

Japanese politics & policy

US and Japan warn of China threat as they upgrade military alliance

Foreign ministers say Beijing is 'greatest strategic challenge' in Indo-Pacific region



US defense secretary Lloyd Austin, third left, and secretary of state Antony Blinken, second left, meet their counterparts at the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee on Sunday © AP

Leo Lewis and **Kana Inagaki** in Tokyo 3 HOURS AGO

The US and Japan have outlined the most significant upgrade to their joint military alliance since 1960, warning that China's aggressive posture posed the "greatest strategic challenge" in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

The allies want to bolster their security ties to respond to what they view as a growing threat from China. At a bilateral meeting on Sunday, Antony Blinken, Lloyd Austin and their Japanese counterparts, discussed how China employs political, economic and military coercion of countries, companies and civil society, a statement said.

"Such behaviour is a serious concern to the Alliance and the entire international community, and represents the greatest strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond," said the statement.

At the start of his meeting with Japanese foreign minister Yoko Kamikawa, Blinken said: "We see the US and Japan side by side in so many places where it matters around the world."

Central to their agreement, first reported by the Financial Times, is a landmark upgrade to America's military command structure in Japan, which will involve placing greater operational control in the hands of locally based US leadership.

Co-ordination between the allies had long been hampered because although roughly 50,000 American military personnel are based in Japan, the US Forces Japan (USFJ) lacked command and control authority. Japan has had to deal more with the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, which is 19 hours behind Tokyo and is 6,500km away.

The upgrade involves placing a three-star commander and accompanying staff in Japan, according to officials with knowledge of the talks. The USFJ will be reconstituted as a joint force headquarters to allow their militaries to co-operate and plan more seamlessly, particularly in a crisis such as a Taiwan conflict. The three-star commander, who would report to the Indopacom commander, was unlikely to be from the US Navy, one of the officials said.

The details were unveiled three months after President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida agreed at a summit in Washington to modernise their alliance structure.

Officials involved on both sides of the preparations for Sunday's meeting expressed surprise at how quickly the agreement had translated into action, but noted an increasingly fragile regional security situation with instability being created by China, Russia and North Korea.

In the joint statement, the US and Japan also agreed to bolster bilateral training and exercises in Japan's Southwest islands, which Tokyo calls the Nansei islands, where China has recently increased its naval presence

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