

ACCELERATE U.S.-JAPAN COMMAND STRUCTURE ALIGNMENT

ISSUE

In the past few years, the United States and Japan have deepened their alliance cooperation, reflecting rising concern about China's behavior. Tokyo has pledged to double its defense budget and inked agreements to buy 400 U.S.-made Tomahawk cruise missiles to enhance its military buildup. As part of this historic effort to upgrade its defense, Tokyo is establishing a permanent Joint Headquarters, slated to open in March 2025. While Japan has fast-tracked its own efforts to develop joint capabilities, the United States has committed to a "phased approach" that could slow the momentum of the alliance. The Pentagon has announced plans to transform the United States Force Japan (USFJ) by providing joint operational responsibilities, commanded by a three-star general and reporting to the Indo-Pacific Command.

SIGNIFICANCE

With its USD2.35 billion purchase of Tomahawk missiles, Japan's strike capability is advancing; however, it needs coordination with U.S. intelligence for effective targeting, reconnaissance, and surveillance. The escalating threats from China and from North Korea, now enhanced by partnerships with Russia, are too urgent to wait for a fundamental change to the U.S.-Japan command mechanism. The 52,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan are the cornerstone of U.S. military power in the Indo-Pacific, but Japan is no longer simply a platform for forward operations. A fully resourced Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF)—if given a modernized command and control structure within the alliance framework—can play a critical role in countering the increasingly severe security challenges in the region.

**RECOMMENDED
COURSE
OF ACTION**

As Japan integrates the combined power of its ground, maritime, and air Self Defense Forces, the United States should accelerate the stand-up of its counterpart control and command structure to maximize deterrence and operational capabilities. The Pentagon should consider whether a standing staff located in Japan is necessary to facilitate communication with Japanese authorities and combat the tyranny of distance with the Indo-Pacific Command thousands of miles away in Hawaii. Given the security landscape, the allies no longer have the luxury of going slowly.