

Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 417 | March 26, 2018

Japan's Oceania Engagement and Maritime Security

BY RIEKO HAYAKAWA

This May, The 8th triennial Japan-Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8) will be held in Fukushima. It will be hosted by the Japanese government and co-chaired by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan and Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi of Samoa. Maritime security will likely be a major agenda item.

Last year, two study groups made up of Japanese parliament members were convened. One was on Pacific Island Countries (PICs), and the other on ocean policy. The parliament members were keen to learn about current PICs maritime security issues and Chinese expansion in this region. Subsequently, they submitted a letter of requests about PALM8 to Japan's Finance Minister Aso and Foreign Minister Kishida. These letters coincided with the publication of the government's next basic ocean policy that emphasize maritime security and Prime Minister Abe's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The focus on PICs' maritime security is important. Fourteen PICs have large, strategic EEZs in the Indo-Pacific region. But the PICs have limited capacity for ocean management. Most PICs have large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) that are hundreds or thousands of times the size of their landmasses, and few ships, planes and equipment to monitor them.

The PICs' GDP-to-population ratio gives an indication of their national capacity limits to manage their ocean resources. For example, compare Japan and Palau. The EEZ per person of Japan is approximately one baseball field, while in Palau it is 1000 fields. In Japan the GDP is \$1 million per square kilometer of EEZ, while in Palau it is \$400.

Additionally, large sections of the Pacific Ocean are lawless spaces for a range of transnational crimes, such as human trafficking, illicit drugs, illegal fishing, and illegal immigration. Weak maritime security in the PICs, a by-product of weak economic security, undermines the whole Indo-Pacific. While there is sincere respect for the decades of the Australian government's Pacific Patrol Boat program, the majority of PICs received only a single patrol boat. That, combined with limited human resources and large operation costs, leaves maritime security vulnerable. All of these factors are compounded by the emergence of China as a major stakeholder in the Pacific Ocean.

In 2008 Admiral Timothy J. Keating of PACOM warned that the PLA had an interest in dividing the Pacific Ocean between China and the United States. Although it made the news, few took his warning seriously. One exception was Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, Chair of the Nippon Foundation, a Japanese NGO. He wanted to make a Japanese contribution to peace focused on the Micronesian region where Japan has deep ties, and contribute to strengthening the Japan-US alliance,

Over the past decade, the Nippon Foundation has not only provided patrol boats to Micronesian countries, but also established a dialogue between Micronesian countries, as well as with the United States and Australia. In January 2018, the Nippon Foundation handed over the sub-regional maritime

Dr. Rieko Hayakawa,
founder of the Sasakawa
Pacific Islands Fund,
explains that "The United
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The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

coordination center in Palau. This center originated out of a concept by Dr. Sam Bateman and Dr. Anthony Bergin of Australia.

The reason a Japanese NGO (rather than the government) has taken the initiative on maritime security in the Pacific is because of Article 9 in the Japanese constitution. Although Japan relies heavily on maritime transportation, after the war Japan did not have an official maritime security role beyond the defense of Japan.

The Nippon Foundation (originally named the Japan Shipbuilding Industry Foundation) took the initiative by launching a surveillance system for the Malacca Straits. There are also two Japanese maritime law-enforcement agencies: the Japan Fisheries Agency (JFA) and the Japan Coast Guard. These two maritime law-enforcement agencies were established by the United States after the war. US fisheries experts even suggested that the Japanese government should establish the Ministry of Fisheries to enhance its ability to manage its own fisheries industry. As a result, JFA now takes leadership on regional fisheries organizations and has more than 40 patrol boats. Since 2014, one of them (500 tons) has been dispatched to the Palau EEZ where illegal Vietnamese fishing boats (so called “Blue Boats”) have been discovered.

The United States Pacific Command (PACOM) and United States Coast Guard (USCG) have welcomed Japan’s NGO initiatives for the maritime security of the western Pacific, although the Kevin Rudd government of Australia (Prime Minister 2007-2010; 2013), and especially the Royal Australian Navy, have had strong reservations. This situation changed with the Tony Abbott government (Prime Minister 2013-2015). As for the Japanese government, after ten years of warnings from Admiral (ret) Keating, Foreign Minister Kono finally made a comment that Japan faces the Pacific Ocean and China does not. This was in response to a statement by Xi Jinping, President of China, where he mentioned that China and the United States could divide the Pacific Ocean.

Fourteen PICs have large, strategic EEZs in the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific as an area has been mentioned by Abe as an area of confluence - a joining of waters. Such an idea has a deep history. Three thousand years ago a seafaring Austronesian-speaking people connected these two oceans. These people are the ancestors of the people of the Pacific Islands. They formed an extensive exploration and trade network. They brought the banana from Asia to Africa, and the sweet potato from South America into the Pacific Islands. The Austronesian peoples voyaged back and forth over hundreds and thousands of kilometers by canoe, moving people, animals, plants, knowledge and new concepts.

Many scholars have argued that small islands have fragile resources and the survival of the communities living on these small islands depends on external exchange networks linking them with outside groups. Those islands that do not have these links disappear. Messages from the past have important lessons for communities today. PICs could develop natural resources in cooperation with other countries such as Japan, rather than restrict themselves. For example, New Zealand’s most successful fisheries company is owned by Maori iwi Ngai Tahu and shared with a major Japanese fishing company to develop its capacity and enter into the global market. Economic security in the PICs is critical for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

If maritime security is a main agenda item for PALM 2018 as expected, then Japan should invite the United States and France who have jurisdiction over a massive EEZ in the Pacific. However, any successful Indo-Pacific strategy will not be centered around countries like Japan, the United States, France, Japan Australia, or India, who have large navies or maritime forces. The fourteen PICs should not only have an active role but should help lead the development of any Indo-Pacific strategy.

Dr. Rieko Hayakawa has over 30 years working on Pacific Affairs. She established the Sasakawa Pacific Island Nations Fund and launched many projects such as the Micronesia Maritime Security Project. She can be contacted at Hayakawa.Rieko@gmail.com.

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The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
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