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Building a Framework for Japan-US-Vietnam Trilateral Cooperation

Series 2

The Changing Security of the Sea Lines of Communication in the Indian and Pacific Oceans

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### **Recent Five Developments in East Asia Security**

Masashi Nishihara1

Since late last year (2012) the new governments that have been formed in China, South Korea, and Japan have been shaping new power relations in the Asia-Pacific region. Five major developments will be discussed here. All of them are important for the security of the Asia-Pacific region.

### Shift in U.S.-China Relations

U.S. President Barack Obama's "rebalancing" strategy for Asia has hedged against the building of "a strong maritime power" and "the great revival of the Chinese people," which China's new leader Xi Jinping has started to advocate since he took office in March. In his meeting with President Obama in California in June, President Xi even proposed "new style of big power relations."

Clearly Xi intended to establish China's sphere of influence in the western half of the Pacific. China continues to send patrol and surveillance ships as well as naval ships, fighters, and even a drone near the Senkakus, Japan's southwestern islands. The number of approaching Chinese fighters "scrambled" by Japanese Air Self-Defense Force has amounted to about 300 times between January through September this year.

In July the Chinese navy conducted a largest-ever joint exercise with the Russian navy off Vladivostok, and returned home via the Sea of Okhotsk and the Western Pacific rather than straight through the Sea of Japan. In late October the PLA (People's Liberation Army) conducted another large-scale naval exercise in the Western Pacific. Clearly China aims at establishing its naval hegemony in the Western Pacific.

On the diplomatic scene as well, China has successfully sought its active presence in Southeast Asia. It was conspicuous particularly in October, when

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President Obama failed to visit Indonesia and Malaysia and more importantly to attend the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) Summit in Bali and the EAS (East Asia Summit) in Brunei, due to the government shutdown. Because President Obama did not come to Southeast Asia, President Xi Jinping monopolized star attraction and worked to "embrace" the region economically and politically. The United States was temporarily pushed to the defensive side.

Although China has thus appeared more vigorous in military and diplomatic activities than the United States has, it faces serious domestic challenges in the areas of economic disparity, corruption, environmental degradation, and ethnic and other political disturbances. In fact, there are many indications of economic turndown. Some analysts argue that China has no chance of overtaking the United States. How U.S.-China relations may change in the future remains to be seen.

### **Changing International Relations in the Korean Peninsula**

Since President Park Geun-hye came into office in February, she has stressed the importance of building "trust" with Pyongyang. She sought conciliatory gesture toward North Korea by responding favorably to the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the reunion of separated families and sightseeing tours at Geumgansan, a high mountain just north of the DMZ (De-Militarized Zone). However, so far she failed in all of them.

In the meantime, President Park has had successful diplomatic activities with major countries including the United States, China, Vietnam, and major European countries, but excluding Japan. President Park's China visit in June was particularly significant. Seoul's high dependency upon China for trade encourages it to lean toward Beijing. Koreans argue that since the United States failed to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons they should move closer to China, which they say can help control North Korea and help attain a unified Korea.

One contributing factor to a growing ROK-China link is President Park Geun-hye's anti-Japanese stance. Being preoccupied with Japan's "lack of sincerity" in admitting wartime conducts, she refuses to meet Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. This has led her to continue to disregard GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) and ACSA (Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement) with Japan. She intends to promote a partnership among South Korea, the United States and China, rather than the one among South Korea, the United States, and Japan.

South Korea is in confused state vis-à-vis the United States. On one hand it wants to have greater independence of Washington than today. The Korean military has decided to acquire longer-range missiles despite the U.S. opposition. They also want to build its own missile defense system, not integrated with the U.S. system. On the other hand, they would like to postpone the time of transfer of wartime operational control from the United States to the Korean forces beyond December 2015.

This dynamic process in the peninsula suggests that relations among the nations involved are changing with the increasing influence of China. Beijing now can exert its influence over both North and South Korea. It would not be in China's interest to help unify the two Koreas but rather to maintain the divided Korea so that the northern half will remain as a buffer against U.S. power. If the military ties between the United States and South Korea should become weaker, the alliance between Japan and the United States will become all the more important.

### China's More Vigorous Efforts in Winning over ASEAN

In March President Xi Jinping spoke of "the Chinese dream," namely "the great revival of the Chinese people," which has since become his favorite slogan. Since then he has extensively traveled to Latin America, Central Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia as well as Europe and Russia. His particular focus appears in Southeast Asia, however. As will be discussed later, in October, taking advantage of President Obama's absence in the APEC and East Asia Summits, he unfolded a charm offensive diplomacy. The president went to Jakarta as the first foreign leader to speak before the Indonesian parliament, where he called for stronger ties with Indonesia and proposed building a "maritime Silk Road." His desire was to strengthen trade link between China and Southeast Asia. He promised generous economic support to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries. China now can afford promising a huge amount of aid and trade. This way it can win over ASEAN countries to his side. He offered to Malaysia to build a pipeline

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across the Malay peninsula, for example. His diplomacy worked in Malaysia as well and at the APEC and East Asia Summits.

China has gained its heightened status in the region. President Xi Jinping attended the APEC Summit, whereas Premier Lee Keqiang was in Brunei, attending the East Asia Summit. Xi Jinping primarily focused on peace, stability and development in his speeches.

At the APEC meeting, the Japanese, U.S., and Australian foreign ministers issued a joint statement indicating their opposition to any attempt to change the present status by force or by coercive action, referring to China's aggressive activities in East and South China Sea.

The Chinese leaders met all ASEAN leaders except for President Aquino of the Philippines. They tried to isolate the Philippines because it submitted its territorial claims to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

### "Japan Is Back" to the Region

Since Prime Minister Shinzo Abe returned to his position in December last year (2012), he has unfolded active diplomacy both in economic and security fields. His economic recovery policy called "Abenomics" has many signs of good start. There are strong indications that Japan is restoring its economy. Japan seems finally to depart from the two "lost decades." The business community holds cautious optimism. In security fields as well, Abe has taken several bold initiatives in strengthening the legal and political base for a larger security role and establishing a national security council. These initiatives include the reinterpretation of the constitutional clause that has prohibited the Japanese forces from exercising the right of collective self-defense.

Abe also would like to play a more active regional leadership role. Because he cannot visit China and South Korea, his strategy is to strengthen ties with those countries around the two unfriendly countries. He also has traveled extensively. He has visited eight Southeast Asian countries. In November he will visit the remaining two countries, Laos and Cambodia. Japan has been in fierce competition with China for winning over ASEAN countries. He has extended his support to ASEAN nations, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines, in providing patrol

ships which can protect their own commercial ships and watch Chinese patrol boats in the South China Sea.

Under Prime Minister's leadership, Japan has increased its defense budget, albeit small, and deployed more forces to defend its southwestern islands, especially the Senkakus. The Self-Defense Forces are forming special units for amphibious landing operations, and are training them together with the U.S. Marines. Japan is sending a message to China that it will be opposed to any attempt to change the present status by use of force. As he said in his February 2013 speech entitled, "Japan is back," in Washington, DC, Japan is becoming a political player in the region.

### Security Talks between Japan and Russia

Japan and Russia are becoming close political and security partners. This is another new development in the region. In early November the foreign and defense ministers of Russia and Japan (so called "two plus two") met in Tokyo for the very first time. Prime Minister Abe has actively engaged himself in talks with President Vladimir Putin to promote economic and security cooperation. Naturally he has in mind the Northern Territories to be settled. President Putin has shown interest in finding solutions of the disputed territories. Russia is Japan's third partner and Japan is Russia's fifth partner in holding the two-plus-two meetings.

The meeting of the four ministers discussed areas of cooperation including cyberdefense, anti-piracy, and anti-terrorism. They also agreed to regular exchange of visits by defense ministers and closer policy coordination for the East Asia Summit. However, they did not agree on how to approach China and territorial disputes. The Russian side also opposed the presence of U.S.-led ballistic missile defense system, which they considered would threaten Russian security and would change the balance of power in the Pacific.

There are limits to their partnership. Russia and China are strategic partners, often confronting the United States, while Japan and the United States are allies. How far the Japanese-Russian partnership will develop remains to be seen.

### To Sum

Despite President Obama's cancellation of attendance in the APEC and EAS meetings in September, the United States remains as a strong Pacific power and in some areas it is more vigorous in reinforcing its position than before. First, the United States with the aircraft carrier *George Washington* based in Yokosuka conducted large-scale emergency operations in providing assistance to the Philippines hit by Typhoon Haiyan in November (2013). Second, the United States has continued to hedge against China's coercive action in the South China Sea and indirectly to support the Philippines' territorial claims. Third, both the U.S. secretaries of state and defense visited Tokyo in early October to hold the two-plus-two talks with their Japanese counterparts to demonstrate their strong partnership. It was a very important event to send a message to China and North Korea, and, to a significant extent, to South Korea as well. Fourth, the United States is making more vigorous efforts to push forward the Trans-Pacific Partnership, multi-nation trade negotiations with Pacific countries, including Japan and Vietnam.

These moves by Washington certainly help counterbalance China's encroaching expansionism in the Pacific region. They encourage the U.S. partners to promote their common objectives.

### The Changing Security of the Sea Lines of Communication in the Indian and Pacific Oceans

Yoji Koda<sup>2</sup>

he security of the sea lines of communication that extend along the coasts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans is challenged not only by insecure choke points but also by the now competitive sea lines in the Arctic Ocean. In this paper, I look at ways that Japan, the United States, and Vietnam might cooperate to make these sea lines more secure.

### The Persian Gulf

The region around the Persian Gulf produces about 25 percent of the world's crude oil, on which many nations, including Japan and Vietnam, depend heavily. Iran's nuclear development and its announced plan to blockade the Strait of Hormuz, however, have threatened the security of this region. Adding to this threat is the Iranian navy's midget submarines, which carry torpedoes and operate in the shallow waters of the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, as well as its conventional submarines, which operate only in the deeper water of the adjacent Gulf of Oman. Both are capable of striking large civilian tankers and surface ships, including the U.S. Navy's carrier strike group. The Iranian navy also has reportedly deployed 2,000 seabed mines. At this time, Japan is not prepared to deal with worst-case conflicts in this area.

### **Rising Tensions in the Indian Ocean**

The geopolitical and strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, at the center of the shipping routes between Asia and Europe, is rapidly increasing. For China, the Indian Ocean is important as its trade route with the Middle East and Africa, with which China is developing close ties. For India, the Indian Ocean is important as a core national interest, just as the South China Sea is to China.

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One way that India could protect itself is for the Indian navy to adopt its own version of an AA/AD (anti-access/area denial) strategy against China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) forces that approach, or operate near, the Indian Ocean. This strategy is similar to the AA/AD strategy that PLAN currently employs against the U.S. Navy in East Asia, often referred to as a "string of pearls" strategy. As a nonaligned nation, China does not have military bases in other countries, although in recent years it has been strengthening its ties with both island nations in the Indian Ocean and nations bordering the ocean, by providing a large amount of aid, investment, and trade. For instance, China has helped build commercial ports and piers with modern facilities, in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Sittwe (Myanmar), and Chittagong (Bangladesh). Although these ports are not naval bases, China is likely to use them to contain India and also as footholds and staging points for PLAN forces in case of conflict with the Indian navy.

Against Beijing's "string of pearls," India may insist on its rights as a coastal state in the Indian Ocean and deny PLAN's activities and operations, just as China unilaterally claims its rights as a coastal state in the South China Sea.

### Evaluating the Chinese and Indian Navies

Both China and India now have modern combat fleets and similarly ambitious plans to further enhance their navies. One of these is the two countries' aircraft carrier programs. In September 2012 China deployed its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, a refurbished Soviet Kuznetsov-class carrier. In November of that year, PLAN released a video of what seemed to be a J-15 jet fighter taking off and landing on the carrier. China also plans to build two aircraft carriers of its own, whose completion is expected in about 2017. In October 2013, India also completed upgrading a Soviet Kiev-class carrier, the *Vikramaditya*, and it, too, plans to build another aircraft carrier, in addition to one launched in August 2013.

All these aircraft carriers, both refurbished and new, are equipped with "ski jump"-style flight decks instead of the steam catapults like those on U.S. aircraft carriers. PLAN's second carrier, however, is an exception. It is the first to be designed and built by China itself, and it is likely to have domestically developed steam catapults.

In addition, both nations have ambitious plans for submarines. Although PLAN has built two Jin-class nuclear ballistic-missile submarines (SSBN), it has not yet produced the second generation of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), which it urgently needs, as PLAN expects its SSBN fleet to function as a strategic deterrence force against both the United States and India.

India's Arihant-class SSBN is to be completed soon, and it also will have a newly developed SLBM, the Sagarika. The combination of these two strategic missiles should be a good nuclear deterrence against China and Pakistan. In order to be effective, the Indian navy will require probably four to eight SSBNs, which enable the Indian navy to maintain two to three SSBN patrol spots, namely, one or two in the Indian Ocean for deterrence against Pakistan, and one in the South China Sea for deterrence against China.

The force strength and structure of the Chinese and Indian navies will be roughly equal; even their time frames for their buildups will be similar. They both will become fully operable in the mid- to late 2020s at the earliest and the 2030s at the latest, making the strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific region complicated and difficult.

PLAN has many missions, including AA/AD operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and antipiracy operations. The question is how many forces it can allocate to the Indian Ocean in an emergency. The Indian navy, too, must consider two factors: a nuclear-powered Pakistan, which is China's ally, and the defense of the Andaman and Nichobar Islands. Defending these islands, which are far from the homeland, is very difficult, but important to prevent Chinese forces from reaching India through the Straits of Malacca. Thus the Andaman and Nichobar Islands could be a key to the defense of India itself and a strategic advantage against a Chinese advance.

### The South China Sea

The South China Sea is even more difficult to defend than the Indian Ocean. It has several choke points, such as the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, the Luzon Strait, and the Bashi Channel. But China's geostrategic position is advantageous. Its Hainan Island is located in an ideal position to oversee Tonkin Bay and the coastlines of northern and central Vietnam. China also is well positioned to defend the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Likewise, with its bases at Tonkin Bay, Da Nang, and Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam is in a geostrategically advantageous location to control the South China Sea. Accordingly, if Vietnam's navy has sufficient capability, it can serve as a vital counterbalance to China's attempt to control the sea.

Indeed, China's desire to control the South China Sea has caused territorial disputes with several Southeast Asian nations. As a result, tensions between China and these Southeast Asian claimants and also between China and the United States are weakening the security of the sea lines of communication in this area. By imposing a "nine-dashed/dotted line" to demarcate its claim over the South China Sea, China has tried to quash the proposal by ASEAN for a "code of conduct" to promote peaceful resolution of territorial disputes and to be signed by the association and China.

For many years, the United States has taken a position of neutrality on any territorial disputes. But now, with China's aggressive expansion of maritime activities and its assertive stand on issues related to territories and exclusive economic zones (EEZs), the United States has started to favor "freedom of navigation" as its main national interest.

China opposes the U.S. call for "freedom of navigation" and is using its AA/AD strategy against potentially hostile (particularly American) forces. China's goal is to achieve PLAN's two other key missions there: to maintain a robust strategic nuclear capability with SLBM-armed submarines (SSBNs) and to protect its forces from the antisubmarine warfare (ASW) capabilities of potential adversaries. China has only a few SSBNs and has so far failed to produce a fully operational second-generation SSBN. A recent report revealed, however, that at the Hainan Island, which faces the South China Sea, PLAN has completed the construction of a new, fully functional naval base that can accommodate more than one SSBN, which also can be protected in superbunkers. Although this base would make U.S. ballistic-missile defense operations difficult, Hainan Island still is vulnerable to the U.S. antisubmarine warfare (ASW) operations, as it is exposed directly to the South China Sea. This is another reason for China's aggressive use of the nine-dotted line. In addition to one large airfield on Woody Island in the Paracels, it plans to construct airbases for its

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aviation-ASW on some of the larger Spratly Islands if it succeeds in taking them over.

### The ASEAN Navies' Submarines

A new and important development here is that many ASEAN countries now have ambitious submarine programs. The Indonesian navy plans to introduce two type 209-class submarines made in South Korea. Indonesia also plans to acquire twenty-four additional submarines of undetermined class, although some sources indicate twelve rather than twenty-four. The Malaysian navy is operating two Scorpene-class submarines codeveloped by France and Spain. The Singaporean navy possesses two Archer- and four Challenger-class submarines, purchased from the Swedish navy. Although they are secondhand and twenty to forty years old, they have been thoroughly refurbished.

Although the details are not known, the Vietnamese navy reportedly will buy six Kilo-class submarines from Russia, with the first delivered to Vietnam in November 2013. Finally, the Thai navy, too, is considering the acquisition of several submarines.

If the ASEAN navies combined their submarines, they would form a robust conventional deterrence force against China's surface ships, especially against its aircraft carrier battle group(s) that may operate in the South China Sea. This force would become an integral part of the ASEAN navies' AA/AD strategy and would complicate China's plans to control the South China Sea.

At the same time, the ASEAN navies must be able to control its water space in order to ensure the safe navigation of submarines operating in relatively constricted waters, and they should establish an effective water-space management scheme before many of the submarines begin operating. As the number of submarines increases, the opportunity for accidents will increase as well. Even though each navy is responsible for coping with its own accidents and rescues, ASEAN might consider establishing a multinational rescue plan. In turn, this could serve as the first step toward multinational naval cooperation and help ensure the security of the South China Sea.

### The Impact of the Arctic Ocean's Sea Lines

The possibility of new sea lines of communication being opened through the Arctic Ocean will have an important impact on the sea lines of communication in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. First, the Northern Sea Route, which goes from the Bering Strait through Russia's vast coastal waters to Norway and the rest of Europe, is 30 percent shorter than the Southern Sea Route, which goes from the Western Pacific to the Bashi Channel, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Eastern Atlantic. Thus if the northern route becomes a regular shipping route for business use, it will lessen the importance of the southern route and could even cause Singapore to decline as a trading hub. Singapore's loss of revenue and national income could then lead to political instability, which in turn would hurt the security of the Indo-Pacific shipping lanes, which would also hurt Vietnam.

Second, the opening of the shorter northern route might increase traffic in the northwestern Pacific, since China and South Korea probably would opt for the northern route. Their ships would have to sail through one of the six strategic straits in the long Japanese archipelago on the way to and from the Bering Strait and the Arctic Ocean, possibly leading to traffic congestion. Japan, therefore, would have responsibility for keeping traffic flowing smoothly. But tensions may arise if Japan's immediate neighbors feel that Japan is controlling them, and they might even insist on having their own navies patrol the straits.

#### Conclusion

The sea lines of communication in the Indian and Pacific Oceans pose many challenging security issues. In order for three Indo-Pacific countries – Japan, the United States, and Vietnam – which share many of the same concerns, to contribute to these lines' stability and security, they must have a dialogue and explore areas in which they can cooperate.

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