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Southeast Asia's Maritime Security

Japan Sails Into New Territory

By John Bradford

SYNOPSIS

In 2020, Japan set a new precedent for its security cooperation in Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding its "Peace Constitution," Japan can now take defence initiatives in the region like other non-ASEAN states. Still, Prime Minister Suga can be expected to sustain Japan's restrained and balanced approach.

COMMENTARY

JAPAN HAS quietly crossed into new policy territory in its support for Southeast Asia's maritime security. In 2020, Japan began engaging in the full range of peacetime security activities in Southeast Asia normally done by other nations. The most significant breakthrough involved the first-ever sale of a lethal defence system.

The Japanese government will remain politically constrained by domestic anti-militaristic sentiments and can be expected to continue to show self-restraint as it carefully pursues a balanced strategy to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, Tokyo policymakers are no longer strictly limited by past interpretations of Japan's Post-World War II "Peace Constitution" nor the narrow definitions of 'defence' established by its leaders during the Cold War.

Exporting Japan's New Defence System

Today, the Japan Self-Defence Force (JSDF) regularly operates in Southeast Asian waters and engages with regional militaries in the full spectrum of cooperation. The key precedent was set in August 2020 when the Philippines purchased four Mitsubishi Electric Corporation air surveillance radars.

The deal represents the first overseas transfer of a newly manufactured Japanese defence system. Prior to this, Japan's defence equipment exports had been limited to spare parts and non-lethal systems such as unarmed patrol boats and hand-me-down training aircraft.

The new radars will be used to monitor the strategic airspace around the Philippines, including that above the South China Sea. With their fire control quality data, these systems will be an important element to the new "fix→ track→ target→ engage→ assess" kill-chain that the Philippines is establishing through its military modernisation efforts. Their capabilities are sufficiently advanced that similar systems also form critical components of Japan's national air defence system.

More recently, readouts surrounding new prime minister Suga Yoshihide's visit to Indonesia highlighted advanced discussions towards the sale of new-build Japanese destroyers to the Indonesian Navy. Should this come to fruition, it will be a more obvious marker that Japan is engaged in all dimensions of Southeast Asia's maritime security.

Regional Maritime Security: Japan's Support

Japan's 1947 constitution famously declares that it will never maintain a war potential, yet policies almost immediately eroded the purity of that stance. In 1954, the JSDF was established. Still, Japan's posture was decidedly non-aggressive.

For decades, Japan's de facto navy, the Japan Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF), limited its operations to the waters near Japan. Its activities in Southeast Asia were confined to navigation transits, goodwill visits, and logistics support for UN peacekeeping missions.

This restrained stance did not prevent Japan from strongly supporting Southeast Asia's maritime safety and security. In the late 1960s, Japanese support began with the provision of large-scale funding of maritime infrastructure, navigation markers, traffic management technology, and dredging services. These projects were an important part of Japan's success in rebuilding its positive image and overcoming of negative war memories.

In the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the associated spike in Southeast Asian sea robberies, Japan enlarged its role to include capacity-building activities aimed at regional law enforcement agencies. The highly capable Japan Coast Guard (JCG) took a central role in these initiatives.

It was only from around 2010 that the JSDF began to directly engage with Southeast Asian militaries through capacity-building activities and exercises, but limited its focus to non-warfighting missions such as anti-piracy, surveillance, military medicine, and disaster response.

Abe's Southeast Asia Posture

When Abe Shinzo returned as prime minister in 2012 (he previously served in the post in 2006-7), he surprised many by making his first overseas destinations Vietnam,

Thailand, and Indonesia rather than the United States. Japan's support for Indo-Pacific maritime security would be a focus of his nearly eight years in office.

The JCG and JMSDF assumed new roles and missions and Abe linked their activities into a cohesive strategy centrally driven from his office and the new National Security Council.

Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision placed Southeast Asia's maritime space at the nexus of Japan's foreign policy. Maritime capacity building was also the focus under the Vientiane Vision, a 2016 roadmap toward enhanced defence cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian partners.

Additionally, JSDF flatdeck helicopter carriers headlined annual deployments to Southeast Asia, maritime patrol aircraft frequented Philippine airfields, submarines docked in Subic Bay and Cam Ranh Bay, and a new amphibious unit stormed beaches alongside US and Philippine marines during exercise *Balikatan*.

Abe's policy reforms also replaced long-standing prohibitions on weapons exports with a carefully crafted system allowing export of defence systems to partners meeting specific criteria. Five retired training aircraft delivered to the Philippines Navy became the first defence systems to be transferred from the Ministry of Defence to a foreign partner.

Lacking military-grade sensors or weapons, these could not be considered full-fledged military equipment even though the Philippines pressed them into service for maritime patrol. Still, these represented an important capability for the Philippines to enhance its maritime domain awareness and a key precedent paving the way for the recent breakthrough.

What to Expect from PM Suga

In September, Abe handed over power to his policy 'right-hand man,' Suga Yoshihide. We can expect Suga to continue expanding cross-sector support for Southeast Asian maritime security. Indeed, Suga followed Abe's example by heading to Southeast Asia for his first overseas trip.

Maritime security and defence cooperation featured at the centre of his regional diplomatic tour. We can also expect Japan's foreign security policy to follow the balanced low-profile approaches that keep their strategic significance generally under the radar.

Suga is known for his even-keeled approach to policy implementation; we should not expect the diplomatic showmanship of Abe. Suga also understands that Japan's security contributions have been historically welcomed because they de-emphasised the military dimension in favour of assisting the region with other high-priority concerns.

Thus, even as some regional states will increasingly welcome Japanese military contributions, Suga will emphasise economic assistance and capacity-building projects. When it comes to Southeast Asian maritime security, we can expect a greater

presence from Japan, without it being seen as provocative. Its maritime forces will be increasingly available but postured to remain unassuming and sensitive to regional concerns.

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