

Banging the Drum

Japan begins gathering allies in Indo-Pacific region to balance China's rise

David Scott



photo: Danielle Prentice

A man performs the traditional Eisa dance at the Tedako Matsuri Festival in Okinawa paying respect to King Eiso of the Ryukyu Kingdom.

CHINA'S RECENT MILITARY growth and aggressive expansionism have proven to be Japan's biggest challenge, prompting Tokyo's signature foreign policy initiative of promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Enunciated in the autumn of 2016 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the initiative was a geopolitical and economic response to China's increasingly assertive presence from the Western Pacific through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. Beijing was of course highly critical of such strategic positioning by Japan, with Chinese state media accusing Japan's Indo-Pacific concept of

being an effort to contain China. Given Tokyo's wariness about Beijing's economic and geopolitical push into the Indo-Pacific, Japan has followed the two-fold approach of building up its own military power and presence (internal balancing), and of strengthening and extending security partnerships with other countries that share Tokyo's concern about China's rise (external balancing). It has also carefully calibrated its economic responses.

One plank of Japan's Indo-Pacific response has been to get around Article 9 of Japan's so-called peace constitution, whereby Japan formally pledged to for-

Dr. David Scott is a regular presenter on Indo-Pacific geopolitics at the NATO Defense College in Rome and a prolific writer. He can be reached at davidscott366@outlook.com

ever renounce war, ensuring that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

This led to ongoing restrictions on military spending and on the overseas deployment of Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF). In July 2014, the Japanese government approved a reinterpretation of Article-9, which gave more powers to the JSDF, allowing them to defend allies in cases where war has been declared against those allies. This opens the way for military action outside Japan, and cooperation with other countries such as the United States, India, and Australia. This adjustment was first issued as Cabinet reinterpretation in July 2014, and was then passed into law in September 2015. Abe continues to push for further direct amendments of Article 9. Not surprisingly, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) officially denounced this development.

Since 2015, Abe has been redeploying Japan’s military forces away from northern Hokkaido facing Russia, down to the southern zone of the Ryukyu chain facing China. The focus is two-fold: Firstly,

anti-ship missile batteries can target Chinese naval units as they pass through the various Ryukyu straits into the Western Pacific; and secondly, radar stations such as the one on Yonaguni island can monitor the disputed waters of the East China Sea.

Increased deployments

Given the increasingly sharp dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and the increase in Chinese naval and air deployments around them, Japan has also been increasing its own naval and air presence in those disputed waters and airspace.

Japanese deployments in the Western Pacific include long-established bilateral training drills with the US military, exemplified by the joint anti-submarine warfare exercise MultiSail 2018 carried out near Guam in March of this year. These have been supplemented by trilateral exercises with the US and Indian navies first seen in 2007, and then again in 2013, 2015 and 2017.

China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea is likewise a concern to Japan. Especially worry-



photo: Christopher Velocenza

Ships sail in formation during MultiSail17, a bilateral training exercise designed to improve interoperability between the US and Japanese forces.



photo: Yamada Taro

Japan's newest helicopter destroyer, the JS *Izumo*, greatly enhances Japan's ability to project power and conduct anti-submarine warfare.

ing is the continued construction there of artificial islands—the so-called Great Sandwall of China—that have become heavily militarized. This is in part because further energy security imperatives are in play for a post-Fukushima Japan that is ever-more dependent on oil and gas from the Middle East and Indian Ocean shipped to Japan through the South China Sea.

Japan continues to join in denunciations of PRC activities in the South China Sea. It also deploys its own forces into these waters, the most powerful deployment being that of the helicopter carrier JS *Izumo* that spent three months in the South China Sea making friendly port calls to the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia in mid-2017. Japanese naval units have also been dispatched to the South China Sea in order to take part in exercises with the Philippines in May 2015, with the US navy in October 2015, July 2017 and March 2018, and with the US and Australian navies in July 2011.

Japan has also been deploying its forces into the Indian Ocean, initially to support US/NATO operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, then for energy security imperatives to safeguard oil shipments from the Middle East, and finally because of China's growing presence across the Indian Ocean. Japan's in-

volvement in the trilateral Malabar exercises with India and the US is particularly China-related and has taken place in the Western Pacific and in the Bay of Bengal. "Joint exercises and defense exchange are increasing in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea in order to promote 'the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,' which Japan is advocating," Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera said in December 2017.

Seeking security partners

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy now being pursued by Japan is explicitly a strategy to seek similarly concerned security partners. This invitation to balance is indicated by earlier Indo-Pacific language used by Shinzo Abe. The "Confluence of the Two Seas" phrasing used by Abe in 2007 was a reference to bilateral Japan-India cooperation. Subsequently, the "Security Diamond" coined by Abe in 2012 described the quadrilateral security cooperation between Japan, India, Australia, and the United States.

The current balancing strategy employed by Japan involves bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral initiatives. Abe's explicit Indo-Pacific platform has found

ready welcome in Washington, Canberra, and New Delhi thanks to his personal relationships with US President Donald Trump, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Japan's security has long been wrapped up in the 1950 Security Treaty with the United States, which set up permanent US military bases in Japan. The two countries' mutual concerns about the Soviet Union have long since been replaced by rising concerns over China, with whom Japan has growing disputes over territory and waters in the East China Sea.

These rising concerns have led to stronger security links between the United States and Japan, whose Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation have expanded to include indeterminate wider settings surrounding Japan, reading; "the concept, situations in areas surrounding Japan, is not geographic but situational." An update to the Guidelines promulgated in April 2015 emphasized maritime security, and talked of US-Japan cooperation and response

in specifically trilateral terms in the "Asia-Pacific and beyond."

Japan's strengthening security links with Australia are China-linked, and attract criticism in Chinese media. Japan's partnership with India is particularly China-related as Japan and India are immediate

"Unofficial strengthening of links with Taiwan has also been pursued by Japan."

neighbors of China, both have territorial disputes with China, and both are threatened by China's maritime push through the Indo-Pacific. It was no coincidence that the joint statement drawn up between Abe and Modi in September 2017 was titled "Toward a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific."

Given these strengthening bilateral links with the United States, Australia, and India, it is not surprising to find Japan joining in associated three-way strategic



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, right, shakes hands with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit.

dialogues, such as the Japan-Australia-US trilateral running since 2002, the Japan-India-US trilateral running since 2011, and the Japan-Australia-India trilateral running since 2015. Japan's trilateral with Australia and the United States also involves military exercises in the Western Pacific and the South China Sea; while Japan's trilateral with India and the United States now involves Malabar naval exercises in the Western Pacific and in the Bay of Bengal.

Quadrilateral cooperation

Japan has enthusiastically embraced quadrilateral cooperation between Japan, India, Australia, and the United States. The initiative included official-level meetings in May 2007 and quadrilateral naval exercises in September that same year, but was halted by Australia and India after severe criticisms from the PRC. Japan continued to advocate this quadrilateral logic, and so welcomed its return in November 2017 rebranded as “the Quad,” complete with quadrilateral naval exercises in the works for 2018.

The response from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was predictably perturbed. “We hope that such relations would not target a third party,” PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang said in a November 13, 2017, press conference. But defending against China is precisely the strategic intent of the Quad. These China concerns were on show at the Raisina Dialogue in January 2018, where Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, the highest-ranking officer in the Japan Self-Defense Forces, spoke to his quadrilateral naval counterparts of China's “aggressive policies.”

Given Japan's rising concerns over Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, Tokyo has also pursued stronger defense relationships with Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia—including defense sales and exercises. All three states have maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea. Unofficial strengthening of links with Taiwan has also been pursued by Japan.

Finally, Japan has sought closer defense links with the UK and France. Discussions with each in 2017



Indian Navy personnel and Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force members at Port Sasebo, Japan, during Exercise Malabar 2014.



photo: Courtney Richardson

A soldier performs a sunset ceremony at an air base in Southwest Asia, deployed as part of the JASDF's Iraq Reconstruction Support Airlift Wing Mission.

made explicit reference to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, followed by bilateral naval exercises with each in the Pacific in 2018. Japan's strengthened links with France also led to its participation in trilateral naval exercises in May 2017 with French and US naval units in the Western Pacific.

Initially reluctant to engage with China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative across the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, Japan instead has supported India in pushing the Africa-Asia Growth Corridor (AAGC) as an alternative. Chinese media has accused Japan and India of using AAGC plan to counter PRC ambitions. Japan has more recently signaled a conditional readiness to participate in the MSR initiative with China, if assurances of a level playing field are provided, but it is also moving to further infrastructure counterpoising through the quadrilateral framework with India, Australia, and the United States.

On the economic front, Japan has also taken the initiative in salvaging the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which appeared doomed when the Trump

administration pulled out in January 2017. However, the TPP was reset and resigned in March 2018, thanks in large part to efforts by Tokyo. The advantage of the TPP is that it brings Japan together with a range of Pacific Rim countries like Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. This gives Japan an alternative to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership being negotiated which would establish a bloc to knit together East Asia, South-East Asia, Australasia, and South Asia—and including Japan—but in which China would play a leadership role.

Japan's strategy to cope with an ever-rising China—a China with opaque long-term goals—is essentially one of hedging: what used to be called “conengagement,” or containment plus engagement. On 16 April, some Indo-Pacific economic engagement was on show in the talks held in Tokyo between Japan and China's foreign ministers, while overt Indo-Pacific security balancing was on show in the talks in the US between Shinzo Abe and Donald Trump. ■