Japan’s Strategic Role in Southeast Asia: A Cause for Concern?

By John Lee*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• Japan’s strategic interest in Southeast Asia under the Shinzo Abe government is primarily motivated by concerns about China’s rise and its impact on stability in East Asia.

• Southeast Asia is increasingly viewed as a critical strategic sub-region for stability in East Asia more generally, and for the protecting of Japanese interests specifically.

• Alarm or concern about a more proactive Japanese role ought to be moderated due to the constitutional, institutional, and political limitations on the use of force by the country’s Self-Defence Forces.

• A more permissive technology and defence export regime, as well as a more active role in checking Chinese influence in multilateral forums, may nevertheless be highly significant to the strategic and diplomatic balance and shape of Southeast Asia and the region more generally.

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INTRODUCTION

The (re)emergence of a ‘can-do’ and ‘will-do’ Japan under Abe is of great interest to Southeast Asia – to key strategic players such as Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, but also to the region as a whole.

Less clear is Tokyo’s strategic motivation, giving rise to some alarmist sentiment in the region. Japan’s conception of an expanded strategic role for itself in East Asia, including in Southeast Asia, has led to some capitals (namely Beijing and Seoul) and commentaries chiding Tokyo for a shift ‘to the right’ and returning to a ‘militaristic past’ which might even ‘threaten peace and stability’ in the region. One survey of South Koreans – a country with still raw memories of its troubled history with Japan - even found that sixty-two per cent of respondents perceived Abe’s Japan to be a ‘military threat’.  

This paper offers some clarification of Tokyo’s motivations. The reasons behind the emergence of Abe’s more proactive stance is well aligned with that of regional states, especially in Southeast Asia, while limitations on the role that Japan can play should counter some of the more alarmist concerns about an increased Japanese strategic presence in East Asia.

THE CHALLENGE OF A RISING CHINA

China is perceived to be the major challenge for Japan and the region in the medium and long term (in Japanese eyes) and is confirmed by the country’s 2013 National Security Strategy which states that “the maintenance and protection of international order based on rules and universal values, such as freedom…” is fundamental to Japan’s national interest. This is understood in the context of a “shift in the balance of power” since the beginning of this century which has been “changing on an unprecedented scale, and has substantially

influenced the dynamics of international politics.”4 Identifying China as the primary factor for changes in the balance of power in a world where “Sovereign states remain the principle actors,” the document goes on to declare that ‘Risks to Global Commons’ presents a grave threat to order more generally, and that “risks that can impede the utilisation of and free access to global commons (such as the sea and cyberspace) have been spreading and becoming more serious.” Zeroing in on “an increasing number of cases of unilateral actions in an attempt to change the status quo by coercion without paying respect to existing international law,” the same section goes on to highlight “disputes that have arisen over sovereignty between coastal states and China” as harmful to “the maintenance of law at sea, freedom of navigation, and stability in the Southeast Asian region.”5

The Chinese challenge to regional order more generally and in areas such as Southeast Asia will have serious ramifications for Japan given Japan’s reliance on sea-lines-of-communication (SLOCs) in Southeast Asia for its trade and energy security.6 As a trading island-nation, Japan is even more dependent than China on imports of energy, food and the like. Such sentiments and analyses of Japanese vulnerability to disruptions in the post-war order generally, and reliance on open and unfettered access to SLOCs in particular, are mirrored in key documents such as the country’s National Defence Guidelines,7 Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology,8 and the explanatory note on the ‘Cabinet Decision on Development on Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect its People’.9

While Japan is hardly alone in its concern about China’s rise and the possible disruption to regional order (and impact on access to SLOCs) resulting from this, Abe’s explicit desire that Japan use its considerable weight to play a significant role in upholding and protecting the existing order is beyond the ambition of any previous Japanese administration in the post-war period. Japan has traditionally relied on economic and ‘soft power’ diplomacy and eschewed strategic and military approaches to addressing problems beyond its immediate environs.10 The point must also be made that Abe’s determination to go beyond mere emphasis on protecting national sovereignty, including Japan’s claims over the Senkaku Islands, and inextricably and explicitly tie Japan’s more ‘proactive role’ to issues of upholding and protecting regional order goes beyond any position taken by his post-war predecessors.

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5 National Security Strategy, pg. 8.
6 National Security Strategy, pp. 9, 16-7.
EXPLAINING THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN TURN

A focus on East Asian SLOCs to Japan’s south will automatically increase the strategic relevance of Southeast Asia. But it does not fully account for the lengths Abe has gone to in enlarging Japan’s strategic and political weight in Southeast Asia. For example, in the prime minister’s keynote speech at the 2014 Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, Abe pledged to “offer [Japan’s] utmost support for efforts by ASEAN member countries to ensure security of the seas and skies and rigorously maintain freedom of navigation and overflight.”

The speech also highlighted Japan’s decision to provide new patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard and aid to Indonesia to allow Jakarta to procure three new patrol vessels. In flagging similar arrangements with Vietnam, another claimant state against China in parts of the South China Sea, Abe left little doubt that the strategic turn to Southeast Asia, and standing up to China in particular, will be a hallmark of his tenure. Japan has also offered technical skills and training in Coast Guard operations to officials in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

It is true that Chinese policies and behaviour over claims in the South China Sea have become an even more fraught issue for the region since Abe first came in to power. But what else explains the Japanese shift in strategic focus toward Southeast Asia?

One partial explanation seems to be that Abe has learnt lessons from his first time as prime minister. In particular, the 2007 Quadrilateral Initiative encompassing Japan, the U.S., India and Australia received a cool reception from major Southeast Asian states. Unintentionally, the Quad created the perception that Abe was seeking to bypass or else supersede ASEAN centrality in multilateral discussions of regional strategic issues; or worse, encourage America to prioritise such groupings over ASEAN-backed institutions. In this sense, Abe realised that if Japan wants a greater strategic role in the region, it needs to garner the support of states that are situated in what his government recognises as the overwhelmingly important strategic gateway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Additionally, it seems that Abe’s strategic objectives and reading of the region has become significantly more profound and nuanced during his second time as leader. Whereas Abe Mark I and Mark II are both wary of increasing Chinese power, the Mark II version is emphasising Japan’s desire to play a more proactive role in upholding and protecting the regional order – and not in containing Chinese power per se. After all, it is not China’s rise in and of itself that is of concern to Japan and other countries in East Asia but how China will choose to wield its enhanced power. While it is true that upholding regional order includes measures to balance against growing Chinese power so as to provide effective constraints and costs against disruptive Chinese behaviour, the focus on order more generally is a far more palatable message for Abe to sell when promoting Japan’s desire to play a more ‘proactive’ strategic role.

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When it comes to building support for a more proactive Japan in Southeast Asia, enhancing legitimacy necessarily includes approval both from a large number of individual states in Southeast Asia, and ASEAN. With respect to the latter, Abe explicitly linked Japan’s desire to play a more proactive role in Southeast Asia with Japan-ASEAN initiatives to deepen institutional and operational cooperation to enhance the capacities of Southeast Asian states to promote maritime security and safety for the explicit purpose of regional ‘peace’, ‘stability’ and ‘order’.¹²

Furthermore, Japanese moves to help enhance the maritime (including naval) capabilities of states like the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia help meet existing and growing demand emanating from within Southeast Asia for states to acquire greater domestic capacity to resist coercive behaviour by great powers over maritime claims and disputes. Southeast Asian states are already engaged in a number of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ balancing approaches vis-à-vis China.¹³ By putting Japanese assistance to Southeast Asian states in the context of strengthening regional capacity to uphold existing order – rather than as a mere hard-balancing ‘containment’ mechanism against a rising China – there is enhanced and widespread acquiescence for a greater Japanese strategic role generally, and for Japanese assistance to these Southeast Asian claimant states specifically.

Finally, Japan may be hoping that its preparedness to strategically counter and criticise Chinese coercive and assertive behaviour over maritime claims in the South China Sea might eventually encourage Southeast Asian states to offer more explicit criticism of similar Chinese coercive and provocative behaviour in and around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Tokyo may hope that, although involving a different set of claims and legal issues in two different Seas, highlighting any Chinese behaviour considered contrary to adherence to a rules-based order may become a collective endeavour – which can only work in Tokyo’s interest.

¹² For example, see official joint comments released following the 17th Japan-ASEAN Summit Meeting, held November 12, 2014 in Myanmar: http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000260.html accessed March 7, 2015. Likewise, Tokyo reiterated the same theme during the inaugural Japan-ASEAN Defence Minister’s Roundtable held a week later. See http://www.mod.go.jp/e/jdf/no59/specialfeature.html accessed March 7, 2015.
JAPANESE STRATEGIC ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

(a) Military involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts

In early February this year, Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatano stated that Japan might one day consider contributing to America-led naval patrols in the South China Sea since “the interdependence of nations is increasing and deepening, and the situation in the South China Sea affects our national security.”14 Comments such as these and others have led to some speculation that under the cover of Abe’s ‘proactive contribution to peace and security’ and specific actions such as the government’s reinterpretation of the Constitution to allow ‘collective security’, the Japanese SDFs will be used to join conflicts in Southeast Asia.

Such expectations ought to be tempered and wound back. There is widespread misunderstanding (or misreporting) of the implications of Abe’s constitutional reinterpretation to allow ‘collective self-defence’. While the reinterpretation now widens the options that may allow Japan to render military assistance to America – reflected in the recently revised U.S.-Japan Defence Guidelines – such a right of collective self-defence only comes into play when the following restrictive conditions are all met.15

1. The situation should pose a clear threat to the Japanese state or fundamentally threaten the Japanese people’s constitutional right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;
2. There is no other way to repel the attack and protect Japan;
3. The use of force is limited to the minimum necessary.

Any deployment of the SDF in scenarios that cannot meet these necessary conditions would require a change to Article 9 of the Constitution and not merely a reinterpretation of an existing provision. Constitutional change would require majorities in both houses of parliament and a public referendum supporting the change which is not possible in the foreseeable future.

In this light, it is no easy matter for Japan to justify deploying its SDF to assist American forces, let alone the military of a Southeast Asian state in a conflict between claimants in the South China Sea. Tokyo would have to make the case that standing aside from such a conflict is either a threat to Japan itself or impinges upon the Japanese people’s right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Even the latter less stringent standard is only plausible in the event of a major war involving the U.S. forces against the PLA in the South China Sea. In such a situation, it is likely that the involvement of Japanese forces would enjoy widespread support from vulnerable Southeast Asian states.

Putting aside constitutional and legal limitations which have in the past been watered down through ‘reinterpretation’ for reasons of strategic convenience\(^\text{16}\) (although trigger-happy Japanese military intervention in the South China Sea would be a step too far for even the most creative of ‘reinterpretations’) one should also consider the domestic obstacles to any Japanese military involvement in Southeast Asia.

As multiple surveys and studies across a long period of time including up to the current period show, any expansive use of Japanese military assets or ‘adventurism’ will be strongly resisted by the population and many elites steeped in a post-war pacifist strategic culture.\(^\text{17}\) One should bear in mind that even with respect to the rather modest reinterpretation of the constitution to allow collective self-defence under the limited conditions mentioned, around half of those surveyed were against such a reinterpretation.\(^\text{18}\)

(b) Offering arms and military technology to Southeast Asian states

In the National Security Statement under the sub-heading of ‘Japan’s Strategic Approaches to National Security’, the Abe government flagged ‘cooperation on defence equipment and technology’ in ways that ‘fit the new security environment’ (i.e., the rise of China and possible challenges to the liberal order.)

In the subsequent ‘Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology’ clarification document released by Abe’s Cabinet, Tokyo appears to offer a fairly permissive export controls regime. The Second Principle states that following a ‘transparent’ and ‘strict examination’ of individual cases, transfers may be allowed if they: (1) contribute to the promotion of peace and international cooperation; and (2) contribute to Japan’s security. Moreover, the second criterion includes transfers designed to further ‘joint development and production projects with allies and partners’ or ‘enhance security and defence cooperation with allies and partners’.

Further guidance is then offered by the ‘Implementation Guidelines’ for these ‘Three Principles’ adopted by the National Security Council on April 1, 2014. Under these Guidelines, such transfers must contribute to Japan’s security, of which promoting international peace and order is an important element of national security. The Guidelines list


two conditions under which transfers would contribute positively to Japanese security and interests: (1) Transfers related to joint development and production with countries cooperating with Japan in security areas including the United States; and (2) Transfers that contribute to enhancing security and defence cooperation with countries cooperating with Japan in security matters.

The bottom line is that subject to the proper governmental deliberation and decision-making processes, the transfer of Japanese defence equipment and technologies is likely to become an important avenue for Japan to play a more ‘proactive’ strategic role in Southeast Asia. As the explanation in the ‘Three Principles’ document puts it, “An appropriate overseas transfer of defence equipment and technology contributes to further active promotion of the maintenance of international peace and security… [by contributing to, amongst other things] capacity building of developing states.” Moreover, “such transfer also contributes to strengthening security and defence cooperation with Japan’s ally, the United States as well as other countries.”

In other words, Japanese military equipment and technology can now in principle be used to enhance the capacity of like-minded Southeast Asian states that seek to resist significant Chinese changes to the territorial status quo in the South China Sea more particularly, and the shape of the regional order more generally. So far, relatively modest contributions of a small number of patrol ships have been made to the Philippines and Indonesia, and would likely be made to Vietnam in the future under the banner of the ‘strategic’ application of Overseas Direct Assistance or ODA.

This is hardly enough to change the tactical military balance in the South China Sea. The emergence of Japan as a major military equipment and technology supplier to like-minded countries in Asia is only at its early stages and must negotiate domestic obstacles (political, bureaucratic and social) against joint-development and selling of military equipment and technology that have been built up over decades of passivity. But as the ongoing Japanese discussions to possibly export its most advanced submarine technology to Australia and discussions with France to develop cutting-edge weapons for fighter aircraft show, things are changing.

19 The most significant impact of Abe’s permissive export regime will be Japan’s new-found ability to enhance its military relevance to the U.S. and leveraging off cooperative development agreements with the U.S. and other advanced Western powers such as France. This will further improve the cutting-edge capability of the Japanese SDFs. See Mina Pollmann, “Japan’s First Steps into the World of Arms Exports,” The Diplomat, January 15, 2015 http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/japans-first-steps-into-the-world-of-arms-exports/ accessed March 8, 2015. On Japan’s contribution to the U.S. ‘pivot’ to Asia from a defence exports perspective, see Ken Jimbo, “U.S. rebalancing: A Japanese perspective,” in William Tow (ed.) The New U.S. Strategy Towards Asia: Adapting to the American Pivot (New York: Routledge 2015), pp. 77-89.

Indeed, China which has maximum ‘skin’ in the strategic game clearly realises the potential for Japan to emerge as a counter-balance to China in this context. As one Chinese official has complained, mirroring the concern of other colleagues, Japan’s openness to both export military equipment and technology to Southeast Asia and provide fund assistance to countries for the purpose (through ODA and other mechanisms) “will break the existing political, economic and military patterns among countries in Southeast Asia” and in the process “undermine stability in the Asia Pacific.”

(c) Multilateral and other diplomatic initiatives

An immediate and consequential impact that Japan might make could be in the multilateral arena, especially as it relates to ASEAN-backed institutions. Like China, Japan is not so powerful as to unilaterally shape or veto a multilateral entity or agenda pursued by such an entity, but powerful enough in the sense that offering its acquiescence is vital to the success and viability of that multilateral process or institution. For this reason, no plausible multilateral process or institution with region-wide impact can exclude Japan, and would find it difficult to gain regional traction without overt Japanese support. That being the case, Japan’s ‘proactive’ advocacy for a particular multilateral process or institution (or ‘proactive’ advocacy against such an entity) is a considerable avenue for influence.

Multilaterally, China has long pursued an approach of promoting institutions that exclude America in security regimes such as ASEAN+3, while Beijing also attempted to deny American membership in emerging regimes such as the EAS (although this is now obviously a lost cause.) Having long caught on to this stratagem, all major countries in Southeast Asia have consistently refused to allow China to elevate institutions that exclude the U.S., thereby helping to institutionalise and entrench the American presence in the fabric of security regimes in Asia.

Greater Japanese willingness to involve itself in matters pertaining to the behaviour of states in the South China Sea, enhances the collective diplomatic pressure that Southeast Asian states may be willing to bring to bear in multilateral meetings that both include and exclude the U.S. such as the EAS for the former and ASEAN+3 for the latter. At the very least,


Japan’s newfound willingness to involve itself in contentious Southeast Asian issues makes it more difficult for China to unilaterally define and dominate the agenda in ASEAN-based institutions lacking American participation, or prevent the ‘multilateralisation’ of disputes which is Beijing’s desire.

CONCLUSION

The proactive Japanese turn under Abe is welcomed by Southeast Asia for a number of reasons:

1. It is placed within a common regional framework of contributing to regional peace and stability rather than as a suite of policies to constrain Chinese power in and of itself;
2. Existing legal and other institutional limitations mean that Japan is unable to overplay its hand; and
3. There is a robust multilateral and pro-ASEAN aspect to Japanese proactivity. Japan cannot decisively shape the balance of power and influence in Asia. But it has enough military, economic and diplomatic weight to help tilt such a balance in favour of America and its security allies and partners for the foreseeable future.