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View Point

Japan's Security Conundrum and the Asia-Pacific

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The transforming Asia-Pacific security landscape has not only propelled the United States (US) to shift its 'pivot' towards the region, but also compelled the states in the region, especially its allies, to revise and reformulate their security strategy and responses. In this context, it is pertinent to understand and analyse to what extent Japan negotiates its security priorities in the wake of recent events in the region: Japan's unsuccessful attempt to sign agreements for military co-operation and intelligence sharing with South Korea; and Japan government's bid to buy the disputed Senkaku Islands from the private owners.

Post-war Japan secured its security interests through the US managed 'hub and spokes' system. The growing Chinese power and the relative decline of its own power forced the US to further strengthen its security relations with its allies such as Australia, the Philippines, Singapore and new partners like Vietnam. Therefore, the US encouraged Japan and RoK, its staunchest allies in the region, to consolidate their bilateral military co-operation so as to enhance greater engagement among its alliance partners, and to complete the circling of China.

After a series of back-door negotiations, Japan and RoK decided to sign two agreements on 29 June 2012. They are: (a) Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which stipulates reciprocal provision of supplies such as food, water and fuel plus medical services when the two sides engage in joint military

activities; (b) a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSMIA), which deals with the sharing of military intelligence. These agreements ought to be seen against both the countries' increasing concerns about the potential threat emanating from North Korean long-range missiles and nuclear weapons, and apprehensions about burgeoning China's military power. Both the countries have similar agreements with the US and other countries as well. However, protests from parliament, media and the public forced the RoK government to cancel the signing of the agreements at the last moment. Yet, Japan remains optimistic about the future of the agreements. On the other hand, it is pertinent to point out that in the last week of June 2012, the United States, Japan, and South Korea conducted trilateral search and rescue, and naval blockade exercises in waters south of Jeju Island.

Even though *realpolitik* concerns motivated both Japan and Korea towards the agreements, the complexities of historical memories and long-standing disputes impeded their progress. Among older Koreans, the memories of Japan's colonisation are still raw; Tokyo ruled the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945. The issue of 'comfort women' – sexual slavery of Korean women by Japanese soldiers during the World War II – continues to elicit strong reactions from the Koreans despite repeated Japanese apologies and compensation. The territorial disputes over Takeshima islands, Koreans call the Tokdo, are still simmering. These issues make the Koreans – especially the general public – concerned about the resurgence of Japanese military power.

On 11 July 2012, three Chinese patrol vessels entered the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, and one of them repeated the next day as well. It was well-nigh repeating of September 2010 boat incident involving a Chinese fishing trawler in the disputed area. It triggered another showdown between Japan and China. China maintained that it was a routine patrol to monitor the fishing moratorium in the East China Sea, which has been ongoing since 2010. Tokyo reacted sharply, and it called its ambassador to Beijing for discussions over the issue.

The provocation relates to the recent attempts by Tokyo Metropolitan government and Japan Central governments' attempt to buy three of the islands from its private owners. Later, a senior US government official indicated, for the first time,

that Senkaku Islands fall within the scope of 1960 Japan-US Security Treaty under which the US is required to defend Japan if it is attacked. The Japanese government already owns one of the five major Senkaku Islands i.e. Taisho Island and the other four were leased from the owners, the Kurihara family. Both China and Taiwan dispute the ownership titles and claim sovereignty over the islands – Diaoyu in China and Tiaoyutai in Taiwan. Beijing perceives this as an attempt by Japan to bolster its legal claims of Senkaku Islands.

The Japanese government announced that it planned to build a port and a lighthouse on the Senkaku Islands once the acquisition process of the islands was realised. Further, they would also be utilised for research and development of marine resources, the study and preservation of rare creatures, and management and preservation of forest resources. In a related development, a Chinese tycoon has applied for Beijing's approval to authorise developing a leisure resort and is ready to send a survey team on the disputed islands.

Unlike 2010, Japan appears to be asserting its rights vis-a-vis China over the islands. Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, responding to a question in the Diet on 26 July 2012, indicated that 'Japan would act resolutely including the use of Self Defense Forces (SDF) if the need arose in case of a neighbouring country engaged in illegal acts on its territorial soil or waters, including Senkaku Islands'. Defence Minister Satoshi Morimoto echoed him later that 'employing SDF would be a "reasonable measure" under the country's legal framework'. Interestingly, in a joint poll conducted by Taiwan based 'Want China Times', a news website, and China's 'Global Times', more than fifty per cent of the people on the Chinese mainland believe Beijing would resort to use of force to protect its sovereignty over the islands.

These developments indicate Japan's sustained movement towards attaining its security priorities despite hindrances. For Japan, navigating through historical questions although remains a challenge in regard to RoK, it is able to forestall damages from affecting broader, if not specific, strategic objectives. Japan's assertion of its territorial rights through the use of force has opened up a new dimension of its security calculus, notwithstanding China's growing military strength. However, an event such as the first China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit, May 2012, Beijing,

offers a platform for them to discuss issues, and an opportunity to resolve disputes amicably.

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