New Dimensions in Japan’s East Asia Security Policy

Tsuneo “Nabe” Watanabe

Summary of remarks delivered at the 2013 Taiwan-US-Japan Trilateral Security Dialogue
Cohosted by the American Enterprise Institute, the Chinese Council of Advanced Policy Studies, and the Tokyo Foundation
Taipei, Taiwan

October 13, 2013
In recent speeches, Chinese President Xi Jinping has propounded the “Chinese dream,” calling it, “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” At face value, the new term does not contain any overtly aggressive elements. However, neighboring countries that have territorial disputes with China fear that the Chinese dream could include a more assertive foreign policy.

China’s neighbors, including Japan, have welcomed the Obama administration’s rebalance to Asia. At the same time, Asian countries are aware of America’s limited political and financial capital to support the rebalance. Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Hung Son has pointed out that China was rather moderate and cooperative on South China Sea issues before the relative decline of US power and Japanese economic power. Japan is currently facing regular intrusions by Chinese paramilitary vessels into its territory around the Senkaku Islands. These attempts to alter the status quo using paramilitary forces depart from internationally and regionally accepted legal standards.

It is not constructive for East Asian countries to be perpetually on edge over the power balance between the United States and China. Nor is it helpful for the United States and its allies to antagonize China through containment or encirclement. Yet US power is a critically effective tool for encouraging China to be a more cooperative player in the region; the US presence acts as a key deterrent against the use of force to resolve disputes.

Japan has helped shoulder the burden of regional security by supporting a sustainable US presence in Asia. Stability in the South China Sea, and in Southeast Asia generally, is critical to Japan’s physical and economic security, since Japan is heavily dependent on sea lines of communication for vital imports of energy and other raw materials.

To ensure protection of these sea lanes, Japan plans to engage in capacity-building with Southeast Asian countries. These countries face a considerable maritime capability gap with China. In December 2011, the Japanese government, under Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, eased Japan’s self-imposed restrictions on arms exports. Japan has long refrained from exporting weapons, although in the past exceptions were made for the United States. Under the new policy, exceptions can also be granted for cases that contribute to peace and the advancement of international cooperation. The Shinzō Abe administration is planning to provide the Philippines with patrol vessels for its coast.
guard, as well as maritime communication systems through Japan’s overseas development assistance budget.

Japan’s present imperative, however, is to relieve tensions with China over the Senkaku Islands. Through diplomacy, the Abe administration is hoping to reopen communication channels with Beijing en route to eventual reconciliation. The Japanese government is also tackling the legal and institutional hurdles that complicate its crisis-management capability. Such preparations are necessary to prevent accidental escalation of conflicts, a real possibility in cases such as territorial disputes, which can blur the line between war and peace. The Abe administration is also working toward smoother security cooperation with the United States. The legal and institutional reforms underway include revising the official interpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan, which bans the Japanese Self-Defense Forces from engaging in collective defense. Such efforts represent practical and benign steps toward Japan’s goal of further sharing in the responsibility for regional security.