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Japan-China Spat Over Nuclear Arsenal: Is Tokyo Hardening its Security Policy?

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14 July 2010

A recent spat over nuclear arsenal between China and Japan could upset the status quo in East Asia. An ardent propagator of nuclear disarmament, Japan seeks China to comply with other superpowers on nuclear disarmament. Will this Japanese posture, started by Hatoyama, continue under the new prime minister Naoto Kan?

IN A RECENTLY concluded trilateral meeting of Japan, China and South Korea over regional security issues, Japan has urged China to cut its nuclear arsenal or at least to stop stockpiling more atomic weapons, which may disturb, if not undermine, the prevailing status quo in East Asia. Japan raised this in the fourth foreign ministers meeting that was attended by Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada, China's Yang Jiechi and South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Yu Myung-hwan in the South Korea's southeast city of Gyeongju from May 15-16.

China's Reaction

The uncharacteristic message from Japan that China should "at least make efforts not to increase the number of its nuclear weapons and 'show its commitment' to nuclear disarmament", has opened up the possibility of a new round of diplomatic rivalry. China obviously reacted strongly to the suggestion. The Chinese minister said "China's nuclear policy is transparent, legitimate, and above reproach", as he nearly walked out of the talks. Recently the United States and Russia have decided to reduce the deployed nuclear warheads to 1,550 each, 30 percent fewer than the limit set in a 2002 treaty. While China, the fourth largest nuclear power with about 240 operational warheads, has not given any commitment to reduce its stockpile.

On the other hand Beijing is modernising its delivery system with credible second-strike capability. The Telegraph recently reported that China is constructing a secret nuclear submarine base to bolster its capabilities in the Pacific. Although Japan is under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella,

increasing nuclear stockpile in East Asia is a cause for worry for Japan.

Japan's "active" diplomacy on nuclear disarmament

As a victim of nuclear device in World War II, Japan has recently pursued nuclear disarmament as a major component of its foreign policy options. The ruling Democratic Party of Japan has pledged to "work towards a nuclear-free Northeast Asia". While addressing the Diet in January, Foreign Minister Okada said that Japan will pursue "active" and "dynamic" diplomacy, and will be taking the lead role on global issues such as nuclear disarmament. Although then Prime Minister Hatoyama faced domestic criticism of his unimpressive attendance at the global nuclear summit convened by President Obama in April, Tokyo considers advocacy for nuclear disarmament as the thrust to raise its global position.

In February Japan and Australia jointly called for "a world of decreased nuclear risk" and considered "ideas" and "practical steps" towards such a global order. One of the major aspects of such "ideas" is "enhancing the effectiveness of the security assurances" -- something that Japan sought from China.

A change from pacifist to "constructivist" security policy

Japan under Hatoyama, brief though his premiership had been, had sought to "construct" a favourable security environment upon which Tokyo can propel its role and position in Asia. He sought to "change" Japan's domestic and foreign policy including demanding that the US-Japan relationship be based on an "equal footing". Although the Futenma issue is now resolved and Hatoyama is out of office, this DPJ policy might continue under the new Prime Minister Naoto Kan.

A clear indication of a possible continuation of Hatoyama's policy is seen when Kan promulgated, in his first Diet speech, "an exhaustive cleanup of post-war government" and "a foreign and security policy grounded in a sense of responsibility". Before taking over the Prime Minister's post Kan told Reuters that "we can have relations with China, India, Vietnam and other developing countries in which we complement each other in technology and economic structuring". Although Kan might not pursue his foreign policy agenda aggressively, he considers Japan as a politico-economic power in Asia.

Japan feels, however, that China is a major long-term threat to its security inspite of both countries having agreed to enhance relations in a "mutually beneficial" manner. Tokyo is wary about China's military build-up especially its development of blue water naval capabilities. China occasionally flexes its military muscle targeting Japan. The latest incident was an encounter between two Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (MSDF) destroyers, the Choukai and Suzunami, and several Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships, including a pair of submarines and eight destroyers. The incident took place approximately 140 kilometres west-southwest of Okinawa in mid April during an exercise mission to the Pacific. The incident prompted a formal protest from Japan.

In early 2009, China deployed cruise missile-laden destroyers around energy-rich gas fields in the East China Sea, and conducted training exercises in the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. To counter the looming threat from China, Japan is increasing its own defence capabilities and promoting a strategic relationship with friendly countries like Australia and India (other than the US) in order to maintain the regional balance in Asia.

Tokyo's Changing Defence Posture?

Of late, Japan has initiated some changes in its defence structure. In 2006 it upgraded the Self Defence Agency to the Ministry of Defence, and deployed its maritime forces in the Indian Ocean for refuelling mission to the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. Tokyo is also enhancing its naval

power. In the fiscal 2010 defence budget, the government earmarked funds for acquiring new tanks and building a new helicopter-carrying destroyer to enhance the military's deterrence and response capabilities.

In November 2009, Japan commissioned a 248-metre long naval ship DDH-22 -- Japan's largest military vessel since World War II. Defined as a "helicopter-carrying destroyer", it is expected to, among other roles, keep China's active maritime activities in the disputed area in check. Indeed, a robust naval capability is the centrepiece of Japan's defence-oriented security policy.

Hatoyama had proven to be tough on regional security issues and was ready to take on China diplomatically. His successor, Naoto Kan's posture is yet to be clearly defined. But fuelled by historical legacies and territorial disputes, and China's increasing assertiveness concomitant with its military prowess in the geo-strategic landscape of Asia, the Japan-China rivalry is likely to be unpredictable in the years to come.

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