

POLICY BRIEF

Sep 27, 2019

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Power balance: Japan's Role in the Indo-Pacific under the constraints of big powers priorities and unsolved historical and territorial questions

Valérie Niquet

What is at stake today in the Indo-Pacific, is not only strategic stability and territorial issues, but also the defence and support of an international order based on democratic values and multilateralism. These values comprise respect for the rule of law, transparency, particularly concerning defence policy, military budget, financial institutions or ODA attribution policy, but also the denunciation of the use of force or threat to use force to solve territorial or other issues and of course the respect for global commons and freedom of navigation. In that respect, the evolution of the situation in the Indo-Pacific is of global interest, including for the European Union and its member States.

These democratic values constitute the core of the liberal international order and are more broadly accepted as universal norms, including in the Asia Pacific. Asean, for instance, a leading player in the region, favours the signature of a code of conduct in the South China sea based on these values in spite of the attachment of its member States, to the principles of non-interference and sovereignty.

However, in spite of these positive evolutions, one cannot but recognize the growing divide emerging in Asia between on one side the PRC (People's republic of China), and on the other side, almost all the other actors in the region who do accept the principal of international norms.

In that context, Japan plays a major role in implementing these norms as the favoured way to answer challenges to stability in the region. One reason is a historical reason: Japan, and the Japanese people paid dearly for having forgotten the value of these norms and, just like Germany in Europe, it gradually became after the war a champion of a peaceful liberal international order. Since the 2000s, and even more since 2012, Japan has been trying to translate this

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position into a more proactive role as a normal, legitimate, normative power.

For the European Union and its member States, the respect and defence of these norms is a fundamental element. Of course, the Indo-Pacific region is geographically far away and this sometimes makes it more difficult for decision makers in Europe to recognize the urgency and challenges to strategic stability and the liberal order in the region.

However, this region is of tremendous importance to us and to the global order both in economic and strategic terms. It has direct influence on European's countries security, related to terrorism and on the migration factor in politics.

It is also a region where challenges and tensions are on the rise, involving leading economic powers. A region crossed by the most important sea lanes of communications, of interest to countries far beyond the region itself; and a region where the respect and implementation of a transparent system of norms in dealing with these challenges is of tremendous importance to the stability of the world.

Since the end of the second world war, Japan has been playing an increasing and today a major role to propose and implement mutually recognized and transparent norms in trade, investment, respect of intellectual property rights, the environment or – of the utmost importance today – the best way to deal in a prudent, transparent but assured manner with maritime and territorial tensions.

The position of Japan in the region however, and the more proactive role Tokyo could play, including in terms of norms prescription, has been challenged by a tensed strategic situation whose main characteristic is the emergence of a more assertive Chinese regime who, in spite of its pragmatism, can choose to turn on or off the heat on relations with its neighbours, particularly Japan.

In spite of its free riding economic policy inside the framework of the WTO, that led to massive trade tensions with the United States and was also a factor behind the election of Donald Trump, China is still a Leninist regime. It did not achieve – yet – its political transition and ideologically, in spite of its successes, the regime is increasingly insecure as demonstrated with the Hong Kong crisis in 2019. In order to survive the threat of regime change – its main objective in terms of security policy – it relies since on an increasingly nationalist narrative and a more assertive position concerning the defence of its “rights,” particularly its “maritime rights,” leading to growing tensions with its neighbours. In that context, the system of liberal international order to deal with territorial and strategic issues in the region is regularly denounced by the Chinese regime as “interference,” a threat to its own “sovereignty” and “core interests.”

In other fields also, whereas Japan is playing an important and leading role as a normative power like transparency of the military budget, the environment, climate change issues, financial institutions or development aid as demonstrated at the G 20, G7 and TICAD 7 in 2019, the PRC tends to adopt a posture of unilateralism and opacity.

The PRC has the ambition to impose a strongly hierarchical regional order, referring to a “pre modern” set of norms and concepts, like the concept of “harmony” or “*tian xia* 天下” and a glorified promotion of the former tributary system.

To counter the re-emergence of Japan – a successful and dynamic democracy whose attractive power remains high – a legitimate normative power on the international scene, China needs to build a counter-narrative to delegitimise Japan's role. Therefore, Japan's more proactive role in security matters, globally welcomed by its neighbours, has often been denounced by Beijing as neo-militarism. Tokyo is accused of trying to “topple the world order

issued from the second world war” and, as an ally of the United States, of supporting the “old obsolete alliances system inherited from the cold war”.

One understands the necessity for Japan, just as for any other former colonial powers, to work on its past history, in order to build better trust with its former colonies or occupied territories, the best way to be fully accepted as a legitimate power in the region and to diffuse the PRC’s strategy of de legitimisation. However, Japan’s partners, particularly in Europe less immediately involved in the strategic tensions in the region, must also recognize that “History” and “historical issues” are essentially used as an instrument of control and domination by the Chinese regime and not as an element of dialogue and trust building. This is also the case in Korea, when the policy is divided, the economy stagnant and the risk of marginalization between China and the United States on the issue of North Korea is high, as is the case in 2018-2019.

On this issue, however, European countries should be best placed to understand the situation between Japan and the PRC, but also between Japan and the Republic of Korea. The example of France-Germany, often cited, is not the best one. But rather the example of the reconciliation between Russia and Germany, which could happen only after the political transition in the Soviet Union – whatever imperfect – and the fall of a regime whose legitimacy – just like in the PRC –, was based on the constant reference to the “great patriotic war against fascism.” Another pertinent example is the still difficult relations between France and its former colonies, particularly with Algeria in spite of the fact that, in recent years, France has been stressing the necessity to “repent” in its own historical narrative and history textbooks.

All these elements are important challenges that Japan has to face, that would also weigh on the level of acceptance of any constitutional change as envisioned by Premier Minister Abe and his cabinet. In spite of these challenges, Japan’s status as a legitimate normative power is more broadly accepted today than at any time in history, including in its own region, with the exception of course of the PRC and the Korean peninsula.

One can find two major reasons to this evolution. On the one hand, thanks to the democratization momentum in Asia since the end of the 1980s, Japan, as a democracy, is less an “alien” exception: Japan can be both democratic AND fully part of Asia. On the other hand, the more aggressive foreign strategy followed by the Chinese regime since 2008 – based on the over confidence of the Chinese regime after the financial crisis – is the source of growing uneasiness in Asia, and led to an embryo and informal coalition of countries embracing the same norms, particularly in international behaviour. Moreover, this community of values extend far beyond the region and could also contribute to the legitimacy of Japan as a normative power on the global scene.

This is in this context, both difficult and full of opportunities that Japan has the responsibility to engage and play an important and positive normative role, both at the regional and global level. This is no time for the temptation of insularity and “comfort.”¹ In order for this to succeed, Japan has the support of other powers engaged in the region spanning two oceans from Africa and the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. France, in Europe, has been particularly active in supporting this new role and cooperation with Japan. At the same time, China, confronted with grave tensions with the US and political challenges at home, has chosen a strategy of appeasement with Tokyo. This of course, is

1 HDP Envall, «What Kind of Japan : Tokyo Strategic Options on a Contested Asia», *Survival*, August-September 2019.

appealing for a Japanese economy also very dependent on trade, that react positively to China's appeasement strategy. However, if the search for stabilization is understandable, the stakes are higher and a true globalized and consistent strategic vision, based on realism and balance, can only serve the best long term interests of Japan both in its region and beyond.