

# Strategic Communication in Japan

**A critical vulnerability**  
by Col William Hendricks

The end of the 20th century was punctuated by two very different crises that coalesced to significantly weaken America's presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The first occurred in 1995 when two Marines and a Navy Corpsman kidnapped and raped a twelve-year-old Okinawan girl. The immediate consequences from this event were the relief of ADM Richard Macke, the Pacific Commander, and a reduction in land used by U.S. bases in Okinawa by twenty percent. The longer-term effects from this event are still felt today: an Okinawa Governor and the two primary Okinawan newspapers ideologically opposed to the U.S. military's presence and training activities.

Following closely on the heels of the Okinawa "Rape Crisis," 1996 saw the United States dispatch two aircraft carrier strike groups to the seas bordering Taiwan in response to Chinese military provocations. This rapid naval response prevented further short-term escalation and assured Taiwan of the United States' support. However, the U.S. military response also provided Chinese military planners with an important lesson in U.S. power projection: In order to gain regional hegemony, China must be able to deny the United States control of the seas bordering its coast.

Twenty-four years later, the United States faces a dilemma shaped by these two events. We must modernize our warfighting capabilities to deny China their asymmetric military advantages. However, we are encumbered by a Japa-

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nese and Okinawan political landscape that constrains the modernization of warfighting capabilities. The United States must address both of these issues lest we concede the Indo-Pacific region to a China committed to revising the current rules-based order.

Fortunately, our leadership is responding to the Chinese military threat. In his now well-circulated *Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG)*, Gen Berger outlined how the Marine Corps will contribute to the joint force and help to deny China their desired *fait accompli*. Describing an "inside force" capable of neutralizing China's asymmetric anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)-based military advantages, the *CPG* is both aggressive and transformative. However, the *CPG* has one critical vulnerability. It does not account for the second half of the equation: Okinawan and Japanese political sensitivities that constrain the more than



**III MEF Marines assisted with disaster relief following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, sending a clear message about the U.S. commitment to Japan. (Photo by GySgt J.L. Wright Jr.)**

20,000 Marines of III MEF and Marine Corps Installations Pacific stationed in Okinawa that provide the bulk of the U.S. stand-in-forces and represent the Commandant's bid for success.

Without a plan to address Okinawan and Japanese political constraints, actualization of the *CPG* and deterrence of Chinese military activities through new force design will be limited. Worse, political sensitivities that constrain III MEF to a few bases in Okinawa provide our adversaries a fixed infrastructure easily targeted by long-range precision fires. To that end, this article recommends increased strategic messaging to address the Japanese political and cultural sensitivities that impede III MEF's response options. To scope the recommendation, a brief overview of the *CPG* is provided. Next, a summary of regional dynamics provides the context necessary to judge the paper's assertions. This paper concludes with an aim point for the recommended strategic messaging while leveraging under-valued Japanese political flexibility and support from the Japanese Defense Minister.

### **The Commandant's Call to Action**

The Marine Corps is a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness designed to respond to crises anywhere in the world, nowhere more so than the naval landscape of the Pacific. In keeping with this construct, and in response to the vulnerability of U.S. forces to China's modernized military, Gen Berger directed the Marine Corps to improve its survivability and lethality. More specifically, the Commandant directed further development of operational concepts such as Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) that leverage dispersion to complicate China's missile-based targeting solutions. Notably, Gen Berger identified Okinawa-based III MEF as the Marine Corps' main focus-of-effort while directing close integration with the U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet.

In response to China's increased military lethality and decreased fear of U.S. response options, III MEF is also tasked to conduct realistic threat-based training that enables Marine forces to defeat an advanced adversary while operating

within their WEZ. How better to deter your adversary than to demonstrate your ability to operate in their backyard and survive their attacks? However, in order to develop and maintain the new capabilities directed in the *CPG*, the 20,000 plus Marines assigned to III MEF in Okinawa require increased dispersion/access to Japanese bases in mainland Japan, realistic threat-based training on advanced ranges, increased coastal training areas, and permission to practice and develop operational concepts on the small Japanese islands key to regional security.

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Unfortunately, because of Japanese political considerations—especially in Okinawa—III MEF is often constrained to small, outdated ranges and denied access to Japanese bases and other areas key to *CPG* implementation. These political constraints represent significant obstacles to modernization and survivability, providing China additional leeway to pursue its revisionist plans. To understand how Japanese politics constrain III MEF, this article will provide a brief summary of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

### **Understanding the Dynamics**

In spite of urging by the United States to invest more in their military, the preservation of peace is a continual undercurrent in Japanese politics since the end of World War II. From the time of Prime Minister Yoshida, the goal of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is economic growth and the separation of security policies from public life; security is left to the United States. Accustomed to the U.S. security blanket and unburdened by readiness reporting requirements, many Japanese politicians feel that American military presence alone is deterrence enough.

For these politicians, the less the U.S. military trains in Japan, the less disruption to social harmony, and the more likely they are to be reelected. These political views clash with III MEF requirements to modernize the force and increase threat-based training. Nowhere is this more apparent than the Okinawa prefecture, home to III MEF, where cultural differences and a strained history exacerbate political sensitivities.

Okinawans are not ethnically Japanese, do not identify with the Japanese mainland government, and feel disenfranchised by higher crime rates, lagging

education, and lower income. Further, amongst many Okinawans—especially those who were alive during World War II—remains the sentiment that they were sacrificed by mainland Japan and used as a shield against the invading Americans. The density of U.S. bases in post-war Okinawa compounds this lasting Okinawan sentiment, underscoring the belief that they still carry an unfair defense “burden.” The rape of the Okinawan girl in 1995 by U.S. service members further exasperated Okinawan sensitivities, resulting in increased training restrictions placed on U.S. military forces. The icing on this political cake was the LDP's loss of power in 2009 after more than half a century of almost uninterrupted control. Playing to Okinawan sensitivities and pledging to move MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa, the Democratic Party of Japan achieved a landslide victory over the LDP. This embarrassing political loss reinforced a lesson the LDP would bring with them once they eventually regained political control: critical Okinawan political favor is linked to limitations placed on U.S. military activities.

Most troubling, China is working to drive a political wedge between U.S.

forces and the Government of Japan (GoJ). In 2017, Japan's Public Security Intelligence Agency reported on China's efforts to deepen ties with Okinawan independence groups through academic exchanges. Not surprisingly, it is these Okinawan independence groups that demand the withdrawal of all U.S. bases from Okinawa, an end state the People's Liberation Army would celebrate. It follows that without a larger engagement strategy designed to address Japanese/Okinawan cultural and political sensitivities, III MEF will continue to face politically imposed constraints that impede implementation of the strategic guidance called for by the Commandant. This begs the question: Is it possible to influence Japanese politics on the scale required to gain support for *CPG* informed activities?

### Myth vs Reality

There is a common misconception that barring a disaster, the Japanese are unwilling to change or adapt to new situations. Why develop a more robust messaging campaign if the GoJ is simply unable to change? In contrast to this widely held belief, this article will provide a quick review of recent events that reveal a Japan quite capable of swift and significant change *when outside pressure convinces Japanese leadership that change suits them.*

In 1998, North Korea launched a Taepodong-1 intermediate range ballistic missile over Japan before it landed in the Pacific Ocean. This was the first instance that North Korea demonstrated the ability to range the Japanese mainland with their missiles. In close coordination with public messaging, the GoJ agreed to move forward with joint research and development with the United States on ballistic missile defense as well as the placement of Patriot PAC-3 air defense systems on Japanese soil.

Chinese activities over the past decade provide another example of how the Japanese can rapidly pivot and adjust to changes in their environment. China's land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea and forays into the waters around the disputed Senkakus islands resulted in the establishment of a new military unit similar to a MEU

called the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB). The establishment of the ARDB was notable for two reasons: 1) The new ARDB was established quickly. 2) While advertised as a defensive unit, it provided Japan with a power projection capability that a Constitutional purist could argue violates Article IX of their pacifistic constitution. Because it suited their needs, Japanese elected leadership was able to accept and promulgate a more flexible interpretation of their constitution through well-designed messaging. At the time of its activation, Japanese leaders consistently messaged Chinese aggressive activities and the ARDB's defense-oriented mission of retaking their own islands.

There are three takeaways from these recent historical examples: 1) Once "Outside Pressure" influences Japanese leadership to change their policy or strategy, they are able to do so quickly. 2) Japanese leadership takes deliberate steps to communicate with the population to gain support for their initiatives. 3) Strategic messaging in Japan can be used effectively to gain support for new initiatives. The conclusion is clear: The DOD and the Department of State, in coordination with the GoJ, must create the "Outside Pressure" needed to gain Japanese domestic support for broader Japan-based U.S. military activities and subsequent *CPG* implementation. This initiative should leverage bilateral strategic messaging that begins at the 2+2 level, supports current INDOPACOM/U.S. Embassy Japan/U.S. Forces Japan lines of effort, and compliments current III MEF Strategic Communication initiatives.

### Way Forward

Twenty years ago, Japan's elected officials and ministers would have been unreceptive to new policies that supported increased U.S. military activities. However, China's military and financial growth, land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, and forays into the Senkakus have changed their calculus. Now it suits them.

Since his assumption of duties in the Ministry of Defense, Defense Minister Kono has made many public statements

emphasizing the need for a safe and stable Indo-Pacific region. Demonstrating his alignment with U.S. views, Defense Minister Kono emphasized the need to deter destabilizing Chinese activities. Consistently calling for a change in the Japanese narrative to better support the U.S. military, Defense Minister Kono's comments potentially indicate a new level of receptiveness to U.S. military requirements.

In December of 2019, Defense Minister Kono visited the Japanese Ground Self Defense Force's Yamasakura Command Post Exercise. Speaking to a mixed audience of Japanese and American military officers, he commented that the Japanese people do not understand the gravity of the threat environment. On 14 January 2020, Defense Minister Kono travelled to Washington, DC, and gave a presentation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Once again, Defense Minister Kono emphasized the need to not only communicate with the Japanese citizens but to provide more locations for U.S. forces to train. Most notably, during one such engagement, he asked for U.S. support.

In spite of Defense Minister Kono's comments, there is a disconnect between the national and local levels of Japanese government. This should not come as a surprise to the reader. It is fairly easy to garner support for activities that protect against missiles that fly over your cities. It is also fairly easy to gain Japanese support for a new amphibious unit that the Japanese public never see. However, gaining widespread support for an increase in "disruptive" U.S. military activities that protect against an attack—that many Japanese believe will never happen—from a Chinese trading partner is challenging. The result is a significant delta in understanding of the threat and levels of support for U.S. military activities between the Defense Minister and the Governors of Japan's multiple prefectures. It is this gap in understanding where the United States, in coordination with the GoJ, should focus its strategic messaging effort in order to create the outside pressure Defense Minister Kono needs to effectively advocate for *CPG*-informed III MEF requirements.



## The Goal

It is foolish to assume that even the most well-designed information campaign can completely negate long-held cultural and historical biases in Okinawa. It is equally foolish to assume that Okinawa can be messaged into a restraint-free training area for U.S. forces. However, it is both reasonable and necessary to develop a bilateral engagement strategy to offset Chinese influence, encourage Okinawa to adopt a more tolerant position, and to gain popular support for modernized III MEF activities throughout the rest of Japan. Moreover, implementation of the CPG is dependent upon a coordinated United States/Japan engagement strategy that provides increased access to Japanese bases and opens new ranges and outlying islands to III MEF training and concept development.

In support of this relatively modest goal, a recent study indicated that among Japanese people nationwide,

more than 70 percent lean toward minimizing the burden of U.S. forces on local communities at the expense of military readiness. This stands in contrast to surveyed communities located immediately outside of U.S. bases in mainland Japan where only 50 percent or less look to minimize U.S. training activities. While the factors behind these differing levels of acceptance for U.S. military activities is not clear, it is reasonable to assume some level of correlation with local base-run community relations efforts—including messaging strategies. Assuming this is the case, how much more effective would this strategic messaging be if it was developed in concert with the GoJ for consumption by the national audience? If the Chinese can take advantage of Japanese political seams to support their strategic agenda, the United States and Japan can similarly leverage existing goodwill toward U.S. military activities to mitigate existing biases and open the

door to key areas that facilitate implementation of the CPG.

The Defense Minister of the most important U.S. ally understands the linkages between China's destabilizing activities, III MEF's key to deterrence, and the need to gain support from his citizens. If the Marine Corps and III MEF are to become more lethal, resilient, and skilled in new operational concepts, our Japanese hosts are key to facilitating the transformation. The Commandant has provided the blueprint to outmaneuver China's military capabilities. Only through addressing both the military threat and existing political constraints will III MEF gain the maneuver space necessary to actualize the Commandant's vision. Our adversaries will not wait for us to develop the strategic messaging plan that enables our new force design.



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