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What Happens in the South China Sea, Matters in the East China Sea: Japan's Reaction to the South China Sea Arbitration Ruling

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Matthew Short, researcher at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Pushing Japan to be a more proactive member of the international system, Abe has advocated for and employed Japan as a guardian of global commons, especially the maritime commons, to ensure they remain open and beneficial to everyone.”

In the aftermath of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 500-page ruling in favor of the Philippines' challenge to the legality of China's "Nine-Dashed Line" claims in the South China Sea (SCS), Japan's reaction displays two congruent, yet different, influences directing Japanese maritime policy. On the one hand, Japan's response calling for all parties to adhere to the ruling, peacefully resolve their disputes, and refrain from taking any unilateral actions, represents Japan's long held position of maintaining and upholding the international liberal order based on the rule of law. At the same time, however, Japan is also becoming more directly engaged, security-wise, in the SCS as China becomes more provocative in its actions towards Japanese maritime claims in the East China Sea (ECS), suggesting that national interests are also heavily influencing Japan's decision making. Understanding how both influences have directed Japanese maritime policy in the past suggests how Japanese maritime policy in this post-arbitration period is likely to develop.

For an island nation with few natural resources of its own, how the seas are governed greatly influences Japan's national prosperity and security. Like many nations in the Asia-Pacific, Japan is heavily reliant on the maritime trade across the SCS for its economic survival, with more than 80% of its oil supply and roughly 70% of its trade traversing through it. Consequently, the ability of such maritime traffic to safely travel through the SCS openly and freely has always been a national security priority of Japan. Despite decades of heavy involvement in the region economically through the funding of numerous infrastructure and governance capacity building efforts, Japan's direct security involvement in the region, until very recently, has been limited and constrained due to historical WWII grievances towards Japan and constitutional restrictions on the Japanese security forces. As a result, Japan has traditionally had to rely on its ally, the United States, and both customary and international rules and norms to ensure the seas remain open and free.

Since the return to power of Prime Minister Abe in December 2012, Japan has adopted a more active role in upholding the liberal international order, with a visible emphasis being placed on the security and governance aspects of the maritime domain. Emphasizing Japan's desire for the seas to be governed by the rule of international law, and not by the "rule of might," Abe has orchestrated a renovation in how Japan styles itself and its role in the international order. Pushing Japan to be a more proactive member of the international system, Abe has advocated for and employed Japan as a guardian of global commons, especially the maritime commons, to ensure they remain open and beneficial to everyone. Likewise, he has also built closer ties with surrounding

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and concurring “mature maritime democracies” (India, Australia, and the United States), forming what he dubs a “Democratic Security Diamond” over the Indo-Pacific region, in an effort to safeguard and keep open the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the Western Pacific.

Specifically in the SCS, Japan’s involvement has developed over the decades from one of limited engagement to being an active but still restrained partner. In 2004, as a response to the increasing number of piracy attacks in the SCS shipping lanes, Japan played a major role in the implementation of the ReCAAP agreement (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia). Under Abe’s leadership Japan’s involvement has increased significantly, with Japan building closer than ever before diplomatic, economic, and security ties with the maritime states in the SCS, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. Diplomatically, Japan was an early supporter of the Philippines’ pursuit of third-party arbitration to resolve its dispute with China, advocating it as a peaceful unbiased solution that used law and not military power to settle the uncertainty over competing claims. Meanwhile, recent changes in Japan’s security laws have enabled Japan to increase its security ties with states in the SCS. These new efforts have included the selling and donating of maritime law enforcement equipment to the Vietnamese and Philippine Coast Guards, maritime security related capacity-building efforts to nearly all SCS states, and joint maritime security exercises between the Japanese and Philippine Coast Guards and Defense Forces.

National interests in both the SCS and ECS also factor into the Japan’s maritime policy decision-making, particularly in regards to Japan’s increasingly active involvement in the SCS. With China’s military and economic power rising relative to Japan’s, there has been a growing concern within Japan that China’s claims over the SCS are an effort to gain strategic control over the vital sea lanes. In response, Japan has been one of the most forthright nations speaking out against China’s island building efforts and militarization in the SCS, consistently calling for their immediate cessation. Additionally, it has continued the process of reorienting the Japanese Self-Defense Force towards the southern ends of its territory, a process started in 2010. Lastly, Japan has sought to curtail China’s growing influence in the SCS by increasing its ties there, emphasizing the quality of its investments over China’s quantity.

At the same time, China has become more provocative towards Japanese maritime claims in the ECS. This presents two possible rationales behind Japanese policy towards the SCS. One possibility is that Japan’s actions in the SCS are an attempt to avert China from dominating the region and thereby misconstruing international “law” in a way that could enable China to gain an advantage in the ECS. Equally likely, is the possibility that Japan, increasingly aggravated by China’s constant provocations in the ECS, is “taking the fight to China’s ‘turf’” by weighing in on the SCS disputes. Regardless of which rationale is true, national interests are nonetheless heavily influencing Japanese maritime policy.

For the near term, Japan will continue to advocate for China and the Philippines to adhere to the arbitration ruling and settle their dispute peacefully, rebuking demands by China that Tokyo should not be involved. For the long term, Japan is likely to continue to increase its security ties with SCS states and its direct activity in the SCS, believing it is important to ensure the rule of law is maintained and its national interests are preserved; following the mantra that “what happens over there (in the SCS) matters over here (in the ECS).”

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