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Building a Framework for Japan-US-Vietnam Trilateral Cooperation: Analyses from Japanese perspectives

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Japan regards three major trends in East Asia as relevant to its security:

1. China is rapidly expanding its military and maritime law enforcement capabilities at the same time that North Korea is developing its nuclear and missile capabilities.

2. Other states in the region also are gradually augmenting their military capabilities while simultaneously strengthening their economic ties to China.

3. The United States would probably not take sides on the issue of third parties' sovereignty over territories while its military budget is being cut in accordance with the so-called sequestration.

This article considers how these trends will affect Japan's security, especially its maritime security in the East and South China Seas.

The Senkaku Islands

The tension between China and Japan regarding the Senkaku Islands is likely to worsen.

First, however, despite China's rapid military buildup, the alliance between Japan and the United States is strong and should be able to deter any overt Chinese military aggression against Japan's southwestern islands—but only if Japan makes the right decisions now.

That is, Japan should not rush to any conclusions before carefully comparing U.S. and Chinese military capabilities. Some Japanese security experts are concerned

[1] This article was presented at the U.S.-Japan-Vietnam Trilateral Workshop held in Washington, DC on July 15, 2013, organized by the Center for the National Interest (Washington, DC), the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (Hanoi), and the Research Institute for Peace and Security (Tokyo).

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that sequestration is undermining U.S. military readiness and that the current fiscal situation in the United States will make the U.S. strategic rebalance to Asia unsustainable. Indeed, U.S. government officials and numerous think tanks in the United States have pointed out the negative consequences of a substantial cut in defense spending.

Many of their warnings seem valid. But most of their assessments focus solely on the implications of a reduced U.S. defense budget; they do not compare the predicted American, Chinese, and Japanese military capabilities in the 2020s. For example, even though the development of cyber capabilities complicates any net assessment, such an assessment is necessary in order to accurately estimate where our militaries' capabilities will stand in the next decade.

Whether or not Japan and the United States will be able to maintain a robust alliance capable of preventing China from suddenly taking military action against Japan's southwestern islands will depend on whether Japan makes the right decisions now. Even though sequestration is causing many problems for the U.S. military, it also is encouraging cooperation between the two countries.

The updating of the Japan-U.S. Defense Guidelines, scheduled to take place in the coming year, will be crucial. Equipping, deploying, and training the two countries' forces based on operational concepts designed to counter China's anti-access / area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities; hardening their military bases; and maximizing the benefits of the Japanese and U.S. forces' complementarities and interoperability will be key tasks in the exercise. In addition, the Japanese government is currently revising its National Defense Program Guideline to accelerate the adaptation of Japan's Self-Defense Forces to the changing security environment.

Japan and the United States must continue, as well, developing a security cooperation outreach network based on a "Japan–U.S. Plus" approach that would involve third countries like Vietnam, Australia, and India.

If Japan makes the right decisions now, it has a good chance of maintaining a favorable balance of military capabilities in the western Pacific. Nonetheless, Japanese and U.S. forces will have a harder time tracking China's naval maneuvers, whose speed and scale will increase in the foreseeable future.

Second, China is likely to continue probing and challenging Japan's control over the Senkaku Islands on a nonmilitary level—or what could be called a "subconventional" level—by using primarily maritime law enforcement vessels and aircraft. China will probably try to force Japan to accept that the territorial dispute over the Senkakus is legitimate. Indeed, the Chinese government has reportedly made this a precondition for talks between the two countries. To this end, China would concurrently take measured actions around the Senkakus that are subtle enough to avoid provoking a strong reaction from the United States but frequent and damaging enough to put pressure on Japan.

Even though China's claim to sovereignty over the Senkakus is blatantly unfounded and misleading, the Japanese government's reaction to this issue has been judicious. During his visit to Washington, D.C., in February 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that he had "absolutely no intention of climbing up the escalation ladder." This is because Japan does not want to further complicate Sino-Japanese relations and instead wants to stabilize the two countries' otherwise mutually beneficial relationship.

The current situation, however, presents a dilemma for Japan. On the one hand, if China's goal vis-à-vis the Senkakus is to force Japan to accept the legitimacy of the territorial dispute over the islands, and Japan reacts calmly and avoids escalation, the Chinese leaders might conclude that they are not putting enough pressure on Japan and thus decide to increase it. On the other hand, if Japan tries to deter Chinese escalation over the Senkakus by taking measures like stationing personnel and sending Maritime Self-Defense Force ships to patrol the islands, China might use that as a pretext to dramatically escalate its own actions. In other words, the tension will worsen either way—if Japan exercises self-restraint or if Japan tries to deter Chinese escalation.

China will continue to pursue this course of action because it believes that it will not be penalized for it. Its takeover of the Philippines' Scarborough Shoal may have reinforced this belief. China assumes that Japan is unlikely to retaliate and the United States will remain on the sidelines unless it takes direct military action. This means that even if Japan exercises self-restraint, China's forceful assertion of its claim will continue, and consequently, the danger of confrontation between the two

countries' maritime authorities will increase. In short, deterrence at the "subconventional" level is unlikely to work, and China will feel free to pursue this tactic.

Third, given this dangerous situation, Japan has been exploring ways to establish a maritime crisis management mechanism (known as the Japan-China Maritime Communications Mechanism) with China, although China seems unlikely to agree to it. Even though it might resume consultations on a mechanism, it will not agree to a formal agreement, for two reasons. First, a crisis management mechanism would defeat China's purpose for pressuring Japan into accepting the territorial dispute because such a mechanism would relieve the pressure on Japan. Second, any move that would alleviate the pressure on Japan would lead to criticism and denunciation from the heavily anti-Japanese public in China. In this regard, China's inflexibility vis-à-vis Japan is problematic because it is rooted in the public's widely shared animosity. Thus, from the Chinese leadership's perspective, the creation of a crisis management mechanism would be unsound on both strategic and political grounds. Although China could pretend that it was being cooperative, it could always find a way to blame the Japanese for stalling and thus avoid a formal agreement.

Fourth, since Japanese trade is heavily dependent on China, China will likely exploit this vulnerability. Japan, however, is unlikely to submit to economic pressure, because even Japanese business leaders operating in China seem to be standing firm against Chinese bullying and submission would be politically fatal for any Japanese prime minister. Under these circumstances, the Senkaku Islands issue will continue to be a test of resolve for both Japan and China and may even lead to more frequent skirmishes between the Japanese coast guard and Chinese maritime authorities.

A major concern here would be the Japanese public's reaction to an increasing number of skirmishes between Japan and China and its implication for the Japan-U.S. alliance. Japanese antipathy to the Chinese government would obviously rise, but the Japanese public might also wonder why its foremost ally, the United States, was not telling the Chinese that the Senkaku Islands belong to Japan, since the United States is the only country to which China might listen. Such a simplistic

reaction could undermine U.S. credibility in the eyes of the Japanese public and could also cause complications if activists begin to connect this issue to the U.S. base issue by asking, "What good is stationing U.S. forces in Japan if they can't help us with the Senkaku issue?" Skepticism and criticism of this kind, however unsophisticated and misleading, could erode public support for the alliance and work to China's advantage. Thus, an important task for the alliance in the coming years is to launch new initiatives that would demonstrate to the Japanese public that the Japan-U.S. alliance still is necessary to protect the integrity of Japan's sovereign territory. For example, enhanced maritime domain awareness through joint information systems research (ISR) activities in the East China Sea would be important, with maritime information relayed to Japan's coast guard. If a mechanism of this sort were established, it also should be widely publicized.

The South China Sea

China is increasing the number of its maritime law enforcement vessels in the South China Sea and constructing naval ports on Hainan Island. Apparently, it may be considering a code of conduct, but it is questionable whether China would agree to a legally binding code that prohibits unilateral change in the status quo. Meanwhile, other states in the South China Sea are increasing their economic ties to China.

These trends should motivate China to take subtle, unilateral measures in the South China Sea. That is, it could appear to be cooperative but at the same time take assertive actions, sometimes known as "small stick diplomacy." China could also use economic incentives to placate any states that protest these actions. The takeover of the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines is a case in point: Manila now is reporting that China has military and paramilitary ships anchored at the shoal.

If China becomes a dominant maritime presence in the South China Sea, Japan, as a heavy user, would necessarily come under its sway. Although China probably would not block ships destined for and departing from Japan, if it were able to harass these ships, Japan would always have to take this into account when dealing with China on any issue.

An example is China's actions following the detention and indictment of the captain of the Chinese fishing boat that collided with a Japan coast guard vessel in September 2010. In retaliation for Japan's rightful exercise of national jurisdiction, China arrested Japanese company workers in China and stopped exporting rare earths. China also prevented tourists from visiting the Philippines during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident.

In ten or twenty years, China's maritime law enforcement fleet will have grown substantially, which in turn will complicate how Japan calculates its response to China's assertive actions. Accordingly, Japan would welcome countries like Vietnam and Indonesia as counterweights to the rising Chinese maritime presence in the South China Sea.

Recommendations

In conclusion, Japan believes that the current trends will increase the tension between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands and will hasten China's domination of the South China Sea.

The fundamental problem underlying maritime security issues over the Senkakus and the South China Sea is that China feels less inhibited about using its maritime law enforcement vessels to take unilateral action. In response, Japan, the United States, and Vietnam should consider imposing political costs for any forceful unilateral actions intended to change the geopolitical map.

In this regard, Japan would like to cooperate diplomatically with Vietnam and the United States in order to discourage China from engaging in low-intensity unilateral actions and coercion. Compiling a record of its unilateral actions in the East and the South China Seas could help achieve this goal. If a record could be compiled, it could be published annually and distributed at international conferences. Conversely, if China did not take any unilateral actions, there would be no report.

Second, Japan would like Vietnam to enhance its maritime presence in the South China Sea in order to counter China's presence there. To this end, Japan and the United States should provide: (1) coast guard patrol boats and personnel training through their development assistance schemes, (2) loans for the development of

harbors along the Vietnamese coast, and (3) equipment and facilities to enhance Vietnam's maritime surveillance capabilities.

Third, if China continues its pressure despite strong diplomatic protests from, and security cooperation activities by, Japan, the United States, and the other South China Sea states, the United States should consider deterring further Chinese escalation by contemplating a change in its position regarding territorial sovereignty issues. For the moment, it may seem wise for the United States not to take sides on territorial sovereignty, but if China continues to engage in pressuring tactics, the danger of an accidental clash and escalation in the East and South China Sea will increase and subsequently entail the United States. At that point, it would be more dangerous for the United States to stay on the sidelines and safer for it to take positive action and diplomatic initiatives regarding these issues.

Japan is now seeing a reinvigoration of its alliances, an expansion of its security cooperation network, and an increase in international cooperation and, possibly, regulation. A rules-based regional order seems to be reasonable, but its success will depend on deterring China's unilateral actions through alliances and security cooperation. Without China's adherence to this order, it will be very difficult to establish strategic trust, or a mutual expectation, that conflicting interests will be resolved through peaceful means and not force. The current challenge is discouraging China from pursuing its territorial goals through unilateral means at a "subconventional" level. Any rules-based regional order must overcome this challenge to create regional interstate relations based on strategic trust.

A Japanese View of U.S-Vietnam Relations

Masashi Nishihara[3]

U.S.-Vietnam Security Relations

Over the last decade, the United States and Vietnam, once staunch enemies, have been normalizing their relations at great speed. Although the war between the two countries ended twenty years earlier, once they began this process, in July 1995, their relations have grown especially quickly in foreign, security, and economic policy.

U.S.–Vietnamese naval relations grew particularly close in June 2010 when the United States hosted a meeting of the Pacific Partnership, an HA/DR (Humanitarian Aid/Disaster Relief) program, which Vietnam and Cambodia attended. In August of the same year, when the nuclear aircraft carrier USS *George Washington* anchored off Danang, Vietnam, Vietnamese naval officers and government officials were invited on board. The two countries also held joint naval exercises. Then in June 2012, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh Bay, once a U.S. air and naval base.

The two countries are strengthening their ties by broadening and deepening their bilateral relations. Since 2009, the U.S. State Department and the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry have held regular political, security, and defense dialogues (PSDD), which involve bilateral exchanges ranging from ministerial-level visits to working-level meetings. The U.S. Defense Department and the Vietnamese Defense Ministry have held regular defense dialogues as well and signed a framework agreement regarding cooperation on defense in areas such as peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, disaster relief, maritime security, and search and rescue. They also have begun exchanges of officers at their defense universities and research institutes.

In addition, U.S. and Vietnamese officials often meet in regional multilateral

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security frameworks, including EAS (East Asia Summit), ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), ADMM Plus (ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus), and the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Economic and Other Relations

Bilateral trade between the United States and Vietnam also has been growing rapidly, despite some minor disagreements. Vietnam joined ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 1995, became a member of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in 1998, and, six years later, hosted the APEC summit. In December 2001 the United States extended "normal trade relations" (NTR) status to Vietnam, and in January 2007 Vietnam became the 150th member of the World Trade Organization. Although negotiating Vietnam's entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership might be challenging, its participation would further strengthen its own economic positions.

The United States has been a key partner of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), which Washington established in 2009. LMI promotes cooperation and capacity building among the United States and the Lower Mekong countries (Myanmar [or Burma], which joined in 2002, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam). The goal of the LMI is subregional integration with U.S. initiatives in such areas as education, health, the environment, and infrastructure.

Strategic Partners?

Japan recognizes that the United States and Vietnam share a strategic interest in restraining China's coercive and expansionist diplomacy and military policy in the Western Pacific. The United States wants to maintain freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and has urged China to settle territorial disputes with Vietnam and other Southeast Asian claimants through negotiation instead of force. Vietnam supports the United States' position and sees restraining China's aggressive behavior to be in its national interest.

The United States and Vietnam still have a few political constraints to overcome before they can elevate their bilateral relations to the level of "strategic partnership."

First, although the two nations have common strategic outlooks, they differ in their emphases. For example, whereas the United States wants Vietnam as a strategic partner against China, Vietnam is wary of becoming too close to Washington. Mindful of this, Japan observes Vietnam's official policy of "three NOs," namely, that Vietnam seeks no alliances, will accommodate no foreign military bases on its soil, and wants no intervention from a third country in settling its bilateral issues.

In August 2010, when the U.S. aircraft carrier was in Danang, Defense Vice Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh pointed out that its visit was a result of U.S. initiatives. And before Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's visit to Cam Ranh Bay in June 2012, Vinh reportedly briefed the Chinese on his visit. Similarly, Defense Minister General Phung Quang Thanh mentioned in a press conference in June 2012 that he expected the United States would use Cam Ranh Bay's commercial port facilities for its naval ship repairs. Vietnam thus appears to be seeking a precarious balance between the United States and China and does not regard its relations with Beijing and Washington as a zero-sum game.

Second, the issues of human rights and religious freedom have prevented the two countries from developing closer relations. Human Rights Watch reports that in the first five months of 2013, fifty Vietnamese were convicted in political trials. Vietnam wants to treat these issues as separate from its other strategic relations. The United States, however, wants to include them as integral part of its overall relationship, which Vietnam considers as interfering in its domestic affairs. This tension derives from the difference between the United States' and Vietnam's political systems, with Vietnam's authoritarian Communist regime restricting political and religious freedom.

Third, the two countries are continuing to try to resolve some of the "legacies" of the Vietnam War: POW/MIA and Agent Orange. These issues have not divided the two countries; rather, their cooperation seems to have forged a stronger bond between the two peoples. Even today, more than two thousand Americans who served in Indochina during the war are still unaccounted for, and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese remain missing. The two governments together are searching for and identifying the missing. The United States will have difficulty

compensating for the damage that Agent Orange and dioxin caused on the people and the environment of Vietnam. But again, the two governments are making efforts to mitigate the impact of these toxins. Nonetheless, these issues have hampered the smooth development of the two countries' bilateral relations.

Long-Term Strengths of U.S.-Vietnamese Relations

The relations between the United States and Vietnam have two advantages that Japan's relations with the United States do not: the role of Vietnamese Americans as interlocutors between the American and Vietnamese societies, and the extensive use of English in Vietnamese government offices.

Vietnamese who are naturalized U.S. citizens or were born in the United States now number about 1.7 million. Many Vietnamese Americans are now serving as important intermediaries in bilateral economic and business relations. Some now have high-ranking government positions in Washington, and others are serving in the U.S. military. As they become even more integrated into American society, they will play an even larger role.

Related to this is the extensive use of English in Vietnam. Vietnam's decision to join ASEAN in 1995 prompted government officials to learn English quickly. This effort is paying off by helping strengthen both Vietnam's political and economic relations with the United States and its role in ASEAN.

The Benefits of Japan's Role in the U.S.-Vietnam Partnership

Japan's strategic outlook on China is basically like that of the United States and Vietnam. It fully supports the U.S. policy of keeping the South China Sea free for navigation, as the South China Sea is an important sea-lane for Japan as well. It also supports Vietnam's strategy regarding China's coercive behavior while at the same time appreciating its cautious approach to Beijing.

Like U.S.-Vietnamese relations, Japanese-Vietnamese relations are excellent, with many areas of cooperation. Japan's Self-Defense Forces have been working with its Vietnamese counterparts at both bilateral and multilateral levels, with ARF and ADMM Plus providing particularly useful frameworks for cooperation. In November 2011 the defense ministers of Japan and Vietnam signed a memorandum

for bilateral defense cooperation and exchanges, under which the two defense ministries hold regular bilateral defense dialogues at the vice-ministerial level and promote visits by each other's high-ranking officers, such as chiefs of staff. Their cooperation covers a wide range of areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, search and rescue, education, antiterrorism and antipiracy measures. In addition, Japan is assisting the "capacity building" of Vietnamese forces through training programs in these areas.

Because Japan and the United States, as allies, have the same strategic outlook on Asia-Pacific security, their alliance will strengthen the three countries' security cooperation, although Japan and the United States should recognize Vietnam's difficulty in coping with China's threats while at the same time maintaining economic relations with that country. Japan and the United States also may jointly provide the technology for the nuclear power plants to be built in Vietnam in the near future. In addition, Japan has initiated programs promoting the development of the Mekong-region countries. Since the first meeting of the Japan-Mekong Partnership Program in 2007, Tokyo has held regular ministerial meetings with its regional counterparts. At the summit meeting held in Tokyo in April 2012, Japan pledged ¥600 billion (about $6 billion) for the following three years, and this may be another area in which Japan and the United States can coordinate their support of Vietnam.

In sum, the relationship of Japan, the United States, and Vietnam should not be exclusive but should include other, like-minded, partners, such as India and Australia, with which Japan already has close security relations.

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