

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

IIPS

Institute for International
Policy Studies



The Japan Institute of
International Affairs

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

Editor:

Akio Watanabe

Editorial Board:

Masashi Nishihara
Naoko Saiki
Taizo Yakushiji

Online Publisher:

Yoshiji Nogami
President, JIIA

No.122. 3 June 2011

THE EARTHQUAKE HAS STRENGTHENED THE JAPAN-US ALLIANCE

Masashi Nishihara

One of the positive results of the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan was the Japanese public's heightened recognition of the importance of both the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the Japan-US alliance, which in turn will affect Japan's future security and relations with the United States. In the past, the two forces had conducted many joint *exercises* but never joint *operations*. Now, however, for the first time in the alliance's history, the SDF and US Forces Japan worked together.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

This was the SDF's largest operation in its fifty-six-year history and the first major joint operation for its ground, maritime, and air forces. For several weeks after March 11, the SDF deployed about 107,000 troops, 42 percent of its entire force. This consisted of 70,000 ground troops with more than 100 helicopters, 15,000 navy crewmen with 50 naval ships and 200 aircraft, and 21,000 airmen with 240 aircraft, as well as 500 troops to aid in the nuclear crisis. The SDF was joined by some 18,000 US troops, again from all the services, including some 150 nuclear crisis fighters. The United States deployed about ten naval ships, including the aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan*, and 140 airplanes. Members of the US Marine Corps stationed in Okinawa were also among the major players.


To help resolve the nuclear crisis, the US government sent specialists from the US Department of Energy and the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission and provided, among other things, a huge quantity of pure water to cool the damaged reactors, unmanned drones and robots to inspect the reactors, and 10,000 protective suits. In this way, the earthquake brought together not only the two military forces but also the two governments.

The operations by the two forces were coordinated at a high level by the chief of staff of the SDF and the commander in chief of the US Pacific Fleet. They were then commanded by the commander of the Northeastern Army of the Ground SDF and the commander of US Forces Japan, respectively, via their bilateral coordination action teams. The American forces positioned themselves as a "joint support force" rather than a "joint task force," with the understanding that they would "support" the SDF's efforts. This joint operation proved to the two forces that they could work well together as allies.

Five minutes after the earthquake, the Japanese Ministry of Defense and the SDF went to work, with the American troops joining them in carrying out search and rescue operations; transporting victims; supplying water, food, and fuel; and administering medical aid. They cleared and opened roads, sea ports, and airports. Japanese and American helicopters used the decks of each other's ships to transport needed supplies. The US troops, who named their mission "Operation Tomodachi (Friends)," also helped displaced persons in towns and

villages clear the devastated areas. In sum, the American troops were willing to help their Japanese ally carry out even the most difficult tasks.

Although many of the Japanese troops themselves had lost family members in the tsunami, they chose not to search for them but instead to continue with their mission. Their self-sacrifice caught the attention of people, including many of the displaced, who felt that their plight would have been much worse without the help of the SDF.

With this now greater public support of the SDF as a professional military force, the government should seize the moment to give the force a wider and more responsible role in Japan's defense, as well as a larger budget. Giving the SDF a proper place in Japan's constitution and security policy also will strengthen the country's alliance with the United States. 

Masashi Nishihara is President of the Research Institute for Peace and Security and former President of the National Defense Academy.