

US-China relations

US military deepens ties with Japan and Philippines to prepare for China threat

Top Marine Corps general James Bierman outlines sweeping reform to adapt force for possible conflict over Taiwan



US Marines fire a Javelin shoulder-fired anti-tank missile during the Resolute Dragon 22 exercises in Japan in October © Cpl Scott Aubuchon/US Marine Corps

Kathrin Hille in Okinawa JANUARY 8 2023

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The US and Japanese armed forces are rapidly integrating their command structure and scaling up combined operations as Washington and its Asian allies prepare for a possible conflict with China such as a war over Taiwan, according to the top Marine Corps general in Japan.

The two militaries have “seen exponential increases . . . just over the last year” in their operations on the territory they would have to defend in case of a war, Lieutenant General James Bierman, commanding general of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) and of Marine Forces Japan, told the Financial Times in an interview.

Bierman said that the US and its allies in Asia were emulating the groundwork that had enabled western countries to support Ukraine's resistance to Russia in preparing for scenarios such as a Chinese invasion of [Taiwan](#).

“Why have we achieved the level of success we've achieved in Ukraine? A big part of that has been because after Russian aggression in 2014 and 2015, we earnestly got after preparing for future conflict: training for the Ukrainians, pre-positioning of supplies, identification of sites from which we could operate support, sustain operations.

“We call that setting the theatre. And we are setting the theatre in Japan, in the Philippines, in other locations.”

Bierman's unusually frank comparison between the Ukraine war and a potential conflict with China comes as Beijing has dramatically increased the scale and sophistication of its military manoeuvres near Taiwan in recent years. Japan and the Philippines are also [intensifying defence co-operation](#) with the US in the face of mounting Chinese assertiveness.



US Marines Lieutenant General James Bierman warned that ‘the Chinese adversary... is going to own the starting pistol and is going to have the ability potentially to initiate hostilities’ © Kyodo News/Getty Images

Japan and the US are set to discuss strengthening their alliance at security talks between the foreign and defence ministers on Wednesday and a summit between US president Joe Biden and Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida on Friday in Washington. The summit comes as Tokyo embarks on a [radical security policy shift](#) that will include increasing defence spending and deploying missiles capable of hitting Chinese territory.

III MEF is the Marine Corps' only crisis response force permanently stationed outside the US. It operates within the range of [Chinese](#) medium- and long-range missiles, with which Beijing seeks to constrain US operational freedom in the region.

The unit is at the heart of a sweeping reform of the Marine Corps that aims to replace its focus on fighting counter-insurgency in the Middle East with creating small units that specialise in operating quickly and clandestinely in the islands and straits of east Asia and the western Pacific to counter Beijing's "anti-access area denial" strategy.

To realise that strategy, closer integration with allies was vital, Bierman said. In a series of recent exercises, the Marines for the first time set up bilateral ground tactical co-ordination centres rather than exchanging liaisons with allies' command points.

In another sign of deepening co-operation, specific Japanese military units have been designated as part of the "stand-in force" alongside III MEF and US Navy and Air Force units.

Instead of a "round robin" of Japanese military units working with US counterparts, as in the past, a "standing community of interest" is emerging of allied units with responsibility for operational plans, Bierman added.

He said while the US military was paying attention to [Chinese aggressive behaviour around Taiwan](#), the People's Liberation Army should not be perceived as being "10 feet tall".

"When you talk about the complexity, the size of some of the operations they would have to conduct, let's say [in] an invasion of Taiwan, there will be indications and warnings, and there are specific aspects to that in terms of geography and time, which allow us to posture and be most prepared."

As part of those preparations, the Philippines plan to allow US forces to preposition weapons and other supplies on five more bases in addition to five where the US has already access.

"You gain a leverage point, a base of operations, which allows you to have a tremendous head start in different operational plans. As we square off with the Chinese adversary, who is going to own the starting pistol and is going to have the ability potentially to initiate hostilities . . . we can identify decisive key terrain that must be held, secured, defended, leveraged."