Japan’s “Proactive Contribution” to Maritime Security in the Pacific and Indian Oceans

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Weiqi Analogy and Quad-Plus Cooperation

Alexander Vuving suggests China’s strategy behind reclamation in the South China Sea is influenced by the game strategy of weiqi, known in the West by its Japanese name, go, the oldest Chinese board game. He points out that weiqi is a struggle of configuration whereas chess is a contest of armies. In the eyes of the weiqi player, the ultimate goal of China is not to control the South China Sea but to gain control of the region. In order to further the campaign, Vuving suggests China relies on creeping expansion, rather than major battles. Tactically, salami slicing and small-stick diplomacy are preferred tactics.

I am not fully persuaded by Vuving on his cultural determinism. James Holmes precisely points out the limitation of Vuving’s argument by stating that people are not cultural automatons and the games may not determine Chinese action, although it may influence their

thinking. I would like to add one more criticism on Vuving’s argument by pointing out the fact that the Asian geopolitical game is played as a multi-player rather than one-on-one game such as weiqi or chess.

In this sense, however, Vuving’s weiqi analogy is useful in thinking about the common strategic rationale of the Quad-Plus (Japan-U.S.-Australia-India plus ASEAN and other regional players). The game which the Quad-Plus would play is definitely one of multi-party actors. In short, U.S.-China game strategy, like weiqi or chess, could be easily affected by other influential players such as the Quad-Plus. Still, the game is closer to weiqi rather than chess.

At least, China seems to seek to secure the area in the maritime domain that they claim as their territory, if not displaying an ambition to control whole region. Apparently, their claim conflicts with other nations including Japan and other East Asian countries. It also conflicts with existing common international rules such as the UN Convention on the Law of Sea. Thus, many regional players would have a common interest in influencing Chinese maritime behavior to conform to common international rules and norms.

If the Chinese are seriously considering a strategy to control the whole Asia-Pacific region, then China needs to neutralize the U.S. presence in the region since the U.S. is regarded as a guarantor of rules-based order. Theoretically, China needs to consider two strategic options: establishing regional hegemony with the tacit approval of the U.S. or establishing hegemony by forcing out the U.S. presence and influence.

The first path would be relatively simple. The U.S. may agree to share the power with China over the Asia-Pacific region if it serves its national interests. This is a rationale of the U.S.-China G2 (Group of Two) theory or Chinese President Xi Jinping’s “new type of major power relations” idea. This picture may look like two strategic players playing on a world chessboard. Chess is a game where a player eventually wins the game by checkmating a king. In this case, the U.S. is considered as the king. It may not be coincident that Zbigniew Brzezinski, author of The Grand Chessboard, was one of the advocates of the U.S.-China G-2 idea.

However, it seems to me that the regional power game does not look like chess but rather like weiqi. China may not attain control over the region just by pushing the U.S. out. It needs to maintain preferential balance of power by utilizing both hard and soft power to exert

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influence over regional players. It may create a common rule or domination, in which all players have to obey the rules in order to maintain stability. As James Holmes mentions, the potential cost of keeping the U.S. out of the region and forcing other Asian nations to obey China’s preferred rules may be unrealistically high unless other regional players agree to keep the U.S. out and cooperate with China.

China, however, does not seem ready to assume the burden of maintaining the public good of peaceful regional maritime governance. At the same time, the US seems to be exhausted from carrying the burden of providing regional public goods all over the world. Which is beneficial for the US, sharing power with uncertain and unpopular China or sharing the burden of maintaining the rules based order with other major players such as Quad-Plus countries?

It would be practical and theoretically sound for Quad-Plus countries to share the burden of providing the public good of peaceful maritime governance in the region. In the long term, it would be also a good idea to to persuade China to join the maritime governance regime rather than lead a lone and costly challenge to the rules-based order.

**How Japan See China’s “Salami Slicing” Incremental Approach**

Japan is one of the countries under pressure from China’s incremental approach to expand its influence in the maritime domain. Japan has been facing frequent intrusions of Chinese law enforcement vessels into Japanese territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. In addition, China has been increasing military flights near Japan’s territory, which requires Japan’s Air Self-Defense Forces to respond. At the same time, the Chinese government has recently tried to improve bilateral relations with Japan. Two bilateral summits between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping were conducted in 2014 and 2015 after a freeze since the Japanese government’s purchase of the Senkaku Islands, which China claims as its territory, in September 2012.

While warming bilateral relations encourage both countries to lower the tension and avoid accidental conflicts in the maritime domain, Japan continues to face constant challenges to its sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands and its maritime security in territorial waters.

According to Japan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Japan-China summit in December 2015 agreed to reinforce mutual efforts to achieve the early commencement of the implementation of the "Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism between the Japan-China Defense

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Authorities." Despite the agreement, actual implementation has been slow. The Japanese have not been convinced that the Chinese intend to deal with territorial issues peacefully. Warming relations are regarded as a Chinese tactical move along with its “incremental approach” to expand its territorial influence by avoiding serious military conflict at a time of economic slowdown. Many Japanese experts have also concluded that China made a high-level political decision to improve bilateral relations in order to improve business ties with Japan.

In order to deal with China’s incremental approach, Japan continues to improve bilateral relations with China while enhancing its maritime patrol and territorial defense capability, as well as grading up its maritime security cooperation with the United States and other like-minded nations.

**Japan’s Maritime Security Cooperation with the U.S. and Quad-Plus Countries**

On September 19, 2015, the Japanese Diet passed new security legislation. According to *The New York Times*, the new legislation would “overturn a decades-old policy of reserving the use of force for self-defense” by “authorizing overseas combat missions for this country’s military.” In reality, the cases in which Japan could dispatch Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to exercise the right of collective defense overseas are limited to only regional contingencies that would critically affect Japan’s security. In addition, the JSDF’s military mission would be strictly limited to non-combatant activities, such as logistical support of Japan’s major ally, the United States, and allied nations. In other words, the JSDF would be allowed only to participate in combatant missions for Japan’s territorial defense.

Despite these limitations, the U.S. government welcomed the new legislation as a clear signal of Japan’s willingness to expand security cooperation with the U.S. and other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, by enabling the Japanese government to exercise, at least partially, the right of collective defense which had been strictly banned as unconstitutional in the past 40 years after establishment of the current constitutional interpretation in the early 1970s.

Japan’s legislation is a follow-through of the Japan-U.S. agreement on new guidelines for...
security cooperation, which was agreed to on April 27, 2015 by the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee (SCC) at the foreign and defense ministerial level.\(^8\) The SCC statement describes bilateral maritime security cooperation as follows.

*The two governments will cooperate closely with each other on measures to maintain maritime order based upon international law, including freedom of navigation. The Self-Defense Forces and the United States Armed Forces will cooperate, as appropriate, on various efforts such as maintaining and enhancing bilateral presence in the maritime domain through ISR and training and exercises, while further developing and enhancing shared maritime domain awareness including by coordinating with relevant agencies, as necessary.*\(^9\)

In addition, the SCC describes a concept of bilateral operation:

*The Self-Defense Forces will have primary responsibility for the protection of major ports and straits in Japan and of ships and vessels in waters surrounding Japan and for other associated operations. For this purpose, the Self-Defense Forces will take necessary actions, including, but not limited to, coastal defense, anti-surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, mine warfare, anti-air warfare, and air interdiction.*\(^10\)

Japan’s move is a reaction to China’s attempt to expand its influence over the maritime domain in the Asia-Pacific area. It is also a reflection of the Japanese perception of regional security, embracing the relative decline of the U.S. military and economic supremacy in the region, and two major, growing security concerns.

On April 29, 2015, two days after the SCC agreement, Prime Minister Abe expressed his support of the U.S. rebalancing policy in his speech to the U.S. Congress. He also stressed the importance of deepening strategic relations with Australia and India as well as cooperative relation with ASEAN and the Republic of Korea:

*My dear colleagues, we support the “rebalancing” by the U.S. in order to enhance the peace and security of the Asia-Pacific region. And I will state clearly. We will support the U.S. effort first, last, and throughout. Japan has deepened its strategic relations with Australia and India. We are enhancing our cooperation across many fields with the*

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\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid.
Prime Minister Abe’s speech suggests that Japan’s proactive contribution is not only to strengthen the bilateral alliance but also to create a multilateral security network with other important regional players. Especially, he believes that relations with Australia and India are strategically crucial. This is an important strategic rationale in the current Japan-U.S. security guidelines and Japan’s security strategy in the maritime domain.

This becomes clearer if we compare to the Japan-U.S. security guideline in 1997. In the previous guideline, its object was “to create a solid basis for more effective and credible U.S.-Japan cooperation” in case of an armed attack, or some other contingency, involving Japan. The current new guideline in 2015 is “to ensure Japan’s peace and security” and “to promote a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Asia-Pacific region and beyond.” In addition, Japan-U.S. bilateral cooperation emphasizes “cooperation with regional and other partners, as well as international organizations” and “the global nature of the Japan-U.S. Alliance.”

Japan’s Perception on Pacific and Indian Ocean Security

Japan’s maritime security policy has been shaped by considerations of securing territorial water and Sea Lane or Sea Line of Communication (SLOC). Security of SLOC includes security of the Indian Ocean as a critical path from the Persian Gulf, since the Japanese economy is heavily dependent on imports of oil and gas. Although Japan’s naval capability has been limited in the Pacific Ocean, Japan has tried to secure its own energy flow by close cooperation with U.S. naval supremacy in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

For example, in a February 2015 Diet session, Prime Minister Abe chose a mine sweeping operation in the Strait of Hormuz as a case for Japan’s exercise of the right of collective defense. He affirmed that engaging in minesweeping operations to deal with undersea mine blockade would be a positive case of Japan using its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) abroad, since it could be considered a situation that clearly threatened as serious and significant damage as a direct armed attack on Japan. The Japanese government tried to limit specific cases for

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14 Ibid.
exercising collective defense to just such a situation. Prime Minister Abe said it would be “far greater than those of the past oil crises and the world economy would be thrown into total disarray.”

His explanation was very unpopular with the Japanese public since this case was too far from Japan’s territory. He later changed to a case nearer Japan’s territory. However, Prime Minister Abe’s concerns are a reflection of the Japanese elite class, who has considered securing SLOC from the Middle East to Japan through the Strait of Malacca, South China Sea and East China Sea as critical to Japan’s survival. As Prime Minister Abe points out, securing SLOC has been one of key security concerns for the Japanese economy, which has been heavily reliant on oil and gas flow from the Middle East for the past half century. Since 1982, when Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone recognized importance of securing SLOC, at least Guam to Tokyo and Taiwan Strait to Osaka, the Japanese governments has emphasized securing SLOC, and it has been one important element of Japan’s incentives to maintain the alliance with the United States.

Japan’s National Security Strategy (NSS) of December 2013 showed its strong interest in securing the global common, particularly maritime commons and SLOC. The NSS first points out that “disputes between coastal states and China cause concerns over the maintenance of the rule of law at sea, freedom of navigation, and stability in the South China Sea in particular.” Then, it explains concerns with rising vulnerability in SLOC as follows:

In addition, vulnerability is also increasing in sea lanes of communication, spanning between Japan and the Middle East, on which Japan is largely dependent for its natural and energy resources, due to various problems including regional conflicts and international terrorism in and around the coastal states, as well as piracy. Therefore, advancing efforts to address these issues is also important for securing the sea lanes. (emphasis by the author)

For Japanese elites, who experienced two oil crises in 1973 and 1979, caused by OPEC’s decision on reducing oil production in 1973 and disruption of oil production in Iran by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, securing oil/gas imports and SLOC became critical security issues in their mind. Many military and foreign policy elites have also come to the conclusion that failure to secure energy flow from South East Asia was a major contributing factor to the

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Japan’s failure in the Pacific War.

For the average Japanese, securing the Indian Ocean per se would not greatly influence their security concerns. However, securing SLOC is regarded as a critical element for Japan’s survival. As matter of the fact, the Indian Ocean is clearly part of Japan’s SLOC. The Abe administration proactively promoted maritime security cooperation with India. Japanese Self-Defense Forces participated in the U.S.-India Malabar naval exercise in October 2015, and Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) dispatched a missile destroyer “JS Fuyuzuki” (DD-118). The bilateral dialogue and joint exercise were held between the Japan Coast Guard and the Indian Coast Guard in October 2014. On January 15, 2016, Japan and India conducted the joint exercise, “Sahyog-Kaijin” off the Chennai coast.17

From a practical point of view, what the JMSDF can do for securing the Indian Ocean or South China Sea in near future, even with cooperation with the U.S. Navy, would still be limited in its capability and budget. At the same time, in the past few years Japan has reduced legal restrictions and increased exercises and cooperation with Quad-Plus countries in maritime governance. Japan is very much interested in developing multilateral maritime security framework around cooperation among Quad-Plus countries. A multilateral framework would be more acceptable to the Japanese public, who are cautious about too much burden sharing within the bilateral framework with the U.S. or increasing unnecessary tension with China.

Japan’s Role in Maritime Security Cooperation and its Synergy with Quad-Plus

Japanese elites view positively the U.S. rebalancing to Asia. The other side of the coin is that they realize Japan’s security is critically dependent on the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific. In Spring 2014, Michael Green conducted a survey with other experts on how non-governmental policy-influential elites in 10 Asia-Pacific countries see the U.S. rebalancing. They surveyed 52 Japanese experts and found 92% support for the U.S. rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific. This level of support is high among 10 countries surveyed. (Taiwan 98%, U.S. 96%, Singapore 96%, Republic of Korea 92%, Indonesia 87%, India 82%, Australia 81%, Thailand 54%, China 23%).18

A public poll conducted by the Japanese government’s cabinet office in January 2015 showed that 84.6% answered that in case of invasion, they would defend their territory with the JSDF and alliance with the United States.

In contrast, the Japanese public did not fully support Prime Minister Abe’s security legislation, passed in the Diet on September 19, 2015. In the poll conducted by the conservative Sankei/FNN media group on September 19 and 20, only 38.3% supported the security legislation, while 56.7% were opposed.

Apparently, the Abe administration failed to explain the purpose of the new security legislation to the worried public, who were not sure how much Japan could share the burden of the U.S. security presence in the region. Considering the unpopularity of its security blueprint, the Abe administration seems to wish to play it safe at least before the Upper House election in summer in 2016.

For example, media reported that at the bilateral meeting in Manila, Prime Minister Abe told U.S. President Barack Obama that he was considering dispatching the Self-Defense Forces to the South China Sea. However, he added a caveat about the need to examine the impact of the situation there on Japan’s security.19 After the meeting, Yoshihide Suga, Chief Cabinet Secretary told the media, “we have no plans for our Self-Defense Forces to take part in U.S. freedom of navigation operations, and at this time the SDF is not conducting continuous patrols in the South China Sea, nor do we have concrete plans to do so.”20

What Japan could do in the name of “proactive contribution” is providing capacity building in coast guard and maritime security capability to regional players. The National Security Strategy of Japan states that Japan will develop a new system of seamless assistance to potential recipients in security-related areas through the strategic utilization of official development assistance and capacity building support, as well as coordination with nongovernmental organizations.21 Providing coast guard ships as a form of capacity building assistance to ASEAN nations is an example of action in this category. The Japanese government has already provided coast guard vessels and capacity building assistance to Indonesia and Philippines in the past. In 2014, Japan agreed with Vietnam to provide six used coast guard vessels. In 2015, Japan provided four of six vessels to Vietnam.22

20 Ibid.
In September 2014, Prime Minister Abe visited Sri Lanka and agreed to maritime cooperation with President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The joint statement emphasized the importance of sea lane and maritime cooperation as follows.

The two leaders noted the strategic geographical location of Sri Lanka, in the Indian Ocean sea lanes straddling Asia and Africa. Bearing in mind the importance of ensuring the freedom and safety of navigation in the region, the two leaders decided to establish the Sri Lanka-Japan Dialogue on Maritime Security and Oceanic Issues in order to effectively address the issues of mutual interest in oceanic issues. With a view to accelerating cooperation on maritime connectivity, the two leaders shared the intention to also promote cooperation in the maritime sector. President Rajapaksa expressed his expectation for cooperation in the fields of ports and harbors development and marine education.

As a follow through to the agreement, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) assisted the Sri Lanka Coast Guard to enhance activities on marine environment protection and maritime disaster management. JICA in collaboration with Japan’s Coast Guard dispatched Japanese experts to Sri Lanka and accepted Sri Lanka Coast Guard officers in Japan for technical training on maritime oil spill incident management. Providing such capacity building assistance to Sri Lanka could be regarded as a Japanese strength and create synergy with Quad-Plus countries in maritime security and governance.

To realize the agenda of Japan’s proactive cooperation in regional security, Japan needs reliable and like-minded partners. Particularly in the maritime area, Japan regards the Quad-Plus countries as indispensable partners.

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