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MARITIME JAPAN SHOULD REINFORCE MARITIME DEFENSE CAPABILITY

Masashi Nishihara

On June 24, a Japanese destroyer entered a Chinese naval port for the first time in post-World War II history. This event completed the first round of exchange of ship visits between the two countries, signifying a remarkable improvement in bilateral relations and helping build mutual trust.

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While I welcome such mutual confidence-building efforts, Japan should not neglect what is really happening in the Western Pacific. Given that China is engaged in robust military buildups while Japan's Ministry of Defense is busy responding to a string of misconduct incidents and scandals that have occurred recently, I question whether Japan has a defense strategy at all. Senior officials as well as the annual Defense White Paper stress the importance of China increasing the transparency of its military budgets and activities. Stressing something is not enough, however; action needs to be taken.

That the US global review of its military posture is leading to a more efficient deployment in the East Asia and Western Pacific region is welcome news. Yet in reality, military reinforcements in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan have reduced the actual troop levels in places like Okinawa. On the other hand, China is beefing up its military at a remarkable pace. China's official figures show that its military expenditures have increased by an annual average of more than 10 percent over the past 20 years. Real military expenditures could be two or three times the nominal military expenditures according to the Pentagon's annual report to Congress on China's military power and to *The Military Balance*, published by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. If so, we must be more vigilant.

China is trying hard to catch up with the United States in military capabilities. As part of this effort, China shot down one of its own weather satellites in low-earth orbit last year in order to demonstrate its capability to destroy satellites of hostile nations. Special attention should be given to the development of China's naval capability. China has built at least two *Jin*-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, one of which is known to have been put into service since 2004. In late May China apparently tested a ballistic missile to be deployed on such nuclear submarines. China is reportedly even building a large underground base on Hainan Island for those submarines so that they can escape being detected when leaving the base. In addition, China has indicated plans to construct an aircraft carrier.

Japan's Self-Defense Forces have taken some important measures. They have implemented or are implementing, among other things, the

introduction of ballistic missile defense systems, the creation of a Central Readiness Force and the relocation of the Air SDF's Air Defense Command to the US' Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo. These are welcome moves designed to enhance Japan's defense capabilities.


Yet concerns remain. For example, Japan possesses only 16 submarines whereas China possesses 62. While the Japanese submarines are admittedly more sophisticated than their Chinese counterparts, this hardly proves that Japan is taking appropriate measures against the qualitative improvements made to Chinese submarines in recent years.

During the 1990s, China set its offshore defense line along sea areas running from Japan through the Philippines. Gradually, however, a new line was drawn to encompass sea areas extending to the Mariana and Palau Islands. China is building the capabilities to counter enemy naval forces in the new sea areas and, to this end, is said to possess more than 30 increasingly stealthy submarines. Since 1996 China has also purchased from Russia 12 *Kilo*-class submarines, which are quiet and hard to detect, and in 2006 it put into service a domestically produced *Yuan*-class submarine modeled after the *Kilo*-class submarine.

The wide ranging water depths, the complexity of water temperatures and the strong tidal currents in the East and South China Seas make it difficult for Japanese and American surface vessels to detect Chinese submarines with increased stealth capability.

Japan's Maritime SDF had trouble detecting a Chinese nuclear submarine when it intruded into Japan's territorial waters near Okinawa's Sakishima Islands in November 2004. The approach of a Chinese submarine undetected within torpedo striking distance of the USS Kitty Hawk during exercises in the waters near Okinawa in October 2006 delivered a serious shock to the US Navy.

Japan must strengthen its submarine capabilities to defend its economic interests in the East China Sea and the sea areas around the Ogasawara and Okinotorishima Islands, as well as to secure sea lanes. The United States is transforming its military posture in the Pacific to meet the Chinese challenge. In

drawing up new National Defense Program Guidelines to take effect in fiscal 2010, it is vital for Japan as a maritime nation to increase its defense budgets, strengthen its maritime defenses within constitutional limits, and buttress the alliance with the United States. A stronger Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force can gain more respect from its Chinese counterpart and build more credible mutual confidence. 

Masashi Nishihara is President of the Research Institute for Peace and Security, Tokyo, and former President of the National Defense Academy, Yokosuka. This article is a revised version of an article that originally appeared in Japanese in RIPS' Eye, No. 90 (May 22, 2008).