



General Dunford meets with Japan Self-Defense Force Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff, at Ministry of Defense in Tokyo, August 18, 2017 (DOD/Dominique A. Pineiro)

Allies and Partners Are Our Strategic Center of Gravity

This August, I was in the Pacific to consult with our South Korean and Japanese allies about the threat from North Korea. In September, I was in Europe for the 178th North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Military Committee in Chiefs of Defense Session. In these meetings, as in all my interactions with senior political and military leaders around the world over the last 2 years, one thing was abundantly clear: The United States is widely considered to be an indispensable nation, critical to the maintenance of the international order that has brought us and our allies relative peace and extraordinary economic prosperity since World War II.

While U.S. global leadership is the product of much more than our military capabilities, the competitive military advantage we possess is vital to our national power and the role we play on the world stage. A primary enabler of that competitive advantage is our worldwide network of allies and partners that has developed since World War II. That is why the National Military Strategy, published last year, identifies the network of U.S. alliances and partnerships as our strategic center of gravity.

That is not just a diplomatic platitude—it's doctrinally sound. According to Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, the *center of gravity* is the source of power that provides moral or physical

strength, freedom of action, or will to act. At the strategic level, our network of alliances and partnerships does just this. At the operational level, our center of gravity is the ability to project power when and where necessary to advance national interests; that power projection is enabled by allies and partners. Both strategically and operationally, then, allies and partners underpin the Joint Force's ability to execute the National Military Strategy.

Allies are nations with whom we have formal defense agreements for broad, long-term objectives. These can be bilateral—as with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—or multilateral, like those that include Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand in the Pacific, and our 28 Allies

in NATO. Partnerships are structured around narrower objectives and may be less enduring, but they are no less vital. In every case, these relationships are based on common interests and common purpose.

At the strategic level, alliances and partnerships serve to enhance legitimacy, improve deterrent capability, and expand our access. Coalitions enhance our legitimacy by demonstrating unity of purpose in the international community. We attract allies and partners when we use our military power to defend a rules-based international order; the coalitions themselves then stand as evidence that our objectives are greater than our narrow self-interest. This unity of purpose also increases our deterrent capacity by demonstrating to potential adversaries that any aggression will be countered not only by the United States, but also by a coalition. And allies and partners expand our reach by providing access to air and sea ports, guaranteeing transit rights and allowing the forward positioning of both manpower and materiel.

Operationally, this access allows the Joint Force to rapidly and flexibly project power across the globe, effectively cheating time and space. In a fight-tonight world of transregional, multifunctional, and all-domain threats, this advantage cannot be overstated. Because our allies and partners live where we do not, they can deepen our intelligence, increase situational awareness, and provide the cultural acuity we lack. Standing alliances like NATO also provide ready-made command and control structures that expedite the formation of broader coalitions and enable enduring mission support. And, critically, coalition members increase available combat power: whether they contribute maneuver units or niche-enabling capabilities, allies and partners share the burden and make us more effective.

These benefits are not hypothetical—they are key to how we have operated for the last 70 years and how we are operating around the globe, across the range of military operations today. After the attacks on the Nation on September 11, 2001, NATO invoked the collective

defense provision in Article 5 for the first time and, in its first operation outside of Europe, immediately brought the strength of the Alliance to bear against al Qaeda. Sixteen years later, NATO is still leading Operation *Resolute Support* in Afghanistan, where 39 nations are contributing more than 13,000 troops.

Today, we are taking the same partnered approach to defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria: we rapidly assembled a coalition that now stands at 69 nations, 28 of whom are contributing troops in Iraq and Syria. Progress there has been substantial and sustainable, even with a modest U.S. footprint. Bilateral relationships are equally key to other challenges around the globe; at the high-intensity end of the spectrum, our planning for military options on the Korean Peninsula would be vastly more difficult without the contributions of our Japanese and South Korean allies. And it is the strength of those alliances that have deterred conflict thus far, contributing to decades of stability and prosperity in the Pacific.

As effective as our network is, we should always strive to make it better. The changing character of war in the 21st century demands a networked response from like-minded allies and partners across the globe, from intelligence-sharing through planning and execution.

A fundamental step in expanding and empowering the network is improving information and intelligence-sharing. This is true across the range of military operations, but especially in the fight against violent extremist organizations; it takes a network to defeat a network. Within this network, we need to cultivate a bias for sharing. Shared intelligence leads to shared awareness that informs plans. If we want our allies to fight with us, we should invite them to plan with us from the start. That requires transparency at all levels, in every phase of operations.

In the execution phase, interoperability is the key to coalition operations. We must continue to pursue technological interoperability with our allies at all levels, from the strategic to the tactical. Just as important, we need to enhance the human dimension of interoperability

through combined exercises that test shared doctrine and refine operating concepts so we can fight seamlessly with our allies. Above all, Joint Force leaders at all levels must ensure that our military-to-military engagements are nested with globally integrated strategies and campaign plans that protect and strengthen our strategic and operational centers of gravity.

Since World War II, the U.S. military has maintained a competitive advantage thanks in large part to our network of allies and partners. Today, we fight side-by-side with our allies and partners in the Middle East, and we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with allies in Europe and the Pacific. Given the nature of the threats we face today and the challenges we are likely to face in the future, I cannot imagine a scenario in which the United States would not be standing alongside allies and partners across the globe. JFQ

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