

# **Defense Diplomacy of Japan Ground Self-Defense Force**

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## **About the Author**

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## **1. Characteristics of Land Forces**

When considering the defense diplomacy of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF), the first thing that must be kept in mind is the characteristics of land forces. As is the case with any nation's army or marine corps, there are two major characteristics of land forces that differentiate them from naval or air forces, which make defense diplomacy by land forces both difficult and, conversely, effective.

The first characteristic is that the field of operations of land forces must be on the territory of one of the sovereign states. In the case of navies and air forces, it is possible for units of multiple countries to conduct joint training exercises on high seas or in the skies above without entering each other's territory, and even when they do enter each other's territory, they can limit their location to ports or airports.

When units of land forces interact or conduct joint training or joint actions, they must inevitably set their feet on the territory of one of the countries. In other words, foreign troops with weapons will have to remain on the territory for a certain period of time.

For any sovereign nation, accepting armed foreign troops into its territory requires a certain degree of preparedness, and the hurdle is high. On the other hand, overcoming this hurdle is proof that mutual trust has been built, and from the perspective of defense diplomacy, it is highly effective in fostering trust.

The second characteristic of land forces is that the main component of the forces is not vehicles such as naval vessels or aircraft, but each and every human being. Of course, vehicles such as tanks and self-propelled artillery are an important part of land forces, but these are only units that support infantry soldiers. The reason why land forces are ultimately important is that the presence of soldiers on the ground gives them decisive control over the area.

Therefore, in defense diplomacy by land forces, there are many situations of interpersonal exchanges, not only in commanders' exchanges, but also in exchanges between units, joint training, and joint actions. This allows the military to experience firsthand the differences in cultures and ways of thinking among the armed forces, and while this has a great effect on mutual understanding, it also forces the military to expose each other's weaknesses and other human aspects. This, together with the first characteristic, forms important characteristics of land-based defense diplomacy. The hurdles are higher than those for maritime or air-based exchanges, but the benefits are greater once these hurdles are overcome.

## **2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Land-based Defense Diplomacy**

Given the characteristics of the land forces discussed in the previous section, the advantages and disadvantages of defense diplomacy among land forces naturally emerge. The hurdles are high, but once overcome, land-based defense diplomacy is highly effective, which will be examined in more detail below.

First, interactions and joint training among land forces are not only effective but also play a vital role, almost indispensably, in enhancing cohesion among allies and the credibility of the alliance. In order for multinational land forces to operate simultaneously in a single region, it is necessary to enhance interoperability not only in hardware but also in the soft aspects of fighting methods that conform to the behavior of each soldier. This includes in-depth coordination and training in advance, which will strengthen the alliance and enhance deterrence against potential adversaries. In stepping up the relationship between friendly countries that are not explicit allies to a stronger one, the strengthening of relations between land forces will also have a significant effect.

On the other hand, when attempting to build trust gradually with a country with which there have been few security ties, it is very difficult, especially for the host country, to receive troops with weapons as a form of defense diplomacy using land forces, and initial exchanges must be limited to visits by high-ranking officials and educational exchanges. Even if exchange of troops is to take place, exchanges with the land forces will generally begin with exchanges related to humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) without weapons, after a certain level of trust has been established, for example, through visits of naval vessels by the naval forces.

What about the case of achieving common international objectives in the territory of a third country? A typical example is United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKO). In order to achieve such objectives in the territory of other countries, land forces must eventually be deployed to the area with weapons. A country that wishes to contribute to that common international objective will overcome high political hurdles at home and abroad, dare to dispatch land forces, and let them act in close coordination with the military units of other countries. In this case, the dispatch of land forces functions as a powerful diplomatic tool for the nation.

When such a deployment takes the form of a multinational force, rather than within the framework of the UN, the advantages and disadvantages of the above-mentioned defense diplomacy by land forces are extremely apparent. From a diplomatic perspective, deployment of land forces must express national will in black or white rather than gray, and as such, it is a means of clearly demonstrating a nation's diplomatic attitude.

## **3. Progress in Defense Diplomacy by the Ground Self-Defense Force**

Taking into account the above characteristics of defense diplomacy by land forces, I would like to

look at the development of defense diplomacy by the GSDF in four areas: bilateral defense exchanges, multilateral defense cooperation, participation in PKO, and joint training for defense operations.

#### (1) Bilateral Defense Exchanges

In the 1990s, the Japan Self-Defense Forces began to engage in substantive, not merely ceremonial, exchanges with the militaries of other countries in earnest. With the end of the Cold War, the military of each country began to seek new roles, and mutual exchanges, such as mutual visits by high-ranking officials and the dispatch of foreign students, rapidly flourished.

The GSDF is no exception to this trend. For example, looking at the visits of the Chiefs of Ground Staff, during the Cold War, with the exception of the United States, they visited only a few European countries, including the United Kingdom and France, and India which was the only visited country in Asia. In the 1990s, however, exchanges with Asian countries began all at once, with first visits to Thailand in 1993, South Korea and Indonesia in 1997, China and Malaysia in 1998, Singapore in 1999, and Vietnam in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Around the time of the visits by the Chiefs of Ground Staff, exchanges of views among the staff members of each country and the acceptance of foreign students also became more active.

In Asia, the majority of countries are so-called army states, in which the army is a major force in the military organization. Therefore, the fact that the GSDF began to deepen exchanges with the land forces of Asian countries in the 1990s was of great significance in terms of fostering trust and promoting friendly and cooperative relations as a basis for Japan to build security ties within the Asian region, which were scarce during the Cold War.

The steady exchanges with Asian countries that began in this way gradually took on the nature of real cooperation, and have developed into a relationship that has enabled various types of multilateral defense cooperation within the Asian region in the 21st century, as described in the next section. The GSDF has developed such relationships in which it provides capacity-building support to other countries.

The GSDF's recent capacity-building assistance to Asian countries includes PKO training to Vietnam and engineering and medical training to Mongolia, Cambodia, and Laos.<sup>2</sup>

These are not only significant as bilateral cooperation but also as a means to enhance the ability of Asian countries to participate in UN PKO and international HA/DR activities in the future.

#### (2) Multilateral Defense Cooperation

As mentioned above, there are high hurdles for land forces to step into the territory of other countries to conduct training and activities. However, the hurdle is relatively low in the field of HA/DR, which is conducted without carrying weapons. Entering the 21st century, multilateral HA/DR exercises in Asia, especially including ASEAN countries, became active, and the GSDF has actively participated

in these exercises.

In 1992, a legal framework was established for the SDF to participate in international emergency relief activities, and the GSDF, which has accumulated experience starting with its deployment to Honduras in 1998 for hurricane relief efforts, has been playing a leading role in multilateral cooperation in this field in Asia, making comprehensive use of its accumulated domestic disaster relief expertise.

In 2011, Japan and Indonesia co-hosted the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Disaster Relief Live Exercise in Indonesia. In 2013, the first live exercise on HA/DR and defense medicine was held in Brunei as part of the expanded ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM Plus) initiative, and the GSDF deployed personnel.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the GSDF has officially participated in Cobra Gold, which evolved from a joint U.S.-Thailand exercise to a multilateral exercise, since 2005, including disaster relief activities, and has also participated in the Pacific Partnership since 2010,<sup>4</sup> which conducts medical training and other activities by traveling to various countries with the United States Armed Forces.<sup>5</sup> The GSDF has steadily built up its expertise in joint operations, including multilateral staff activities, and is playing a significant role in supporting security cooperation diplomacy in Asia on the ground.

### (3) Participation in Peacekeeping and Multinational Operations

Since its participation in UN PKO in Cambodia in 1992, the GSDF has deployed troops and personnel to nine UN PKOs around the world, as well as for refugee relief in Rwanda and reconstruction support in Iraq. However, as of the end of 2020, the country's activities in this field has been limited to the deployment of an Anti-Piracy Task Force to Djibouti with the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF), four staff officers to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and two staff officers to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) on the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

Although the number of deployed personnel has been greatly reduced, the GSDF has accumulated a great deal of expertise in PKO and other activities, mainly in the engineering area. The results of these efforts have been demonstrated in the form of Japan's chairmanship in the formulation (2013-15) and revision (2018-19) of the UN PKO Engineer Manual, and the Japan GSDF contribution in the area of capacity-building for UN PKO.

Since 2008, the GSDF has continued to send instructors to PKO training centers in Africa and other areas, and as part of the United Nations Triangular Partnership Project (TPP),<sup>7</sup> has been providing education on operation of engineering equipment to African countries since 2015 and to Asian countries since 2018. The TPP framework is expanding to include the medical sector from 2019, and the GSDF will continue to enhance its activities to support countries in improving their PKO participation capabilities. The GSDF is expected to continue to enhance its activities in this field.

#### (4) Joint Training for Defense Operations

While the activities described in the previous sections are defense diplomacy in terms of contributing to global and regional peace and stability, defense diplomacy by the GSDF includes activities pursued from a different perspective. This has the effect of directly enhancing deterrence against potential adversaries by improving combat capabilities and strengthening alliances and other partnerships.

A typical example is the Japan-U.S. Joint Training Exercises. But even in the case of training with the United States, the GSDF has a relatively recent history compared to the Maritime and Air SDFs. The Maritime SDF was the earliest to conduct Japan-U.S. joint training exercises, commencing them in the 1950s,<sup>8</sup> while the GSDF first conducted them in 1981, the last of the three SDFs.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, joint training involving combat operations with non-U.S. land forces, which had been once completely unthinkable, has spread rapidly in recent years, leading to training involving combat operations with Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and France.

With Australia, for the first time in 2012, the GSDF team began participating in the annual shooting competition in Australia, and since 2013, the Japan-U.S.-Australia trilateral joint training exercise Southern Jackal has been conducted.<sup>10</sup>

In 2018, the Japan-India Joint Anti-Terrorism Exercise Dharma Guardian began in India, as well as the Japan-U.K. Joint Exercise Vigilant Eyes, which aims to improve tactical skills and strengthen cooperation with the British Army in Japan,<sup>11</sup> and these will likely be conducted regularly thereafter. Furthermore, the first Japan-U.S.-France trilateral land-component exercise was conducted in 2021.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that joint training involving combat operations between land forces, which is a relatively high hurdle to overcome, is now being conducted not only with the United States but also with Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and France is of great significance in terms of making defense cooperation more substantial among countries that share the same values in the Indo-Pacific region, namely, the Quad (Japan-U.S.-Australia-India) + U.K., France.

#### **4. Future Challenges for Defense Diplomacy by the Ground Self-Defense Force**

In light of the progress in defense diplomacy by the GSDF described in the previous sections, I would like to conclude by considering various remaining challenges for the future.

##### (1) Establish a Strategic Policy and a Coordination Framework that Cuts Across All Activities

First of all, it must be pointed out that there is an urgent need to establish a system to govern a wide range of defense diplomacy activities under a consistent policy of the Japanese government. This is not limited to the GSDF, but I would like to illustrate this point with an example from the field of GSDF activities.

The bilateral capacity-building support for Asian countries discussed in section (1) above and the educational support for African and Asian countries in the framework of the UN-TTP discussed in section (3) above are almost the same activities for troops in the field. Even though these activities have almost the same content, they are not fully coordinated with respect to the selection of target countries and improvements based on past experiences because different departments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense host them.

While this example alone may not appear to be a major problem, the lack of a government-wide defense diplomacy guideline and coordination framework that cuts across the various competent departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense in other activities is a challenge for Japan's defense diplomacy as a whole.

In the United Kingdom, the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have jointly formulated an "International Defence Engagement Strategy," clarifying guidance for national defense diplomacy and promoting close coordination between the two ministries. It is hoped that Japan will establish a strategic policy on defense diplomacy in this way and clarify the framework for coordination in the future.<sup>13</sup>

## (2) Need for a Proactive Approach to Southeast Asian Countries

Cooperation with Southeast Asian countries will be extremely important in building a desirable strategic environment for Japan under the vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." As mentioned earlier, many Asian countries have traditionally been so-called Army states, and Southeast Asia is no exception. In the future, the GSDF's deepening of cooperative relations with the land forces of Southeast Asian countries will lay a great foundation for the promotion of overall security cooperation between Japan and these countries.

Specifically, multilateral cooperation in the field of HA/DR and bilateral capacity-building support will be further developed. It will be necessary not only to expand these activities quantitatively, but also to make cooperation qualitatively attractive to each country, for example by introducing emerging technologies such as drones. This point is particularly important when considering China's attempts to change the status quo by force in the region.

## (3) Creation of New Approaches to Involvement in UN PKO

With the GSDF's participation in UN PKO activities interrupted since 2017, it is considered important for Japan's defense diplomacy in general to strengthen the GSDF's participation in some new form in the future, even though it has made certain contributions in manual formulation and capacity-building support.

The trained personnel from the supported country do not necessarily participate in UN PKO, and the capacity building has only a limited effect on UN PKO. On the other hand, it has been pointed out



that delays in the deployment of engineering forces have a significant impact on PKO missions, and that ensuring the availability of engineering forces during the startup phase of an operation is critically important.<sup>14</sup>

By making use of the GSDF's accumulated know-how, it would be possible to support capacity-building as a package that includes not only equipment and material operation but also all aspects of design, construction, and maintenance of the secured encampment, thereby contributing to the rapid deployment of UN PKO.

In addition, the scope of capacity-building support is currently being expanded from the field of engineering to the field of medicine. In the future, it is likely that working with other advanced countries such as the United Kingdom and France to improve the quality of UN PKO capabilities in areas such as information and communications, utilizing satellites and drones, will be a promising area for expanding the support.<sup>15</sup>

The key to developing defense diplomacy by the GSDF will be seeking ways to contribute more directly to improving the quality of UN PKO.

#### (4) Defense Diplomacy for Countering Hybrid Threats

In modern warfare, various kinds of means including military and non-military measures, so called hybrid threats, are used for hybrid wars in gray-zone or multi-domain operations in high-intensive military wars. They include disguised troops; cyber, electromagnetic, drone and space operations; various means of exerting economic pressure; and cognitive attacks like influencing operations and use of disinformation.

As it becomes more important for modern land forces to deal with such hybrid threats simultaneously as well as old-type military threats, the new area for land-based defense diplomacy has emerged. That is defense cooperation for countering hybrid threats.

In the area of cutting-edge technologies such as cyber, electromagnetic, drone and space technologies, it is difficult for one country to develop enough equipment to counter sophisticated new types of threats. Therefore, it is important for land forces of allies or friendly countries to cooperate in developing and operating them.

In order to counter disguised or unmarked troops such as soldiers pretending to be citizens or members of private military companies under circumstances of cognitive warfare, it is important for defending troops to deal with them legally in terms of international and domestic law. If this aspect is insufficient, the enemy will take advantage of such flaws as a means for their global propaganda. Taking visual records and broadcasting them in real time is also important. As current land forces need this kind of new expertise, it is important for land forces of each country to exchange information on such types of new threats and know-how to deal with them. Involvement of law-enforcement organizations of each country is also considered to be effective in this cooperative framework.

Protection of civilians is also a significant issue to get the support of the world opinion and win in the cognitive domain as well as to fulfil the humanistic responsibility of the military. According to the NATO's "Protection of Civilians Allied Command Operations Handbook,"<sup>16</sup> the concept of protection of civilians is not necessarily limited to mitigating harm against civilians, but includes also facilitating access to basic needs like shelters and foods, and contributing to provide a safe and secured environment for civilians. As the GSDF has a plenty of experience in such humanitarian assistance in Iraq, South Sudan, and many other places in the world, this kind of protection of civilian efforts is another suitable area of capacity-building for the GSDF. This would be helpful for land forces of supported countries to enhance their legitimacy which is important in cognitive warfare.

As mentioned above, taking account of countering emerging hybrid threats, there are many new potential areas for land-based defense diplomacy in which the GSDF is expected to contribute more.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on data provided by the Ground Staff Office, in addition to the Defense White Paper 1999, p. 183 and the Defense White Paper 2001, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Defense White Paper 2020, p. 362; Defense White Paper 2020, pp. 380-381.

<sup>3</sup> Defense White Paper 2014, pp. 267-270.

<sup>4</sup> Defense White Paper 2006, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> Defense White Paper 2011, p. 328.

<sup>6</sup> Defense White Paper 2020, p. 556.

<sup>7</sup> The UN Triangular Partnership Project (TPP) is a project to strengthen PKO capacity utilizing the triangular relationship between the donor country, the UN Office of Operations Support (the training provider), and the country sending the trainees. Japan contributes funds and conducts training in this project to strengthen PKO capabilities. Defense White Paper 2020, pp. 398-399.

<sup>8</sup> Toshihide Yamauchi, "Japan-U.S. Joint Exercises (Maritime Self-Defense Force)." <http://www.jpsn.org/special/security/183/> (Ref. 2020-12-07). Press Release, "Special Anti-submarine Training Exercise," Maritime Staff Office, November 10, 2020.

<https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/release/202011/20201110.pdf> (Ref. 2020-12-07).

<sup>9</sup> Defense White Paper 1982, pp. 241-242.

<sup>10</sup> Defense White Paper 2013, p. 234.

<sup>11</sup> Defense White Paper 2019, pp. 360, 369.

<sup>12</sup> Defense White Paper 2022, p. 346.

<sup>13</sup> For more information, see Goro Matsumura, "New Military: 'Diversified Warfare' Will Change the Military, and the Self-Defense Forces then...," Naigai Shuppan, 2020, pp. 215-218, 274-276.

<sup>14</sup> Tomoaki Honda, "New Developments in UN Peace Operations and Engineering Peace," KEIO SFC JOURNAL, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2015, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> For more information, see Goro Matsumura, "The Future of UN PKO and Japan's Role," Anzenhosyo-wo-kangaeru, No. 753, Japan Security Research Association, 2018, pp. 10-12. [http://www.anpokon.or.jp/pdf/kaishi\\_753.pdf](http://www.anpokon.or.jp/pdf/kaishi_753.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> "Protection of Civilians Allied Command Operations Handbook," NATO Allied Command Operations, 2021. <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2021/the-protection-of-civilians-allied-command-operations-handbook>.

## About This Report

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## About the Defense Diplomacy Project (FY 2019-21)

Building on the knowledge amassed through private-sector programs for defense exchange among Japan-China and Japan-Vietnam field officers and Japan-South Korea retired generals, SPF launched a research project in fiscal 2018 to study the policy implications of Japan's defense diplomacy, which has seen a dramatic expansion in terms of both quantity and quality. Reports published under the project include an outline of the aims and activities of defense diplomacy and case studies of initiatives being undertaken by six countries (Australia, Britain, China, France, South Korea, and United States) that are actively promoting defense diplomacy.

Report/Case Studies (in Japanese) <https://www.spf.org/security/programs/V20190143.html>

The project also published a policy proposal “Strengthening Japan's Defense Diplomacy” in 2021.

Policy proposal (in English) <https://www.spf.org/en/security/publications/20220322.html>



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