

The Challenges and Responses to Japan's Maritime Security*

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Abstract

The challenges of maritime security facing Japan are extremely complex. During peacetime and gray zone, the Japanese Coast Guard and the Self-Defense Force must conduct intermittent presence patrols to dynamically deter the adversary's opportunistic expansion. However, when considering seamless escalation from low-intensity aggression to high-intensity conflicts, the forward presence to address Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) threats needs to be deployed by distributed manner. These competing operational demands complicate how to combine the best mix of defense posture and portfolio direction. The assessment of Japan's decision to introduce F-35Bs and modifying the Izumo-class helicopter carrier is emblematic of this complexity. Their combination of high anti-ship attack capabilities can complicate the People's Liberation Army's fleet operations. At the same time, however, high-value assets such as light aircraft carriers carrying latest stealth fighters will also be a priority target for China, which may in turn impose costs on Japan. In recent years, China and Russia have also begun to conduct strategically coordinated operations, such as the joint patrol of Russian and Chinese bombers around Takeshima, a disputed territory between Japan and ROK. This behavior is seen as an attempt to probe the response of Japan and ROK and to further stimulate the deteriorating relations between the two countries. The U.S., Japan, and ROK need to work closely together on how to respond to these challenges.

Thank you very much for inviting me here. As some of you may know, the current Japan and China relationship is improving. For example, President Xi Jinping is scheduled to visit Japan as a state guest next year. However, looking at the East China Sea, the activities of the Chinese Coast Guard and People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and PLA Air Force have become increasingly active rather than restrained. In other words, diplomatic relations between Japan and China have been irrelevant to China's behavior in the East China Sea.

So, what kind of activities especially is China doing in the East China Sea? I would like to at first talk about the low-intensity activities, which means these activities are not regularly undertaken by armed forces. They are often of closed focus on the Chinese Coast Guard and maritime police vessels.

The activities of the Chinese government vessels in the East China Sea, especially around the Senkaku Islands, have become more active and regular since Japan's decision to nationalize the

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Senkaku Islands in 2012. The Chinese Coast Guard vessels navigate the contiguous zone almost every day, when the weather is fine, and they enter into Japanese territorial waters three times a month on the average—in the security and intelligence community in Tokyo, they have informally called these activities “3-3-2 Method.”

This means that three Coast Guard vessels enter into the Japanese territorial water around the Senkaku Islands three times each month, remaining in the water for two hours. But, since September 2016, this method was upgraded to “3-4-2 Method.” In other words, the Chinese Coast Guard increased the number of vessels from three to four.

In my understanding, the long-term Chinese objective is to create change in the status quo and making it a *fait accompli* through their regular activities nearby the Senkaku and in the East China Sea.

So, why has the Chinese Coast Guard been able to increase the number of the vessels in the operation? This is because they are rapidly building the Coast Guard ships. For example, in 2012, the Chinese Coast Guard had just 40 vessels weighing more than 1,000 tons, but now—now meaning in 2019, this number has increased to 135.

At present, the average weight of the Chinese Coast Guard vessels operating in the East China Sea is 3,000 tons while that of Japan Coast Guard vessels is 1,500 tons. It is obvious that Japan Coast Guard is inferior to the Chinese Coast Guard, both in quality and quantity in the East China Sea.

In addition to the hardware, another important point is the software, which means the command and control. In July 2018, the Chinese Coast Guard was placed under the command of the Chinese People’s Armed Police Forces, under the Central Military Commissions. The People’s Armed Police is a paramilitary group, and the Chinese Coast Guard is expected to be more closely coordinated with be the PLA than before. Japan has long sought to make the defense posture seamless, but it cannot be overlooked that China is making progress in updating its defense posture to be seamless and integrated.

Now, let’s move on to the upgraded PLA forces and its characteristics. First, the intelligence-gathering vessels and aircrafts are operating in the area closer to the Senkaku Islands. Second, as the Pentagon annual reports pointed out, the over-water presence of the PLA Air Force bombers is increasing. In particular, they are conducting joint exercise with PLA Navy vessels, including aircraft carriers, more frequently, and most of these joint exercises go around Taiwan via Miyako Strait and Bashi Channel.

In my understanding, those kind of strategic collaborations and operations between China and Russia had been expected as a near term potential by Japan’s security and intelligence community.

From that perspective, couple of months ago, I had an opportunity to participate in Japan, the U.S., and the Republic of Korea (ROK) trilateral track 1.5 and track 2 dialogue. At that time, I mentioned and made recommendation about the potential that Chinese or Russian air force fly over to Japan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ). In terms of the ADIZ in in the East China Sea, a part of the area in Japan’s ADIZ is overlapped with South Korean ADIZ, and China’s ADIZ. So in that context, I recommended the ROK colleagues that Japan and South Korean air force should have more prior discussion on how to deal with such contingencies and what the rule of engagement would be like for our air forces if that occurs.

With some political struggle between the two countries, my perspective about the current Japan–South Korean relationship is not so optimistic, but I think that is one of the possible areas to cooperate with each other.

And third, the PLA operational area extended far beyond from the East China Sea. This includes not only Kyushu, Shikoku, and Honshu of Japan. The concern is that most bomber, like H-6Ks and Chinese surface ships and submarines bound for the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Islands, Pacific side, can carry long-range cruise missiles.

These activities are conducted in the peace time, and not necessarily in the wartime, but we need to be aware that not only ballistic missile attack from mainland China, but also saturation attack with the cruise missile from the mobile platforms of land, sea, and air, is becoming an emerging threat for Japan and the forward presence of the U. S.

So that is one of the major perspectives from the lower-intensity and the high-intensity operations.

In that context, I would like to add in some other challenges. In my initial remarks, I pointed out the low-intensity challenges and high-intensity challenges—I think it could be paraphrased as the combination of the gray zone challenges and A2/AD challenges. The problem is how to deal with such combination. When we face such kind of challenges, we have to consider the balance between maintaining presence through patrol in the peacetime and reducing the vulnerabilities in the wartime.

The issue of the gray zone has already been recognized in the security communities of Japan by 2010. As a result, the 2010 version of the National Defense Program Guideline already described the importance of the dynamic deterrence concept as one of the solutions for gray zone challenges.

In my understanding of this concept, it increased the number of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities or the presence patrol by Japan's Coast Guard and Self Defense Forces in the area with concerns for gray zone challenges. It tried to prevent the making of physical windows of opportunities.

I think that the 2018 version—the latest version of the National Defense Program Guideline—basically followed the same directions. The problem is, however, that our resources are limited, so we need to prioritize the defense investment for the most effective means. In that context arise the challenges which I already mentioned—how do we deal with the combination of the gray zone challenges and A2/AD challenges.

So, why am I concerned especially about this area? It is because of the importance for Japan's Coast Guard vessels and Self Defense Forces to continue their activities in order to prevent the Chinese side from attempting to create a *fait accompli* or engaging in the probing activities.

I think that those kind of efforts as the refurbishment of the Izumo-class helicopter carriers, and the potential combinations with the F-35B, which have been decided to the latest National Defense Program Guideline, will enhance Japan's capabilities necessary for the presence patrols in the peacetime and during the gray zone situations.

However, given China's anti-access/area denial capabilities, it is extremely risky to deploy these high-value platforms forward, as some contingencies happen at once. In particular, Beijing has some incentive to use anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles carried by variety of platforms early in the confrontation to counter Japan's advantages.

For instance, the stealth assets like F-35, are hard to detect and intercept in the air, and therefore, the detection and neutralization have much higher probability of success while these assets are on the ground or on ships. So, the forward presence in the peacetime and the reduction of its vulnerability, through some dispersal measures in the wartime, are very competing demand. It is extremely difficult to balance them. So that is one of my current major concerns about dealing with this combination.