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New U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines Deepen Alliance Cooperation

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Evolution of the U.S.-Japan Alliance

In recent years, the U.S.-Japan alliance has evolved in response to changes in Japanese defense policies and the regional security environment in East Asia. The alliance originally was constructed as an asymmetric arrangement—Japan hosts U.S. military bases in exchange for an unreciprocated security guarantee from the United States—but this partnership is shifting incrementally toward more equality. Japan boasts its own sophisticated defense assets and has taken steps that could lead to more involvement in U.S.-led military operations around the world. The United States, meanwhile, rhetorically has ratcheted up its commitment to defend Japan, including the small, uninhabited islands (called Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China) that Japan administers but China claims as its territory. The new [bilateral Mutual Defense Guidelines](#) (MDG), which the United States and Japan announced at a [high-level meeting](#) on April 27, provide policy guidance for more integrated U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. Yet, questions persist about the direction and extent of Japan's security policy reforms.

Abe Administration Promotes Greater Defense Role for Japan

Since the early 2000s, [Japan](#) has increased incrementally the emphasis on the security dimension of its foreign policy, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has accelerated this trend since returning to power in late 2012. Previous Japanese governments in the post-war era had held that the exercise of [collective self-defense](#) (defending another country that has been attacked) would violate Article 9 of the [Japanese constitution](#). In July 2014, the Abe Cabinet issued a [Cabinet Decision](#) that changed the official interpretation of the constitution to permit the exercise of collective self-defense under certain conditions, alongside other security policy reforms. Japan's apparent willingness to aid in the defense of the United States or other partner countries is one component of the Abe Administration's [National Security Strategy](#), which calls for a greater role for Japan's military in upholding security in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world. However, analysts assert that the conditions for exercising collective self-defense are rather restrictive and could limit significantly the latitude for Japan to craft a military response to crises outside its borders. The pacifist-leaning party in Japan's ruling coalition played a large role (reinforced by cautious public sentiment) in curtailing the scope of this new flexibility for the Japanese military.

Abe has also relaxed restrictions on arms exports, created a Japanese National Security Council, and pushed to allow Japanese soldiers on U.N. peacekeeping missions to protect other peacekeepers and civilians. The Obama Administration and Congress (in the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act, [P.L. 113-291](#)) have welcomed Japan's initiatives to increase its contributions to the alliance and to international security. However, neighboring countries South Korea and China, as well as some in Japan, have been critical of what they claim is the "re-militarization" of Japan.

The Japanese government currently is finalizing drafts of legislation to implement the new security policies that derive from the Cabinet Decision on collective self-defense and the revised MDG. The debate surrounding this legislation in Japan's parliament and in the public sphere will shine a light on the willingness of Japan to become involved in conflicts for the sake of aiding the United States, and on Japanese perceptions of the security environment in East Asia. A recent [public opinion poll](#) shows that 64% of Japanese think that China poses a military threat, a perception that may lead Japan to shed more of its pacifist restrictions. So far, the strong anti-militarist legacy of World War II has restrained such a shift and, in combination with fiscal pressures, has kept the Japanese defense budget under 1% of GDP for decades.

Mutual Defense Guidelines Revised for New Security Environment

The MDG outlines how the U.S. and Japanese militaries will interact in peacetime and in war and serves as the basic framework for defense cooperation. The United States and Japan first codified the [MDG in 1978](#) and then updated the [guidelines in 1997](#), after their main security concerns had shifted from the Soviet Union to regional hotspots like the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. The new MDG accounts for developments in military technology, improvements in interoperability of the U.S. and Japanese militaries, and the complex nature of security threats in the 21st century. For example, the MDG address bilateral cooperation on cybersecurity, the use of space for defense purposes, and ballistic missile defense, none of which was mentioned in the 1997 guidelines. Under the banner of collective self-defense, the Japanese military would be able to defend U.S. vessels and aircraft, provide non-combat logistical support to U.S. troops, and engage in minesweeping operations.

The new MDG also seeks to facilitate "seamless" bilateral coordination. Japanese leaders have become acutely concerned that China could attempt to act on its claim to the [disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands](#) by using non-military agents, such as the China Coast Guard or armed fishermen, to wrest control of the islets from Japan. To address this type of "gray zone" contingency—meaning the use of force between a state of war and a state of peace—and improve overall alliance functioning, the new MDG establishes a standing Alliance Coordination Mechanism that will involve participants from all the relevant agencies in the U.S. and Japanese governments. This new coordinating body removes the "seam" between war and peace that had inhibited alliance coordination during peacetime, such as during the [disaster relief response to the 2011 earthquake and tsunami](#) in northeast Japan.

Washington and Tokyo continue to see more value in enhancing security cooperation through the [alliance](#), especially through further integration of military operations. The expansion of alliance cooperation to explicitly include "gray zone" contingencies appears likely to make it nearly impossible for the United States to avoid entanglement in a Japan-China conflict surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Conversely, the Abe Administration's decision to enable collective self-defense will facilitate Japan's involvement in more U.S. conflicts, in more significant ways. Deeper alliance cooperation offers significant opportunities for the United States and Japan, but also poses risks if either country is not prepared to meet the raised expectations of the other.