

Observation of Japan's Ministry of Defense establishing the "Commander of Joint Forces" Role

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The Kyodo News reported on June 6, 2022, that as China continues to strengthen its military capabilities in sea, space, internet, and electromagnetic warfare, Japan's Defense Ministry intends to appoint a "Commander of Joint Forces Command" role. A "Command of Joint Forces" to support the commander will also be established to unify the administration of its Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces.¹ This article will discuss the history of Japan's intention to establish a "Commander of Joint Forces" and the purpose of its establishment.

Idea of "Commander of Joint Forces Command" has been around for long time

As early as 2006, when Japan's Joint Staff Office was established, the idea of setting up a "Command of Joint Forces" in charge of the operation of military branches was already in the works.² In 2016, the then Chief of the Joint Staff (equivalent to Taiwan's Chief of General Staff), Katsutoshi Kono, also proposed the idea of establishing the said Command.³ In May 2018, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Policy Research Council released the "Proposal for a New National Defense Program Outline and Medium-

1. "The Evaluation of Establishment of SDF 'Commander of Joint Forces Command' Regarding Taiwan's Strategic Situation and Mobility of Japanese Forces," *Kyodo News*, June 7, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/articles/8f6b6faf035b69243f834cd040c7f5e32c138eff>
2. "Exclusive: Defense Ministry Formally Considers New 'Commander of Joint Forces'," *Kyodo News*, June 7, 2022, <https://tchina.kyodonews.net/news/2022/06/f2e91192e682.html?phrase=%20統合司令部=統合,司,令,部>.
3. "SDF Top Official Considers the Permanent Establishment of 'Command of Joint Forces'," *Sankei Shimbun*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20160301-ADFFGV5HFZOKROLFZTTTVFOZWQY/>.

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Term National Defense Capability Development Plan," which proposed the establishment of a permanent "Command of Joint Forces" in response to the growing threat from North Korea and China. In addition to strengthening the command system of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF), the establishment of the Command will further integrate the Self-Defense Forces in the fields of integrated air and missile defense, space, internet, electromagnetic wave, amphibious operations, information, and logistics.⁴ The then chairman of the LDP's Policy Research Council was Fumio Kishida, the current Prime Minister. Citing the experience of the Joint Task Force temporarily established by the SDF in Northeast Japan during the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 to incorporate the efforts of the ground, maritime, and air forces, Kenji Wakamiya, the then head of the LDP's National Defense Division, suggested that a permanent "Command of

Joint Forces" could be established on the Ryukyu Islands. For example, the Ground SDF's Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade uses Maritime SDF ships for transportation, while the Air SDF supports the missions from the air. This is more conducive to the defense of the outlying islands under the integration of the Command of Joint Forces.⁵ The concept of Command of Joint Forces was originally expected to be included in the "National Defense Program Guidelines" and the "Medium-Term Defense Program (FY 2019-FY 2023)" expected to be presented in late 2018 but was not included in the end.

Integrating chain of command and relieving Chief of the Joint Staff

The main purpose of the Ministry of Defense's plan to establish the Command of Joint Forces and its Commander is to integrate the command structure and to relieve the work of the Chief of the Joint

4. "Proposals for the Formulation of a New National Defense Program Outline and Medium-Term Defense Force Development Plan," *Liberal Democratic Party Policy Research Committee*, May 29, 2018, p.3, https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/news/policy/137478_1.pdf.

5. "Establish a Joint Force for Space, Computer, and Electromagnetic Warfare," *Nikkei Business*, September 21, 2018, <https://business.nikkei.com/atcl/report/16/082800235/091900006/?P=4>.

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Staff in response to the new threats.⁶ Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines and Medium-Term Defense Program (FY 2019-FY 2023) proposed in 2018 places special emphasis on threats from the internet, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum. Since the authorization to operate the military resources is vested in the respective defense forces, the function of the Joint Staff Office is limited for the SDF to respond effectively and flexibly to new types of conflicts.⁷ With the new types of threats, the SDF's current command system may not be able to meet the modern warfare requirements. The capabilities call for rapid response to immediate crises if subjected to simultaneous attacks from multiple fronts such as electronic warfare, cyberattacks, missiles, and conventional naval and air forces. In addition, although the Chief of the Joint Staff position is the highest rank of the uniformed SDF personnel, it has only a supervisory relationship with the Chief of Staff of Ground, Maritime, and Air SDF but no right or responsibility to command or direct them.⁸ In terms of integration and coordination, it may take more time from communication to the actual execution of the operations.⁹ Thus, establishing an organization that can immediately coordinate the Ground, Maritime, and Air SDF and the joint forces has become imminent.¹⁰ The Medium-Term Defense Program (FY 2019-FY 2023) does not include the Command of Joint Forces, but it does mention that in addition to the planned establishment of related forces, Japan

6. The Minister of Defense has the authority to command and supervise the SDF, but orders are given through the Chief of the Joint Staff and the Chief Staff of Ground, Maritime, and Air SDF, as detailed in Article 8 of the Self-Defense Forces Law. Theoretically, the Chief of Staff does not have command of the forces but carries out the military orders of the Defense Minister. For more details on the issue of military administration and commands in Japan, see Fan, Sheng Meng, "A Study on the Armed Forces and Organization under the Principle of the Rule of Law," *National Defense Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 6, July 2014, p.107.

7. Tseng, Chi-Yan, "Recognize the Development of the Japanese Cyber Self-Defense Forces from the Viewpoint of Departmentalism," *Review of Global Politics*, Special Issue 006, September 2021, p.177.

8. The Chief of Staff of Japan's Ground, Maritime, and Air SDF are the highest ranks in the respective SDF branches.

9. For details, see Fan, Sheng Meng, "A Study on the Armed Forces and Organization under the Principle of the Rule of Law," *National Defense Journal*, vol. 29, no. 6, July 2014, p.107.

10. The Joint Forces report directly to the Ministry of Defense, and orders are executed through the Chief of the Joint Staff. The Forces include the SDF Intelligence Security Team and the Command Communications System Team.

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will evaluate the establishment of a cross-sectoral combat organization that unifies the countermeasures against these threats and strengthens the function of the unified Joint Staff Office.¹¹

On the other hand, the establishment of the Commander of Joint Forces Command would also help to share out the work of the Chief of the Joint Staff. The Chief of the Joint Staff's primary duties are to work under the command and supervision of the Minister of Defense, advise the Minister of Defense on military matters, and deliver the orders from the Minister of Defense to the troops.¹² However, the Chief of the Joint Staff may not be able to assist the Defense Minister and the SDF simultaneously in the event of an emergency. For example, during the Great East Japan Earthquake, the Chief of the Joint Staff had to be detached from control of the troops to spend more than half of his time reporting at the Prime Minister's residence and coordinating

with the U.S. military.¹³ Therefore, with the establishment of the Commander of Joint Forces Command, the Chief of the Joint Staff will be able to assist the Defense Minister in the events of future emergencies, while the Commander of Joint Forces Command will focus on carrying out the orders of the Defense Minister and leading the SDF in their missions.

The achievement of Commander of Joint Forces remains to be seen

Although establishing a Commander of Joint Forces and the Command could streamline the SDF command process and strengthen joint warfare capabilities, possible opposition from the SDF branches could affect the schedule and scope of the position. The factors may include the division of responsibilities between the Command of Joint Forces and the Joint Staff Office and the scope of the coordinated command system. The

11. "Medium Term Defense Program (FY 2019 - FY 2023)", *Japan Ministry of Defense*, December 18, 2018, pp. 3-5, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/pdf/chuki_seibi31-35.pdf.

12. For details, see Article 9 of the Self-Defense Forces Act of Japan.

13. "The Command of Joint Forces was Created, and the Ministry of Defense Performed the Final Adjustment. The SDF is under Permanent Unified Command," *Sankei Shimbun*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20180425-7F4G4VVMTRMWWJ3KH2J5T6VIUM/>.

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Japanese government intends to revise the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Program Guidelines, and the Medium-Term Defense Program by the end of this year;¹⁴ the future establishment of the Commander of Joint Forces and the Command and whether their functions align with their original purpose will be judged by the contents of the documents mentioned above.

As the military situation on both sides of the Taiwan Strait continues to be tense, the question of how to effectively operate the armed forces and mobilize troops to respond to a large-scale attack immediately is one that Taiwan should seriously consider.

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14. "Responding to the Threat of China, Japan Intends to Shorten the Revision Period of the Defense Outline," *Liberty Times*, December 31, 2021, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/breakingnews/3786179>; "Japan's Self-Defense Forces Face Pressure for Structural Reform," *Nikkei Chinese*, January 4, 2022, <https://zh.cn.nikkei.com/politicaeconomy/politicasociety/47186-2022-01-04-05-00-26.html>.