

"Air Force Alliance"



USAF photo by SSGT Joshua Strang

Tokyo and Washington have gotten serious—really serious—about joining forces and multiplying their power.

North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear weapon tests had a decidedly unintended effect: They kicked the US-Japan security alliance into high gear. And, as this alliance grows, the US Air Force will play a unique and critical role.

Ties between Tokyo and Washington—which had been somewhat chilly during the 1990s—had already been improving. However, North Korea's hostile moves accelerated efforts to draw together US and Japanese forces with greater cooperation and collaboration on intelligence, operations, and technology.

Pyongyang could not be pleased at the outcome: The alliance, say officials on both sides, has never been stronger.

For its part, the US sees the alliance as a model for other Pacific nations wondering where to place their trust as China grows ever more powerful and North Korea remains dangerous and unpredictable.

"A lot's going on," said Lt. Gen. Bruce A. Wright, commander of both 5th Air Force and US Forces, Japan. "A lot's

changed—and for a lot of reasons."

Wright described the partnership as "an air force alliance, in a lot of ways," because of the long distances between countries in the region and the speed and destructive power associated with air weapons. Some of the biggest changes in the US-Japan relationship are centered on the coordination of air activities.

Within Japan, a big shift is reshaping its military force. Early this year, the Japan Defense Agency, previously part of the nation's Ministry of State, was elevated to full Cabinet status, and is now the Ministry of Defense. The move reflects Japan's growing appreciation of its need to integrate military affairs with affairs of state.

Simultaneously, the Air Force has restructured the way it operates in Japan, establishing more logical connections between USAF units there and with Pacific Air Forces headquartered in Hawaii. The changes will streamline the coordination of air assets within the Pacific theater and put all USAF capabilities in Japan unambiguously under the control of a joint forces air component commander in wartime.

In peacetime, 5th Air Force will practice the main day-to-day contact between the Air Force and Japan.

The Air Force has upgraded the capabilities of aircraft based in Japan, raising them to the most powerful configurations available. Its F-15Cs at Kadena Air Base, on the Japanese island of Okinawa, are being swapped for the latest versions with upgraded engines, radars, and helmet-mounted displays. F-16s at Misawa Air Base, located at the northern tip of the Japanese island of Honshu, have the most up-to-date upgrade package. At Yokota Air Base near Tokyo, newer C-130H transports have replaced E models.

The Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) will soon build a new facility at Yokota, where its officers and USAF counterparts will sit side-by-side and manage air defense of the Japanese islands, using data and surveillance culled from both countries' assets and shared fully, in real time.

Other US services are likewise upgrading forces in Japan. For example, the aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk*, long homeported in Japan, will be replaced

for the US and Japan

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor



Japan Air Self-Defense Force F-15Js line the ramp.

next year by the younger USS *George Washington*. Japan has accepted the presence of the new nuclear-powered carrier despite its long opposition to nuclear vessels. That, say officials, marks a kind of turning point all on its own.

Since the North Korean salvo of ballistic missiles on July 4, 2006, there has been “very intensive intelligence coordination” between the US and Japan, Wright reported. The two have shared intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance data that was previously very closely held.

Japan also granted the US permission to set up the Patriot PAC-3 ballistic missile defense system on Kadena. The missile site overlooks the west end of the runway, on a recently cleared jungle hilltop.

“I would not have predicted, three years ago, that we would ever have been able to do that, based on my experience in Okinawa,” Wright said, because Okinawans have traditionally balked at the US military presence there.

Also this year, Japan permitted the first operational deployment of the Air Force F-22 fighter—the service’s

newest combat system—at Kadena. Wright appraised the local community protest as “minimal,” compared with protests in previous years against the base’s resident F-15 unit. A new US early warning radar, called the FBX, was set up in Shariki, in northern Honshu, late last year, with almost no public opposition.

Brig. Gen. Harold W. Moulton II, commander of the 18th Wing at Kadena, said the base these days is having an easier time with community relations. He chalks that up, in part, to the dwindling population that holds ill feelings from the “pre-reversion” period before 1972, when the US returned control of Okinawa to Japan.

Moulton said, “I have greater hope for having less of an anti-base mentality” as the next generation comes to appreciate the benefits of the alliance.

Wright reported that the US does polling in Japan to gauge the mood of the people and said that the data show “60 percent or so” of Japanese view the alliance as a positive thing, and there is about a 50 percent “level of support ... for the stationing of US forces in Japan.”

He added, “We are looked at more and more as a ‘partner’ in this alliance, vice some sort of occupying force.”

The numbers represent a sharp comeback from the mid-1990s, when there was public debate in Japan about whether the end of the Cold War had robbed the alliance of any lingering usefulness. Those feelings mushroomed following the rape of a 12-year-old girl by US marines on Okinawa in 1995, which Wright termed a “horrific” episode in the alliance’s 47-year history. The incident chilled the alliance for several years.

Still, things began to turn around in 1998. In that year, North Korea launched its Taepo Dong long-range ballistic missile right over Japan. The test was a surprise to the allies, Wright said, and they decided they would not be caught out again. The US and Japan redoubled discussions about how to defend against the North Korean danger, given that country’s warning in 1999 that it would resume development of nuclear weapons if certain demands were not met. In 2003, it withdrew from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and, in 2005, North Korea announced it had produced

The Next Japanese Fighter

The Japan Air Self-Defense Force will need a new fighter in a few years to replace its F-4 fleet. The defense ministry has let it be known that it will consider the F-15E, the F/A-18E/F, and the Eurofighter Typhoon as candidates.

Japan would most like to acquire the F-22, but the Raptor is for now off-limits due to the Obey Amendment (see "Washington Watch," December 2006, p. 11), while the F-35 likely won't be available in time for Japan's requirement.

Brig. Gen. Joseph M. Reheiser, vice commander of 5th Air Force, said he thinks Japan will go with an American aircraft.

"I think they would prefer to buy from the United States and do some kind of license where they could produce it here," he said, based on talks with his counterparts. Japan built the F-15J under license and collaborates heavily with the US on its F-2, a larger version of the F-16.

In March, six JASDF pilots visited Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., to try out the F-15E, which is the attack version of the Eagle already in Japan's fleet. The team had previously visited an F-18 unit in California.

nuclear weapons. Last October, North Korea conducted what it called a test of a nuclear device, although the results were ambiguous to foreign intelligence services.

Tighter Coordination

In 2005, the US and Japan conducted what are now known as the "2+2 meetings" because they featured the American Secretaries of State and Defense and the Japanese foreign and defense ministers. The meetings yielded an agreement that the alliance would continue indefinitely, that US forces would remain in Japan for "the life of the alliance," and that steps would be taken to more closely coordinate military actions.

One of the steps taken was to set up the Bilateral Joint Operations Coordination Center, or BJOCC. At the center, American and Japanese service members, working together, monitored the 2006 North Korean missile tests. Intelligence warning of the impending tests was received in early May; by June, the joint center was standing by around the clock.

"We knew exactly what the North Koreans were going to do," Wright asserted, adding that the event was instructive in many ways.

"The Japanese saw that we were with them, and that the alliance was real in deed and not just word, that we were ready to respond across the range of military operations," he said.

The tests were eye-opening in other ways, too, according to Col. Stephen A. Town, the Army's director of missile defense in Japan. The missile that got the most attention last July was the long-range Taepo Dong 2, which failed. However, "the other six missile firings were actually very accurate, hit very close to their center points, and

demonstrated that North Korea has a capability of putting missiles on target," Town said.

US and Japanese officials also were surprised at the professionalism of Pyongyang's effort. North Korea took some of its operational mobile missiles off the line, brought them to the shoreline, and launched them "overnight." The tests involved two Scud Cs, two Scud Ds, and two No Dong ballistic missiles, all of which worked perfectly, Town said. Only the Taepo Dong, which is thought to be capable of lifting a satellite or large warhead, went awry.

Japan's radar network—augmented by Air Force radar assets and US Navy and Japanese Aegis cruisers—immediately plotted the track and forecast the missiles' impact points in the Sea of Japan, where previous tests had been aimed. Because of this, Japan did not activate its Patriot missile systems.

The PAC-3 version of Patriot is the most advanced and optimized for use against ballistic missiles. Japan's Patriots are older models, but Town said 16 PAC-3 systems will be delivered to the Japan Air Self-Defense Force over five years, on an "accelerated" schedule. The JASDF is responsible for missile defense.

Japan's missile defense will also be bolstered by Aegis systems on its naval vessels and accompanying SM-3 missiles. It is collaborating with the US Navy on improvements to both.

Under the "2+2" agreement, the allies will make Yokota a joint US-Japanese base. The centerpiece will be the Bilateral Air Operations Coordination Center, which is to be built and operational by 2010, according to Brig. Gen. Joseph M. Reheiser, Wright's deputy.

The JASDF's air defense command will move onto Yokota, Reheiser said. Japanese officers have visited PACAF's air operations center at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, and have asked for help in designing their own "Falconer-like" AOC, he said. When completed, USAF and JASDF airmen will be "looking at [a] common operational picture," linked to Hickam's AOC, "working air defense and ballistic missile defense of Japan." The cost of the facility, as well as new housing and other infrastructure at Yokota, will be borne by Japan.

Another 2+2 directive was a plan to send US fighters to Japanese air defense bases, the better to learn other operating areas and to interact more frequently and directly with JASDF crews. Japan



F-22A Raptors arrive at Kadena AB, Japan, for their first foreign deployment. Kadena was picked for the visit both to highlight Japan's status as a trusted ally and to familiarize forces in the region with the F-22's unique capabilities.

USAF photo by Airm. Sheila deVera



Kadena Air Base is well-situated to support air operations in the Far East. All of Taiwan and eastern China are less than an hour's flying time away; all of Korea is within two hours; the rest of China, Indochina, and the Philippines are within three hours.

is bearing 75 percent of the cost of these “road shows,” which will initially last a few days each, but will expand to two weeks or more in the coming years. The visits, involving Navy and Marine aircraft as well as USAF, is seen as reducing the local noise “burden” of the towns surrounding the existing American bases.

“It strengthens our strategic alliance,” Reheiser said. “It enhances our bilateral interoperability; it gives us some flexibility. ... After you go to these bases, and you train there and you work with their people and you’re more familiar with the base, it’s more bases you can operate from,” he explained.

There has been further cooperation beyond simple exchanges of aircraft visits and sharing of information. Air Force E-3 AWACS operate out of Kadena, and there are regular exchanges with JASDF crews who fly a similar system mounted on a Boeing 767 platform.

Col. Mark Henkel, 18th Wing operations group commander, said, “Our controllers have been flying with their controllers on their ... 767 [AWACS],” which are fairly new and equipped with the latest gear. The crews return with complaints “about the age of the E-3,” he noted.

He also pointed out that USAF KC-135 crews at Kadena are helping to train JASDF tanker crews—also flying a variant of the 767—in “the art of aerial

refueling.” Kadena-based KC-135s also “drag” Japanese aircraft up to Alaska for exercises with US forces there. It is expected that Japanese tankers will in the near future perform aerial refueling for some USAF aircraft.

The 2005 agreements also call for

USAF personnel and their Japan Air Self-Defense Force counterparts practice together and share knowledge. Air Force SSgt. Christopher Hill (l) and JASDF MSgt. Masashi Mitake participate in joint firefighting training. Members of the two services trade knowledge on many levels.



USAF photo by MSgt. Jeffery Loftin

a study of making Yokota a “dual use” base accommodating commercial flights. Moreover, 5th Air Force, which controls the airspace over central Japan, has been freeing up more airspace for civil flights.

JCS, Japanese Style

Fifth Air Force is also hosting or participating in symposia and exercises to work out linkages with Japan, whose military staff is also undergoing a restructuring. With the change to a Ministry of Defense, as of March, Japan has something akin to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, although Japan’s version retains operational control over military forces. One US officer likened the Japanese command structure to that of the US regional combatant commands.

Wright, asked what the Japanese tell him are their chief security concerns, said ballistic missile defense is near the top of the list, as is airspace control. The JASDF continues to routinely intercept incursions by Chinese and Russian reconnaissance aircraft; Japanese F-15Js scramble several times a week. If an inbound US AWACS isn’t identifying itself properly, it gets intercepted, too.

However, Japan is also “concerned about resource competition in the region” as China and other neighbors grow “militarily and economically,” Wright said.

Keeping up With a High Maintenance Alliance

In Japan, personal relationships are key to any cooperative enterprise. That was a big part of the reason that Pacific Air Forces' 13th Air Force set up Det. 1 at Yokota Air Base early this year.

For decades, the commander for USAF forces in Japan during a war would be the same one who commands them in peacetime: the head of 5th Air Force, who is also commander of US Forces, Japan.

However, since the Air Force created "Falconer" air operations centers for all its regional commands, it has also designated a joint forces air component commander, or JFACC, from those commands to run them. In the Pacific, that's the head of 13th Air Force, Lt. Gen. Loyd S. Utterback.

In a Pacific war, PACAF would supply "the operational punch," through 13th Air Force, Utterback said, and coordinate air- and space power from all over the Air Force. The AOC at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, would run the air war.

However, Utterback can't be in Japan all the time to do the continuous work necessary to keep vital personal relationships fresh.

Japan is a "high maintenance alliance," said Lt. Gen. Bruce A. Wright, 5th Air Force commander. Relationships with the Japanese leadership are critical and must be worked every day.

"You can't do what we do here with 'reachback,'" Wright said. "You've got to be here all the time."

Det. 1, then, is Utterback's "plug" into Japan, he said, and its commander, Col. Michael A. MacWilliam, is his personal representative to the Japanese.

"When you talk to Colonel MacWilliam, ... you're talking to me. And you're talking to the guy who's going to fight the war," Utterback said.

While 5th Air Force will now perform more of a support function for the alliance—providing "beans and bullets" Utterback said—it remains a numbered Air Force with three combat wings, at Kadena, Yokota, and Misawa Air Bases. Wright, and his successors, will continue to be the overall "face" of the US military to his Japanese hosts, but the detachment will gradually become the operational interface with the Air Force.

To streamline the transition, MacWilliam said, about 80 people who were doing coordination work with the Japanese at Yokota Air Base simply "switched patches" and began doing the same work for 13th Air Force. Utterback said he will visit Japan more frequently, since it's important that Japanese commanders know their counterparts in the alliance.

Neither the USAF F-15s at Kadena nor the USAF F-16s at Misawa perform air intercepts for Japan, as a rule. The air sovereignty mission is carried out by the JASDF, although the USAF units are "on call" if requested. So, how do US forces contribute to the security of Japan?

The two countries are "committed to credible deterrence" and their partnership, Wright said. The alliance itself is a message to the region, as is the fact that the two countries have prospered to be the top two individual economies in the world, Wright noted.

Moulton, the 18th Wing commander, said the "mere presence" of US forces in Japan "provides a statement about willingness to be engaged." He added, though, that it's not only about keeping Japan safe.

"Our constant physical presence here has a dampening effect on animosities throughout the region. I'm convinced that [while] China has the desire to be the regional power in this region, they're very comfortable, I think, having us here. We lend a cover over the region so that nothing swings too wildly out of control."

In terms of pure airpower, Kadena

is the crown jewel of the US-Japan alliance.

"We could get 400 tactical aircraft in here," Moulton said. The base already plays host to F-15s, C-130s, KC-135s, E-3 AWACS, and RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft.

Located almost equidistant from mainland China and Taiwan, Kadena is less than three hours' flying time

from most of the Asia-Pacific nations and within six hours of the rest.

"You can't find a more heart-of-the-envelope place for this region," Moulton asserted.

Under revisions to the original 1960 alliance treaty, an attack on Japan is an attack on the US, and vice versa. But would Japan allow the US to launch attacks from its soil if Japan itself had not been attacked? Could the US deploy bombers to Kadena?

Wright noted that Japan, which pays more than \$4 billion annually for the stationing of US forces on its soil, routinely agrees that those forces be deployed elsewhere. An F-16 unit at Misawa, for example, recently went to combat operations in Iraq. The situation is in contrast to that of South Korea; US forces stationed there don't deploy off the peninsula.

The US discusses "the full range of options with the senior leadership of Japan," Wright said, noting that using bombers would help increase sortie rates and decrease reliance on tankers in a major conflict. The idea is "certainly something we ought to talk about, given the reality of the challenges we face."

He added that although the US has invested heavily in South Korea's defense, it has invested greatly in Japan, as well.

"I think we have to consider that defense of Japan is just as important, and possibly more important, in the allocation of resources," Wright asserted, noting that any major conflict in the region would be "absolutely dependent" on the alliance with Japan. "Logistically, we cannot engage any other country without this support."



Japanese F-15Js and USAF F-16s form up on a Japanese AWACS at Cooperative Cope Thunder. In many ways, the JASDF is mirroring USAF in developing its capabilities.

JASDF photo by 1st Lt. Takeshi Okubo

Wright also said that airpower could help substitute for the departure of 6,000 Marines from Okinawa, which was another 2+2 initiative. The US may wish to add a squadron, he said, noting that Gen. Paul V. Hester, PACAF commander, is thinking that Kadena might one day host three squadrons of F-35s.

Town, who has served with the US Army in Japan for more than 17 years, said Japanese military leaders express “blatant, open distrust, dislike” of China and consider that nation as their main threat.

At joint military seminars, “the Japanese generals say, ‘When are you going to wake up and smell the reality of the enemy?’” Town related.

Triad of Resentment

Japan’s new political leadership has been tiptoeing around China. It hopes to sidestep the tensions attending their relationship since Japanese former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited a shrine to Japan’s war dead, among them war criminals. His successor, Shinzo Abe, has not made such a visit. The payoff was an April summit meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Tokyo—the first such visit in seven years.

Nevertheless, Town said, “I think, in Asia, there are eternal enemies,” adding that there isn’t an Asian tradition of forgiveness. China and Japan, he said, have longstanding grievances. So does Korea with China, and Korea with Japan.

“That’s a triad of resentment that will persist,” Town asserted, adding that Tokyo likely will continue in its alliance with the US because “the Japanese are desperate for at least one key friend in the region. And the reality is that the US is that friend.”

Wright said China is a concern because its military spending is leaping by double-digit increases, and “we’re not sure what their military goals are.”

However, the US wants the alliance with Japan to be “inclusive,” he said, and the US is hoping to get regional nations involved through military-to-military contacts. He’s hoping for “more visits at the general officer level, more one-on-one engagement with China.”

Article 9 of Japan’s constitution renounces Japan’s right to make war or even to maintain a military. The air, ground, and maritime self-defense forces are technically an extension of Japan’s constabulary, but the nation



USAF photo by MSgt. Val Gempits

A Kadena F-15 prepares for a dawn sortie. After a decade of doubt, the US-Japan alliance now seems rock-solid.

has been debating whether to alter its constitution for several years. Japan’s contribution of forces to the Iraq war was an issue of major national controversy. (See “Dragon, Eagle, and Rising Sun,” June 2005, p. 62.)

However, Tokyo is recognizing that there are benefits to being able to provide military forces in the world arena, Town argued.

In the 1991 Gulf War, he said, the Japanese solved the issue of how to support the war effort “by sending money,” contributing about \$9 billion “as their share.” But paying the bill hurt the Japanese economy, Town suggested.

After Sept. 11, 2001, the Japanese realized they couldn’t afford to “just be a money-giver,” he said, so they have helped by dispatching a ground unit to Iraq, as well as C-130s to Kuwait to help with airlift, and other gestures.

Praise was heaped on Japan for its modest contribution, he noted, and the nation reaped “huge dividends” domestically and abroad for its military moves.

“There was a sense of patriotism and a sense of doing their duty,” which was “unprecedented” in recent memory, he recalled.

“To see the people lining the streets and waving their flags at the troops on their way was something that hasn’t been seen in Japan since World War II. And so, there is an awakening spirit in Japan, as I see it—a new invigoration of their military ethos.”

He believes that this mood provided

impetus for the 2005 agreements to transform the alliance with the US.

The talks, he noted, revolved around keeping the alliance healthy “for the next 50 years. ... Well, that’s a huge statement just in itself.” The recent talk of changing the constitution would have been unthinkable merely five years ago, Town said, “so there are definite winds of change in Japan.”

In the last two years, Japan has sent fighters to Guam to practice dropping small unguided bombs—the only time they’ve performed such missions since World War II. In keeping with its broadening view of “defense,” Japan is exploring what it would take to be able to prosecute precision air attacks.

“They are interested in JDAM,” the Joint Direct Attack Munition, a senior PACAF official said. But acquiring a precision weapon and being able to employ it effectively are two different things.

“They don’t have any targeteers,” he explained. “They haven’t done targeting. They don’t know how to build a target list” and have done no weaponizing. Japan and the US have talked about a tutorial, but no formal program exists yet.

Town said that the 50 years after World War II saw a “snail’s pace” of change in the alliance, but “in the last five years we’ve seen dramatic changes in attitudes. And that helps the US-Japan relationship to blossom, because all of a sudden there’s a new openness and willingness to engage.” ■