

15 November 2012

A Spider's Web to Catch a Dragon? The South China Sea Disputes and Japanese Aid Policy in Southeast Asia

China and Japan continue to compete for influence across the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, the competition is prompting Japan to make some interesting policy choices, writes Tom French. One of them includes pursuing closer cooperation with the US's regional allies.

By Tom French for ISN

Behind the well-publicized souring of Japan-China relations caused by the purchase of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands by the Japanese central government lies a larger picture of increasing polarization across North and South East Asia. The United State's strategic '[pivot](#)' towards Asia is being accompanied by a drive by Washington and many pro-US countries to co-operate more closely in the face of a 'rising' and potentially belligerent China. The past year has seen what some consider the beginnings of a move away from the Cold War era '[hub and spoke](#)' system of bilateral security alliances, towards a more interconnected 'spider's web' relationship between the pro-US states of East Asia.

Such a shift of alliances became apparent in June when Japan and the Republic of Korea came close to signing [a deal to enhance technology and intelligence co-operation](#). However, South Korea's internal politics and the ongoing territorial dispute over [Takeshima \(Dokdo\)](#) prevented the conclusion of the agreement at the last minute (it may be signed once the South Korean presidential election is decided in December). Failure to reach an agreement also serves as a timely reminder of the [influence that history](#) - particularly the Second World War - still exerts on modern East Asia.

Japan's Southeast Asian 'tilt'

Japan had more success in the Philippines with regard to its efforts of creating a more integrated pro-US bloc. The Philippines, another close ally of the US, has a major maritime territorial dispute with China over the Spratley Islands. Unlike in the case of South Korea, Japan's approach to improving ties with the Philippines focused upon the strategic use of official development assistance (ODA). In April, Japan announced its intention in the 2+2 Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee to use ODA to '[promote safety in the region . . . through providing coastal states with patrol boats](#)'. [The first such deal was concluded](#) with the Philippines in late July. Although officially designated for "[various maritime safety and law enforcement issues, such as piracy and search and rescue.](#)" it seems

increasingly clear that the ten patrol boats and two larger vessels Japan intends to give to the Philippines are intended to strengthen its ability to resist Chinese pressure in the South China Sea. They also form part of a broader change in the use of Japan's vast ODA resources in Southeast Asia to assist friendly states enhance their infrastructure, industry and military capacities. This strategy wins (or perhaps buys) Japan, and the emerging US bloc, a number of benefits.

By increasing the strength of the South East Asian states' maritime capabilities (particularly those with ongoing territorial disputes with China), Chinese maritime resources will have to increasingly focus upon *both* North and South East Asia. This will require the diversion of resources and units to its southern commands in order for China to maintain its currently favorable balance of power across the region. Chinese naval strategy may also need to be adjusted to account for the enhanced capabilities of its rivals in the South China Sea. Chinese coastguard and naval units, for example, may need to be upgraded and / or replaced in order to more effectively deal with the technologically advanced boats that the Japanese are likely to provide.

The strategic provision of ODA not only strengthens bilateral ties between Japan and individual Southeast Asian states, it may also lead to improved diplomatic ties within the pro-US bloc. Moreover, Japan's improving ties with Southeast Asia may also serve to strengthen the US-Japan alliance. Over the past year, relations between Tokyo and Washington have been strained due to the ongoing deadlock over the [relocation of the Futenma base](#), [worries over the safety of the Osprey aircraft](#) and [recent alleged crimes by US servicemen](#). However, despite these problems and the backlash they provoke - particularly among Okinawans - the Japanese government still sees the US-Japan alliance as its most important bilateral relationship. The recent [escalation of the dispute over the Senkaku \(Diaoyu\) islands](#) and the rising wave of anti-Japanese sentiment in China have reminded Tokyo that an effective and sustainable US-Japan alliance is perhaps the greatest guarantee of Japan's security in a rapidly changing Asia Pacific.

To demonstrate the changing dynamics of the region, a number of commentators have also cited the [first ever failure of ASEAN to agree a joint communiqué](#) as evidence of the emergence of a rift within the organization between states leaning towards China and those with closer ties with the United States. With the emergence of this possible fragmentation into pro-Chinese and pro-US blocs, integration of the resource-rich states of Southeast Asia into the American centered group would clearly be seen as a benefit to both Japan and the US. Consequently, it may also have been a secondary motivation behind Japan's decision to target its ODA in a more strategic way across the region.

Finally, the provision of the maritime vessels, and the development aid which accompanies them, may provide new business opportunities for a still struggling Japanese economy. This change marks something of a fundamental and underreported shift in Japanese defense and aid policy. From the late 1960s onwards, Japan's ['three principles on arms exports'](#) set such stringent restrictions on the arms trade that the export of military hardware became exceptionally difficult. Recently, Japan has begun to relax its stance and allow arms exports and defense co-operation with other friendly, pro-US states. The [first of these agreements](#) was signed with the United Kingdom in April 2012.

Asia's 'pro-US' Camp

Tokyo's increasingly warm diplomatic ties with Southeast Asia, coupled with its strategic use of ODA, may also suggest that Japan is gradually overcoming the [antimilitarist norm](#) prevalent in its society since 1945. Not only have these policies been met with little in the way of domestic opposition, they come at a time when profile of more conservative politicians in Japan - such as [Shinzo Abe](#), [Toru Hashimoto](#), and [Shintaro Ishihara](#) - has never been higher. Whether their media appeal will translate into electoral success or has more to do with the ongoing domestic political malaise in Japan, remains

to be seen. Nevertheless, despite their alleged 'nationalism' most of these politicians, while occasionally bristling over the impact of US bases on the country, do not seek to abandon the US-Japan alliance. Indeed, many Japanese politicians even seek to strengthen it, albeit on more equitable terms.

Accordingly, with both the current government and opposition seeking closer ties with Washington and the promotion of better regional diplomatic relations, it seems as if an increasingly integrated pro-US camp is emerging across the Asia Pacific region. Enhanced defense cooperation and economic relations, driven in part by the erosion of Japan's antimilitarist norm and arms export restrictions, are seen as essential instruments of foreign and security policies in the face of a rising, and increasingly assertive, China.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Uncomfortable Truths: Breaking the Impasse in the South China Sea](#)

[The South China Sea: "Good Friends, Good Partners, Good Neighbors"? Good Luck!](#)

[South China Sea: Emerging Security Architecture](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's featured [editorial content](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

Thomas French is an Associate Professor in the College of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto. His research interests include US-Japan relations, Northeast Asian security and the Japanese Self Defence Forces.

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=154873>

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland