

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

NPI

Nakasone Yasuhiro
Peace Institute

JIIA

The Japan Institute of
International Affairs

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

Editorial Advisory Board:

Akio Watanabe (Chair)
Ichiro Fujisaki
Masashi Nishihara
Kenichiro Sasae

Editorial Committee:

Tsutomu Kikuchi
Fumiaki Kubo
Tsuyoshi Sunohara
Shujiro Urata and
Tomiko Ichikawa

Editor & Online Publisher:

Kenichiro Sasae
President, JIIA

No. 285

2 February 2021

A SECURITY POLICY FOR JAPAN TO DEAL WITH CHINA'S ACTIVE STRATEGY

Bonji Ohara

- China's national strategy is shifting from a passive to an active strategy, and its impact on the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region is increasing.
- China is trying to create circumstances rather than simply reacting to them. For example, it has shifted from a strategy of avoiding US pressure to a strategy of not allowing the US to interfere. This is made possible by China's economic and military power.
- In order to respond to China's attempts to change the status quo by force, cooperation among countries, centered on the alliance with the US, is necessary. Japan should play a major role in achieving this.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

China's national strategy is not necessarily focused on the Indo-Pacific region. However, it does have a significant impact on the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. The fact that China's national strategy is shifting from a passive to an active strategy makes its impact even greater.

Strategies are designed to fill the gap between national goals and current circumstances. Therefore, strategies are formulated to deal with the challenges faced when a nation tries to achieve its national goals. In order to describe China's national goals, we must start by considering the goal of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This is because China has an authoritarian political system ruled by the Communist Party.

The CPC's goal is to continue its stable rule of China. To achieve this, one of China's national goals is to maintain the Communist Party's authority over the people, and the means of achieving this goal is to develop the economy and gain a dominant position in the international community. China's national goals remain the same, but the circumstances surrounding China are changing, so it is only natural that its strategy will change.

China's "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" is based on a 2012 article "March Westward: The Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy" insisting that China revise its geopolitical strategy in response to the lack of economic development in inland China and expected US pressure.

China's national strategy was to develop trade between inland China and Central Asia and expand its activities westward, thereby avoiding conflict with the US, in order to overcome these challenges and achieve its national goals.

However, China's strategy is changing. A shift is being made from a passive strategy focused on responding to current circumstances to an active strategy seeking to mold circumstances to China's advantage. This has been made possible by China's economic and military power.

The fact that China has begun to adopt an active strategy has prompted increased concern among Japan, the US, and other neighboring countries. Although China's BRI began with a westward expansion of economic activities and military operations to avoid conflict with the US, China is now actively trying to block US interference.

China's arms buildup and aggressive military operations to create a favorable situation for itself is worsening the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. Even if China claims that it is trying to prevent the US from interfering, China's provocative military operations as well as its seizure of reefs and rocks in the South China Sea (SCS) and construction of military facilities thereon are nothing but a threat to the security and interests of neighboring countries.

China, which is inferior to the US in strategic nuclear power, is trying to build up its intermediate-range nuclear weapons, which the US could not possess due to the INF Treaty, block the US Navy with anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) and cruise missiles, and even limit the US Navy's access to the Indian Ocean by controlling the SCS.


Furthermore, another Chinese objective in controlling the SCS is to guarantee the finality of retaliatory attacks against the US. For China's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) deployed on Hainan Island, which is in the SCS, to safely conduct their strategic patrols, they must eliminate US Navy anti-submarine warfare (ASW) operations from the SCS.

The US will not tolerate a nuclear strike on its own territory. Japan also cannot allow military control of the SCS by any country. In its Defense White Paper 2020, the Japanese government expressed concern about the situation in the SCS when describing the changing security environment around Japan. The SCS, which connects the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, is an important maritime transportation route for Japan. Dividing the Indo-Pacific will have direct negative economic and security impacts on Japan and other countries.

To avoid these negative impacts, Japan should strengthen its economic, diplomatic, and military presence in the Indo-Pacific region, including the SCS. It is difficult, however, for Japan alone to maintain the "free and open" condition of this region. Strengthening the Japan-US alliance is vital to prevent China from changing the status quo by force.

Getting support for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) from other countries in the region is also essential to ensure stability in this region. There are two multilateral cooperation initiatives particularly important to achieve this goal. One is the quadrilateral cooperation among Japan, the US, Australia and India, which share the same values and respect for human rights. In the military sphere, such cooperation can cover the vast Indo-Pacific region.

Another important initiative is to make Southeast Asian countries an influential and unified actor. An FOIP cannot be achieved without the cooperation of Southeast Asian countries. It is important that these countries build their own capacity to maintain order in the SCS, but a more important effort is developing the economy of the Southeast Asian region. China cannot ignore Southeast Asia when trying to change the status quo in the SCS if that region is an influential economic actor.

On the other hand, it is difficult for Japan and the US to establish cooperative relations with Southeast Asian countries, even if the US were simply to ask them for cooperation unilaterally. Although the quadrilateral military cooperation is vital, Japan also should play a major role in this initiative to establish a cooperative regional network by using its diplomatic and economic capabilities. 

Bonji OHARA is Senior Fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.