



**Weighing Japan's South China Sea options** by Ralph A. Cossa

Ralph A. Cossa ([Ralph@pacforum.org](mailto:Ralph@pacforum.org)) is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS.

Dateline Tokyo. *"Japan weighs course of action in disputed South China Sea."*

Today's lead story in *The Japan Times* (headline cited above) notes that "some senior US military and diplomatic officials have pressed [Japanese Prime Minister] Abe to dispatch the Self-Defense Forces on joint patrols with the United States in the South China Sea." While the officials are not further identified, the article later states that US Pacific Command chief Admiral Harry Harris has said that "the US would welcome Japanese participation during patrol operations in the South China Sea."

Well, not exactly! What Admiral Harris actually said, in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun* National Security Correspondent Yoichi Kato in June is "I view the South China Sea as international water, not territorial water of any country, and so Japan is welcome to conduct operations on the high seas as Japan sees fit." Japanese officials acknowledge that the US has not officially asked Japan to participate in joint patrols in the South China Sea . . . nor should it!

The greatest maritime challenge to Japan's national security interests is in the East China Sea, not the South China Sea (illegal as Chinese claims to 12-mile limits around man-made islands which would otherwise remain under water at high tide might be), and that is where Tokyo should be (and indeed is) focusing its attention. Actively challenging China's questionable territorial claims in the South China Sea will likely cause an increase in aggressive Chinese naval activity against the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands (called Diaoyu Islands by China) and would thus prove counter-productive to Japan's security interests.

However, the reverse should also be true. While the situation in the East China Sea appears relatively stable at present, should Beijing once again become more aggressive in asserting its claims to the Senkakus/Diaoyu Islands, Tokyo should announce that, as a quid pro quo, Japanese Freedom of Navigation patrols may start taking place in the South China Sea. In this case, Japanese actions in the South China Sea would not stimulate an aggressive Chinese response in the East China Sea but themselves be the result of Chinese provocations. Chinese actions would be the cause; Japanese patrols would be the effect, as opposed to the other way around.

All this is not to say that Japan does not have an important role to play in Southeast Asia. But I would argue that that role should be focused not on maritime challenges (a US specialty for many years, and not just against specious Chinese claims)

but on maritime capacity building. Japan is already a leader in this field, helping to establish ReCAAP (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia) to enhance regional anti-piracy efforts and taking a lead role in bringing regional Coast Guards together. Its offer of 10 Coast Guard patrol boats to the Philippines was another positive step in this direction, as was the agreement (announced during Defense Minister Gen Nakatani's current visit to Vietnam) to accelerate maritime training and exchange programs (including a promised Japanese ship visit to Cam Ranh Bay within a year).

Almost all the maritime nations of Southeast Asia have one thing in common: they are ill-equipped to monitor, much less defend their own sovereign territory and exclusive economic zones. These nations would welcome an increase in Japanese maritime capacity building efforts, which should take the form not just of patrol boat deliveries, but also by providing surveillance and telecommunications equipment, plus more joint military training and exercises during more frequent ship visits and alongside regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) and search and rescue multilateral training efforts. Focusing its overseas development assistance (ODA) to address maritime capacity shortfalls would also pay huge dividends to Japan's friends in Southeast Asia.

Prime Minister Abe and senior Japanese officials are becoming more frequent visitors to Southeast Asia and this renewed focus on this important region is well-appreciated and long overdue. Sending Japanese ships to conduct FON patrols in the region is not the most effective use of Japanese maritime resources however, and could prove counterproductive, absent increased Chinese aggressiveness in the East China Sea. Instead Tokyo should continue to focus its efforts on maritime capacity building, an area where even a modest contribution can make a big difference.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*