
Mitsuko Hayashi

The Covid-19 pandemic is unlike any other in modern history. It is not just a global health crisis. If the virus continues to disrupt the social environment, it could put a serious strain on international peace and security. On April 9, 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres warned the world of an ever-increasing number of security risks that have emerged as a result of the virus. They include social unrest, violence, and resurgent terrorism due to rising unemployment and the economic downturn. The situation hinders regional and international efforts to resolve conflict. It provides some actors with incentives to create division as the main players in peace and security focus their efforts on combating the virus.

These pressures are evident all over the world, including the Indo-Pacific region, where multiple challenges will have global consequences. Connecting a rapidly growing Asia and a future prosperous Africa and having more than half of the world’s population, the region is the world’s economic engine room and the core of its future vitality. In the face of the pandemic, forging resilience across the region will be increasingly important. If the region can weather the storm of Covid-19, there is a good chance the whole world will enjoy the benefits of peace and security. To maximize the chances of a good outcome, the region will need to demonstrate unity as well as resilience.

Building up capabilities, maintaining constant awareness of the security situation, and harmonizing regional effort are essential if we are to forge resilience against the pandemic. What kind of contribution can an individual country make for that purpose in the era of Covid-19? Take Japan, for example, which can provide a unique contribution in response to the global health pandemic. Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has a track record of upholding regional resilience through its defense diplomacy and capacity building cooperation.
As early as February 3, 2020, right at the start of the global spread of the virus, Japan was hit by an outbreak on the Diamond Princess cruise ship. Around 3,700 passengers and crew members arrived at the Port of Yokohama with the confirmation that a passenger who disembarked from the ship in Hong Kong had been infected by Covid-19. In an unprecedented situation, Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) were dispatched to the ship under a disaster relief operation order. Since then, the Japanese government has taken a range of measures including the declaration of a national state of emergency and the swift authorization of a robust economic stimulus package. With a declining number of daily new cases, a falling replication rate, and other encouraging indicators, the government lifted the emergency measures on May 25, 2020. Japan is now on the path to containing the Covid-19 outbreak. Correspondingly, disaster relief activities have been shifted away from the SDF to local governments and the private sector.

Based on this experience, Japan seems well equipped to provide a unique and important security contribution to the Indo-Pacific region. Japan’s expertise in humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR), regional engagement and partnerships, and multilayered defense relationships can be leveraged to bolster the resilience of the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

**Building Up Resilience Capabilities to Combat the Covid-19 Pandemic and Future Disasters**

The Indo-Pacific region is frequently struck by natural disasters. It has suffered from typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis, and pandemics such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. Given the potential implications for future stability and prosperity, the Covid-19 pandemic could become the most serious and complicated challenge the region has ever faced.

Currently, many Asian militaries are playing key roles in support of civilian efforts to combat Covid-19. Militaries are engaged in medical care or transportation in the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia, and others. Japan’s SDF have also been dispatched for anti-pandemic operations domestically, and Japan has much to offer other countries based on its experience with HA/DR operations that could improve regional resilience capabilities.

**JAPAN’S DEFENSE ACTIVITIES TO COMBAT COVID-19**

Japan’s Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the SDF have mainly engaged in two types of activities. The first is professional medical care provided by SDF doctors and nurses. The Self Defense Forces Central Hospital, one of the biggest MOD hospitals, has played a major role in the Tokyo metropolitan area. It has received more than 400 confirmed patients from 17 countries. Infection control in this facility has been exceptional—no hospital-acquired infections have been reported as of this writing.

The Self Defense Forces Central Hospital courtesy of Japan’s Ministry of Defense
The second set of activities undertaken by the SDF is disaster relief operations. In Japan’s legal system, disaster relief operations can be ordered by the defense minister or an officer designated by the minister upon request from prefectural governors or other officials, with the exception of particularly urgent cases. In the current crisis, 30 out of 47 governors have requested disaster relief operations so far for operations that exceed local civilian capabilities.

As an island nation, Japan prioritizes border checks as preventive measures. SDF personnel have been deployed to the front lines to perform high-risk duties that have involved direct exposure to Covid-19. In the case of the Diamond Princess cruise ship, a total of around 2,700 SDF personnel were dispatched to support the response. They were assigned to daily onboard activities such as distributing necessities as well as disinfecting ship facilities such as common areas, floors, and doorknobs. SDF personnel also provided medical assistance and issued prescriptions. After the quarantine was complete, the SDF helped the ship’s passengers return to their home countries on chartered flights. Images of U.S. nationals being transported by the SDF to Tokyo International Airport were shown on U.S. TV channels and generated primetime headlines.

Currently, Japanese citizens and all other nationals must take Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests at airports and other entry points, in principle. To support the procedure, the SDF personnel collect PCR test samples, transport passengers, and distribute necessities while people await their PCR test results. For example, the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) provided transportation for passengers arriving at Tokyo International Airport to hotels in Tokyo and, once there, the SDF engaged in activities such as distributing food for them.

As urgent and immediate situations are passing, the SDF has passed the baton to local governments and the private sector, offering them help such as training on infection preventive measures. As of this writing, no infections have been reported among a total of around 4,900 SDF personnel involved in pandemic disaster relief operations.

**SHARING LESSONS LEARNED AND HA/DR EXPERTISE**

With such experience, Japan has many lessons to share with regional partners. First, Japan can provide technical and practical expertise in areas such as hand hygiene protocols and the proper use of personal protective equipment such as eye protection, face masks, and gowns. Professional medical analysis such as the effectiveness of CT scans performed by the SDF Central Hospital was particularly helpful.
Second, Japan can share HA/DR management expertise. Proper management and oversight are vital for the battle against the pandemic. Examples include how to control potential exposure at medical and other facilities, how to ensure front-line staff work efficiently, and how to coordinate smoothly with civilian authorities. The current Covid-19 crisis marks the first time the SDF have been deployed for a pandemic disaster relief operation. However, they have been able to employ principles and expertise gained in multiple disaster operations since the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995. Coping with an extended number of natural disasters, the SDF have accumulated expertise in disaster relief operations over the decades. A total of 10 million SDF personnel engaged in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. In fiscal year 2016 alone, a total of around 33,000 SDF personnel were engaged in 515 disaster relief operations across the nation, in addition to around 800,000 personnel engaged in the Kumamoto earthquake that year. The SDF commitment is critical and highly received in Japan as shown in a Cabinet Office opinion poll in 2015,1 where 98.0 percent of the Japanese population valued the SDF disaster relief operations.

In addition to deployments within Japan, the SDF have also responded to disasters affecting countries in the region. Examples include the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2004 and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. Japan has regularly received requests for sharing HA/DR capabilities from other defense authorities in the region.

CAPACITY BUILDING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS
The MOD’s capacity building assistance program can also contribute to improving regional resilience against the pandemic as well as future disasters. In line with Japan’s National Security Strategy2 and Defense Program Guidelines,3 the MOD has carried out capacity building assistance programs since 2012. In order to execute various types of projects without stovepiped management among the services, the Defense Policy Bureau in the MOD has primary responsibility for planning, coordinating with partner militaries, budgeting, executing, and evaluating each project.

Aiming to address regional security challenges, the program provides the SDF’s defense expertise to militaries in the Indo-Pacific region. The program covers capabilities in various areas including HA/DR, maritime security, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), international aviation and maritime law, military medicine, unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance, cybersecurity, and others. The program covers 15 countries and one organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For example, international aviation law seminars provide not only a basic understanding of laws but also doctrine related to defense measures. A PKO program focused on road construction for Cambodia has helped that country to transition from a PKO recipient into a PKO provider in Africa.

Cooperation with other countries providing assistance is another important aspect of the MOD’s capacity building initiative. The United States (in particular the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command), Australia, and the United Kingdom are constant partners with Japan. Over the years, Japan, Australia, and the United States participated in engineering capacity building training with the Timor-Leste Defense Force. In 2016, Japan and the United Kingdom hosted a joint HA/DR seminar in the Philippines that included several militaries from the region.

Yet, coordination does not necessarily have to result in conducting capacity building projects together. In fact, regional coordination is often more about information sharing and maximizing independent efforts while creating synergy across a range of activities. Differences in geographical location, operating mechanisms, and priorities often require countries to focus on different areas of expertise and supplement each other’s activities while avoiding duplication. For example, when Papua New Guinea (PNG) hosted the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in 2018, Japan helped establish a PNG military band, while Australia focused on security capabilities.

Above all, Japan is the major provider of HA/DR capacity building and has conducted programs in the Philippines, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, PNG, and Timor-Leste. Japan has also joined the Balikatan exercise on HA/DR with the United States and the Philippines since 2017 and took the initiative to invite ASEAN member militaries to the Cope North Guam and HA/DR exercise with the United States and Australia in 2018. HA/DR is the domain where Japan, based on its extensive expertise, can contribute most to the resilience of the Indo-Pacific region. The lessons it has learned from the current Covid-19 crisis, added to those learned from other HA/DR operations, will contribute to building up resilience capabilities to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and future disasters.
Maintaining Resilience for Peace and Security in the Region

The Indo-Pacific region is home to multiple security challenges. North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile development is a constant threat. Chinese assertiveness and coercive attempts to challenge the status quo are seen both in the East and South China Seas. China continues to intrude into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands and enter Japan’s contiguous zone.⁴ In the South China Sea, Vietnamese fishing boats collided with the Chinese Coast Guard in April 2020. Tensions between Malaysia and China over oil exploration in regional waters also garnered regional attention. Other security challenges such as ethnic strife, terrorism, and piracy also feature in the region.

It is critically important to maintain resilience under what will become the new normal of living with Covid-19. Japan, through its alliance with the United States and active engagement with other regional security partners, is positioned to prepare against the wide range of issues affecting the Indo-Pacific region.

THE U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE

While the whole region inevitably allocates resources to combat the virus, defense forces and militaries in the region must remain ready and vigilant against the full range of potential security challenges. No attempt to exploit the situation to threaten peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region can be allowed to take place.

The current situation places a premium on constant monitoring of regional developments and coordination among regional partners on ways to signal resilience and maintain regional peace and security. All these tasks will fall to the U.S.-Japan Alliance. The alliance, based on shared universal values such as democracy, freedom, and rule of law, is a natural foundation for showing resilience in the region. As Defense Minister Kono Taro highlighted at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conference commemorating the 60th anniversary of the U.S.-Japan security treaty in January 2020, one of the key features of the alliance is the protection of regional and global security.⁵ This is also underscored in the 2015 Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation.⁶

To maintain readiness in the context of Covid-19, Japan’s lessons learned from the SDF’s activities and medical analysis have provided helpful insights for the protection of all U.S. forces, in particular the roughly 50,000 U.S. forces stationed in Japan. Bilaterally coordinating the response to Covid-19 will help strengthen resilience through training and exercises. Under bilateral efforts, exercises have continued as usual, such as bomber/fighter training by the Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF) and the U.S. Air Force in the airspace over the Sea of Japan and vicinity of Okinawa in April 2020.

Ensuring the forward deployment capability of the U.S. Forces stationed in Japan will become even more important should the Covid-19 crisis complicate that objective. The U.S. forward presence, prescribed in the U.S.-Japan security treaty, is critical to defending Japan and maintaining security in the Indo-Pacific region. The aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, a symbol of such presence, recently returned to sea from the Yokosuka naval base in Japan free of Covid-19 and will be ready soon after taking Field Carrier Landing Practice at Iwoto Island in Japan.

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Japanese Defense Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

In 2016, Prime Minister Abe introduced a regional policy vision called the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” to further Japan’s contribution to regional stability and prosperity. The FOIP concept, which is supported by the United States and other partners, focuses on three pillars: (1) the promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; (2) the pursuit of economic prosperity; and (3) a commitment to peace and stability including capacity building assistance for disaster relief operations and others. Defense cooperation plays a critical role in this vision, and defense-defense relationships prove indispensable in the region from an operational and strategic perspective.

To this end, the MOD has further strengthened its efforts, in particular through enhancing Japan’s presence and providing capacity building assistance as described above. A prominent example is a two-month long Indo-Pacific deployment headed by the Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) destroyer Izumo in 2019. The MSDF conducted 11 types of regional exercises including a Japan-U.S.-India-Philippines multilateral exercise in the South China Sea and a Japan-U.S.-France-Australia multilateral exercise in the Indian Ocean. The deployment also included a one-week long Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Program with officers from ASEAN member states focused on HA/DR and maritime security.

Even though face-to-face meetings may become difficult in the age of Covid-19, Japan has continued to share regional awareness with defense authorities in the region. One example is the Japan-Philippines defense ministerial telephone conversation on May 12, 2020, where Defense Minister Kono and his counterpart exchanged views on the current security situation in the South and East China Seas. They emphasized that both countries strongly oppose any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo by force and any activities that add to the tension in the region. Such outreach efforts continue at all levels in the region.
As to the operational engagement in the Indo-Pacific, MSDF destroyers and aircraft have continued their counter-piracy operations in the waters off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. The MSDF are also conducting information gathering activities to ensure the safety of Japan-related vessels in the Middle East, having deployed the destroyer Kirisame with careful precautions against Covid-19 on May 10, 2020.

Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19, Japan will continue to coordinate closely with the United States and regional partners to maintain resilience for peace and security in an increasingly complex regional security environment.

**Harmonizing Defense Strategies for Regional Resilience**

In a strategic context, some argue the Covid-19 pandemic will bring about a severe escalation of tensions between the United States and China or a power shift from one to the other. There is another suggestion: Japan can assume a unique role in the region. This is the point of view expressed in the *State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report*, where respondents considered Japan the first strategic option (38.2 percent) for hedging against U.S.-China competition, followed by the European Union (31.7 percent) and Australia (8.8 percent).  

Right now, it is difficult to reach any definitive conclusions about the Covid-19 crisis. However, one thing is certain: regional cooperation is vital for the borderless fight against Covid-19. One country’s success will lead to another and, in the end, the whole region could mitigate the impact from the pandemic. Unfortunately, it seems that this is the first transnational crisis in modern memory where international collaboration and new institutions were not expanded. But it is not too late, and Japan has the network and the capabilities to support that process.

Unlike Europe with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Indo-Pacific region is not equipped with a multilateral and legally binding security architecture. Instead, regional institutions such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) have grown to become platforms for promoting regional peace and security. The ADMM-Plus is a defense ministerial meeting comprised of 10 ASEAN Southeast Asian states and 8 non-ASEAN countries including Japan, the United States, China, and Russia. It provides an institutionalized framework for information sharing, building up capacity, exploring exercises, and seeking solutions to challenges in areas including HA/DR, maritime security, PKO, and cybersecurity.

However, one of the most difficult challenges in developing a regional response against the Covid-19 pandemic is the underlying interstate competition in the political, economic, and military realms. The current Covid-19 crisis could invite skepticism about regional cooperation if individual responses are considered tools to enhance regional influence in a broader strategic context. Thus, underlying power dynamics could hinder regional coordination in response to Covid-19 in contrast to past disasters such as the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2004 and the financial crisis in 2008. This presents an unprecedented challenge for institutional frameworks such as ADMM-Plus and could require additional sub-institutional coordination to support a regional approach.

Under these circumstances, Japan’s defense diplomacy with regional partners will prove critical to harmonizing attempts to forge regional resilience against the Covid pandemic.

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Japan actively promotes regional security cooperation to uphold ASEAN resilience; engages regional countries bilaterally; and coordinates concrete initiatives with the United States, Australia, India, and other partners. This combination of pan-regional defense cooperation and strategic coordination with like-minded partners epitomizes current dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

EVOLVING DEFENSE RELATIONSHIPS

Over the years, Japan has deepened its relationships in the region socially and economically through political leadership, economic ties, official development assistance (ODA), cultural exchanges, and other activities. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report* shows that Japan is thought of as the most trusted major power in the region.8

Japan’s regional defense relationships have a long history dating back to the end of the Cold War and have evolved in quality and quantity. In 1991, MSDF vessels including minesweepers were dispatched to the Persian Gulf as the first overseas operation for Japan. In the following year, the GSDF participated in the UN PKO mission in Cambodia as the first UN PKO for Japan.

Under the Cold War structure, Japan’s defense planning used to be considered in the context of Japan’s own efforts and the U.S.-Japan Alliance relationship. But Japan added a new role of defense capability in the National Defense Program Outline in and after FY1996: the promotion of security dialogues and exchanges among defense authorities with neighboring countries, aiming at contributing to a more stable security environment in the post-Cold War era.9

Since then, defense channels have been established with regional partners through high-level exchanges, regular bilateral defense consultations, and memorandums on defense cooperation. Defense consultations play critical roles in security policy coordination, especially where a country’s political power is concentrated in the military. Japan’s defense cooperation with Southeast Asian countries has evolved to include not only high-level exchanges, regular consultations, academic exchanges, ship visits, and exercises but also new initiatives focused on capacity building assistance and defense equipment and technology cooperation.

Since 1958, the MOD has received military cadets and personnel in its research and academic institutions such as Japan’s National Defense Academy from more than 20 countries in the region. Thailand has sent the most students to Japan thus far, including the former commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Air Force. In addition, the number of students from Myanmar has increased since 2015.

Japan’s regional defense diplomacy also focuses on operations through ship visits and exercises. In 2009, the SDF joined the first ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) HA/DR exercise in the Philippines. Japan demonstrated HA/DR expertise performed by all services from the SDF together with Japan’s US-2 amphibious aircraft. The SDF has continued to participate in regional exercises such as the ADMM-Plus HA/DR exercise in Thailand in 2016, which was coordinated at the ADMM-Plus working group Japan and Thailand cochaired. President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines visited the MSDF destroyer Kaga during a call at the Port of Subic in 2018, which showcased the long-standing relationship between Japan and the Philippines.

Recently, the MOD has pursued two other means of defense cooperation, both of which were long requested by nations in the region: One is a capacity building assistance program described above. Another is defense equipment and technology cooperation based on the “Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and

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8. Ibid.
Technology” introduced in 2014. For example, the MOD transferred a total of five fixed-wing TC-90 aircraft to the Philippines in 2017 and 2018 and UH-1H helicopter spare parts in 2019. The support aims to contribute to the country’s disaster relief operations, maritime security, and surveillance capabilities. The TC-90 case is a good example of a multifaceted program including pilot training and maintenance support. Currently, many potential opportunities are developing with ASEAN countries and they will be realized soon under the close coordination between MOD’s Acquisition, Technologies and Logistics Agency (ATLA) and Japan’s defense industries.

Japan’s defense relationships with individual Southeast Asian countries have evolved over time by focusing especially on shared challenges such as HA/DR, maritime and air security through joint training, capacity building, and equipment and technology cooperation. Japan’s defense diplomacy covers all ASEAN countries and is characterized by patient and sustained engagement without disruption.

DEFENSE COOPERATION WITH LIKE-MINDED COUNTRIES
The MOD has also strengthened defense relationships with like-minded partners, putting more focus on addressing regional challenges such as HA/DR and maritime security. The Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation signed with Australia in 2007 and with India in 2008 provided the impetus to advance those respective relationships. With Australia, Japan has improved interoperability through joint training of all services based on the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA). Both countries enhanced not only bilateral but also trilateral exercises including the Japan-U.S.-Australia Southern Jackaroo and Cope North Guam. Defense ties with India have developed in the maritime sphere since the first MSDF participation in the multilateral Malabar exercise in the Indian Ocean in 2007 but also among the ground services, such as anti-terrorism exercises held in India in 2018 and 2019.

MULTILATERAL DEFENSE COOPERATION: AN ASEAN-WIDE APPROACH
In addition to bilateral and trilateral cooperation, the MOD has taken further initiative to engage ASEAN

as a whole. ASEAN countries, located at the hinge connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, are the key to regional cooperation. ASEAN principles such as openness, transparency, inclusivity, and a rules-based framework align with Japan’s FOIP vision. With diverse historical, cultural, political, and social backgrounds among ASEAN members, regional cooperation under institutional frameworks such as ADMM-Plus is sought by consensus, not by one country’s leadership. Attempts to co-opt individual member states and divide the region into spheres of influence will not create comprehensive solutions to regional challenges. Japan recognizes that ASEAN unity and centrality is important and its defense diplomacy aims to provide capabilities to enhance ASEAN’s resilience as a foundation for consensus building. Specifically, Japan focuses on ensuring the rule of law, strengthening maritime security, and building up regional capabilities to address natural disasters and nontraditional threats with all ASEAN countries.

In 2016, at the Japan-ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Informal Meeting in Laos, Japan announced the “Vientiane Vision: Japan’s Defense Cooperation with ASEAN.” The vision was welcomed by all member states as a comprehensive guideline to advance Japanese-ASEAN defense cooperation. The vision has three objectives: (1) respecting and promoting shared principles of freedom, democracy, and basic human rights; (2) promoting and enhancing the rule of law; and (3) supporting ASEAN efforts to strengthen its centrality and unity. Core themes include capacity building cooperation, joint training and exercises, and education and research exchange. The Vientiane Vision is constantly followed up and improved through regular ministerial and vice-ministerial meetings between Japan and all ASEAN states in a transparent way. Recent activities taken in 2019 under the Vientiane Vision cover engagement of three services between the SDF and ASEAN militaries: the third Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Program on the MSDF destroyer Izumo on HA/DR and maritime security, the second HA/DR invitation program to share GSDF expertise, and the first Japan-ASEAN professional airmanship program on air security and international aviation law and norms in Tokyo.

In the age of Covid-19, promoting regional resilience is largely dependent on how individual countries can harmonize their efforts within a framework like ADMM-plus. Japan’s defense diplomacy with a focus on capacity building for regional challenges such as HA/DR and nontraditional threats will help to reduce the tensions and rivalry that have been fueled by Covid-19. In addition, Japan’s long-standing and widely developed defense cooperation ties in the region will contribute to sharing awareness of security concerns and developing habits of security cooperation. In a broader strategic context, Japan’s multifaceted, pan-regional, and long-standing defense relationships can, in combination with U.S. forward presence and engagement, support stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan will continue to develop networks with Southeast Asian states, strengthen U.S.-Japan alliance ties, further partnership with Australia and India and others, and develop new habits of defense cooperation in the region. Japan’s defense diplomacy can be cultivated to harmonize defense strategies for regional resilience.

**Conclusion**

Already, Japan has demonstrated the capability and willingness to harmonize approaches with other countries in the region. In one example, a recent trilateral defense authorities’ videoconference among

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Japan, the United States, and South Korea in May 2020 proved encouraging. The discussion covered a wide range of issues including the North Korean nuclear and missile threat and the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, the MOD plans to host the first multilateral defense ministers’ conference with Pacific Island nations, which is named the Japan Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue (JPIDD), to further expand its coordination network in the region.

In the era of Covid-19, Japan is well-positioned to further regional defense partnerships that support peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. The response to health pandemics ties neatly with Japan’s existing initiatives in the realm of HA/DR and capacity building and can serve as a springboard for strengthening security cooperation in other areas. Japan’s regional defense engagement strategy creates room for various modes of security cooperation. By building on the alliance with the United States, budding security ties with other regional partners, and support for institutional frameworks, Japan can develop platforms for harmonizing strategies to maintain regional security and prosperity. The battle against the Covid-19 pandemic is the spur for the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen its future resilience. Japan’s defense cooperation and defense capacity building initiative will undoubtedly support that cause.

Mitsuko Hayashi is a visiting fellow with the Japan Chair at CSIS from Japan’s Ministry of Defense (from October 2019-July 2020). The views expressed herein are her own and do not represent the view of Japan’s Ministry of Defense nor the Government of Japan.

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