

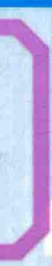
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Trends in  
Southeast Asia

STRATEGIC POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS  
FOR ABE'S JAPAN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

JOHN LEE



**ISEAS**

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# Trends in Southeast Asia

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# Strategic Possibilities and Limitations for Abe's Japan in Southeast Asia

By John Lee

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's desire for Japan to play a more proactive role in strategic affairs stems largely from not just his concern about the nature of China's rise but the challenge to the post-war liberal regional order that the latter's rise and behaviour presents. Any disruption to that order is perceived to be extremely detrimental to Japan's core national interest.
- The concern with reinforcing and strengthening the existing regional order is causing Japan to take far greater strategic interest in Southeast Asia – and also reflects lessons learnt from Abe's first time in office (2006–07.)
- The increased Japanese strategic interest in Southeast Asia is welcomed by all key states in Southeast Asia and the United States, meaning that the growing Japan-Southeast Asian strategic dynamic is mutually reinforcing.
- Japanese desire to play a more proactive strategic role in Southeast Asia needs to be understood alongside its post-war constitutional limitations. While relaxation of military equipment and technology export policy may be highly significant, constitutional limitations are likely to preclude direct Japanese military involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts.
- There is strong potential and promising possibilities for Japan to play a more proactive multilateral role in Southeast Asia through its standing and participation in regional institutions (especially ASEAN-led or backed institutions) that will further Tokyo's

# Strategic Possibilities and Limitations for Abe's Japan in Southeast Asia

By John Lee<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In his first press conference for the current year conducted on 5 January, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reaffirmed that Japan will continue to pursue a “proactive contribution to international peace.”<sup>2</sup> The phrase has been used numerous times by Prime Minister Abe to characterize his government’s strategic vision and narrative of the role for Japan, including in the country’s “National Security Strategy”,<sup>3</sup> “National Defence Program Guidelines”<sup>4</sup> and in almost every major foreign policy speech delivered by the prime minister and his foreign and defence ministers. One such recent occasion was the prime minister’s keynote address to the Shangri La Dialogue in May 2014.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Lee is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS. He is also a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C. and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University.

<sup>2</sup> “New Year’s Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe”, 5 January 2015 <[http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201501/05newyear.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201501/05newyear.html)> (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>3</sup> “National Security Strategy”, 17 December 2013 <<http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>> (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>4</sup> “National; Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014”, 17 December 2013 <[http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217\\_e2.pdf](http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e2.pdf)> (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Keynote Address by Shinzo Abe at the Shangri La Dialogue, Singapore, 30 May 2014 <<http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20a%20dialogue/archive/2014-c20c/opening-remarks-and-keynote-address-b0b2/keynote-address-shinzo-abe-a787>> (accessed 4 March 2015).



That Japan make a proactive contribution to peace is linked to Abe's insistence that "Japan is not, and will never be, a Tier-two country."<sup>6</sup> The desire for Japan to play such a "proactive role" was offered in large part as the justification for the formation of a National Security Council to coordinate strategic, foreign and defence policy under the Prime Minister's direction, for increasing Japanese defence spending in 2013 (which was the first increase for eleven years even if the rise was a modest one of 0.8 per cent,) and for relaxing its self-imposed arms export ban for the first time by revising the country's long-standing "Three Principles on Arms Exports" — guidelines which had been left in place for over fifty years. Tellingly, seeking to play a more "proactive role" is at the heart of Abe's reinterpretation of the country's pacifist constitution to allow contributions to "collective security" (i.e., coming to the military aid of allies) under a number of scenarios.

The (re)emergence of a "can-do" and "will-do" Japan under Abe is also of high interest to Southeast Asia — to key strategic players such as Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia — but also to the region as a whole. Telling an audience in Jakarta of the strategic significance of Southeast Asia due to the region's geographical position between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Abe promised that Japan would shift its attention southward rather than only focus more narrowly on its immediate environs as it has done for decades after World War II. Abe also reaffirmed the significance of the Japan-U.S. alliance in maintaining stability in Southeast Asia (and not just Northeast Asia,) while the prime minister would make genuine efforts to "strengthen ties with maritime Asia" and also with ASEAN.<sup>7</sup> When one considers that Abe took the highly symbolic decision to visit all ten ASEAN nations during his first year in office of his second coming as prime minister (a first for any non-ASEAN leader,) it is clear that Tokyo's contemporary strategic interest in Southeast Asia under Abe is both genuine and meaningful.

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<sup>6</sup> Shinzo Abe, "Japan is Back", Speech at CSIS in Washington, D.C., 22 February 2013 <[http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us\\_20130222en.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html)> (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Shinzo Abe, "The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy", 18 January 2013 <[http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/abe\\_0118e.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/abe_0118e.html)> (accessed 4 March 2015).

Less clear is Tokyo's strategic motivation, giving rise to some alarmist sentiment in the region. Japan's conception of an expanded strategic role for itself in East Asia, including in Southeast Asia, has led to some capitals (namely Beijing and Seoul) and commentaries chiding Tokyo for a shift "to the right" and returning to a "militaristic past" which might even "threaten peace and stability" in the region.<sup>8</sup> One survey of South Koreans — a country with still raw memories of its troubled history with Japan — even found that 62 per cent of respondents perceived Abe's Japan to be a "military threat".<sup>9</sup> Such sentiments tend to be based on crude "slippery slope" projections of an ever expanding Japanese strategic role and presence including in Southeast Asia. Little consideration is given to what Japan is actually doing in the region and why; and importantly what enduring limitations remain for Japan when it comes to Tokyo playing an extended role in Southeast Asia in particular.

The paper is designed to answer these above contentions. It begins by looking at the pillars of the liberal order that emerged after World War II, and why China's rise potentially presents a fundamental challenge to such an order. As the paper will argue, offering such a "scene setter" is important for two reasons. First, the Abe administration's desire for Japan to play a much more "proactive" strategic role in regional affairs is driven primarily by China's rise. But second and more important, seeking to counter Chinese power and influence (especially in Southeast Asia) is not so much about reigniting historical rivalries for the sake of

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Zhang Junshe, "Japan Turning to the Right Threatens Regional Peace and Stability", *China-US Focus*, 18 February 2014 <<http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/japan-turning-to-the-right-threatens-regional-peace-and-stability/>>; Peter Cai, "Abe's alarming assault on Japan's democracy", *Business Spectator*, 27 June 2014 <<http://www.businessspectator.com.au/article/2014/6/27/china/abes-alarming-assault-japans-democracy>>; Norihiro Kato, "Japan's Break With Peace", *New York Times*, 16 July 2014 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/17/opinion/norihiro-kato-japans-break-with-peace.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fnorihiro-kato&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/17/opinion/norihiro-kato-japans-break-with-peace.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fnorihiro-kato&_r=0)>; "Shinzo Abe: is Japan's PM a dangerous militarist or modernising reformer?", *The Guardian*, 16 December 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/16/shinzo-abe-japan-pm>> (all accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>9</sup> See "62% of South Koreans regard Japan as a military threat: think tank poll", *Japan Times*, 30 October 2013 <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/10/30/national/politics-diplomacy/62-of-south-koreans-regard-japan-as-a-military-threat-think-tank-poll/#.VPeEovmUeSo>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

it but about protecting and strengthening the pre-existing liberal order in East Asia.

Indeed, as the paper will go on to argue, Abe's growing strategic interest in Southeast Asia is very much part of this Japanese desire to reinforce and strengthen the existing regional order vis-à-vis China's rise by providing a partial check against Chinese ambitions and territorial claims, assertive actions and rising influence; in addition to offering greater hedging and balancing options for Southeast Asian states. The paper will then examine the possible ways that Japan might enhance its strategic relevance in Southeast Asia and how this relates to countering Chinese influence in shaping and protecting its preferred East Asian regional order — but also consider some of the limitations on a greater Japanese strategic role in that sub-region.

## **SETTING THE SCENE: THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ORDER AND THE RISE OF CHINA**

### *(a) Historical Basis of Order in East Asia*

The historical basis for regional stability since after World War II is founded on two related pillars. The first is uncontested American naval power and maritime access. Even during the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union lacked the capacity to deny the United States unfettered access to the maritime commons in the region since Soviet military power was a continental-dominated force and largely focused westward. The Soviet Union was also geographically better positioned as a Eurasian rather than Asian great power, meaning that Moscow found it particularly challenging to project power into the Far East for any sustained period of time. Importantly, American naval pre-eminence meant that no Asian power (or group of powers) could seek regional dominance, and any attempts to do so would lead to those countries suffering enormously prohibitive costs.

American naval power was sustained through its base in Guam, but also through allied Asian states hosting and maintaining American military assets in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia,

and to a lesser extent in Singapore and Malaysia. In return, America provided public security goods to the region in terms of a strategically stable regional environment, and safe and unfettered maritime access for commercial shipping.

Importantly, America also opened its immense domestic economic market to states who willingly played by Washington's rules, leading to the emergence of an Asian export-led growth model for development. Indeed, the economies of Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and China owe a debt of gratitude to the American consumer, just as the latter owes a debt of gratitude to the former countries for providing them with cheap consumer goods over many decades.

In addition to the increased foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows and outflows between the United States and Asia, and agreement on international norms, the economic integration between America and the region created a virtuous spiral in which American interests became increasingly tied to Asia — thereby increasing the incentives for Washington to devote significant military assets to the Asia-Pacific for the long term. This meant that American strategic and military engagement in the region survived periods when Washington increasingly doubted its own lasting power in the region (e.g., the Nixon Doctrine articulated in 1969). On the other side of the coin, the continued prosperity of Asian states was increasingly linked to the permanence and pre-eminence of the American strategic role.

The second and related historical pillar for stability is that American strategic and military pre-eminence dampened competition between still rivalrous Asian states. This occurred for a number of reasons.

For one, it was impossible for any Asian state to match or exceed American military capabilities in the region, making it pointless (and dangerous) for larger states such as Japan to attempt to do so. Given that much of the region's security was outsourced to a much more powerful and generally reliable superpower, the pro-growth states in the region focused on achieving rapid economic development rather than engaging in an escalating and costly military competition.

Indeed, one could advance a persuasive argument that the balancing and band-wagoning activity of many large and small pro-growth Asian

states over the past few decades is largely designed to perpetuate a U.S.-led hierarchical strategic order within which no Asian state can dominate the region or sub-region<sup>10</sup> — much to the dismay of many contemporary Chinese strategists who preferred a multipolar order within which China can exercise increasing influence. This, incidentally, also partly explains why America's geographical distance from Asia makes it the preferred security partner of all major Asian countries (excluding China).<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, American alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines, de facto alliances with Taiwan, and the security partnership with Singapore and Malaysia were seen as stabilising influences in the region, rather than divisive arrangements. There was a general balance of capabilities and influence between states in Northeast Asia, and in Southeast Asia which provided a strong foundation for strategic stability in the region — despite the prevalence of historical rivalries and unresolved territorial disagreements.

Note that this U.S.-led order underpinned and facilitated Japan's deepening connections and reliance on Southeast Asia in the post-World War II period. In economic terms, Southeast Asian countries provided an important outlet for Japanese goods, and stable and fruitful markets for Japanese outward capital investment. Southeast Asia was also an important source of raw materials during Japan's decades of rapid growth. In security terms, the stability and security of sea lines of communications (SLOCs) was critical to the success of Japan's export-led model of development in the second half of the previous century. In institutional terms, and under the American security umbrella, Japan played the leading role in organizations such as the Asian Development Bank and became an extremely active and constructive member of ASEAN-led regimes such as the ASEAN Regional Forum.

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<sup>10</sup> See Evelyn Goh, "Hierarchy and the role of the United States in the East Asian security order", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8, no. 3 (2008): 353–77 <<http://irap.oxfordjournals.org/content/8/3/353.full.pdf>> (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>11</sup> See John Lee, "An Exceptional Obsession", *The American Interest* 5, no. 5 (2010) <<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2010/05/01/an-exceptional-obsession/>> (accessed 4 March 2014).

*(b) China's Rise and the Emergence of "Systemic Instability"*

There are developments within individual countries and events that could negatively impact Japanese interests in the region. One major one is developments in the Korean Peninsula which could trigger serious strategic and economic instability, and even lead to the threat of a nuclear arms race or exchange in East Asia. Others include the prospect of failing states in particularly Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, even if this is looking less likely over time. Regional and transnational criminal activities also constitute enduring problems for all countries such as drug trafficking, people smuggling and money laundering.

Despite the seriousness of the above challenges, it is China's rise which has the potential to systematically and seriously undermine every element of the aforementioned historical pillars of regional security and stability; and which commands the most attention and dominates long term strategic thinking of most analysts in the region. China is the first major power in the post-World War II period to emerge as a strategic competitor to America in East and Southeast Asia. Its emergence is of unparalleled significance and creating unique disruption for several reasons.

The first factor is China's absolute size and resulting potential capabilities. Although the Soviet Union was a more formidable military competitor to the United States at the peak of its powers, the Soviet economy was barely one third the size of America's. In contrast, although China's GDP per capita is still about one-fifth that of the United States', the size of the Chinese economy is already at least two-thirds that of America's. Even though it is likely that the Chinese economy will grow at more modest pace over the next few decades, it is still likely to match or exceed the size of the American economy in absolute terms over the next ten years.

Sustained by its growing economic weight, the Chinese defence budget is almost three times larger than Japan's, even if it is less than one third of America's overall defence budget. But America has global interests and responsibilities while China can focus primarily on its immediate environs. In other words, China's re-emergence signals the rise of an Asian power that could dominate Asia, but for the American presence.

The second factor is China's geography and historical place and role in the region. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is geographically at the centre of Asia. It shares an extended maritime border with almost every major trading country in Asia. Whereas the Soviet Union's interest in maritime Asia was an ideological-driven matter of extending its influence into the region, China's interest in maritime Asia is permanent and unavoidable — deepened by its reliance on seaborne trade of especially energy resources and commodities. It also means that the growth in Chinese strategic, military and economic power directly affects the interests of every major Asian state.

In particular, the contemporary Chinese shift from being a predominantly land or continental power (as it has been throughout most of its history) to a maritime power is disconcerting for other maritime Asian states; especially given China's more assertive recent behaviour in asserting its maritime claims in the East China and South China Seas.

Moreover, unlike the Soviet Union, China has crafted (and also somewhat exaggerated) an image of itself as the enduring and natural hegemon in Asia. China has propounded and domestically nurtured an interpretation of history which sees itself as the victim of foreign powers jockeying to remove China from this historical and natural position, and that Beijing is simply reclaiming its natural preeminent status. In other words, the roots of Chinese ambition in Asia are far deeper, and are more extensive, those of the Soviet Union's.

Third, China is the first major Asian country in the post-World War II period to emerge as a formidable military competitor vis-à-vis the U.S. — at least as far as capabilities in the region are concerned. Furthermore, the greatest advances in Chinese military capabilities are maritime-relevant capabilities along its east and southeast borders — impacting the interests of both American and all maritime Asian powers.

Significantly, Chinese military advances from the mid-1990s onwards are explicitly designed as a counter against both American military capabilities in the region and against the effectiveness of conventional American extended deterrence on behalf of East and Southeast Asian allies. The fact that these capabilities were initially designed to primarily counter America's capacity to defend Taiwan is increasingly irrelevant since these Chinese capabilities can be redeveloped and deployed in

theatres of conflict beyond the Taiwan Straits. In particular, Chinese investment in anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities threatens to upset the long-standing regional strategic and military balance, if it has not done so already.

The A2/AD strategy is part of what the People's Liberation Army (PLA) term "counter-intervention operations" which is a stratagem designed to slow, limit or prevent a militarily superior enemy from conducting successful military operations in China's theatres of core interest. Part of an awkward sounding capability to "wage and win local (or regional) wars under conditions of informatization", cyber-warfare capabilities and anti-satellite weapons will be used to disable or else inflict severe damage on the "eyes and ears" of America's heavily networked offensive military assets (such as aircraft carrier battle groups). Diesel and nuclear submarines, mines and missiles will be used to inflict heavy losses on supporting vessels within the carrier group, and possibly on an aircraft carrier itself.

For strategic instability to deepen, China only needs to create a credible fear for Washington that the PLA is able to inflict prohibitive losses on U.S. aircraft carrier groups, making the prospect of U.S. intervention in any Chinese conflict less likely or far more difficult. The point is that China's military modernization and doctrine could mean that uncontested and unfettered access for American naval vessels in East and Southeast Asia is at an end for the first time since after World War II.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, China's emergence as an economic power is a unique challenge to the post-World War II order. Unlike the Soviet Union, sectors of the Chinese economy are heavily integrated with the rest of Asia and America. China has emerged as the largest trading partner of Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia. China is the largest trading partner of India and America in Asia. The dilemma for many of these countries including Australia is that their largest trading

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of China's challenge to the U.S.-led liberal order in East Asia, see Ashley J. Tallis, "Uphill Challenges: China's Military Modernization and Asian Security", in *Strategic Asia 2012-13: China's Military Challenge*, edited by Ashley J. Tallis and Travis Tanner (Washington: National Bureau of Research 2012).



partner is now engaged in a deepening strategic competition with their American security guarantor. Unlike relations with the Soviet Union, there are potential economic costs for all major regional states should relations with China dramatically worsen — even if the extent of regional integration and reliance on the Chinese economy and market is often overestimated and misunderstood.<sup>13</sup>

More than that, many states (including Japan) are increasingly dependent on a growing Chinese economy for their own continued growth — meaning that security and economic interests are not necessarily aligned. Importantly, China’s importance to the regional and global economy means that it is not possible for America to lead an overt security coalition against China in the absence of immense and sustained provocation by Beijing. At best, American-led security coalitions and relationships can serve to “shape” Chinese strategic actions without at the same time inhibiting China’s economic rise.

## **RESPONDING TO CHINA’S RISE: PUTTING CONTEXT TO ABE’S “PROACTIVE” TURN TO SOUTHEAST ASIA**

### *(a) Focusing on China and Systemic Threats to Order*

Despite the current elevated interest in Abe “Mark II”, the Japanese leader’s abiding interest in meeting the challenge of China’s rise is not a recent inclination. For example, and in January 2007 during one of his first major foreign policy speeches as prime minister, Abe “Mark I” expressed his intention to pursue a “proactive foreign policy” and have Japan “play a meaningful role on the global stage”.<sup>14</sup> While the speech was primarily about deepening cooperation between Japan and the North

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<sup>13</sup> See monographs in the ISEAS *Trends in Southeast Asia* series by this author examining China’s economic relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore: <[http://www.iseas.edu.sg/research-output.cfm?category\\_id=586BB54F-C2F7-8320-1CE59EA764DCEFAD&status=past](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/research-output.cfm?category_id=586BB54F-C2F7-8320-1CE59EA764DCEFAD&status=past)> (accessed 4 March 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Shinzo Abe, “Japan and NATO: Toward Further Collaboration”, Speech at the North Atlantic Council, 12 January 2007 <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/pmv0701/nato.html>> (accessed 4 March 2015).