

Overview

East Asia in 2011

1. The Lessons from the Great East Japan Earthquake and New Developments in Japan's Defense Policy

In 2011 Japan faced a severe test. In March of that year, the strongest earthquake in Japan's history struck the Tohoku region of the main island of Honshu, with seismic intensities ranging from over six to seven on the Japan Meteorological Agency scale in Miyagi, Fukushima, Ibaraki, and Tochigi prefectures. Massive tsunami struck the coastal regions of the Tohoku region, including Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures, causing a terrible disaster that brought immense destruction and the loss of very many lives. Furthermore, the ensuing accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station was an unprecedented disaster resulting in the dispersal of radioactive materials over a wide area, forcing the evacuation of large numbers of residents. More than 100,000 Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) personnel were mobilized and deployed in search and rescue operations, rescuing almost 20,000 victims of the disaster. The SDF also implemented disaster relief operations in cooperation with the US Armed Forces and the Australian Defence Force, among others. This response was the largest operation in the history of the SDF, and the rapid response capabilities it displayed received high acclaim. These SDF operations embodied the "Dynamic Defense Force" set forth in the National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2011 and Beyond published in 2010—the demonstration of high defense capabilities through operations with an emphasis on readiness and sustainability and cooperation with other countries.

The Great East Japan Earthquake was a special case of multiple disaster in which an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident occurred at the same time. This created unprecedented circumstances in which the SDF had to respond to two situations—the earthquake and tsunami disaster and the nuclear disaster on the one hand—while continuing to conduct its normal peace-time duties on the other. Although caution has to be exercised in making generalizations, it will be useful to draw multifaceted lessons for Japan's security policies from these multiple situations. The main lessons were: (1) the need to establish decision making mechanisms for the unification of information, issuing of appropriate orders at the right time; (2) the need for integrated operation of the SDF; (3) the need to strengthen materials and personnel transportation capabilities; (4) the need to build a system for the integration of specialist knowledge for responding to complex disasters; and (5) the enhancement of readiness to accept aid from

overseas. To ensure that it can respond rapidly and effectively to multiple disasters that might occur in the future, in addition to disseminating these lessons both in Japan and overseas, Japan is required to strengthen its multifaceted capabilities including the strengthening of transportation and intelligence capabilities, establish a system for integrating different types of specialist knowledge, expand training and exercises, and promote cooperation with other countries.

As of the end of 2011, in addition to facing severe financial difficulties, Japan is still engaged in promoting recovery from the earthquake disaster and dealing with the damage from the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. It should also be noted that Japan faces various challenges arising from changes in its security environment, such as North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and provocative behavior, the ongoing military modernization of a rising China, and the emergence of cyber threats. Looking back on Japan's national security measures undertaken in 2011, we can see that several significant developments emerged against the backdrop of the changing security environment. These include the strengthening of the SDF's deployment posture in the southwestern islands, the deepening of the US-Japan alliance, the promotion of multilateral cooperation such as trilateral cooperation of the United States and Japan with both Australia and South Korea and cooperation with India and the ASEAN, the formulation of new standards in the Three Principles on Arms Exports, and the adoption of next-generation fighter aircraft. In these ways, steady efforts have been made to put into practice the aforementioned National Defense Program Guidelines.

2. North Korea in the Post-Kim Jong Il Era

Kim Jong Il, chairman of North Korea's National Defense Commission (NDC), died on December 17, 2011. His sudden death came on the heels of a series of summit meetings aimed at strengthening ties with China and Russia at a time when North Korea was moving to bolster the regime's foundations for the transition to the post-Kim Jong Il era and prepare for the establishment of a "strong and prosperous nation" in 2012. It was already public knowledge that Kim Jong Il's third son Kim Jong Un was being groomed as his successor. In September 2010, Kim Jong Un was promoted to the rank of general. At the subsequent Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and meeting of the Central Committee of the WPK, he was elected to membership of the WPK

Central Committee and given the title of vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. A meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the WPK on December 30, 2011, appointed Kim Jong Un supreme commander of the Korean People's Army. North Korea, under its new young leader, has stressed the continuation of established policies, including Songun (military-first) politics and the building of a "strong and prosperous nation," but because the succession of power has occurred in a short time-frame, there is growing uncertainty about the future of the regime.

North Korea stepped up preparations for a succession of power in 2008 after NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke. Experts have previously identified the strategic goals of the North Korean regime as (1) the survival of the regime led by the Kim family, (2) the elimination of internal threats, (3) reunification of North and South Korea on North Korea's terms, (4) the maintenance and strengthening of the country's conventional forces, (5) improving capabilities in the fields of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles, and (6) upgrading deterrence against the United States and South Korea. The emergence of NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il's health problems spurred initiatives aimed at achieving these goals, prompting a succession of provocations by North Korea, such as announcements of a missile test and second nuclear test in 2009, the sinking of a South Korean patrol ship in March 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November of the same year.

The Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program have been suspended since December 2008, and while there has been a revival of diplomatic activity aimed at restarting the talks, the outlook for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem remains unclear. Moreover, for the reasons listed below, concerns over the nuclear situation are becoming more acute. First, there are reports that the North may have succeeded in miniaturizing its nuclear warheads. If this leads to North Korea gaining the ability to mount its nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles, it would pose a major threat to countries in the region, including Japan. Second, North Korea is pressing ahead with nuclear development using enriched uranium, increasing the opacity of its overall nuclear development plans. Third, the country is understood to be extending the target range of the ballistic missiles used to deliver WMD and to be improving the stability and mobility of its mobile launchers.

As of January 2012, the new regime under party and military leader Kim Jong Un, supreme commander of the Korean People's Army, is calling for a continuation

of Songun politics and completion of North Korea's transformation into a "strong and prosperous nation." Against this backdrop, however, lies the risk that the country will resort to missile firings, nuclear tests and other provocations to boost its national prestige and strengthen the regime's foundations, to demonstrate to the rest of the world its military capabilities, and as a means of securing assistance from outside. The security situation in the Korean Peninsula therefore remains as unpredictable as ever. It is entirely unclear whether a young leader short of experience and charisma can, over the longer term, cement the foundations of the regime by securing the support of the military, maintaining internal stability, reviving the economy, and achieving a favorable shift in external relations.

3. The US Security Strategy for the Asia-Pacific Region in an Age of Change and Austerity

The year 2011 marked the tenth anniversary of the US-led "war on terror" (or "Overseas Contingency Operations," a term used by the Obama administration) that was launched in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. During the year, the United States took steps toward winding down its military operations in Afghanistan, and in December finally brought to a close its nearly nine-year deployment of troops to Iraq. While overseeing those transitions, the Obama administration continued to lay the strategic groundwork for pivoting US military posture and presence toward the Asia-Pacific region.

The Obama administration's Asia-Pacific policy is largely characterized by the following three tasks: (1) strengthening of ties with Japan and other US allies in the region; (2) bolstering of relations with US partners, including Southeast Asian countries and India; and (3) formation of a multilayered network of relations centered around US alliances and complemented with greater strategic engagement with the East Asia Summit (EAS) and other regional institutions. In a speech given in Hawaii on November 10, 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted the necessity of "updating" US alliances in the region to adapt them to the changing world, and stated three guidelines for that effort: (1) ensuring that the core objectives of the alliances have the political support of the US public; (2) making the alliances nimble and adaptive so they can continue to deliver results; and (3) making sure that the alliances have the operational and material capabilities needed to deter provocation from state and non-state actors. Within this context, the United States is endeavoring not only to strengthen its traditional "hub and

spoke” system of alliances founded on bilateral frameworks, but also to pursue so-called “minilateral” relations—such as US-Japan-South Korea, US-Japan-Australia, and US-Japan-India—while expanding joint military exercises and training. As for the task of bolstering relations with regional partners such as Southeast Asian countries and India, the United States appears to be motivated by rising concern among China’s neighbors about that nation’s rapidly modernizing military capabilities, and by the need to respond promptly and effectively to various contingencies in the region, including through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Furthermore, the United States, since declaring in 2010 its intention to participate in the EAS, has been drawing attention for its emphasis on that forum as a linchpin for the multilayered network of relations across the Asia-Pacific region.

As the United States pursues this new course of strategy, however, it must contend with the challenge of adapting to current and future changes in the security landscape while operating under a major political constraint—the need to drastically cut back defense spending in order to rein in the country’s runaway deficit. In other words, the United States is caught between having to tackle its fiscal crisis on the one hand, while maintaining its foreign commitments on the other. Moreover, the planned drastic reduction of the defense budget has sparked expressions of concern domestically and abroad that the influence and military capabilities of the United States could be adversely affected. Given that this predicament is expected to persist for a long time, it is likely that the United States will work to enhance its capacity to respond rationally and effectively to various security challenges, and will further strengthen cooperation and coordination with Japan, other allies, and partners so as to allay concerns over its ability to live up to its commitment to the Asia-Pacific region.

4. The South China Sea Issue Rekindled and US-Chinese Tensions

In recent years, the issue of territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea has increasingly driven a wedge between China and certain Southeast Asian nations. Most notably, the intensification of Chinese activity in those waters has created friction with Vietnam and the Philippines in particular. The United States, while on one hand taking a stance of nonintervention in the territorial disputes, is showing a growing interest in the South China Sea from the perspective of

maintaining freedom of navigation and maritime security. Consequently, the South China Sea issue will likely remain a source of tension between Washington and Beijing for the foreseeable future.

Since around 2009, China has stepped up its patrols and military exercises and training in the South China Sea, provoking sporadic clashes with other countries claiming sovereignty over territory in the region. For example, its seizures of Vietnamese fishing boats, and detentions of Vietnamese fishermen, have been on the rise since 2009. A series of high-profile incidents, widely reported by the press, has generated growing unease about China's "assertive" actions. This includes: in March 2009, harassment by Chinese government ships of a US Navy surveillance ship operating in the South China Sea; in March 2011, intimidation by Chinese patrol vessels of a Philippines oil exploration ship operating near the Spratly Islands; and, in May 2011, attempts by surveillance ships from the State Oceanic Administration, China Maritime Surveillance division, to interfere with a Vietnamese research vessel conducting a resource survey off the coast of central Vietnam by severing a cable towed by the research vessel. Moreover, by conducting large live-ammunition exercises and training in the South China Sea, China is widely seen as pushing to increase its military presence in the region.

In February 1995 when China occupied the Spratly Islands' Mischief Reef, over which the Philippines claimed territorial rights, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) strongly urged its member states to take unified action as members of ASEAN rather than responding as individual states. The Philippines also proposed creation of a "code of conduct" for legally regulating actions in the South China Sea by the countries involved. Later, issues surrounding the South China Sea became a subject for discussion in a China-ASEAN multilateral framework, and China and ASEAN signed the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" in November 2002. When an official Chinese vessel harassed and damaged a Philippine survey ship in March 2011, the Philippines once again, just as in the 1990s, called for unified ASEAN action. It further pressed Japan and the United States for greater cooperation on maritime security.

When an official Chinese vessel interfered with a Vietnamese survey ship in May 2011, Vietnam reacted with sharp criticism, and took action in June to contain China through such measures as the Vietnamese Navy's live-fire exercises off central Vietnam and calls for strengthened ties with the United States. At the same time, however, Vietnam still sought to promote its bilateral relations with

China by, for example, continuing its exchanges of ranking officials, and during the October visit of Vietnamese General Secretary Nguyen Fu Chung to China, the two countries concluded a pact on maritime issues. This pact included elements such as agreement to seek settlement of issues in the South China Sea through discussions, promote discussion on joint development in Tonkin Bay, and establish a hotline between the Chinese and Vietnamese defense establishments. Also during the same period as General Secretary Chung's visit to China, Vietnam's State President Truong Tan Sang called on India and issued a joint declaration with his counterpart. In the declaration, the two countries recognized the importance of pursuing a peaceful resolution of South China Sea issues and confirmed a memorandum on joint development in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, India's future actions in the South China Sea will be watched for the role it may play in maritime security.

As can be seen from the description of recent events, China's growing levels of maritime activity and the frictions between China and some of the Southeast Asian countries over territorial rights in the South China Sea have become important factors facilitating greater security cooperation between the United States and Southeast Asia. Secretary of State Clinton, while participating in the July 2010 meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, clearly indicated the US intention to secure freedom of navigation and adherence to international law in the South China Sea. During 2011 the United States pushed forward with strengthening its security cooperation with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia, which was ASEAN chair for that year. At the Tenth IISS Asia Security Summit (the "Shangri-La Dialogue") in June, then-US Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates announced plans to deploy US Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) to Singapore. In addition, agreement was reached with Australia in November for rotation of US Marines through bases in Darwin on that country's northern coast and for expanded use of Australian air bases by the US Air Force. Such developments can be seen as significant elements in the US strategic position to maintain and expand the US military's presence in the Asia-Pacific region and to ensure maritime security, including security in the South China Sea.

