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Japan-US-Vietnam Trilateral Cooperation*

Series 3

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Yoji Koda

Responses to Rising Tensions in the South China Sea: A Japanese Perspective

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Chapter 1

China's Assertive Conduct Leads to the Expansion of Japan's Security Role

Masashi Nishihara
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1. New Tensions in East Asia

Between late November 2013 and June 2014, the biggest concern for East Asian security was China's assertive conduct, which was creating new tensions between China and the countries it was targeting. The balance of power, however, remained in favor of the latter, especially as U.S. President Barack Obama reaffirmed his strong support of regional security during his trip to Asia in April 2014. China's diplomatic isolation in East Asia thus continues.

On November 23, China unilaterally established an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, a zone that covers the Senkakus. Then on May 24 and June 11, Chinese fighters flew dangerously close to Japanese fighters and transports. In early May, China began installing a huge oil rig in waters claimed by Vietnam. In response, Vietnam mobilized ships to disrupt the rigging operation and permitted street demonstrations in some of its major cities, which resulted in the deaths of some Chinese.

In December 2013 and in early April 2014, respectively, Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel visited Beijing to try to persuade the Chinese to rescind their establishment of the ADIZ, but to no avail. Japan also condemned China's actions, and in return, China's top leaders continued to refuse to hold a summit meeting with their Japanese counterparts.

In late April 2014, President Obama visited four East Asian capitals to reaffirm the United States' response to their respective security concerns, including a new military cooperation agreement with the Philippines. Not surprisingly, Beijing was very critical of his trip, and on May 21, in his speech at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai, President Xi Jinping stated

that “Asian security should be discussed among Asian people themselves,” implying that Americans and Australians should be excluded.

On May 30 and May 31, both Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Secretary Hagel spoke at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, respectively, stressing the need for the rule of law to be observed in settling territorial disputes. Then in a speech on June 1, Lieutenant General Wang Guangzhong, deputy chief of the People’s Liberation Army’s General Staff, attacked Abe and Hagel for having “coordinated” with each other and making “provocative” remarks about China. But China, receiving little support, was nearly isolated in the meeting.

President Obama also moved to strengthen the United States’ position in East Asia by mediating between Japan and South Korea. The trilateral summit at the U.S. embassy in The Hague that he hosted in late March was the first time that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Park Geun-hye had met since they took office. They talked primarily about North Korea’s missile and nuclear issues and avoided thorny bilateral issues. The U.S. interest here was to keep the trilateral coalition intact and to prevent South Korea from leaning toward China in security matters. Then in early July, the trilateral meeting of these countries’ top military leaders met in Hawaii.

President Obama’s visit to Asia was meant to reconfirm the United States’ close ties to Tokyo, Seoul, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila. In Tokyo, the president publicly referred to the United States’ treaty obligation to help defend the Senkakus, and in Manila, he confirmed his support of the newly signed Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). All this should have signaled Beijing that China must respect the rule of international law in settling territorial disputes.

2. China’s Shift to Tactical Self-Restraint

In response to the tension between China and those East Asian countries worried about its coercive behavior, China began to pull back and gesture toward joining the security community. This shift, however, should be understood as a tactical decision. To wit: for the last few months, Chinese fishing boats, coast guard, and naval ships have maintained a low-key presence around the Senkakus, compared with the highly risky and dangerous incident on February 5, 2013, when a Chinese naval ship directed its fire-control radar to a Japanese destroyer. In contrast, Chinese ships defending the oil rig in the South China Sea have used only water cannons, not guns, against

Vietnamese ships.¹

Even though President Xi Jinping maintains that Asian security should be discussed only among Asians, the Chinese navy participated in the biennial Western Pacific Naval Symposium, held in Qingdao in April. The symposium, led by the United States Navy, adopted the “code for unplanned encounters at sea” (CUES) by unanimous agreement. Despite its having been proposed ten years ago, the Chinese opposed the code because, they asserted, the word *code* implied legal force. Also this year, for the first time, China is participating in RIMPAC, the U.S.-led multinational naval exercise that was held off Hawaii in July. China sent four ships, including its second largest destroyer, which reflects its desire to participate in this multinational exercise and to conform to the U.S.-led multinational rules.

Thus China has two faces, a coercive face pressing those East Asian countries with territorial disputes to give up their claims and trying to drive the United States out of the Western Pacific. But it also has a concessionary face willing to work with the United States and its like-minded partners in Asia. It seems safe to assume that the first face is strategic and the second one is tactical. Indeed, President Xi Jinping revealed China’s true strategic motives in his remarks in June 2013 when he stated that “the Pacific is vast enough to accommodate two large powers.” China wants the western half of the Pacific Ocean under its own sphere of influence, thereby placing Japan under China’s control, an idea that recalls President Xi’s assertion that Asian security should be discussed only among Asians.

3. Japan’s Decision to Expand Its Security Role

On July 1, 2014, the Abe government announced that it would revise the interpretation of Japan’s constitution so as to permit Japan to exercise its right to collective self-defense, as sanctioned in Article 51 of the UN Charter. After that, the Japanese government would proceed to revise those laws related to its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to put into practice the notion of collective self-defense and then revise

¹ In mid-July, China withdrew the big oil rig that it installed in early May, explaining that it had completed its research earlier than expected. The withdrawal also may be interpreted as a tactical move to avoid strong criticism by the ASEAN nations, the United States, Japan, and Australia.

the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation. The revised laws and the revised guidelines would accordingly expand the SDF's security role, thereby strengthening the alliance. The Abe government's main reason for wanting to reinterpret Article 9 is to be able to respond to threats by North Korea, China, Iran, and the like.

If and when the SDF is able to exercise the right to collective self-defense, it could, for example, help defend U.S. warships operating outside Japanese territory, such as in the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, and perhaps the South China Sea. This expansion also would strengthen Japan's partnership with such Southeast Asian countries as Vietnam and the Philippines.

The U.S. Defense Department issued a statement on July 1 that welcomed the Abe government's decision. A spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, however, expressed concern that Japan may deviating from the path to peaceful development long held in the postwar period. The South Korean Foreign Ministry also issued a similarly critical statement, demanding that Japan revise any defense-related laws more transparently. It also insisted that it could not accept Japan's taking part in any situation involving the security of the Korean peninsula and its national interests without Korea's request and agreement.

As the South Korean and Chinese reactions indicate, today both the two countries have taken a critical position against Japan. This was demonstrated during President Xi Jinping's visit to Seoul on July 3. He and President Park Geun-hye issued a statement that included the beginning of joint research on Japan's wartime use of "comfort women." Therefore, because it is in Japan's interest to prevent China and South Korea from also jointly "ganging up" on it, Abe announced on the same day that Japan would lift some of the sanctions imposed on North Korea, in return for the latter's willingness to help investigate North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens. It was Abe's way of discouraging South Korea from leaning toward Beijing. Indeed, the Abe government's new security policy will actually strengthen Japan's defense posture and make the country a more credible partner in its alliance with the United States as well as a stronger supporter of regional peace, giving South Korea a strategic advantage in working with Japan.

4. An Assertive China Deepens Japan's Security Concerns

Japan's decision to strengthen its security role is being driven primarily by China's actions in the region. Japan has paid close attention to China's ever increasing military budgets and military capabilities as well as its decision to impose its ADIZ without consulting Tokyo. Chinese jet fighters scrambling against Japanese planes are a worry for the Japanese government. Perhaps more important, China's search for weak spots in the South China Sea and gradually but coercively expanding its presence there has shown Japan how China later may act in the East China Sea.

As China becomes stronger, it is becoming hegemonic in its desire for domination over the two Koreas. Consequently, China's growing political "alliance" with South Korea will enhance its presence there, in addition to its overwhelming influence over North Korea, although at the moment President Xi Jinping and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un are not on good terms. Therefore, unless Japan and the United States find ways to restrain China's influence on the Korean peninsula, Northeast Asia's strategic landscape may drastically change.

Chapter 2

Responses to Rising Tensions in the South China Sea

A Japanese Perspective

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Today the situation in the South China Sea is extremely dangerous, with a larger risk of escalating into military clashes between China and the nations in the region than that between Japan and China in the East China Sea.

In May of this year, China began exploratory drilling for oil in a contested exclusive economic zone (EEZ), a move strongly resisted by Vietnam. Besides attracting the world's attention to its aggression, China also may have misinterpreted the last, relatively calm, forty years as Vietnamese complacency in regard to territorial ownership.

1. China's Strategic Interests in the South China Sea

China has drawn "a strategic line" connecting Sanya (Hainan Island), Woody Island (Paracel Islands), and Johnson South Reef (Spratly Islands). The distance from Sanya to Johnson South Reef is about 1,200 kilometers (750 miles or 650 nautical miles). The distance between Sanya and Woody Island is 700 kilometers (440 miles or 380 nautical miles), and that between Woody Island and Johnson South Reef is about 900 kilometers (560 miles or 490 nautical miles). [Map-1]

Hainan Island and Woody Island are located in an ideal position to control Tonkin Bay and the coastline of northern and central Vietnam, a future key nation in regional security. These islands also are in a good place to keep an eye on, and possibly take military measures against, the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The location of Johnson South Reef, in the middle of Paracel Islands, is well positioned to link Woody Island and Sanya, as well as to keep a close watch on the sea lines of communications in the South China Sea.²

² In addition to these three island groups are four clusters of banks, shoals, and sea mountains, most of which are submerged in the vast central South China Sea (740 kilometers (460 miles or 400 nautical miles) north to south, and 430 kilometers (279 miles or 230 nautical miles) between the three island groups. A breakdown of their locations is eight shoals and sea mountains in the north, nine shoals and

Woody Island, the largest of the Paracel Islands, offers various facilities, including an airport with a 2,400-meter (7,900-foot) runway with a parallel taxiway, as well as three ports. Despite China's campaign to promote the island as a leisure resort, the island is regarded as a core military base for its navy and air force because of its size and well-developed infrastructure. For decades, Woody Island has been a stepping-stone for China's maritime expansion into the South China Sea. It is important strategically not only to China but also to other nations in the region.

In addition, China has begun reclaiming a huge lagoon in Johnson South Reef, which it seized from Vietnam in 1988. The reef is about 4.5 kilometers (2.8 miles) from north to south and 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from east to west. A deep channel runs through the middle of the lagoon from north to south, opening to the sea at the north. According to various media reports and news releases by the Philippine government, China seems to be reclaiming the eastern half of the lagoon and plans to build a one jet-capable 2,500-meter (8,200-foot) runway, with a parallel taxiway and other facilities, including several ports and piers to accommodate deep-draft ships. The reclamation and construction of facilities reportedly are to be completed in the next several years.

Johnson South Reef thus has a huge potential for Chinese military use. For the first time, China will have a secure foothold in the Spratly Islands, one that is far larger and more capable than anything the thirteen islands and reefs, which have a potential for military use, controlled by four other nations have.³ In future contests for power in the South China Sea, this reclaimed reef will surely be a game changer. China will have two bases in the South China Sea: one on Woody Island in the north and the other on Johnson South Reef in the south. [Map-1]

sea mountains in the east, four shoals and sea mountains in the south, and fourteen shoals in the west.

³ Since 1988 China has gradually seized other small outcroppings in the Spratlys and expanded its control. However, as of June 2014, China still had failed to take over any of twelve "major" islands and reefs, controlling only ten small outcroppings and reefs. The current breakdown of those countries that control the thirteen islands is six by the Philippines, five by Vietnam, one by Taiwan, and one by Malaysia. Four islands that have short airstrips with parallel taxiways are Itu Aba Island (1,150 meters [3,800 feet], Taiwan), Thitu Island (1,800 meters [5,900 feet], the Philippines), Spratly island (500 meters [1,700 feet], Vietnam), and Swallow Reef (1,300 meters [4,300 feet], Malaysia). Except for Thitu Island, the airstrips on the other three islands are not suitable for jets or large aircraft.



Source: Author

Being in the middle of the Spratly Islands, Johnson South Reef is in an ideal location to control most of sea lines of communication and naval/maritime activities in the South China Sea. In this way, China's strategic chain of islands in the South China Sea, demarcated by its unilaterally claimed "nine-dashed / nine-dotted line," will complete its plan to expand its presence. This is bound to have a huge impact on the strategies of the Asian regional coastal nations, Japan, and the United States.

Another place that deserves attention is Scarborough Shoal, which China seized from the Philippines in 2012. It is the only shoal in the eastern part of the South China Sea near the Philippines that is not submerged. Since China lacks a stronghold to control the eastern South China Sea, it is likely to reclaim part of the shoal for military facilities.

2. Primary Objectives of China's Territorial Claims

China has several objectives for establishing monopoly control over the entire islands and water area within the “nine-dashed line” in the South China Sea. First, control of this area would protect its southern front. Second, China wants to establish an EEZ that guarantees its free and unimpeded access to all maritime natural resources. Then, through its free access to oil deposits and other natural resources in the seabed, it will be able to prepare for any future shortages of land-based resources.

China also wants to build a strategic nuclear strike capability, comparable to that of the United States. But because it has no long-range bombers, an important part of TRIAD, it depends more on nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) and nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines (SSBN) than the United States and Russia do. So far, to test its missile launches, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has kept its nuclear submarines in the Bohai Sea between the Liaodong and Shandong peninsulas, though a recent media report reveals that PLAN has completed construction of a new nuclear submarine base in Hainan Island.

The base in Hainan Island has a serious drawback, however. Unlike the Bohai Sea, the Hainan base directly faces the South China Sea. PLAN submarines operating from the risky base thus are exposed to the US Navy's antisubmarine warfare (ASW) forces. Nonetheless, PLAN is determined to carry out a plan to exert more sea control, with the two major strongholds of Woody Island and Johnson South Reef as key. The reclamation of Johnson South Reef is the more important, as it is here that PLAN will build an air base for its aviation-ASW force, to protect against the SSNs of the US Navy and other neighbor navies. Likewise, if China converts the eastern Scarborough Shoal into another ASW base, PLAN's ASW capability will be substantially enhanced.

The South China Sea is an area where several vital sea lines of communications (SLOCs) connect the Malacca Strait / Singapore and the Luzon Strait / Bashi Channel, which are the lifelines of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China itself, as well as of the United States and other Pacific nations. Control of the South China Sea thus is critical to China, so the geographic locations of Hainan Island, Woody Island, Johnson South Reef (if fully reclaimed), and perhaps also Scarborough Shoal are strategically significant. From this perspective, although Itu Aba Island (Taiwan), Thitu Island (the Philippines), Spratly Islands (Vietnam) and Swallow Reef (Malaysia) are smaller and have only shorter single runways. [Map-1]

3. Southeast Asia's Response

Faced with China's growing naval capabilities, the Southeast Asian nations have responded by acquiring submarines and launching ambitious submarine programs. According to some reports, the Indonesian navy has started an aggressive submarine program to introduce two Type-209 boats from South Korea and twenty-four additional submarines of an undetermined class by 2024, although other reports indicate the number as twelve, not twenty-four.

The Malaysian navy is operating the two latest Perdana-Menteri-class submarines, which represent the most recent Scorpene class of French-Spanish development. Singapore's navy has two Archer- and four Challenger-class boats, which were, respectively, Vaastergotlands and Sjoormens of the Swedish navy. Although these submarines are twenty to forty years old, they have been thoroughly refurbished and are considered suitable assets for the Singaporean navy. It is also reported that the Singaporean navy has a plan to replace these old boats by new ones in the near future.

Although details of the program are not yet known, the Vietnamese navy has begun acquiring six Kilo-class submarines. According to media reports, the first two were transferred to the Vietnamese navy in 2013 and early this year. Thailand's navy also is reported to acquire several submarines.

When completed, the submarine forces of all these Southeast Asian navies will be a robust conventional deterrent force against PLAN's surface force, especially its aircraft carrier battle group(s), which may operate in the South China Sea. This capability could form an integral part of the Association of Southeast Nations' (ASEAN) anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) strategy in the future, although these submarine forces will complicate overall control of the South China Sea.

In addition, the region's water space must be managed effectively in order to guarantee the safe navigation of submarines operating in the relatively small area of the South China Sea. Unfortunately, there is no functioning control mechanism for this purpose today, so a water-space management scheme must be established before a large number of submarines are deployed. Also, as the number of submarines operating in the South China Sea increases, the possibility of submarine accidents will rise as well. In general, a nation that has submarines is responsible for its own submarine rescue capability, but a multinational rescue framework involving all the submarine-deploying navies in the region would be desirable. The Southeast Asian

nations therefore should create both a water-space management scheme and a multinational rescue framework as soon as possible. These also should help promote a new type of regional naval cooperation.

4. The United States' "Freedom of Navigation" Response

The position of successive US governments on territorial disputes in the South China Sea has been clear: The United States does not support any specific nation's claims. Instead, it encourages nations to settle their problems by peaceful means. The US government is likely to adhere to this policy in the future.

Accordingly, the position of the US government has been neutral vis-à-vis China on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. But with the recent quick and substantial buildup of China's naval capability, the United States started reemphasizing its fundamental position on the South China Sea problems, now citing "freedom of navigation" as one of its key national interests. Therefore, if the United States interprets any conflict in the South China Sea as interfering with its national interest, it may decide to intervene. This U.S. policy should give pause to China's aggression, which may be why, at an ASEAN's foreign ministers' meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, China showed some signs of concession on the code of conduct (COC) for the South China Sea.

5. How should we cooperate to cope with China in the South China Sea?

To promote multinational efforts to cope with China, the nations in the region could undertake the following initiatives:

(1) Support the Southeast Asian nations' maritime capacity building, especially that of Vietnam and the Philippines. China's unilateral maritime expansion in the South China Sea is causing serious frictions with the region's coastal nations, particularly the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam. It also has caused deep concerns among the "non-disputing" nations, Indonesia and Singapore. In particular, both the Philippines and Vietnam are facing strong pressure from China's maritime expansion in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The United States, together with Japan and Australia, should develop a robust joint action plan as soon as possible to support and implement the Philippines' and Vietnam's capacity building.

(2) Stop China's reclamation of Johnson South Reef and Scarborough Shoal. Only one of these islands has a jet-capable air base: Woody Island in Paracel Islands. It is no surprise, then, that China started land reclamation at Johnson South Reef in late 2012 and may do the same in the eastern Scarborough Shoal. If military facilities on the two islands are completed, the strategic power balance in the South China Sea will be substantially and irretrievably lost.

Claimants to both Johnson South Reef and Scarborough Shoal should refrain from unilateral action, including reclamation. Moreover, reclamation on top of coral reefs and use of coral reefs as landfill destroy the area's natural environment. For these reasons as well, the United States, together with Japan and Australia, should team up to help Vietnam and the Philippines. Especially China's high-handed challenge against preservation of natural environment in the great South China, i.e., unilateral destruction and killing of live-coral in the Johnson South Reef, must be stopped, or at least be made as an international issue which should call for interested nations to convene an international conference to discuss the matter.

(3) Help build up Vietnam's maritime capabilities. As quickly as possible, Vietnam, which is under the strongest pressure of China, should develop an appropriate maritime domain awareness capability that includes its airspace. In addition and at the same time, the current maritime strength and capability of the Vietnamese navy and coast guard needs to be upgraded in both quantity and quality. Although the United States should support these efforts, they are primarily the responsibility of the Vietnamese government as a sovereign nation.

(4) The United States should promote freedom of navigation. Despite the US government's insistence on freedom of navigation, in recent years, its action vis-à-vis China has often failed to match its strong statements. A typical example is China's underhanded seizure of Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and 2013 from the Philippines' territorial control. Another example is the recent skirmish between Vietnamese and Chinese ships, prompted by China's moving in its oil rig. The United States criticized China but took no other action. Nonetheless, freedom of navigation is still a huge psychological deterrent to China's decision makers.

(5) The United States should have a more visible military presence in the South China Sea. Deterring China's heavy-handed moves in the South China Sea requires a more visible and prominent US presence. During last several years, the US presence seems to have been mainly scheduled deployments and exercises, with few actions in

response to crises like the Chinese seizure of Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and 2013. Japan, as well, needs to play its role as an allied partner in the United States' global and regional strategies.

(6) The United States should maintain a strategic deterrence posture by means of conventional force. The best way to control China's actions in the South China Sea is to stop them before they become military measures. None of the region's coastal nations has a conventional deterrence capability; only the United States has the capability to destroy China's major infrastructures and military facilities in the region.

As I pointed out earlier, Sanya, Woody Island, Johnson South Reef, and perhaps Scarborough Shoal in the future have huge strategic significance for China. But they also are vulnerable to precision-guided missiles. Since all of these key bases are exposed to sea and airspace, they could easily become targets of US long-range Tomahawks and air-launched cruise missiles. China would not be able to protect these bases from such swarm attacks. Accordingly, the United States should send a clear signal to Beijing that it would use this capability if necessary. This would be the United States' most useful contribution to the region's coastal nations.

(7) Japan and the United States should have a joint strategy to protect the Pratas Islands. The Pratas Islands, which have been forgotten islands in maritime strategy in the South China Sea for decades, are located about 440 kilometers (280 miles or 240 nautical miles) west of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and 310 kilometers (190 miles or 170 nautical miles) southeast of Hong Kong. The islands, which are Taiwanese territory, are composed of three large reefs and sea mountains. Pratas Island, the largest island in the archipelago with an area of 1.74 square kilometers (0.67 square miles), has a 1,500-meter (4,900-foot) runway but no parallel taxiway or other support facilities.

Together with mainland Taiwan, the islands are in a key location to control the Bashi and Luzon Channels, which are the eastern approach to and from the South China Sea. In a geopolitical crisis, if China took control Pratas Island, the balance of power in the South China Sea region would shift to China. Consequently, Japan and the United States should have a joint strategy regarding this obscure archipelago, which in turn would help defend Taiwan. In sum, we should not underestimate China's real intent in constructing military facilities on small islands in the South China Sea.

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