



National Institute for Defense Studies
NIDS Commentary

China and Japan: Scrambling for Regional Space

Dr. Joshy M. Paul, NIDS Fellow

The meeting of the defence officials of Japan and the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) held in Tokyo in the last week of September has been important in many ways. In the meeting, both sides sought to deepen regional cooperation amid China's creeping expansion in the disputed South China Sea, and Tokyo signalled its willingness to play a bigger role with the regional countries.

The Japanese Vice-Minister of Defence, Kimito Nakae, said after the meeting that the relationship has 'matured from dialogue to one where Japan plays a more specific cooperative role' on an array of security issues concerning the region. The officials from the ASEAN sought the need to establish a common interpretation of international law regarding freedom of navigation, and to implement a formal, binding code of conduct to keep disputes in check. Different levels of claims and counterclaims have been raised by China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia regarding the disputed areas in the South China Sea. Stability, security and freedom of navigation are high priority for all stakeholders.

The latest developments bring forth a new period in Japan-ASEAN relationship because decades back, Japan's political overtures to the region was met with suspicion and was viewed in light of the atrocities perpetrated by it during the second world war in the South East Asian region. Such suspicions lingered on, notwithstanding the fact that Japan was the economic driver of the region and provided many countries with generous economic aid and develop-oriented direct investments. However, today China has overtaken Japan as the leading economic partner of the ASEAN countries. But Beijing's hegemonic ambitions

are viewed with great trepidation by other regional countries. In these circumstances, the ASEAN countries have started welcoming Japan to play a more active political role in the regional security issues. Recently, Tokyo and Hanoi have entered into an agreement on cooperation in nuclear energy and a Tokyo-based consortium has begun feasibility study for the construction of two 1000 megawatt capacity nuclear reactors in Vietnam. These reactors are expected to become operational by 2021 and 2022¹. Though the Fukushima incident has created further hurdles at the domestic level for Japanese nuclear power companies, they are aggressively seeking opportunities in foreign markets.

China is increasing its assertiveness in the South China Sea, the latest being a massive naval drill in the disputed waters in mid-June off hundreds of miles from China's southernmost border that was widely seen as a warning to Vietnam. In fact, in May, cables of a seismic survey ship owned by Vietnamese oil and gas company Petro-Vietnam was allegedly severed by a Chinese fishing boat, which Vietnam accuses as a deliberate provocation. An unidentified Oceanic Administration official was quoted in China's news media as saying that the civilian maritime surveillance force would be increased to 15000 from 9000 personnel by 2020².

Maritime domain has become major source of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region compared with other parts of the world. Eminent writer Robert Kaplan argues, 'East Asia, or more precisely western Pacific, is quickly becoming the world's new centre of naval activity'³, which is entirely different from the post-world war II Euro-centric security calculation. China's silent push for strategic primacy in the East Asian region has led to a period of military modernization by other regional countries. Indeed, to match China's quantitative military build-up, among other things including the commissioning of a 248 meter long naval ship DDH-22 in November 2009, Japan has planned to induct 40-45 warplanes, either a US F-35 Joint Strike Fighter or Euro-Typhoon of the European consortium at the cost of \$ 40 billion.

¹ 'Tokyo Nuclear Firms Sign Deal With Vietnam', *The Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2011.

² 'Chinese Naval Maneuvers Seen as Warning to Vietnam', *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 2011.
<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/18/world/la-fg-china-vietnam-20110618>.

³ Robert Kaplan, 'Europe is a Landscape ; East Asia is a Seascape', *Foreign Policy*, Sept/Oct 2011, p-78.

Evidently, China has cultivated a delicate foreign policy towards Southeast Asian region over the years. It initially followed the Japanese path - making friendly relationship by providing economic aid to various infrastructure projects and opening its domestic market for Southeast Asian manufactured products without antagonizing the region politically. This 'feel-good factor diplomacy' paid dividends as it helped China to sign a code-of-conduct on the dispute of the South China Sea with the contending parties, which eventually benefitted China's 'peaceful rise' theory.

Like western Hemisphere for the US and Eastern Europe for the former Soviet Union, China needs a favourable regional system to prop up its power and prestige in the international arena. An economic consolidation in the Southeast Asian region was not sufficient for China as it seeks to reformulate the world order, a political pre-eminence is necessary especially in the immediate neighbourhood. China envisions a new 'negotiated world order'⁴, in which it aims a hedging strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with the United States but preparing favourable conditions for China to shape a new order (hierarchical order) in the long term. China needs a peaceful neighbourhood at present; otherwise its long-term ambitions may suffer. China is already having territorial problem with other two big neighbours, India and Japan, so a political consolidation over small neighbours would help China in achieving its desired objectives. However, contrary to China's calculations none of the littoral countries of South China Sea is willing to accept Chinese claim on the dispute. China is lately shifting its focus to the Southwest Asia region comprising Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran for a larger political role particularly after US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014. This may give China a more assured entry to the Indian Ocean region. Yet the Southeast Asian region still remains a challenge for China's global ambitions. Importantly, the South East Asian countries are now increasingly welcoming other major powers, including the US, Japan and India to be involved in regional security matters. During the visit of Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang to India in October 12-15, both countries have signed a memorandum-of-understanding for joint oil exploration activities in the South China Sea and for starting strategic talks between the two. China had raised its objection on Indian exploration projects

⁴ Randall L. Schweller and Xiang Pu, 'After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline', *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2011, pp. 41-72.

on Vietnamese blocks in South China Sea, claiming they are in Chinese area. Recently, China Energy News, published by Communist Party mouthpiece the People's Daily, said cooperation between India and Vietnam in these seas was a bad idea, and warned that "India's energy strategy is slipping into an extremely dangerous whirlpool,"⁵

In this context, Japan's advancement towards the Southeast Asian region is significant in the regional security dynamics of the entire East Asian region. If Japan increases its political presence in the Southeast Asian region, it will help the region to become more stable and assured.

The author is NIDS Fellow at the National Institute for Defence Studies, Tokyo. He is also a Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. The views are personal and do not reflect the views of the organizations he represents. He can be reached at mpjoshi@gmail.com

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Planning and Administration Department, The National Institute for Defense Studies

Telephone: 03-3713-5912

FAX: 03-3713-6149

Website <http://www.nids.go.jp>

⁵ 'REFILE-China paper warns India against Vietnam oil deal', Reuters, October 16, 2011. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/10/16/china-vietnam-india-idUKL3E7LE1B420111016>.