How to Pacify the South China Sea: a Japanese Perspective

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Japan can rattle its saber virtually by dispatching its submarine tender/rescue ships. This essay will discuss why and how this would be possible through analyzing Japan’s naval capabilities. It will also elaborate hard- and soft-balancing effects thereof vis-à-vis growing China’s naval power.

By engaging in the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP), the U.S. has recently endeavored to check China’s coercive move against the territorial status quo in the South China Sea. U.S. major naval surface combatant vessels continually transit within 12 nautical miles of some of China’s artificially constructed islands there, challenging China’s territorial claims over them.

Sharing similar maritime interests, Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed explicit support without mentioning of any concrete plan for Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) to partake regularly in the FONOP. In fact, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga confirmed November 2015 that Japan had no such plan. Now with new authority granted by the National Security Laws of 2015, however, the Abe administration is evidently exploring effective measures. Meanwhile, binational naval exercises have been conducted in the South China Sea, as opportunities arises when anti-piracy JMSDF flotillas and P3-C anti-submarine/maritime surveillance aircraft are on the way to and back from the Gulf of Aden and the coastal waters off Somalia.

Certainly, JMSDF’s continual presence has been made and will be kept possible under the politico-legal cover of anti-piracy, disaster relief, humanitarian, and other non-traditional military operations. But, such limited presence is totally insufficient to match growing China’s challenge, while as necessary as has been. This essay will explore how the JMSDF can rattle the saber within the existing politico-legal and capability constraints, dramatically enhancing its check against China.

This approach assumes that an additional high-profile yet unprovoking measure is essential to cope with increasingly coercive China. This also admonishes against continuation of the longtime soft and nuanced approach centered on non-traditional operations, which many ambivalent regional middle and small powers prefer due to their growing security concerns and economic dependency vis-à-vis China.
1. Japan’s Limited Naval Power

JMSDF’s capability, both the quantity of its major surface combatants as well as manpower, constitutes a primary impediment to active participation in the FONOP, despite its arguably second largest blue water navy next to the U.S. navy among its allies. True, it possesses significantly more major surface combatants than the Royal and the French navies, though no nuclear-powered submarine or fix-wing aircraft carrier. Yet, given that around-the-clock sustained operation requires three shifts for current operation, training, and maintenance, JMSDF does not have sufficient spare capacity for the FONOP, due to the need for high preparedness in Northeast Asia, the world’s allegedly most intense strategic cockpit. Also, JMSDF has been burdened by the ongoing anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden.

Here come JMSDF submarines involving semi-strategic offensive sea denial capability. Facing their threat, real or perceived, Chinese navy would be forced to take anti-submarine warfare measures for defending the home ports of the South China Fleet. Then the Fleet’s surface and subsurface combatants would find it very difficult to transit to the East China Sea and, more generally, while seeing China’s sea lanes of communication jeopardized, particularly those between the South, East, and North Sea Fleets.

2. Significant Japanese Submarine Warfare Capability

The JMSDF at present has 19 world’s largest conventional submarines, including two as auxiliary training submarines. It will have 24 subs in 2021 by commissioning one each for the next five years and decommissioning none while following in the international standard by extending the commission period from 16 to 30 years.

These subs are extremely quite in underwater operation, and extraordinarily difficult to locate them. It is generally understood that, under some specific conditions, such as ambush or low-velocity operation in littoral waters, they are more than on a par with U.S. nuclear attack submarines, at least as demonstrated in submarine warfare exercise. It is well known that Chinese navy lacks meaningful anti-submarine warfare capability, including fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, and an effective database of subs’ acoustic signatures that would not be able to construct soon, given the significant quietening down already achieved by Japanese as well as other major navies’ advanced subs.

During the Cold War, the JMSDF publicized that its sub operation doctrine long aimed at attacking Soviet submarines as well as major surface combatants at three chock points against the home port of the Soviet Pacific
Fleet, Nakhodka: the Straits of Soya, Tsugaru, and Tsushima. Today it remains as the legacy raison d'être of JMSDF subs. Even given the three shift requirement, with the peacetime deployment of a sub each to the three straits, JMSDF has a more than sufficient number of spare subs to regularly dispatch one to the South China Sea. With the deployment of two subs on defense readiness condition in the three straits, JMSDF barely has such capability to dispatch a sub to the South China Sea once in a while.

Notably, JMSDF seven most advanced Soryu-class subs with Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP), which displaces 2900 tons, are capable to transit and operate extensively in the South China Sea. It has to be noted that smaller subs, with the standard displacement of 1500 tons or less would satisfy operational needs in Japan’s coastal waters. The very fact that JMSDF came to have significantly larger subs with the standard displacement of 2000 tons or more in the latter half of the Cold War period means that it had significantly wider waters of its subs’ operational interests than generally assumed, most probably, including the Sea of Okhotsk and significant portions of the western Pacific. In April 2016, the JMSDF had an AIP-equipped training sub call at the Subic Bay, the Philippines, signaling Japanese subs’ presence in the South China Sea.

3. Utilizing Japan’s Submarine Rescue Capability

Given the secretive nature of submarine patrol operation, however, it is almost impossible to exert its deterrence effects on China without purposely creating her strong perception of Japanese subs’ presence. In order to overcome this seeming contradiction, the JMSDF has to consider dispatching its submarine tender/rescue ships in the South China Sea, with the presence of which China cannot but assume that of the subs, with or without their actual being there. By so doing, Japan can rattle its saber virtually.

Besides, JMSDF’s sub tender/rescue capability, including platform, operational experience, and personnel training, will be an effective policy tool to deepen its cooperation with Southeast Asian and other regional powers’ navies, for example, given that Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Taiwan possess subs but not sub tender/rescue ships, and that Singapore’s capability remains very limited. No wonder that these subs are underused due to their dearth of rescue capability, rendering them a mere prestige item. The JMSDF could assist these navies in this functional area and activate the potential of their sub power, generating some major capability-based hard counter-balancing effects on rapidly growing Chinese naval power in the South China Sea that has
already overwhelmed regional power's total naval power.

In particular, this kind of rescue operation can be justified well as non-combat humanitarian activities, while strengthening the sense of regional solidarity through military diplomacy and exchange that involves significant soft counter-balancing effect on China’s growing coercive diplomacy. Also, this approach could even emancipate Taiwan’s navy from international isolation consequent upon the lack of substantial experience of binational naval exercise with the U.S. navy and multinational one with the U.S. and its major allies' navies. This results from Taiwan’s lack of de jure statehood under China’s overwhelming political power. China could hardly oppose humanitarian operation, and, should it attempt to bulldoze, the JMSDF could simply propose to offer a similar exchange and service to the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Then, should PLAN take such an offer, the JMSDF could be able to keep military exchange with it that has been prone to frequent interruptions due to the wild fluctuation of Sino-Japanese political relations, and, possibly, to obtain scarce information on the enigmatic realities of PLAN submarines, such as technological performance, personnel proficiency, and fleet organization.

Today the JMSDF has only two submarine tender/rescue ships, one Chihaya-class with the standard displacement of 5,450 tons and another Chiyoda-class with that of 3,600 tons. The latter is hardly sufficient for extended inter-theater operation. When one of them operates in the areas surrounding Japan with the other inoperable, there will be none in the South China Sea. The two ships setup assumes subs' operation only in the waters near Japan, each homeported in Kure and Yokosuka, and, considering the great military and political potential of submarine tender/rescue function, has become the already obsolete modus operandi that used to be tenable only in the Cold war period. The JMSDF needs to have an additional large inter-theater sub tender/rescue ship or two at its early convenience, even by converting a commercial vessel.

In the age of fiscal austerity involving hard choice in defense acquisition, it is not easy to place a priority on the investment in a non-frontline platform such as sub tender/rescue ships. But, it is high time that, to achieve the aforementioned policy goals, the JMSDF convince the Japanese political leadership of its great multiple utilities. The governments and navies of regional middle and small powers are advised to walk in the policy line, and to request the Japanese government and the JMSDF for naval cooperation in sub rescue function.
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