europe and the Middle East, the same thing can be done in Asia, where the US military has increasingly focused upon air and sea capabilities under the air-sea battle concept. Nevertheless, the United States has so far actively utilized its ground forces through a flexible and mobile use of forces such as rotational deployment, rather than withdrawing them.

Indeed, the essence of Layne's offshore balancing strategy is *burden-shifting* or *buck-passing*, suggesting that the United States give up the pursuit of regional primacy and let regional countries assume a primal responsibility to maintain the balance of power in the region. Contrary to this, the ongoing US strategy is to keep its strong leadership in maintaining the regional order while expecting its regional allies and friends to enhance their defense capabilities. By so doing, the United States has sought to maintain its primacy in the region more cost-effectively than before. It is not burden-shifting or buck-passing, but *burden-sharing* that the United States has pursued in Asia.

This does not guarantee, however, that the United States would never change its strategy from burden-sharing to burden-shifting (that is, offshore balancing). From the perspective of its allies, it is necessary to expand their regional security roles to some extent, as well as further strengthen their defense capabilities, in order to minimize the future risk of abandonment. Such an effort will not only strengthen allies' own capabilities to respond to regional threats, but also further stabilize America's rebalancing toward Asia-Pacific in favor of allied interests.

### **Implications for the US-Japan Alliance: Toward Dynamic Defense Cooperation**

The concept of Japan-US DDC is based on both the abovementioned new rebalancing of the military strategy of the United States and Japan's dynamic defense force concept that focuses upon operation of the Self Defense Forces (SDF). The DDC was first announced at the Japan-US defense minister's meeting in October 2011, and later referred to as strengthening the deterrence of

the alliance at the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee (2 plus 2) in April 2012. Furthermore, enhancing the DDC was positioned as the new alliance initiative among the United States-Japan Cooperative Initiatives announced after the Japan-US summit meeting held in the same month.

The US-Japan DDC has three key elements. First, under the DDC, the SDF and the US military have timely training for maximum effectiveness with other regional partners. Examples of such training includes the Japan-US-Australia joint military training in the South China Sea in July 2011 and the Japan-US-ROK joint military training held in the waters near the Korean Peninsula in June 2012. Although the scale of both training exercises was not necessarily large, it was obvious that the United States and its allies consciously chose the time and location of their training areas in order to demonstrate their solidarity and will. It should also be pointed out that the United States conducted bilateral military exercises with the Philippines and Vietnam before and after the Japan-US-Australia training as well as with South Korea immediately after the Japan-US-ROK training. In this way, connecting bilateral and trilateral military training/exercises multiplies the signaling effect by the United States and its allies. Such an approach is also consistent with a new US strategy that seeks a more effective and flexible military presence in this region.

The second element of DDC is concerned with joint ISR activities between Japan and the United States. After the meeting in August 2012, the defense ministers of Japan and the United States announced that two countries would jointly utilize the US military's UAVs for more effective ISR activities. Although the MOD has occasionally considered the purchase of the UAVs, it has postponed the introduction due to budget limitations and management problems. Introducing UAVs, which have a longer flying range and time with a higher altitude than manned airplanes, may potentially allow the SDF to conduct maritime surveillance and intelligence gathering activities not only in areas surrounding Japan, but also in broader parts of the region. The joint statement after the 2 plus 2 meeting in April 2012 also revealed that Japan and the United States would more actively collaborate in outer-space, especially in Space Situational Awareness (SSA).

Third, as a part of DDC, Tokyo and Washington have agreed to increase shared use of facilities in both countries. Most importantly, the two countries have planned to develop training areas in Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands as shared-use facilities by US forces and the JSDF. According to a report, joint training units consisting of units from the Ground, Air, and Maritime SDF will rotationally deploy to a training range on Tinian Island in the Northern Mariana Islands and conduct joint military exercises of defending offshore islands (or *tōsho bōei*) with the US Military. In fact, JGSDF Western Army Infantry Regiment and the US 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force located in Okinawa jointly conducted military training for *tōsho bōei* in Guam and Tinian for about a month during August and September in 2012.

The primary purpose of the joint use of facilities in Guam and Tinian is to secure training ranges for *tōsho bōei*. Although the number of SDF's training for *tōsho bōei* has tended to increase in recent years along with the enhancement of defense of South-West islands, the joint training between the SDF and the US Marines in Okinawa, for example, remains difficult because of the lack of support by local people. Likewise, there is no suitable place in other parts of Japan for conducting trainings necessary for *tōsho bōei* (such as training for amphibious operations). The joint use of facilities by the SDF and the US military in Guam and Tinian would thus significantly increase training opportunities and enhance interoperability between Japan and the United States.

More importantly, the US-Japan joint trainings in Guam and Tinian, which increases the SDF's presence in this region, may potentially encourage Japan-US cooperation that leads to the expansion of the US-Japan alliance. For example, enhanced interoperability between the SDF and the US military in those islands may contribute to their close cooperation in international

peacekeeping and HA/DR in wider areas across the region in the future. Of course, to realize such cooperation, it will be necessary to engage long-term discussion on topics including legal arrangements or consultation about the Roles, Missions, and Capabilities between Japan and the United States. Nonetheless, if such cooperation is materialized, that would become the enhanced form of the US-Japan alliance beyond the concept of DDC.

### **Conclusion**

As discussed above, the United States has sought to establish a new form of presence that emphasizes mobility, adaptability, effectiveness, and level of advancement in facing the increase in importance of the Asia-Pacific and the decrease in its defense budget. Furthermore, the United States has expected its regional allies and friends to assume a greater burden in stabilizing the region through such measures as capacity building of allies and friends. Such a new rebalancing of US strategy has a strong affinity with Japan's dynamic defense force concept, which seeks to establish a more mobile and proactive defense posture under the current level of defense budget. It was such a synergy of the two countries' new defense concepts that created the DDC pursued by Japan and the United States.

Of course, there are many challenges before establishing truly dynamic defense cooperation. In particular, it is expected that the relocation of Marines to Guam or construction of training facilities there would require a significant amount of time and cost. Since the US Congress decided to cut the whole budget for the Marines' relocation to Guam due to the unclearness of the plan, the future prospect of the Marines' relocation is not necessarily clear. Japan in the meantime has problems that could undermine the whole alliance structure such as the relocation of Futenma Air Facility and the deployment of MV-22 Osprey to Okinawa. In addition, it is necessary for the two countries to further improve cooperation in peacetime such as information sharing and policy coordination, in order for both countries to flexibly respond to unexpected incidents. The future of DDC depends upon whether Japan and the United States could steadily implement the decided agreement between the two countries with the greatest care towards alliance management.

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