

Tokyo needs to boost economic growth and foreign relations to enhance its ability to implement security and defence policies

Tackling Japan's security challenges

By WILLIAM CHOONG
and HENG YEE KUANG
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

THE recent killings of two Japanese by the radical Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have led to much grief and soul-searching in Japan. In particularly strong language, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has vowed to make the terrorists "pay the price".

The killings underscore the fact that there was precious little Japan could do. Relying on its Jordanian ally for negotiations, it highlighted Tokyo's shortcomings in crisis management despite Mr Abe's desire for a more active foreign policy role. Japan's strategy in the Middle East has long been economic, not strategic. Given that more than 80 per cent of its crude oil comes from the region, Japan is interested in stability in the region but has few hard military and intelligence assets there.

Critics pour cold water on Mr Abe's suggestion that the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) should be enabled to rescue Japanese hostages overseas, with permission of the host country, simply because the JSDF has no such capability at present. Even American Special Forces have had a patchy record of hostage rescue.

The severe ISIS hostage crisis demonstrates the range of security challenges Tokyo is managing, none more perplexing than the rise of China.

Nothing encapsulates this better than Okinawa, an island prefecture located 1,600km away from Tokyo that is of great strategic importance. Japan has been tweaking its security infrastructure to focus on its south-western island chain, including Okinawa island and the Senkaku islands, which China also claims and calls the Diaoyu islands.

Last December, we were part of an Asean group of scholars who were flown from wintry Tokyo to Naha, Okinawa's sub-tropical capital. Briefed extensively on Japan's foreign and defence policies, we learnt how Okinawans are unhappy with the base arrangements that Tokyo proposed. When American forces invaded the island in 1945, 30 per cent of the population died. Seventy years later, Okinawa, with only 1 per cent of Japan's population and 16 per cent of its land mass, hosts 75 per cent of the US military presence in Japan.

We visited the residence of the US consul-general in Okinawa. Perched on the crest of a hill, it had a splendid view of Futenma air base. The view substantiated the key Okinawan gripe: because the base is surrounded by many homes, residents are upset about the noise and safety issues. Even subsidies for



Grief-stricken Japanese holding a silent prayer rally early this week after the murder of two hostages by ISIS militants. The hostage crisis demonstrates the range of security challenges Tokyo is managing, none more perplexing than the rise of China. PHOTO: EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

soundproofing of homes have not reduced discontent. Said one exasperated official: "No matter what Tokyo does, it would be perceived badly. If Mr Abe were to give a million dollars to each Okinawan, he'd be deemed to be using bribery."

In November, Okinawans elected as governor Mr Takeshi Onaga, who opposed the construction of a new US base in Henoko to replace Futenma air base. Mr Onaga wants Futenma moved to other parts of Japan, if not outside Japan altogether.

In Tokyo, we thought that Japan rightly feels a palpable sense of concern about its immediate region,

given festering territorial disputes with China, Russia and South Korea. A senior official, using his iPhone, played a video of Chinese venture capitalist and political scientist Eric Li, speaking at the Global Strategic Review conference in Oslo organised by the International Institute of Strategic Studies. Mr Li stated that China's maritime assertiveness was "brilliant strategy", given that it did not result in war.

"If our Chinese friends say things like these, we're pretty worried," the official said.

In Okinawa, the Japan Coast Guard had its hands full fending off Chinese incursions into Japanese waters, and could not meet us. Their colleagues at Tokyo headquarters said they respond to Chinese incursions into Japanese territorial waters with "patience and dignity".

To help Japan deal with such challenges, Mr Abe has introduced Abenomics (a three-arrowed quiver of fiscal spending, monetary easing and structural reforms), established a National Security Council and beefed up military spending to record levels.

Mr Abe should unleash more arrows to slay some sacred cows. He himself has stressed how economic growth bolsters Japan's ability to implement its security and defence policies. Mr Abe should consider "smart immigration" and allow in strategic talent – such as entrepreneurs, scientists and engineers – as Bloomberg columnist William Pesek argues.

Japan should reconsider joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Japanese officials fret about governance issues, and the challenge posed to the Japan-led Asian Development Bank.

But as Tomoo Kikuchi and Takehiro Masutomo at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy have argued in these pages, the AIIB presents an opportunity for China and Japan to cooperate in the economic sphere and provides Tokyo with the influence to shape processes and rules from within.

Mr Abe should also craft an historic statement to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Media reports suggest that Mr Abe could essentially repeat the terms "colonial aggression" and "tremendous damage" caused by Japan – used by his predecessors Tomiichi Murayama and Junichiro Koizumi at the 50th and 60th anniversaries, respectively.

But an apology with a sense of time and place also matters. In October 2001, Mr Koizumi paid silent tribute at the Memorial Museum of Chinese People's Anti-Japanese War and pledged that Japan would learn from its past. The memorial is near the Marco Polo Bridge, where Japanese and Chinese Nationalist forces squared off in 1937.

Lastly, Japan's official position is that there is no dispute surrounding the islands. Tokyo, which already exercises administrative control over the islands, sees few benefits in acknowledging the existence of a dispute.

However, we also get a sense that, if China does decide to take Japan to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Japan, as a country that respects and upholds international law, would accept the judicial process and indeed, quite possibly obtain a favourable judgment to resolve this festering issue once and for all. If Mr Abe is bold enough, proactive pacifism would stay specifically Pacific.

✉ stopinion@sph.com.sg

William Choong is Shangri-La Dialogue senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Heng Yee Kuang is associate professor of international relations at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, and currently a visiting associate professor at the University of Tokyo, Japan.