

MURKY WATERS IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

CHINESE GRAY-ZONE OPERATIONS AND
U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE COORDINATION

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*Chinese Gray-Zone Operations and
U.S.-Japan Alliance Coordination*

Edited by
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Tensions in the East China Sea are often overshadowed by those in the South China Sea, but they are a potent flashpoint for conflict between China and Japan and pose a unique challenge for the United States, which is treaty-bound to assist Japan in an armed conflict. While it is understandable that the South China Sea would receive more public attention—the South China Sea is a major international waterway with territorial disputes involving seven nations—the East China Sea should not be overlooked. Both China and Japan claim overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and air defense identification zones (ADIZs), in addition to their dispute over the Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyu Islands in China). Although Taiwan also claims the islands, they are administered by Japan, and the dispute is largely between Japan and China. Moreover, while economic benefits from the rich fishing grounds and the potential for oil are a factor, ownership of the Senkaku Islands is an issue of great national pride to both countries, making the possibility of outright conflict a heightened concern.

The complexity and urgency of the situation in the East China Sea requires that the United States and Japan work on a full-time basis to examine and prepare for China's activities there. In the July 2020 issue of *Asia Policy*, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) published a roundtable titled “Navigating Contested Waters: U.S.-Japan Alliance Coordination in the East China Sea” that examined options for the United States and Japan to improve their coordination and deter Chinese provocations in the East China Sea. The roundtable concluded that current alliance response mechanisms are inadequate to deal with the rapidly evolving nature of Sino-Japanese tensions in the sea and that the creation of a U.S.-Japan Standing Bilateral Joint Task Force is one potential option to improve coordination and readiness. In their analyses of U.S.-Japan alliance coordination, the authors identified managing Chinese gray-zone operations, which blur the boundary between war and peace, as a salient area for improvement.

Since the publication of this roundtable, NBR has sought to build on its findings and further explore related questions through workshops and research. This NBR Special Report edited by Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, who holds the John M. Shalikashvili Chair in National Security Studies at NBR, is the result of these activities. It evaluates the dynamics surrounding Chinese gray-zone operations in the East China Sea and considers options for effectively countering them without risking a dangerous escalation that could precipitate a broader armed conflict.

The United States has reaffirmed—first in April 2014 and most recently at the summit between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in April 2021—that the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan applies to all territories administered by Japan, including the Senkaku Islands. This appears to have effectively deterred China's conventional aggression in the East China Sea, at least for now. However, Chinese gray-zone operations have persisted and even increased, prompting the U.S. secretaries of defense and state to both express concern at the March 2+2 dialogue in Tokyo over recent Chinese activity.¹ Gray-zone operations by nature are difficult to define and detect, making them challenging for the U.S.-Japan alliance to counter effectively.

¹ Junko Horiuchi, “Japan, U.S. Express ‘Serious Concerns’ over China Coast Guard Law,” Kyodo News, March 16, 2021, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/03/6669d017ecd7-update3-japan-us-hold-security-talks-in-response-to-chinas-coercion.html>.

Thus, Chinese gray-zone operations in the East China Sea have highlighted logistical, legal, and political constraints that exist within the U.S.-Japan alliance framework. The United States and Japan have divergent legal and operational responses to gray-zone activities because their domestic laws differ in terms of what constitutes an act of war or an armed attack. This lack of clarity has the potential to hinder an alliance response if Japan cannot activate Article 5 of the security treaty to receive U.S. military assistance.² Furthermore, gray-zone operations continue to change, making it even harder to reach a consensus within the alliance on what constitutes an armed attack.

China will likely continue to exploit this weakness in the alliance and challenge the Japanese government's claims to the Senkaku Islands as well as Japan's EEZ and ADIZ. Its gray-zone methods in the South China Sea have achieved relative success, and Beijing will continue similar tactics in the East China Sea if Washington and Tokyo do not reach a consensus on how to effectively respond to such contingencies.

This report comprises four essays addressing key issues that are impeding both the understanding of gray-zone operations in the East China Sea and effective responses by the U.S.-Japan alliance. The essays not only shed light on the nature of China's gray-zone capabilities and activities and the lack of alliance coordination but also discuss policy options for improving allied responses and mitigating the potential for a larger conflict in the East China Sea.

In the first essay, Hideshi Tokuchi provides a working definition of gray-zone operations and highlights numerous examples of when the United States and Japan have faced such tactics in the past. The second essay, authored by Kristen Gunness, assesses China's capabilities in gray-zone operations across conventional and nonconventional domains of warfare and analyzes the potential use of tools like cyberattacks and influence operations in a conflict over the sea. Building on this analysis, the third essay by Admiral Takashi Saito (ret.), Susumu Nakamura, Hidetoshi Hirata, Hideshi Tokuchi, Goro Matsumura, and Koichi Sato considers options to improve U.S.-Japan cooperation across a range of alliance mechanisms. In the final essay, John Hemmings and Wade Turvold examine U.S. command-and-control capabilities across the spectrum of gray-zone operations and propose ways for improving U.S. responses.

Tensions in the East China Sea have the potential to escalate rapidly, posing a pressing security challenge to both Japan and the United States. Structural and organizational challenges within the current alliance structure make it difficult for the two countries to be proactive, and gray-zone contingencies further test the effectiveness of the alliance. With Chinese capabilities continuing to evolve, this report clarifies the challenges presented by gray-zone operations and identifies potential remedies to increase alliance coordination.

Rachel Bernstein

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² Tomohisa Takei, "Gray Zones and Vulnerability in the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Operational and Legal Dimensions," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 3 (2020): 27.

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The Gray Zone in the Definition of Gray-Zone Warfare: Challenges for Japan-U.S. Cooperation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the differences between the Japanese and U.S. definitions of “armed attack” and “gray zone,” discusses Chinese gray-zone activities in the East China Sea around the Senkaku Islands, and considers options for the two allies to address this evolving threat.

MAIN ARGUMENT

China’s approach to asserting its claim over the Senkaku Islands through gray-zone activities seems intended to circumvent the U.S. defense commitment under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. As a result, the concept of “gray zone” must be understood so as not to block alliance cooperation to achieve common security goals. Gray-zone warfare violates the sovereignty and national interests of foreign countries in a manner that does not rise to the level of armed attack. The challenge for Japan and the U.S. is how to effectively cooperate with each other outside the commitment of Article 5 of their security treaty. Given the allies differing interpretations of the term “armed attack,” they should devise a practical way for operational cooperation, including coordination of their rules of engagement. With the rapid development of the China Coast Guard and China’s problematic new Coast Guard Law, cooperation to address China’s gray-zone warfare has become even more pressing for the Japan-U.S. alliance.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Japan and the U.S. must not be complacent about the current robustness of the alliance but should squarely face the security challenge that China has been posing, particularly in the East China Sea.
- The allies need to develop a better understanding of each other’s relevant security institutions, regulations, and processes.
- A whole-of-government and whole-of-alliance approach must be pursued under the strong political leadership of the two countries.

China often expresses an aversion to the Japan-U.S. alliance, which it considers a relic of the Cold War and anachronistic. This characterization, however, ignores the fact that the alliance was redefined a long time ago to be adapted to the post-Cold War era.

Neither Japan nor the United States views the alliance as a remnant of the Cold War. Instead, for more than two decades, both countries have viewed it as relevant to the post-Cold War environment. However, they now face a new reality for which a new definition of the alliance is necessary. In the case of an “armed attack” against Japan, Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty requires the two countries to act to meet the common danger. The U.S. government has repeatedly declared that this article covers the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.¹ However, the gray-zone warfare China has been engineering against Japan over the islands is not believed to constitute an “armed attack” against Japan, even though China keeps violating Japan’s sovereignty. It is an obstinate but quiet invasion.

The Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands in China) are part of the southwest island chain that stretches from the south of Kyushu Island toward the direction of Taiwan. The strategic importance of the island chain amid China’s expansion toward the oceans in the age of Sino-U.S. rivalry is geographically obvious. The security of the Senkaku Islands is important not only for Japan but also for the regional security order. A Chinese attack on the islands would pose a critical test for the durability of the Japan-U.S. alliance as the cornerstone of the U.S. alliance network in the region. The two allies thus must squarely face this security challenge that China has been posing.

In 1954, when then prime minister Shigeru Yoshida visited Europe before visiting the United States, he emphasized that European nations should pay more attention to East Asia, where the Communist bloc would likely go on the offensive, striking at the liberal bloc’s vulnerable point.² Although the Cold War ended around three decades ago, his view has not lost its relevance. There are two salient points here. First, Europe and Asia must be more conscious that the gray-zone warfare Russia has been engineering on Eastern European soil and the gray-zone warfare China has been engineering in East Asian waters have commonalities. Transregional cooperation will generate the synergy necessary to address these threats. Second, Asia’s weakness today is in both the South and East China Seas, but China is more assertive in the South China Sea. While the Japanese and U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia is considerable, Japan and the United States have no permanent military presence in Southeast Asia, where regional military capabilities are very limited.³ Therefore, a lack of Japanese and U.S. efforts to strengthen their alliance cooperation would put the security of the Senkaku Islands and the broader East China Sea at risk, militating against the stable and robust U.S. military presence and the regional balance of power.

¹ President Barack Obama stated in Tokyo on April 24, 2014, “And let me reiterate that our treaty commitment to Japan’s security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan’s administration, including the Senkaku Islands.” See “Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, April 24, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/24/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan>. Likewise, the joint statement from President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on February 10, 2017, reads, “The two leaders affirmed that Article V of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security covers the Senkaku Islands. They oppose any unilateral action that seeks to undermine Japan’s administration of these islands.” See “Joint Statement from President Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,” February 10, 2017, available at <https://kr.usembassy.gov/021017-joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-prime-minister-shinzo-abe>. The “U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement” on April 16, 2021, reads, “It [the United States] also reaffirmed the fact that Article V of the Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands. Together, we oppose any unilateral action that seeks to undermine Japan’s administration of the Senkaku Islands.” See “U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement: ‘U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era,’” April 16, 2021, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100177718.pdf>.

² Shigeru Yoshida, *Kaizo 10-nen I* [10-year Reflection Vol. 1] (Tokyo: Chuo-koron-sha, 1998), 237.

³ Hideshi Tokuchi, “Fighting in Maritime Gray Zone Warfare in East Asia,” Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, September 12, 2018, 6, <https://spfsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Fighting-a-Maritime-Gray-Zone-Warfare-in-East-Asia.pdf>.

With these points in mind, this essay discusses the scope of the “gray-zone” concept from a Japanese perspective and examines how China conducts gray-zone warfare in the East China Sea over the Senkaku Islands.

The Scope of the Japanese Concept of “Gray Zone”

“Gray zone” is an elusive term. It is not a legal term and does not generate any legal effects as such. Instead, the term is used to express a feature of the current international security environment. Japan’s most recent defense white paper describes it as follows: “So-called gray-zone situations, which are neither purely peacetime nor contingency situations, are becoming persistent over a long period of time, playing out as part of inter-state competition. They may possibly further increase and expand. Such gray-zone situations harbor the risk of rapidly developing into graver situations without showing clear indications.”⁴ The white paper then elaborates on the concept of a gray zone:

The so-called gray-zone situations simply represent a wide range of situations that are neither peacetime nor wartime. In a gray-zone situation, for example, a country that confronts another over territory, sovereignty or maritime and other economic interests uses some forceful organization to demonstrate its presence in the relevant disputed region in a bid to alter the status quo or force other countries to accept its assertions or demands.⁵

This translation lacks a very important phrase that is found in the original Japanese version just after the phrase “some forceful organization.” The omitted text in the English version is “to the extent in which the action does not constitute an armed attack.”⁶

“Armed attack” is a legal term that establishes a trigger for joint operations as stipulated in Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. The long-established interpretation of this term by the government of Japan is “the organized and planned use of force.”⁷ As Tomohisa Takei argues, the definition of this term differs between Japan and the United States.⁸ Although his argument is somewhat misleading, his point is well-taken that the variance of the definition could undermine bilateral alliance cooperation to address gray-zone contingencies.⁹

Takei contrasts the Japanese interpretation of armed attack with the U.S. position that the inherent right of self-defense potentially applies against any illegal use of force.¹⁰ If, however, the present issue between Japan and the United States concerns the scope of the armed attack

⁴ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Defense of Japan 2020* (Tokyo, 2020), 41, https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/wp2020/pdf/R02010100.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Reiwa 2-nenban Nihon-no bouei: Boueihakusho* [Defense of Japan 2020: Defense White Paper] (Tokyo, 2020), 41.

⁷ This English translation of the interpretation is based on page 42 of the English translation of “Report of the Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security” on May 15, 2014, which became a basis of the reinterpretation of the constitution of Japan with regard to use of force. The English version is available at https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/anzenhoshoyou2/dai7/houkoku_en.pdf.

⁸ Tomohisa Takei, “Gray Zones and Vulnerability in the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Operational and Legal Dimensions,” *Asia Policy* 15, no. 3 (2020): 23–24.

⁹ According to Takei, Japan’s interpretation of armed attack is unique because of the constraints of the Japanese constitution. However, according to Ichiro Komatsu, the former director-general of the International Legal Affairs Bureau of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau, the point of the Japanese interpretation is that the situation is objectively recognized as obvious to anyone. On this reading, the objective of such an interpretation is to emphasize that there is no risk that the U.S. side will unilaterally recognize the occurrence of an armed attack against Japan to activate Article 5 of the treaty. See Ichiro Komatsu, *Jissen kokusaihou* [Practical International Law], 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Shinzan-sha, 2015), 412. Even if the Japanese interpretation of armed attack is as narrow as Takei believes, the narrowness should not be attributed to the Japanese constitution.

¹⁰ Takei, “Gray Zones and Vulnerability in the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” 23.

as the trigger to activate Article 5 of the security treaty, his point is not necessarily relevant. In addition, according to the Japanese interpretation of the constitution of Japan (not of international law), the right of self-defense is permitted only when an armed attack has taken place, but measures of defense of a lesser degree are not prohibited against contingencies that do not amount to armed attack.¹¹

The phrase “armed attack” is used in Article 51 of the UN Charter as well as in Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. As the latter article is based on the former, there is no reason to interpret the term “armed attack” differently. According to Ian Brownlie, the records of the San Francisco Conference that crafted the UN Charter in 1945 do not include an explanation of the term. He presumes that the reason is that the words were regarded as sufficiently clear.¹² Sir Humphrey Waldock viewed only a grave breach of the peace or intrusion by a large organized force acting on the orders of a government as constituting an armed attack.¹³ The above-mentioned interpretation by the government of Japan was possibly influenced by this view, given that the country joined the United Nations in the 1950s when the view was presumably pronounced.

The Japanese government has held for a long time that the interpretation of an armed attack as an organized and planned use of force is shared by international lawyers and the international community more broadly.¹⁴ If in fact Japan and the United States differ in their interpretations, as Takei argued, it will cause a problem for the implementation of Article 5.

However, addressing this issue in abstract legal terms would not be constructive because it is practitioners and policymakers rather than academics that need practical guidance for action. What kind of military or nonmilitary measures will each country take in specific circumstances, and how will they coordinate their measures to generate efficacy of joint action? It is indispensable for Japan and the United States to hammer out clearer answers to these specific questions. Differences in domestic institutions, regulations, and processes are likely to affect their respective answers. Thus, a better understanding of each other’s relevant institutions, regulations, and processes is more necessary than ever.

As far as Japan is concerned, if the government recognizes the contingency as an armed attack against Japan, the country will exercise its right of self-defense. In this case, the government is legally required to obtain approval by the National Diet, which in principle must be granted in advance of actual use of force. If both Japan and the United States recognize the contingency as an armed attack against Japan and accordingly invoke Article 5 for joint action, the Japanese mechanism to coordinate the use of Japanese sea ports and air ports will be activated for use by the Japanese and U.S. military forces in accordance with legislation to deal with such contingencies. If the Japanese government does not recognize the situation as an armed attack and handles it as a matter of law enforcement, the National Diet’s approval is not necessarily required. In this case, the above-mentioned coordination mechanism for the use of Japanese ports would not be available. These institutional and legal issues will affect the Japan-U.S. joint response. In order to ensure

¹¹ For example, use of weapons as law-enforcement measures under the threshold of “use of force” is permitted. The use of weapons by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force against North Korean spy boats in the Sea of Japan in March 1999 falls into this category.

¹² Ian Brownlie, *International Law and the Use of Force by States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 278.

¹³ The teachings of Sir Humphrey Waldock in 1952, quoted in *ibid.*, 279.

¹⁴ In response to a question on the occurrence of “armed attack” in the Special Committee on Security of the House of Representative of the Japanese National Diet in 1981, Takakazu Kuriyama, then director-general of the Treaties Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated: “When use of force is conducted in an organized and planned manner, the exercise of the right of self-defense against it is permitted. I think that this recognition or interpretation is shared by international lawyers and in the international community.” Shuugiin, “Anzenhoshou Tokubetsu-iinkaigiroku Dai-2-go” [Minutes of the Special Committee on Security, No. 2], November 9, 1981, 2, <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/minutes/api/v1/detailPDF/img/109503818X00219811109>.

smooth decision-making (including necessary intelligence cooperation) and implementation of decisions, better mutual understanding between Japan and the United States is indispensable.

Gray-zone warfare is a violation of national sovereignty and the national interests of foreign countries in a manner that does not amount to an armed attack. If the violation of Japan's sovereignty takes the form of an armed attack, then Japan-U.S. cooperation is the obligation set forth in Article 5 of the security treaty. If the infringement does not take such a form, however, the treaty obligation will not arise. Even in such a scenario, it is still legally possible that the United States could help if Japan were to request assistance. In this case, the United States might regard any use of force as the exercise of the right of collective self-defense, whereas the Japanese side will regard its own response as a matter of law enforcement under its domestic legal system. That would be the case even if the Japanese defense forces were involved in the operation. As a matter of international law, the Japanese action might be construed as a lawful countermeasure. This scenario shows that the international legal principles invoked by the two countries may not be consonant with each other. Yet a more important point is the coordination of their rules of engagement to effectively respond to a situation, even though it may be difficult to reach a full agreement. If the situation becomes more serious and both Japan and the United States recognize it as an armed attack, then the situation will not be in a gray zone any longer but in a deep black zone, for which Article 5 of the security treaty is fully implemented.

The armed attack requirement should not be regarded as an impediment to alliance cooperation for common security. It would be counterproductive for both countries, including politicians, practitioners, and intellectuals, to get bogged down in the legal technicalities involved with invoking Article 5. Just like cooperation between the law-enforcement organizations and military forces of one country is possible in a time of war, collaboration of operations undertaken through different legal interpretations between the allies to address the same gray-zone contingency will be possible. In other words, the salient issue is not correspondence of respective legal bases but the operational coherence of the two sides through closer coordination. Full correspondence of legal bases would not be guaranteed simply because of the decentralized nature of the international community, which lacks any organization to officially decide (not only interpret) what the international law tells. A practical way to enable such collaboration between Japan and the United States must be worked out, based on better understanding of each other's relevant institutions and regulations. If it is successfully done, the advantage will be hopefully on the side of the alliance in a gray-zone situation. Therefore, both countries must look more deeply into specific cases of China's gray-zone activities rather than focusing on their own legal differences.

Examples of China's Gray-Zone Activities in the East China Sea

China's gray-zone warfare in the East China Sea over the Senkaku Islands is unflagging. It is no exaggeration to say that Japan is invaded almost every month. Such Chinese intrusions are a blatant violation of Japan's territorial sovereignty, but they are not considered to constitute armed attacks against Japan. This view would not be changed even in light of the international legal doctrine of accumulation of events. This is neither a cold war nor a hot war, but a quiet invasion.

Just as a matter of fact, Chinese government vessels entered the contiguous zone adjacent to Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands for 333 days in 2020. It is a record far above the previous year's 282 days. Also, a total of 78 Chinese government vessels intruded into

the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands on 24 occasions in 2020. The number of ships and the frequency of entries were lower than in 2019, but the vessels stayed for a longer period in the Japanese waters. For instance, between October 11 and 13, 2020, Chinese vessels remained in Japanese waters for a total of 57 hours and 39 minutes, breaking the previous record.¹⁵

However, when we look into the recent history, there is a fluctuation in the magnitude of the contingency depending in large measure on the political environment involving Japan and China. The following four occasions attracted special attention and caused grave concerns in Japan.

First, a Chinese fishing boat operating in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands rammed a Japan Coast Guard cutter that demanded the Chinese ship to leave the surrounding waters on September 7, 2010. The captain of the Chinese boat was arrested by the Japan Coast Guard, and the Chinese government responded by demanding the release of the captain. On September 24, some Japanese media reported that the Chinese government had stopped the export of rare earth elements to Japan in retaliation for the arrest of the Chinese captain, though China denied the allegation. The Chinese captain was released in less than a month, but the rare earth exports to Japan remained at an unusually low level until November of that year. While other factors may have been at work behind the scene, there is a reasonable suspicion that the arrest triggered the export restrictions.¹⁶ This is gray-zone warfare fought by the use of economic means for political purpose.

In terms of the alliance response to this incident, the then foreign minister Seiji Maehara met with the then secretary of state Hillary Clinton in New York on September 23, and the two exchanged their views on the incident in the East China Sea. On this occasion, Clinton conveyed the U.S. position that Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands.¹⁷ Later, when they met again in Honolulu, Clinton reiterated this position at a joint press conference.¹⁸

Second, the Japanese government acquired ownership, from a Japanese private citizen, of three of the Senkaku Islands on September 11, 2012. In response, the Chinese government, based on its own assertions, intensified its claims and unilaterally drew territorial baselines, submitted a coordinate and marine chart of the claimed baselines to the United Nations, gave its own “names” to them, and published a “white paper” to propagate its claims to the international community. Chinese vessels traversed within the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands almost daily, resulting in more than twenty separate occasions of territorial water intrusions between September 11 and the end of the year. Immediately after the change in ownership, large-scale anti-Japan demonstrations broke out across China, causing acts of violence against Japanese nationals and destruction of assets of Japanese companies and diplomatic establishments.¹⁹ In this incident, Chinese citizens were involved as a means to put pressure on Japan, though the Chinese government denied this allegation.

As far as the Japan-U.S. alliance response is concerned, on September 28, when the then foreign minister Koichiro Gemba met with Secretary Clinton in New York, he explained Japan’s basic position that while it cannot concede China’s claims to the Senkaku Islands, Japan intends to

¹⁵ “Record Activity by Chinese Ships around Senkakus,” NHK World-Japan, January 2, 2021.

¹⁶ Marukawa Tomoo, “2010 nen no rea aasu kiki” [Rare-Earth Crisis of 2010], Social Sciences of Crisis Thinking project, June 23, 2016.

¹⁷ “Nichibei gaishou kaidan gaiyou” [Japan-U.S. Foreign Ministerial Meeting (Summary)], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), September 23, 2010, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/usa/visit/1009_gk.html.

¹⁸ “Joint Press Availability with Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara,” U.S. Department of State, October 27, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/10/150110.htm>.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), *Diplomatic Bluebook 2013* (Tokyo, November 2013), 11, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000019037.pdf>.

respond in a calm manner without losing sight of the broader context of Japan-China relations. Both sides confirmed that Japan and the United States will cooperate under the bilateral partnership based on the Japan-U.S. alliance.²⁰

Third, the Chinese government announced on November 23, 2013, that it had established an air defense identification zone over the East China Sea, including the airspace over the Senkaku Islands. China described the islands as if they were Chinese territory and stated that its armed forces would take “defensive emergency measures” in the case of aircraft that do not follow the required procedures.²¹ Even apart from the sovereignty issue, implementation of such enforcement measures is a dangerous act that might cause unintended consequences and is against the principle of the freedom of overflight over the high seas. Soon after the Chinese announcement, Japan strongly protested the decision to China, and the United States also expressed deep concern and urged China to exercise caution and restraint. The two allies consulted with each other on this matter.²²

Finally, approximately two hundred to three hundred fishing boats entered the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands in early August 2016. At that time, a maximum of fifteen Chinese government vessels navigated within the contiguous zone simultaneously, and over a period of five days a large number of Chinese government vessels and fishing boats repeatedly intruded into the Japanese waters. Many of the government vessels that advanced into those waters were armed.²³ This incident occurred less than a month after the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the South China Sea dispute between the Philippines and China. It is speculated that China’s actions near the Senkaku Islands were in retaliation against Japan’s support for the ruling of the international tribunal against China.²⁴ If so, the South China Sea disputes and the Senkaku Islands dispute are interconnected and must be addressed holistically. When G-7 foreign ministers (of course including Japan and the United States) met in New York, they issued a joint statement on the recent developments. The two allies reiterated their opposition to any unilateral actions that raise regional tensions and expressed concern over recent incidents that had occurred in the East China Sea. They also expressed their strong opposition to unilateral actions that raise tensions in the South China Sea.²⁵

All these provocative actions were threats to Japanese sovereignty, interests, or lives and property. It makes no difference what the true intention of the Chinese side was or what instruments China utilized. These actions escalated the tension between the two countries, even though none was considered an armed attack against Japan.

²⁰ “Japan-U.S. Foreign Ministerial Meeting (Summary),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), September 29, 2012, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/meeting_s1209_fm.html.

²¹ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Defense of Japan 2014* (Tokyo, August 2014), 42, https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2014/DOJ2014_1-1-3_web_1031.pdf.

²² “Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the Announcement on the ‘East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone’ by the Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), November 24, 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_000098.html; and John Kerry, “Statement on the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone,” U.S. Department of State, November 23, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/218013.htm>.

²³ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Defense of Japan 2017* (Tokyo, August 2017), 100–101, https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2017.html.

²⁴ A Chinese academic told the author of this article in late August 2016 that the incident had been “retaliation.”

²⁵ “G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement on Recent Developments in Asia,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), September 20, 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000189791.pdf>.

Conclusion

As shown in the four examples discussed in the preceding section, China is attempting to assert its claim to the Senkaku Islands by conducting gray-zone activities in the surrounding waters. Its actions are both covert and overt. China employs not only maritime law-enforcement vessels and military forces but also fishing boats. Its coercive actions have even taken the forms of economic sanctions and violent demonstrations.

By employing fishermen and locals, the Chinese government can easily deny that it is directing activities from behind the scene. With regard to this point, Sam Tangredi argues, “International lawyers and academics have continued to agonize over how to ‘prove to the world’ that gray-zone tactics are part of the official strategies of China, Russia, or other perpetrators.”²⁶ It is thus a priority for Japan and the United States to disclose the evidence of China’s gray-zone activities to both their own constituencies and the international community.

China has a variety of instruments to use in its maritime gray-zone warfare, including the China Coast Guard. It is rapidly becoming bigger and stronger and has acquired a new “legal” tool. The new Coast Guard Law took effect on February 1, 2021, and allows the China Coast Guard to take compulsory measures against foreign naval and other government ships in “the waters under the Chinese jurisdiction.”²⁷ The term “the waters under the Chinese jurisdiction” had been defined to include the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone, and the continental shelf in the draft released in November 2020.²⁸ However, the definition was deleted in the final text, and thus the scope of the law is ambiguous. If the Chinese side maintains the original definition found in the draft, the rule violates the principles of both sovereign immunity and freedom of navigation. Japan’s foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi stated at a news conference on January 29, 2021, that China “must not apply the law in a way that goes against international law.”²⁹ It is not clear if the rule is new or just a codification of the existing rule because of a lack of transparency on the Chinese side. At least, China’s assertiveness has become more overt. The international community must be united and keep objecting to actions that run counter to the rule of law. They have multiple tools. In light of this and other developments, cooperation to address China’s gray-zone activities has become more pressing for the Japan-U.S. alliance.

In the end, gray-zone warfare presents a situation in which national sovereignty or national interests are violated in a manner that does not rise to the level of an armed attack. It may employ various means, both military and nonmilitary, including law-enforcement organizations and civilians under disguise. Economic means are also employed to put pressure on the domestic society of the targeted state to accede to the violating country’s political position. Although a commitment to joint defense based on Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty may serve as the final bulwark, the article does not create a sufficient deterrent against the present threat. A whole-of-government and whole-of-alliance approach should be pursued to rectify this deficiency.

²⁶ Sam Tangredi, “Tax China for Gray-Zone Infractions,” *Proceedings Magazine*, May 2017, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-05/tax-china-gray-zone-infractions>.

²⁷ Article 21 of the China Coast Guard Law.

²⁸ Article 74 of the draft China Coast Guard Law.

²⁹ “Japan Braces for Moves in East China Sea after China Coast Guard Law,” *Japan Times*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/02/01/national/japan-china-coast-guard-law-senkakus>.

Military-to-military cooperation is indispensable, but only one part of a broader approach. In order to generate synergy of the bilateral efforts necessary to deter and counter China, Japan and the United States need to muster and coordinate all their security instruments, including military, diplomacy, law-enforcement, intelligence, economics and trade, science and technology, and even academic research and public education under strong political leadership.

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China's Gray-Zone Capabilities in the East China Sea

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay explores China's capabilities to conduct gray-zone operations in the East China Sea.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Since 2012, China has developed a range of capabilities for gray-zone operations, including “conventional” capabilities such as the China Coast Guard and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia and “nonconventional” capabilities, including information operations, cyber, space, and electronic warfare. These are increasingly enabled by China's development of emerging technologies—artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms, and big data analytics. Chinese military concepts such as algorithm confrontation, which holds that the side with the data advantage dominates the conflict, and People's Liberation Army (PLA) organizational reforms such as the creation of the Strategic Support Force emphasize the integration of information operations, space, and cyber capabilities into military operations. China will continue to incorporate these capabilities, potentially augmenting Beijing's ability to achieve its objectives for gray-zone operations: asserting administrative control over disputed maritime territory, controlling access to energy and fishing resources, influencing regional rules and norms on territorial claims, and testing Japan's resolve to respond.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Future gray-zone operations will capitalize on PLA efforts to integrate information operations, cyber, and space technologies, as well as China's military-civilian fusion strategy, and will potentially include more coordination between organizations such as the Strategic Support Force and China's civilian space agencies. The integration of these capabilities, if successful, will likely enhance China's ability to conduct gray-zone operations in the East China Sea.
- China's future gray-zone actions will likely feature more emerging technologies such as AI and associated data-processing capabilities to enhance maritime intelligence, data collection, and surveillance.
- Which nonconventional capabilities China chooses to use in future East China Sea gray-zone operations will depend on Beijing's objectives and perception of escalation risk, particularly if it deploys newer, emerging capabilities that are currently untested in such operations.

In 2012, two China Marine Surveillance vessels entered the territorial seas of the disputed Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyu Islands in China) in the East China Sea.¹ Since then, China has developed capabilities for gray-zone operations that cut across multiple domains of warfare—maritime, air, information, space, and cyber. They involve organizations under the auspices of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), such as the Strategic Support Force (SSF) and China Coast Guard (CCG); paramilitary organizations, such as the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM); and civilian organizations, including China’s state-run media and space institutions.

This essay explores China’s capabilities to conduct gray-zone operations in the East China Sea. The first section discusses China’s objectives for these operations, while the second section focuses on China’s gray-zone capabilities, including nonconventional and emerging capabilities. The concluding section assesses the implications of and future trends for China’s approach to gray-zone operations in the East China Sea.

China’s Gray-Zone Objectives in the East China Sea

Broadly speaking, Chinese leaders have articulated the assertion and defense of maritime territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific region as an important national goal, tied to the achievement of the “China dream” and defense of China’s “core interests.”² The China dream is the overarching vision of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to achieve “national rejuvenation” by 2049.³ A key element of this vision is to use economic, diplomatic, and military clout to support Beijing’s objectives, one of which is to “resolutely safeguard” China’s sovereignty, security, and development interests, including protection of regional maritime territory in the East China and South China Seas.⁴ This perspective, along with increased Sino-Japanese rivalry and regional competition, means that China likely views the ability to assert its maritime rights in the East China Sea as critical to its regional power.⁵

Within this broader objective, Chinese discussions about gray-zone operations in the East China Sea focus on (1) asserting administrative control over disputed maritime territory to create a de facto Chinese presence;⁶ (2) controlling energy and fishing resources within the East China Sea, given that both China and Japan claim economic rights in overlapping exclusive economic zones of 200 nautical miles from their respective coasts;⁷ (3) influencing regional rules and norms that

¹ Edmund J. Burke et al., *China’s Military Activities in the East China Sea* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), 9, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2574.html. The Senkaku Islands are administered by Japan and claimed by China, Taiwan, and Japan.

² China’s “core interests” include (1) maintaining the basic system and national system, (2) national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and (3) the continuous, stable development of China’s economy and society. See Caitlin Campbell et al., “China’s ‘Core Interests’ and the East China Sea,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Research Backgrounder, May 10, 2013, 2–3, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20Core%20Interests%20and%20the%20East%20China%20Sea.pdf>.

³ Yang Jian and Zheng Yingqin, “Renlei mingyun gongtongti sixiang yu xinjiang yu de guoji zhili” [The Community of Common Destiny Concept and the New Territories of International Governance], *International Studies*, no. 4 (2017): 1–16.

⁴ For example, China’s 2019 defense white paper states that China’s “security interests” include safeguarding regional maritime rights and interests. State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), *China’s National Defense in a New Era* (Beijing, 2019), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

⁵ Zhang Haiwen, “Yi qiang hai meng tuo qi Zhongguo meng” [Use the Strong Maritime Nation Dream to Support the China Dream], *People’s Daily*, February 11, 2018, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/201802/11/nw.D110000renmrb_20180211_3-05.htm.

⁶ Lyle J. Morris, “Gray Zone Challenges in the East and South China Sea,” *Maritime Issues*, January 7, 2019, <http://www.maritimeissues.com/politics/gray-zone-tactics-and-their-challenge-to-maritime-security-in-the-east-and-south-china-sea.html>.

⁷ There are an estimated 200 million barrels of oil reserves in the East China Sea. See Council on Foreign Relations Global Conflict Tracker, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/tensions-east-china-sea>.

affect territorial claims and delegitimize rivals' rules and norms;⁸ and (4) testing Tokyo's resolve to respond through challenging Japan in the maritime and air domains around the Senkaku Islands.⁹

China's Gray-Zone Capabilities

This section examines the capabilities China is developing in conventional and nonconventional warfare domains for gray-zone operations. Discussions in academic and military literature are somewhat unclear on which military capabilities fall under nonconventional (or unconventional) warfare.¹⁰ This discussion will consider China's "conventional" gray-zone capabilities to include the CCG and the PAFMM. China's "nonconventional" gray-zone capabilities include information operations; cyber, space, and electromagnetic warfare; and emerging technologies that enable these capabilities—including artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms, and big data analytics.

China's Conventional Gray-Zone Capabilities

China's conventional capabilities include the CCG and the PAFMM. These forces have increased in size, scope, and capability since 2012 and are now among the primary tools China uses for gray-zone operations in the East China Sea. The CCG is responsible for protecting maritime rights and conducting maritime law-enforcement missions, including enforcement of sovereignty claims, surveillance, protection of fisheries, and anti-smuggling.¹¹ Since 2018, the CCG has fallen under the People's Armed Police, which in turn is directly under the Central Military Commission. Inserting the CCG into the military chain of command has allowed China to better integrate its maritime resources and provides the coast guard with a greater ability to coordinate with the PLA Navy.¹² The CCG is the world's largest coast guard, with more than 130 large patrol ships, 70 fast patrol combatants, more than 400 coastal patrol craft, and approximately 1,000 inshore and riverine patrol boats.¹³ The newer ships are better armed; many are equipped with helicopter facilities, high-capacity water cannons, and guns ranging from 30 to 76 millimeters.¹⁴ The heavily

⁸ In 2013, for example, China established an air defense identification zone over the East China Sea that includes airspace over the Senkaku Islands.

⁹ Morris, "Gray Zone Challenges in the East and South China Sea." For relevant examples of Chinese discussion of gray-zone operations, see Yang Shengli and Geng Yueting, "Dui jiaqiang di qiangdu haishang weiquan guofang dongyuan de zhanlue sikao" [Strategic Thinking on Strengthening National Defense Mobilization for Low-Intensity Defense of Maritime Rights], *National Defense* (2017): 28–32; and Zhao Qinghai, "Five Years' Practice of Protecting Maritime Interests in the Seas of China's Neighboring Areas: Practical Innovations and Experiences," *Journal of China's Neighboring Diplomacy* 3, no. 2 (2017): 57–69.

¹⁰ Much of the Western literature defines nonconventional capabilities in terms of how they are used (e.g., in multi-domain operations, hybrid warfare, gray-zone operations, or conventional operations). See, for example, David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "The Irrelevance of Traditional Warfare?" War on the Rocks, January 27, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/01/the-irrelevance-of-traditional-warfare/>; and Dorothy E. Denning, "Rethinking the Cyber Domain and Deterrence," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 77 (2015), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-77/Article/581864/rethinking-the-cyber-domain-and-deterrence>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020* (Washington, D.C., 2020), 70, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

¹² In 2018, China's Central Military Commission assumed direct control of the People's Armed Police and subordinated the CCG to it. See Andrew S. Erickson, "Maritime Numbers Game," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, January 28, 2019, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2019/01/maritime-numbers-game/>; U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 29; and "The Change in the China Coast Guard (CCG) Chain of Command," JMSDF Command Staff College (Japan), April 23, 2018, https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/SSG/topics-column/eng_col-097.html.

¹³ Erickson, "Maritime Numbers Game"; and Ronald O'Rourke, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R42784, December 29, 2020, 12, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784/121>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 71; and Gao Yue, "Liangjian donghai! Zhiji Zhongguo hai jing hai kong xietong zhanshu yanlian" [Bright Sword East Sea! The Sea and Air Coordinated Tactical Exercises of the Chinese Coast Guard], China Ocean News, August 23, 2013, <http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2013/08-23/5199083.shtml>.

armed nature of the CCG is particularly concerning in light of a new Chinese law that empowers the CCG to use “military force” against foreign vessels that enter into Chinese territorial waters.¹⁵

The PAFMM is China’s government-sponsored armed fishing militia, comprising vessels from various local and provincial civilian organizations that assist the CCG and PLA Navy in establishing a Chinese presence in and around disputed maritime waters, conducting surveillance, and providing logistical support.¹⁶ China uses both the CCG and PAFMM to regularly patrol the waters around the Senkaku Islands and amass in contested areas during crises. Examples include an incident in August 2016 when China sent between two hundred and three hundred fishing vessels to gather in waters near the Senkakus, and fifteen CCG vessels entered the contiguous zone around the islands.¹⁷ More recently, in March 2020 a Japanese destroyer collided with a Chinese fishing boat, and in May 2020 two CCG ships chased a Japanese fishing vessel as it sailed near the Senkaku Islands. In October 2020 the Japanese Ministry of Defense stated that two Chinese vessels entered the disputed waters, marking the 21st incursion into the area by Chinese ships that year. These incidents illustrate the continuous presence of the CCG and PAFMM around the Senkakus.

Nonconventional Capabilities

As stated above, China’s nonconventional gray-zone capabilities include information operations, cyber, space, and electromagnetic warfare, as well as the emerging technologies that enable these capabilities. This section will examine these capabilities in greater depth.

Information operations are meant to coerce an adversary’s decision-makers, shape regional public opinion, control the narrative on regional issues, and build support for China’s objectives.¹⁸ The Chinese military concept of the “three warfares”—public opinion, legal, and psychological warfare—embodies this approach, as does the operational concept of “information dominance,” which holds that the side that dominates the information environment wins the war and includes the gathering and control of data in peacetime to prepare the ground for potential conflict.¹⁹ The PLA applies these concepts to operations in both peace and wartime and increasingly views them as critical to succeeding in gray-zone and hybrid warfare.²⁰

China uses state-run media organizations and social media platforms to disseminate narratives on the East China Sea (and specifically the Senkaku Islands dispute) and send warnings to Japan (and the United States).²¹ For example, an article published in China’s hawkish *Global Times* criticized Japan for planning to hold joint military drills in May 2021 with the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. The article stated: “In recent years, Japan has internationally accused

¹⁵ The CCP revealed a draft of this law in November 2020. See Peter Suci, “China Coast Guard Cleared to Use Arms Against Foreign Vessels,” *National Interest*, November 18, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/china-coast-guard-cleared-use-arms-against-foreign-vessels-172817>; and Guo Yandan, “Foreign Media Stir Trouble by Hying China’s Draft Coast Guard Law,” *Global Times*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1205906.shtml>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 72.

¹⁷ Burke et al., *China’s Military Activities in the East China Sea*, 15.

¹⁸ Wu Jieming and Liu Zhifu, *Yulun zhan xinli zhan falu zhan gailun* [An Introduction to Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, Legal Warfare] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and Systems Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern War* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), 15; and Yu Zhifeng, “New Network-Electronic Combat Methods Are Currently Disrupting the Rules of Warfare,” *China Military Online*, December 19, 2017.

²⁰ Jiang Tianjiao, “Kua yu weishe yu wangluo kongjian zhanlue wending” [Cross-Domain Deterrence and Cyberspace Strategic Stability], *China Information*, no. 8 (2019): 36–39.

²¹ Maiko Ichihara, *Influence Activities of Domestic Actors on the Internet: Disinformation and Information Manipulation in Japan* (Seoul: Asia Democracy Research Network, 2020), 1–29.

China over territorial issues in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Tokyo wants to gain more support from non-regional countries by joining the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance to further counter China.”²² Chinese social media posts have supported this narrative of China’s territorial claims over the Senkaku Islands.²³

China deploys a growing arsenal of cyber capabilities to augment its information operations campaigns, both to disseminate false information and to harvest data from adversary government and commercial systems.²⁴ Chinese military literature discusses the use of cyber capabilities to degrade or shape an adversary’s decision-making through injecting false or confusing information, accessing information systems, and controlling or destroying data.²⁵ China has launched cyber intrusions against Japan in the past, mainly targeting Japanese industry and government organizations to gather data on Japanese defense policies and plans.²⁶ While Chinese cyber efforts have primarily focused on data harvesting, as these capabilities in the information domain grow, it is likely that China could use them more offensively—for example, to confuse adversary decisions, inject false intelligence, deter rival military operations in disputed territory, or negatively affect a rival’s economy or industries.²⁷ The PLA’s reform agenda has focused on the advancement of offensive cyber capabilities that are integral to paving the way to information dominance during peacetime and in gray zones.²⁸ The SSF, which was established as part of the PLA in 2015 to integrate information operations, space, cyber, electronic warfare, and psychological warfare capabilities, illustrates this effort.²⁹ Understanding of the SSF is still evolving, but this force leads the PLA’s psychological warfare and disinformation efforts against regional adversaries.³⁰ Given China’s focus on information dominance, more integration of these capabilities in the East China Sea is expected.

China is also actively modernizing its satellite communications infrastructure; space-based survey, mapping, and navigation systems; and space launch vehicles.³¹ China has maritime surveillance satellites, dual-use oceanographic and hydrological satellites, and an expanding constellation of BeiDou navigation satellites that assist with operations by augmenting intelligence collection and surveillance—both critical activities for information dominance and placement of maritime forces and patrols.³² The PLA also has electronic warfare and jamming capabilities that

²² Zhang Junshe, “Japan, France, U.S., UK Make Hypocritical Naval Moves against China,” *Global Times*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209262.shtml>.

²³ Miao Feng and Elaine J. Yuan, “Public Opinion on Weibo: the Case of the Diaoyu Islands Disputes,” in *The Dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands: How Media Narratives Shape Public Opinion and Challenge the Global Order*, ed. Thomas A. Hollihan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 119–40.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 74.

²⁵ Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and Systems Destruction Warfare*, 20–25.

²⁶ “Significant Cyber Incidents since 2006,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/201218_Significant_Cyber_Events.pdf.

²⁷ Chinese authors discuss the use of cyber capabilities in economic coercion in general, acknowledging that the cyber and economic domains are intertwined in hybrid warfare operations. See Jiang, “Kua yu weishe yu wangluo kongjian zhanlue wending.”

²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 70.

²⁹ Elsa B. Kania and John K. Costello, “The Strategic Support Force and the Future of Chinese Information Operations,” *Cyber Defense Review* (2018): 105–21, https://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/Portals/6/Documents/CDR%20Journal%20Articles/The%20Strategic%20Support%20Force_Kania_Costello.pdf.

³⁰ John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China’s Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2018), 31, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives_13.pdf.

³¹ Mark A. Stokes, statement before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., April 25, 2019, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Mark%20Stokes%20USCC%2025%20April.pdf>.

³² Wang Woven and Hu Haowei, “Dian liang ‘BeiDou’ Zhongguo xingzuo shanyao” [Light Up the ‘BeiDou,’ the Chinese Constellation Shines Globally], *Jiefangjun bao*, May 8, 2019, <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/n1/2019/0503/c1011-31062066.html>.

can threaten other countries' satellite communications and navigation systems as well as conduct cyberattacks on satellite systems—as Chinese hackers have done on U.S. weather satellites.³³ It is possible that future gray-zone operations involving space capabilities might include more coordination of civilian and military space assets and involve the SSF, although the role of the SSF in coordinating the operations of civilian satellites is still unclear.³⁴

Emerging Technologies

China is investing in emerging technologies that will enable both its conventional and nonconventional gray-zone capabilities. These technologies include AI to gather data and algorithms and big data analytics to evaluate that information. Chinese writings have recently started referring to “intelligentized” (*zhinenghua*) warfare. This emerging concept suggests that future warfare will evolve from “system confrontation,” which holds that modern war is a confrontation between opposing operational systems waged across all warfare domains, to “algorithm confrontation,” which states that the side with the data advantage can dominate war with human-computer hybrid operations, AI, and big data.³⁵ The key difference between the two concepts is the emphasis on data and information combined with AI and other emerging technologies to gain the edge over an adversary.

While Chinese authors do not specifically discuss the use of AI for gray-zone operations, they do analyze the potential for AI to augment other capabilities such as unmanned systems (e.g., unmanned underwater or aerial vehicles and intelligence-collection satellites), cyberattack and cyberdefense, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).³⁶ China is still in the early stages of determining the military applications of AI, and much of what is written in Chinese sources analyzes the United States' use of such technology. Chinese authors also acknowledge that China is still constrained in development and application of AI and other emerging technologies by the lack of a technically literate workforce and overreliance on foreign technology.³⁷ Although it is possible that in the future these technologies might become common in China's gray-zone operations, their use is currently more an aspiration than a reality.

Implications and Future Trends

This essay has discussed the key conventional and nonconventional capabilities, military concepts, and emerging technologies that underpin China's approach to gray-zone operations. These capabilities point to several implications for future trends in Chinese gray-zone operations in the East China Sea.

³³ Kathleen Hicks, Joseph Federici, and Connor Akiyama, *China in the Gray Zone* (Helsinki: European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2019), 4, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Strategic-Analysis-4_2019_rgb.pdf.

³⁴ Kevin Pollpeter, testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., April 25, 2019, 11, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Kevin%20Pollpeter%20USCC%2025%20April.pdf>.

³⁵ Yuan Yi, “Rengong zhineng jiang zhihui weilai zhanzheng” [Will AI Command Future Wars?], *Defense Daily*, January 12, 2017; and Edmund Burke et al., “People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts,” RAND Corporation, Research Report, 2020, 22.

³⁶ Jiang Jingchun, “Guanyu jiakuai woguo junshi zhineng hua fazhan de cuqian sikao” [Some Reflections on Accelerating the Development of China's Military Intelligence], *National Defense*, December 13, 2018. See also Ryan Fedasiuk, “Chinese Perspectives on AI and Future Military Capabilities,” Center for Security and Emerging Technology, August 2020, 11, <https://cset.georgetown.edu/research/chinese-perspectives-on-ai-and-future-military-capabilities>.

³⁷ Jiang, “Guanyu jiakuai woguo junshi zhineng hua fazhan de cuqian sikao.”

First, China will continue to employ a mix of conventional and nonconventional capabilities in gray-zone operations. While the CCG and PAFMM have mainly been deployed around the Senkaku Islands, China is honing its ability to integrate information operations, cyber, and space technologies through instruments such as the SSF, civilian space institutions, and the national military-civilian fusion strategy. China will likely capitalize on these efforts to integrate information, cyber, and space capabilities to surveil, gather intelligence and data, and shape Japan's responses to Chinese actions in the East China Sea.

Second, future gray-zone operations in the East China Sea could feature greater use of emerging technologies as China develops them. Chinese literature indicates that the country is actively exploring the military applications of AI, algorithms, and big data analytics. Though discussion on the use of these and other technologies for hybrid or gray-zone operations is sparse, future operations could include technologies that provide an edge on maritime surveillance and intelligence gathering—for example, AI-driven ISR or intelligent satellites.

Third, which nonconventional capabilities China chooses to use in the East China Sea will depend on its objectives and perception of escalation risk, particularly if it deploys newer, emerging capabilities. In the East China Sea, China has so far attempted to avoid some of the more escalatory actions it has taken in the South China Sea. This reflects Beijing's concern over U.S. involvement in a Sino-Japanese clash and the capability of the Japan Coast Guard to deter Chinese actions. The use of emerging capabilities such as cyber and AI carries an increased risk of escalation—both because of their potential effects and because they are relatively untested in gray-zone operations. China would likely seek to balance the use of nonconventional capabilities to support maritime operations with the risk of escalating the conflict beyond gray zones.

China's capabilities for gray-zone operations in the East China Sea will continue to evolve and present challenges for Japanese and U.S. responses in the maritime, air, information, and cyber domains. China's paramilitary maritime forces will likely remain in the leading role for operations around the Senkaku Islands, supported by information operations and existing Chinese ISR networks for surveillance. The country will also continue to develop nonconventional capabilities that it can use to augment conventional capabilities, including information operations, cyber, and electronic warfare, enabled by AI and other emerging technologies. However, China's ability to fully develop and integrate these newer capabilities and technologies into gray-zone operations remains limited for the time being.

Options for Japan-U.S. Cooperation in Coping with Gray-Zone Operations over the Senkaku Islands

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NOTE: This essay is the view of the Maritime Security Study Group and does not necessarily represent the view of NPI.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines China's operations around the Senkaku Islands as an example of a gray-zone situation, explores tools of Japan-U.S. cooperation to effectively respond to such a situation, and suggests ways to improve these tools.

MAIN ARGUMENT

For stabilization of the Indo-Pacific, cooperation among countries in the East Asia region, based on the Japan-U.S. alliance, is becoming more important. Additionally, the dispute over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea poses an inherent danger that, if handled incorrectly, could force a change to the alliance—the keystone of stability in the region. The U.S. commitment to defend the Senkaku Islands in the event of an armed attack is crucial for deterring aggression. However, China's increasingly sophisticated gray-zone capabilities will require Japan and the U.S. to further improve their crisis-response capabilities not only in the conventional domains of land, sea, and air but also in the new domains of cyber and space, among others. China is likely to try to employ various gray-zone strategies in a calculated way to dissuade Japan and the U.S. from invoking Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. The key issue is how the allies can deal effectively with these gray-zone maneuvers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Against China's increasingly sophisticated gray-zone capabilities, it is important to further enhance Japan-U.S. joint response capabilities across all domains.
- The key issue is how Japan and the U.S. should respond to China's use of nonconventional gray-zone capabilities to sway the U.S. from defending Japan.
- Further studies should be conducted to identify ways to concretely improve and strengthen the existing Japan-U.S. alliance coordination mechanism.

The nonconventional gray-zone domains of space, cyber, electromagnetic, and cognitive battlespace—all of which have become increasingly essential in military operations—continue to grow more complex and sophisticated due to rapid technological innovation. These forms of nonconventional gray-zone tactics represent methods to alter the status quo while intentionally blurring the boundaries between the military and nonmilitary realms. Through various means, including nonconventional domains, gray-zone situations represent a wide range of situations that are neither peace nor war and tend to last for a long time.¹

The territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands in China) presents a volatile gray-zone situation in the East China Sea. China Coast Guard vessels have repeatedly approached Japanese fishing boats operating in Japan's territorial waters around the islands. As a result, Japanese fishermen now find it difficult to operate safely in the area without protection provided by the Japan Coast Guard (JCG).² In the future, if more capable China Coast Guard vessels, together with swarms of large Chinese fishing boats and maritime militias, attempt a coordinated intrusion, it would be difficult for the JCG to manage on its own.

How will China react if the Japanese government orders the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to engage in a “maritime security operation” (law-enforcement support) in response to a worsening situation, including the landing of maritime militias on one or more of the islands? There is the possibility that China will resort to gray-zone tactics by integrating the actions of its armed forces and law-enforcement units. For example, China could launch a global propaganda campaign, via a narrative edited in its favor through social and regular media, that insists that Japan was the first to escalate the situation by deploying MSDF warships while the China Coast Guard was carrying out law-enforcement duties, thus creating negative international public opinion toward Japan.

This essay shows that the Senkaku Islands issue poses an inherent danger of causing a separation between Japan and the United States if not handled properly, as well as becoming an ignition point for broader instability in East Asia. The first section argues that it is important to clarify the challenges for the Japan-U.S. alliance posed by the Senkaku Islands dispute and to reiterate that this is not merely an issue between Japan and China. The second section then considers specific policy options for strengthening the alliance cooperation framework between Japan and the United States, which will enable a precise alliance-wide response to diverse threats in the future. The essay concludes by arguing that Japan and the United States need to quickly overcome two challenges: maintaining deterrence and response capabilities against conventional armed conflicts and building deterrence and response capabilities in new gray-zone situations.

Challenges for the Japan-U.S. Alliance

The U.S. commitment to applying Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty to the Senkaku Islands is vitally important as a deterrent against an “armed attack” situation.³ Thanks to the long history of the Japan-U.S. alliance and decades of joint exercises, collaboration in the conventional

¹ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Defense of Japan 2020* (Tokyo, 2020), 41.

² “Chugoku kousen ga saichou no ryoukai shinnyu” [The Longest Ever Intrusion into Japanese Territorial Waters by Chinese Government Ships], *Kaijo Hoan Shimbun*, October 29, 2020, 2.

³ Article 5 reads as follows: “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes.”

domains of land, sea, and air has reached a mature level. Nevertheless, the two allies still need to improve and strengthen their collaboration to counter gray-zone operations.

China has adopted a complex and sophisticated approach to confront Japan, which avoids triggering an armed-attack situation by using gray-zone tactics along with its law-enforcement powers. In response to this approach, the Article 5 commitment alone may not be sufficient as a deterrent. Additionally, the new Coast Guard Law passed by the National People's Congress shows that China regards the Senkaku Islands as part of its jurisdictional waters, much like it does the area inside the so-called nine-dash line in the South China Sea and that west of the Okinawa Trough in the East China Sea. The latter includes a natural gas field lying along a median line between Japan and China.⁴ How should Japan and the United States deter and counter these threats? It will be important for the two allies to concretely and explicitly strengthen their cooperative relationship beyond the current framework of defense and diplomatic collaboration.

For China, the solid alliance between Japan and the United States is a major obstacle to increasing its effective rule over the claims it makes to “jurisdictional waters” around the Senkaku Islands. Against this background, China is highly likely to try to utilize the dispute as leverage to cause estrangement between Japan and the United States.

In the case of a gray-zone crisis situation vis-à-vis the Senkaku Islands, China could opt to employ any of the following disruptive nonconventional gray-zone tactics:

- Tampering with critical infrastructure, including the banking system and the power grid
- Interfering with electromagnetic systems, causing disturbance to satellite and terrestrial communications networks
- Hindering communications through destruction of submarine cable systems

These types of disruptive operations would indirectly and negatively affect the operational capabilities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the U.S. Forces Japan, which rely heavily on Japan's infrastructure.

Proposals for Reinforcing Japan-U.S. Cooperation

Discussions on the Japan-U.S. alliance have thus far proceeded primarily in the context of military affairs. However, the security of a country is closely linked with the whole of its sovereignty and national interests. A bilateral alliance should be viewed more broadly as a partnership between countries, with the relationship between their armed forces as a core underpinning element. Just as the formulation and implementation of a national security policy requires a whole-of-government approach, bilateral alliance cooperation requires the participation of all related organizations in both countries.

For Japan-U.S. alliance cooperation, the institutionalized framework is the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee (also known as the Japan-U.S. 2+2) and the guidelines it formulates for defense cooperation (known as the Japan-U.S. defense guidelines). However, the Japan-U.S. 2+2 framework is solely between the diplomatic and defense authorities of the two countries. The current guidelines were created under the 2+2 framework and serve primarily as the general

⁴ Chisako Masuo, “Shu Kinpei ga tekoire suru ‘Shinpou’ de Chugoku wa ‘Senkaku no jikkou shihai-ka’ ni noridasu: ‘Chugoku Kaikei-hou’ ga shimesu tsugino kajiyō koudou” [Xi Jinping Spearheading China's Maneuver for Gaining “Effective Rule over the Senkaku Islands” under a “New Law”: China's “Coast Guard Law” Unveils Its New Maritime Ambition], *Gendai Business*, November 24, 2020, <https://gendai.ismedia.jp/articles/-/77630>.

direction for the roles and missions of the JSDF and the U.S. armed forces. The guidelines thus fall short of a whole-of-government perspective. Similarly, the alliance coordination mechanism (ACM) is primarily a tool for operational coordination between the JSDF and U.S. forces, while other Japanese ministries and agencies only participate or provide support on an ad hoc basis. Because of this, it is highly likely that in the event of the need to deal with gray-zone operations, the ACM may not be fully effective for coordination between the Japanese and U.S. governments.

To respond to future threats related to gray-zone operations, Japan and the United States need to strengthen the existing frameworks for alliance cooperation to make all of the alliance's response resources adequately available. The remainder of this section considers potential options to help accomplish this goal.

Creation of a New Framework for Alliance Cooperation

The existing defense guidelines should be reviewed, and a new set of "Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Alliance Cooperation" that includes not only defense and foreign affairs authorities but also all other relevant ministries and agencies should be formulated so that both countries can effectively integrate all available means to respond to common threats. The alliance guidelines will need to fully consider what should be treated as common threats and should thoroughly recognize the potential problems and effects caused by gray-zone operations.

A Japan-U.S. Alliance Council should be inaugurated as a permanent intragovernmental forum to regularly consult on all aspects of the alliance relationship. The current ACM should be redefined as an auxiliary organization to support the proposed council in the area of military affairs. Of note, the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty affirms that the two countries will maintain close contact in political, economic, and social domains; therefore, alliance cooperation is not limited necessarily to security affairs. Accordingly, it will be necessary to define the relationship between the alliance council and other bilateral government coordination channels. As part of this effort, it is imperative to effectively integrate the ACM into a greater framework for whole-of-government alliance cooperation.

Information Sharing and Policy Coordination for Gray-Zone Situations

Together, the Japan-U.S. alliance guidelines and alliance council should facilitate the sharing of relevant information from an early stage of a gray-zone contingency and help create a "common operating picture." The existing ACM does not have a system in which both countries can immediately embark on crisis-management coordination and exchange information.⁵ The two governments must therefore set up a permanent standing coordination unit, working under the ACM, to share the common operating picture pertaining to gray-zone operations. Such information should be fully shared by all relevant branches of both governments. Additionally, to facilitate the creation of a common operating picture, the alliance council should ensure the close coordination and effective alignment of alliance responses.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation at the Law-Enforcement Level

Contingencies below the threshold of armed attack at sea should be handled initially by the JCG. If the situation develops further and requires the MSDF to engage in a maritime security

⁵ John P. Niemeyer, "U.S.-Japan Coordination in an East China Sea Crisis," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 3 (2020): 39.

operation, a certain level of prudence is required. Nevertheless, in such a case, the Japanese government should ensure good communication with the United States. When both countries closely coordinate policy in an outwardly visible way from the outbreak of a gray-zone situation, their joint approach is more likely to be effective in preventing the situation from escalating.

There is no fundamental difference between the JCG's law-enforcement authority and that of the U.S. Coast Guard. Both the JCG and its U.S. counterpart function as maritime police organizations. They are governed by the rule of law, and the limitations of their authority are specified in accordance with their respective constitutions. By contrast, the U.S. Navy is prohibited from law-enforcement activities, whereas the MSDF is legally permitted under the *posse comitatus* principle to exercise police authority while engaging in public security and maritime security operations in peacetime as a way of complementing police and JCG activities.⁶ However, in maritime security operations, the MSDF's authority does not go beyond that of the JCG because the provisions defining the JCG's authority are also applied to the MSDF.⁷

Since its establishment after World War II, the JCG has been prohibited from performing any military functions under Article 25 of the Japan Coast Guard Act, which was enacted to eliminate any fears of a naval revival. As such, the organizational characteristics of the JCG are considerably different from those of the U.S. Coast Guard. The latter was established as a federal law-enforcement agency and an armed force and can be subordinated during wartime or by the sitting president to the U.S. Navy to engage in combat operations as necessary. Although the JCG may be placed under the direction of the minister of defense in armed-attack situations, as stipulated in the Self-Defense Forces Law,⁸ even under such circumstances its activities are limited to maritime law-enforcement operations. This kind of legal environment causes adverse effects for the JCG, related to not only its activities but also personnel training and the types of equipment installed on its cutters. For example, U.S. Coast Guard cutters are equipped with 127-mm guns, torpedoes, and sonar systems that are essential for combat operations, while JCG cutters are not similarly equipped.

Currently in the waters around the Senkaku Islands, only JCG and China Coast Guard vessels are deployed. As the naval vessels of the MSDF and China's People's Liberation Army Navy have been kept well away from the islands, a military standoff has thus far been averted. Against such a background, the commander of the U.S. Forces Japan stated in 2020 that the U.S. military was steadfast in its commitment to help Japan monitor Chinese government ships' "unprecedented" intrusions in waters surrounding the islands.⁹ The presence of the U.S. forces conducting surveillance in the area can serve as a strong message to China.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation in Cognitive Warfare

Japan-U.S. security cooperation in the domain of cognitive warfare will be imperative to deal competently with nonconventional gray-zone capabilities. This will be particularly crucial given that China attaches importance to information-driven warfare in the contemporary security environment. To reinforce its information-based warfare capability, China aims to gain "brain

⁶ Government of Japan, "Self-Defense Forces Law," Articles 78, 81, <https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=329AC0000000165>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tim Kelly, "U.S. Says Will Help Japan Monitor 'Unprecedented' Chinese Incursion around Disputed East China Sea Islands," Reuters, July 29, 2020, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defence-japan-idUSKCN24U13Q>.

supremacy” to influence adversary decision-makers by employing all available means in its *san zhan* (three war) control strategy, which includes public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare.¹⁰

The United States is thought to have inaugurated the Global Engagement Center in 2016 to counter foreign-state and nonstate propaganda and disinformation campaigns by utilizing social networking system technologies, among others.¹¹ Japan lags behind in this kind of activity. It is urgent that the Japanese government establish an organization with a system capable of providing seamless responses in the cognitive warfare domain. To realize such an organization of its own, the Japanese government should consider a four-point proposal for enhancing Japan-U.S. security cooperation.

First, the Japanese and U.S. governments should make people in both countries aware of the history and current developments in the dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands.¹² For example, live video streaming would enable the public to objectively view, in real time, what happens in the surrounding waters. This setup can also help prevent the international community from being misled by false information in the event of any contingency. To enable this system to work effectively, Japan and the United States should continuously share information gathered by satellites, ships, aircraft, and drones deployed to the area. The collected information should then be made viewable by the public in an appropriate way rather than being limited to government and military channels. Besides the governments of both countries, research institutes and other private-sector entities can also play an important role in disseminating information.

Second, within Japan’s legal frameworks concerning “maritime security operations,” “public security operations,” and “defense mobilization,” the core roles to be played by the JSDF are particularly complex.¹³ To clarify these roles, Japan and the United States should mutually deepen their understanding of each other’s security-related laws. In particular, both open and closed war games, among other activities, should be used to facilitate mutual understanding of legal systems, including interpretations of relevant domestic laws based on international law.

Third, Japan and the United States should regularly hold consultations on China’s drive to infiltrate social-networking sites. This would help the allies improve their situational awareness, exchange opinions, and jointly devise effective countermeasures.

Fourth, making their common security intent known to other countries by means of joint deployments of military units and joint exercises is an effective security approach.¹⁴ To that end, the U.S. military and the JSDF should continue to plan and conduct front-line drills, thereby making it viable to propagate their common intent when necessary without any inconsistency.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation in Space

Space has emerged as an indispensable part of JSDF and U.S. military operations. However, this domain is also a vulnerable area that urgently requires worldwide consensus for stable and

¹⁰ Takahiro Tsuchiya, “Neuro Security ‘Brain Supremacy’ and ‘Mind Wars,’” *Keio SFC Journal* 15, no. 2 (2015): 14–25.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, Global Engagement Center, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center>; and David Brunnstrom, “U.S. to Base Coast Guard Cutters in Western Pacific in Response to China,” Reuters, October 23, 2020, <https://jp.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-pacific/u-s-to-base-coast-guard-cutters-in-western-pacific-in-response-to-china-idUSKBN2782VY>.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), “Situation of the Senkaku Islands,” April 4, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/senkaku/page1we_000010.html.

¹³ Government of Japan, “Self-Defense Forces Law.”

¹⁴ Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, “National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond,” December 18, 2018, 9, 11, http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/pdf/2019boueikeikaku_e.pdf.

sustainable use—not just for military operations but for telecommunications and the distribution of goods. Aiming to ensure the security of space, the Japanese government has begun enhancing cooperation with the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and the United States, as well as with other agencies and countries. The Japanese Ministry of Defense plans to launch a Space Situational Awareness (SSA) system by fiscal year 2022 with a particular mission to monitor such things as debris that could pose a threat to Japanese satellites. The mission will be carried out with the help of radar and a seamless system of gathering, processing, and sharing space-based information. In May 2020 the Ministry of Defense inaugurated the Space Operations Squadron as an Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) unit that is responsible for the SSA mission, while also preparing solutions for space warfare unit operations, conducting relevant personnel training, and formulating frameworks for cooperation and coordination with a variety of relevant agencies in the United States and other countries.

Many countries have been increasing their dependence on space for digitalization and telecommunications, among other areas. But the truth is that space-related systems may turn out to be the first attacked in combat for the following reasons. First, space-related terrestrial infrastructure, such as satellite traffic control systems, tends to be vulnerable to attacks. Second, the space warfare environment makes it difficult to gather information about an attack, including the identity of the party responsible, and there are various possible means of conducting strikes. Given these limitations, to deal properly with destructive space activities, it will be crucial to monitor situations and share information with relevant agencies and countries. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation, led by the United States, is progressing rapidly with European countries, Australia, and others.

Additionally, the United States and Japan need to improve cooperation in oceanographic situational awareness, promotion of hosted payloads, and human resource development, among other areas, in order to enhance the safety of space-related missions. It will also be important to study procedures for joint Japan-U.S. responses and bilateral and multilateral cooperation to deal with a variety of space-related threats.

It is still unclear whether sovereignty extends to satellites and whether the right of self-defense against attacks on satellites is an inherent right of a nation. Under these circumstances, Japan's approach to exercising the right of individual and collective self-defense, including the conditions for invoking this right, is expected to be restrained. Therefore, any joint response to satellite attacks is expected to be complex, and Japan-U.S. cooperation needs to be deepened in space security as soon as possible.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation in the Cyber and Electromagnetic Domain

In 2014, Japan adopted the Basic Act on Cybersecurity, leading to the establishment in 2015 of the National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity (NISC) within the Cabinet Secretariat, which now plays a central role with regard to the country's cybersecurity policies. In reality, however, the NISC's role is limited. It functions as a central office for coordination among relevant ministries and agencies and has no command authority in emergencies. As such, the government should prioritize setting up a centralized organization responsible for practical cybersecurity operations and the development of personnel with advanced cybersecurity expertise.

Japan and the United States need to emphasize cybersecurity surveillance to improve attribution capabilities by conducting more joint training and exercises. They also should cooperate not only

to enhance supply chain security but also to assist the cybersecurity capacity-building efforts of developing countries through official development assistance and other government funds.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation for the Formation of International Norms

The issue of the Senkaku Islands serves as a touchstone for requiring China to abide by an international order based on the rule of law that is commonly recognized by the world's democracies. It will be important for Japan and the United States to take the lead in formulating effective international norms for the oceans, as well as space, cyber, electromagnetic systems, and cognitive warfare. They should also help lead the development of an international system to ensure surveillance on activities in these domains.¹⁵

As for the maritime realm, Japan, the United States, and other concerned countries should make clear a common stance to maintain order under the international norms stipulated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and set up an international surveillance framework to ensure that the established norms continue to prevail. In the event that China has any argument or takes action in defiance of international norms, Japan, the United States, and other concerned countries should adopt a strong stance that shows no tolerance for any attempt to create a *fait accompli*.

In the space domain, Japan and the United States should cooperate in establishing an international code of conduct, including governing provisions for space traffic management. The two allies also can play a leading role in promoting international cooperation in setting new norms in preparation for a future increase in the use of space. Moreover, the allies should cooperate on addressing electromagnetic interference and disruption. These could cause tremendous damage not only to space activities and unmanned system-driven operations but also to ordinary socioeconomic activities. Given the urgency of this threat, Japan and the United States need to work toward the adoption of international norms governing and protecting the use of electromagnetic systems.

Conclusion

Japan and the United States must continue demonstrating their intention and capabilities to deal firmly with any gray-zone crisis that might occur around the Senkaku Islands. Unwavering determination to address Chinese actions vis-à-vis this issue will be vital in ensuring stability not only in the East China Sea but also in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific more broadly. As a key priority in dealing with the various new gray-zone threats, Japan and the United States will need to revamp their alliance to strengthen not only the partnership between the JSDF and the U.S. armed forces but also cooperation at every level of government.

¹⁵ Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, "National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond."

U.S. Command and Control across the Spectrum of Gray-Zone Operations in the East China Sea

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NOTE: This essay and its recommendations represent the views of the authors alone and do not represent the views or policies of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the role of the U.S. in gray-zone contingencies in the East China Sea in the context of alliance coordination with Japan.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The U.S. and Japan produced the New Defense Guidelines in 2015 that created the alliance coordination mechanism (ACM) to enable the allies to better manage crises. The ACM has proved useful but is showing some limitations in handling the challenges of complex gray-zone activity posed by China. This is in part due to the differing definitions of “gray zone” in Japan and the U.S., which could lead to confusion over appropriate response mechanisms. This uncertainty may have the unintended effect of giving China the power to set the tempo of activities in and around the Senkaku Islands to incrementally wrest control from the Japan Coast Guard. There are also growing concerns that the ACM is insufficient for dealing with kinetic operations above the threshold of gray-zone operations. Therefore, the U.S. and Japan should consider reforming the ACM, reorganizing U.S. Forces Japan, and developing a command and control (C2) structure for crises just below and above the gray-zone threshold.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Japan and the U.S. must find a common definition of gray zone that will enable them to agree on the threshold where gray-zone activity ends and conflict begins.
- Japan and the U.S. must strengthen the ACM by constant usage and rehearsal in order to allow it to function properly during a *fait accompli* gray-zone operation by China.
- The disjointedness of U.S. C2 in the vicinity of Japan could be a significant challenge in a fast-paced crisis above the gray-zone threshold. The allies should consider creating a unified command structure for the alliance, given that the current “coalition-style” approach to C2 could prove insufficient for dealing with a peer competitor with a unified command in a crisis scenario.

China's political goals in the East China Sea have been to obtain increased access to and dominion over geopolitically contested maritime space rather than destabilize target nations. They include using all elements of national power that are "derived from a well thought-out, active, assessment-informed national strategy."¹ The prize for the People's Republic of China (PRC) is not the Senkaku Islands themselves (called the Diaoyu Islands in the PRC) but enhanced authority over the surrounding waters, enabling the country to further challenge the rules-based international order.² Beijing uses this gray-zone approach to increase Chinese control over nearby seas while avoiding a kinetic conflict or robust response.³

The Japan-U.S. alliance must anticipate confusion in interpreting these actions and prepare itself accordingly. Tomohisa Takei, a former chief of maritime staff in the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, wrote on the vulnerabilities presented to the alliance by the lack of a common definition of "gray zone."⁴ He points out that a lack of agreement on this definition has real-world effects for planners. While there is already a significant literature on the term among security experts,⁵ the fact is that this term contains ambiguities. These ambiguities and a lack of a common working definition mean that U.S. planners and their Japanese colleagues may not agree when the upper limits of a "gray zone" have been reached—i.e., when an "armed attack" has occurred.⁶ The shift from "gray zone" to "armed attack" in Japanese domestic law is the condition for transferring control of the contingency from Japan's National Police Agency and the Japan Coast Guard to the Maritime Self-Defense Force and potentially triggering Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty.⁷ Therefore, a lack of a common definition could be a major stumbling block to jointly responding in a fast-moving crisis.

While the element of contested wills certainly exists in the case of the Senkaku Islands, as it does in all of China's territorial disputes with eighteen neighboring states, the character of force, or violence, has evolved such that it may no longer precisely fit this definition. This lack of clarity presents a challenge for the alliance in determining when to trigger Article 5. The currently constructed alliance coordination mechanism (ACM) is a step in the right direction toward coordinating the various actors in Japan and the United States in a crisis. However, there are increasingly questions about its sufficiency for dealing with crises in and above the gray-zone threshold with a peer competitor that has a unified command over its various actors and brings a growing set of capabilities to bear in the East China Sea.

¹ Scott Swift, "Foreword," in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, ed. Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), xv.

² Michael B. Petersen, "The Chinese Maritime Gray Zone: Definitions, Dangers, and the Complications of Rights and Protection Operations," in *ibid.*

³ Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, "War without Gun Smoke: China's Paranaul Challenge in the Maritime Gray Zone," in Erickson and Martinson, *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*.

⁴ Tomohisa Takei, "Gray Zones and Vulnerability in the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Operational and Legal Dimensions," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 3 (2020): 19–29.

⁵ See, for example, Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015); David Carment and Dani Below, "War's Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, October 2018; Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007); and Joseph L. Votel et al. "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," *Joint Force Quarterly* 80 (2016).

⁶ This term was drawn from Article 51 of the UN Charter: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations." See the UN Charter, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), "Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security: Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan's Survival and Protect Its People," <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000143304.pdf>. In 2015, Japan passed security laws that provided two new conceptual conditions for transferring control and potentially triggering Article 5: first, a situation that has a major influence on Japan's peace and security and could lead to an armed attack on Japan; second, a situation that threatens Japan's survival. However, these conditions can only be applied in the strictest manner.

This essay examines the role of the United States in gray-zone contingencies in the East China Sea in the context of Japan-U.S. alliance coordination. The essay assesses both the ACM and the U.S. command and control (C2) structure and then provides options to enable alliance partners to effectively approach this complex challenge. We argue that the alliance's C2 structure is currently inadequate because of increasingly complex challenges presented by China in the gray zone. New collaboration among allies and partners and a reimagining of the existing C2 structure are required to compete, deter, and win in the gray zone and beyond.

The Alliance Coordination Mechanism

The ACM is a whole-of-government standing arrangement involving participants from various relevant agencies in both governments, depending on the nature of the contingency, that acts as the main body for a coordinated allied response. The mechanism was created to “strengthen policy and operational coordination related to activities conducted by the Japan Self-Defense Forces and U.S. armed forces in all phases from peacetime to contingencies.”⁸ It is a virtual network, rather than a physical meeting, connecting participants by phone, email, and teleconferencing.⁹ The ACM sits atop a number of other mechanisms for policy coordination. On the operational side, links between the Japan Self-Defense Forces and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command are robust, as the Joint Staff Office in Japan and Indo-Pacific Command J5 (Strategic Planning and Policy) carry out regular meetings. However, the multiple communication points could cause confusion in establishing clear lines of C2 during a contingency, revealing what James Holmes has called “subterranean fractures” within the alliance.¹⁰

The ACM has gone some way to improving inter-alliance and interagency communications. It has been used twice in real-life situations—once in 2016 after a North Korean nuclear test and once during the 2016 “swarming” of Chinese vessels near the Senkaku Islands—as well as being activated during training exercises such as Keen Edge and Keen Sword.¹¹

However, various observers of the ACM have identified weaknesses. According to one account, the mechanism does not reach very far into nontraditional agencies with tools that must be utilized in a gray-zone contingency, such as economics, public affairs, cyberoperations, and social media.¹² The lack of a permanent physical presence with a collocated staff is clearly a limitation on the ACM's resources.¹³ Moreover, the ACM “lacks the command and control elements necessary for a rapid combined and joint response to...the type of complex, high-intensity warfare that the allies must be prepared to conduct.”¹⁴ Other observers have softened this criticism, noting that the ACM was never meant to provide this function and was instead introduced to present a flexible communications node between Japan and the United States that was hindered by the previous lack

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation,” April 27, 2015, 3.

⁹ Emma Chanlett-Avery, Caitlin Campbell, and Joshua A. Williams, “The U.S. Japan Alliance,” Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL33740, June 13, 2019, 27–28.

¹⁰ James Holmes, “Would War with China Destroy the U.S.-Japan Alliance?” *National Interest*, February 12, 2021.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation”; and “USFJ, JSDF Wrap Successful Keen Edge 2016,” U.S. Forces Japan, Press Release, January 29, 2016.

¹² John P. Neimeyer, “U.S.-Japan Coordination in an East China Sea Crisis,” *Asia Policy* 15, no. 3 (2020): 33.

¹³ Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Managing the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, April 14, 2017, 50–52.

¹⁴ Michael Green et al., *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016), 58, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/asia-pacific-rebalance-2025>.

of standard operating procedures.¹⁵ But even taking this into consideration, it is still unclear that the ACM has matured in its more limited role. The two allies will need to consider whether they require a body that is fully capable of coordinating alliance actions from the gray-zone threshold through to high-intensity military conflict.

U.S. Command and Control in Japan

Current U.S. C2 in Japan is complicated and difficult for Japanese alliance managers to navigate. Japan's Chief of Staff, Joint Staff Office, has three very different U.S. counterparts: the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the commander of Indo-Pacific Command, and the commander of U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ).¹⁶ The latter is a sub-unified command under the Indo-Pacific Command and located at Yokota Airbase, with a mission to "manage the U.S.-Japan Alliance...setting the conditions within Japan to ensure U.S.-service components...maintain a lethal posture and readiness to support regional operations in steady state, crisis, and contingency...[and] to coordinate and synchronize actions in support of the U.S.-Japan Alliance."¹⁷ USFJ's purpose is to administer the alliance, while Indo-Pacific Command provides direction in a contingency. USFJ does not have operational control of forces in Japan, though it must be prepared to assume control in the event of a contingency. To this point, in the spectrum of maritime gray-zone activity, the USFJ commander lacks operational control of the U.S. Seventh Fleet and III Marine Expeditionary Force, which report directly to the U.S. Pacific Fleet and U.S. Marine Forces Pacific, respectively, in Hawaii. Given a "serious, complex fast emerging situation...from a gray zone confrontation around the Senkaku Islands,"¹⁸ there are questions about the ability of alliance forces closest to the area of operations to respond in a timely and coordinated manner.¹⁹

The ACM, after it is organized, would find difficulty in initially coordinating with various U.S. commands in distant locations in Honolulu and Washington, D.C.²⁰ Further, because there is no standing allied staff, there are "pitfalls involved in kickstarting a security crisis response and bringing diverse military commands together into an action team on short notice."²¹ A permanent organization and staff structure that includes other civilian agencies and departments could be formed into a standing group. While this concept would likely deal well with gray-zone contingencies below the threshold of war, the prospect of high-intensity conflict in the East China Sea means that such a standing group could also serve as a locus for deeper integration of U.S. and Japanese C2 in Japan over the long run.

One way forward would be to concentrate more operational control in USFJ. This could move toward a gradual integration of U.S. and Japanese C2 structures to loosely resemble those that currently exist in U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), though with adjustments made for the particular requirements of Japan. This of course is a highly politically sensitive issue, but one that could be

¹⁵ Hornung, "Managing the U.S.-Japan Alliance," 61.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ U.S. Forces Japan, "Guidance from the Commander, U.S. Forces Japan," <https://www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ>.

¹⁸ Neimeyer, "U.S.-Japan Coordination in an East China Sea Crisis," 33.

¹⁹ Thomas Storch, "Putting 'Meat on the Bones' of the U.S.-Japan Alliance Coordination Mechanism," Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, June 1, 2016, <https://spfusa.org/sasakawa-usa-forum/putting-meat-bones-u-s-japan-alliance-coordination-mechanism>.

²⁰ Neimeyer, "U.S.-Japan Coordination in an East China Sea Crisis," 39.

²¹ Ibid., 40.

approached carefully and incrementally so that equities on both sides are satisfied and taken into account. In some ways, such sensitivities might be met with the response that Japanese and U.S. forces are already placed under unified command in military exercises. This in itself presents the opportunity for alliance managers on both sides to use increased military exercises to gain increasing experience in short-term unified command. For example, the United States could invite the Japan Self-Defense Forces to take part in Valiant Shield, a large U.S. exercise in the Pacific. However, coalition-style command systems similar to what currently exists in Japan are arguably only sufficient for low-intensity conflicts with less technologically advanced adversaries. They are less than ideal for threshold operations against a peer competitor.²²

Steps for Evolving the Allied C2 Structure

The first step that the United States and Japan can take to develop the alliance's C2 structure is to create an East China Sea working group with personnel from both countries' national security councils to examine the current assumptions upon which the alliance response to Chinese activity is based. This working group could make recommendations upon reviewing the following four assumptions that undergird the current framework:

- *Assumption 1: U.S. and Japanese forces can distinguish between a gray-zone contingency and an armed attack.* The assumption that both alliance partners understand the complexity of the current environment must be tested. As Tomohisa Takei asserts, Japan employs a strict legal definition of gray-zone activity, whereas the U.S. approach is more flexible. An alliance working group should seek to explore the vulnerabilities caused by this divergence. A secondary benefit of such a study would be to strongly encourage Japan to write a Japanese version of the U.S. *Law of War Manual*.²³
- *Assumption 2: The concept of gray zone meaningfully distinguishes traditional military means from the maritime constabulary.* Gray-zone activities by the maritime constabulary have provided the PRC a number of benefits, enabling it to control the tempo of activity in the East China Sea while utilizing multiple local and central government entities to overwhelm the Japan Coast Guard. Reforms in 2018 subsumed the China Coast Guard under the Central Military Commission, while the Coast Guard Law of 2021 legitimized the legal right to use force to defend Chinese sovereignty.²⁴ These actions have streamlined Chinese C2.
- *Assumption 3: The primary goal of the Japan Coast Guard and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force in interacting with Chinese actors in the East China Sea is to de-escalate tensions in order to preserve the status quo.* Making de-escalation the primary tactical response may not lead to the best long-term outcomes. This is not to say that either the United States or Japan should seek to provoke conflict, but it is reasonable to move responsibility for the East China Sea issue from civilian and constabulary agencies to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the U.S. Navy. Naturally, there is a narrative element to this in which the PRC would seek to accuse the alliance of escalation. Yet, if executed with reference to the new military status and legislation

²² See, for example, Russell W. Glenn, *Band of Brothers or Dysfunctional Family? A Military Perspective on Coalition Challenges during Stability Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011); Eric V. Larson, "Interoperability of Coalition Air Forces: Lessons Learned from U.S. Operations with NATO Allies," RAND Corporation, Research Brief, 2004; Thomas A. Cardwell III, *Command Structure for Theatre Warfare: The Quest for Unity of Command* (Montgomery: Air University Press, 1984); and Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour: The Second World War*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), 25–122.

²³ Takei, "Gray Zones and Vulnerabilities in the U.S.-Japan Alliance," 28.

²⁴ Ryan D. Martinson, "Early Warning Brief: Introducing the 'New, New' China Coast Guard," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 25, 2021.

of the China Coast Guard, this reform would create an alternative narrative while retaking the tactical initiative. The United States has traditionally found success in deterrence through escalation and by increasing the tempo of operations.²⁵ China, however, has cleverly crafted a strategy designed to prevent the United States from doing so. The United States needs to regain strategic advantage and shift from a reactive to a proactive approach.²⁶

- *Assumption 4: The best C2 approach of the alliance is that of a coalition rather than a combined command.* The risk of a high-intensity conflict requires a serious review of USFJ's existing C2 structure. The allies should consider the possible evolution to a sub-unified combatant command status, elevating USFJ to a four-star command and giving it operational control of U.S. forces based in Japan. This could be based on the USFK model, which has a proven ability to enable alliance coordination in gray-zone and warlike conditions, while making exceptions to fit the particular cultural and bureaucratic requirements of the situation in Japan.

Second, the United States and Japan should expand regular and institutionalized intelligence sharing and communications systems to match the requirements of a combined command structure in a potential war zone with a near peer power. The complexity of gray-zone activities requires a common, integrated picture of events across multiple agencies in both countries so that both allies are able to read adversary intentions through the haze of strategic ambiguity in real time.²⁷ Ideally, this could take place through the Mission Partner Environment program raised by the former commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, during his testimony to the Armed Services Committee in March 2021.²⁸

While the prospect of Japan's addition as a sixth member of the Five Eyes intelligence community seems unlikely in the near term,²⁹ Japan could take steps to move its intelligence community toward Five Eyes standards that would facilitate closer links to the U.S. intelligence community. More use of the Combined Regional Information Exchange–Japan classified message exchange would also add value.³⁰

Alternatively, Japan and the United States could create a combined defense intelligence fusion center similar to the facility at the British Royal Air Force base in Wyton, England.³¹ This could bring together highly trusted personnel from various services in both countries to institutionalize data sharing and analysis in order to create actionable real-time assessments for military leadership in the alliance.

A third step is to operationalize USFJ. This option acknowledges that the challenge posed by China cannot be limited geographically and that strategic competition is taking place in every region, and through every domain, and requires the use of all instruments of national power. The aim of operationalizing USFJ would be to empower it to focus broadly on the defense of Japan and the continuation of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. The reformed command would do well to harness the positive elements of the current geopolitical landscape by involving the Quad

²⁵ Kelly McCoy, "In the Beginning, There Was Competition: The Old Idea Behind the New American Way of War," Modern War Institute at West Point, April 11, 2018, <https://mwi.usma.edu/beginning-competition-old-idea-behind-new-american-way-war>.

²⁶ Lyle J. Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019), xiii.

²⁷ For more on the need for integrated operational awareness to combat gray-zone strategic ambiguity, see Melissa Dalton et al., *By Other Means: Part II Adapting to Compete in the Gray Zone* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), 42.

²⁸ Video of the committee hearing is available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/21-03-09-united-states-indo-pacific-command>.

²⁹ Tsuruoka Michito, "Japan and the Five Eyes: A Reality Check," Nippon.com, December 24, 2020, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00654>.

³⁰ Hornung, "Managing the U.S.-Japan Alliance," 50–52.

³¹ "Into the Greyzone: Britain's Armed Forces Get Ready for a Revolution," *Economist*, September 15, 2020.

and European efforts. These would likely start slowly but with time could develop into a powerful association with huge asymmetrical benefit. Operationalizing USFJ would also allow Indo-Pacific Command to focus on region-wide strategic planning.

A fourth option is to develop possible alliance avenues for collective defense and counter-narrative generation to challenge China's actions and messaging campaigns. The most obvious place to start is partnering with India, which is facing efforts by China to enlarge its border at India's expense below the threshold of war. Japan and the United States could seek to include Australia in the dialogue to round out the Quad, identified by one U.S. policymaker recently as "likely the most important relationship we've developed since World War II."³² The results of closer coordination would be to counter Chinese narratives of upholding international law. While there are real political challenges to the Quad taking on the job of collective deterrence or collective defense, the fact is that it is evolving toward quasi-alliance status, with every member now holding logistics and basing agreements with every other member. The Quad also contains two full alliances within it. The United States and Japan, therefore, would do well to capture support from the Quad states and apply it to countering China's narrative construction in its gray-zone campaigns.

Fifth, the United States and Japan should develop a political-military dialogue to discuss what a C2 structure in Japan might look like and consider prior examples in U.S. military history. In addition to the current C2 structure in USFK, which was built when South Korea was a much more junior partner to the United States, there could also be attempts to repeat a more symmetrical structure, such as the U.S.-UK C2 structure, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, which was used during World War II. The commander would also be a four star.

Conclusion

Since its inception, the Japan-U.S. alliance has weathered many storms, but never one involving a peer competitor with such a range of political, economic, and military tools at its disposal. While the alliance has begun the process of adaption and restructuring to respond to this development, it has some ways to go. We have discussed how ambiguity in the definition of gray zone could present the alliance with problems and identified a few options for addressing current issues in the ACM. Although the mechanism has laid the foundations for interagency and interdepartment engagement in a gray-zone contingency, it is unlikely to be sufficient for dealing with events above that threshold, such as a high-end conflict with a peer competitor. We have also noted that the alliance has never had a truly unified staff dedicated to addressing strategic challenges. Command structures have run in parallel, with touch points at all levels of warfare, but in a consultative rather than collaborative way. The proposal to elevate USFJ to a sub-unified combatant command should be studied to ensure that it is truly a coalition effort and accounts for both countries' unique cultures and interests, while at the same time laying the groundwork for a combined C2 structure that assumes control of events above the gray-zone threshold. This last step—though the difficulties are great—is of such importance that a senior-level political-military dialogue should be started as soon as it is viable to discuss the various equities and likely requirements of such a structure.

³² John Grady, "Biden Administration Wants to Expand Pacific 'Quad' Relationship, National Security Advisor Sullivan Says," USNI News, January 29, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/01/29/biden-administration-wants-to-expand-pacific-quad-relationship-national-security-advisor-sullivan-says>.



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