

By Invitation

A normal power: Japan's welcome role in rebalancing Asia

Abe's efforts on multiple fronts needed at a time of great uncertainty



C. Raja Mohan

For *The Straits Times*

With the Japanese helicopter carrier *Kaga* docked in Changi this week, it may be a good moment to reflect on Japan's re-emergence as a power to reckon with in the Indo-Pacific.

That the *Kaga* is named after an aircraft carrier launched nearly a century ago by the Imperial Japanese Navy is perhaps incidental. What matters is the fact that post-war Japan, which consciously limited its military role for decades, is now lifting self-imposed constraints in a bold effort to rebalance the region.

On a two-month deployment to the Indo-Pacific, *Kaga* and its accompanying destroyers made port calls in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, and conducted joint exercises, including with a British frigate that was on its way to the South China Sea.

Amid the rapidly changing power distribution in the region, Japan's rising military profile has been more than welcome across the Indo-Pacific. The only exception, unsurprisingly, is in North-east Asia.

The strong reservations of China and the two Koreas against Japan's military role in the region are well known. But the rest of the Indo-Pacific no longer views Tokyo through the prism of Japan's disastrous imperial history in Asia.

GOOD INTERNATIONAL CITIZEN

As a major global economy and good international citizen over the past seven decades, Japan has earned the right to have a say in the region's security architecture. Even more important is the reality that it is impossible to structure a stable regional balance of power system without Japan's effective military contribution.

Japan's armed forces are called "self-defence forces", a word play to overcome restrictions imposed by the post-war peace Constitution. They are small in size and spend a lot less in comparison with China's. But in absolute terms, Japan is no pushover. It is the world's eighth-largest spender on defence, at around US\$45 billion

(S\$62 billion) a year. (China spends more than US\$200 billion.)

Japan's military may be outmanned and outgunned by its giant neighbour. But Japanese forces are better equipped and retain an edge, at least for now, in technological capability. Traditionally focused on defence, Japan is on the way to developing offensive capabilities. Its navy is considered the best in Asia and is turning towards power projection. While the world has debated China's first military base in Djibouti, it pays little attention to Japan which has also built a base in the same country, strategically in the Horn of Africa.

For Japan, it is not just a question of being a military power. It is also about taking political leadership at a moment of great strategic uncertainty in the world. Japan is no longer content to remain an economic giant and a political pygmy.

A lot of the credit for making Japan a "normal power" goes to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has nudged a reluctant Japanese public to support an expansion of Japan's regional military role and more pro-active diplomacy.

Mr Abe has won Japan new friends across Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. He is not looking to supplant the alliance with the United States; he is seeking to complement it with a network of partnerships that will help insure the region against the unpredictable political trajectories of America and China.

While US President Donald Trump pits America against the global trading system, Mr Abe has pushed for the implementation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) minus the US. He has welcomed a post-Brexit Britain into the TPP. Tokyo is also actively pressing for an early conclusion of negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership involving the 10-member Asean and its economic partners – China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. Mr Abe wants early implementation of the free trade agreement signed with the European Union earlier this year.

CONFLUENCE OF THE TWO SEAS

Mr Abe's greatest contribution perhaps is in getting Japan to think big about geopolitics and campaign relentlessly for the implementation of his ideas. Until recently, Japan seemed to have no agency of its own and was expected to merely

echo concepts emerging from the US. That is no longer true. Consider, for example, the current buzz about the Indo-Pacific, generated by the Trump administration's adoption of the term and its renaming of the Pacific Command as the "Indo-Pacific Command".

But Mr Abe was the first to articulate the idea more than a decade ago in his address to the Indian Parliament in New Delhi in August 2007. Central to that address, titled *Confluence Of The Two Seas*, was the visualisation of the Pacific and Indian oceans as a strategic continuum. It was based on the recognition of the deepening economic interdependence between the eastern and western halves of Asia.

This involved persuading the Japanese elite to extend their idea of Asia beyond Myanmar. In recent decades, the Japanese tended to see South Asia and the Middle East as very distinct from East Asia. Mr Abe encouraged the Japanese to return to the idea of a "broader Asia".

As Asians began to rediscover their shared heritage and deep interconnections between different sub-regions at the dawn of the 20th century, the idea of Asian unity gained traction, thanks to scholars and poets such as Okakura Kakuzo and Rabindranath Tagore. Mr Abe's distinct contribution has been to lend a maritime dimension, the Indo-Pacific, to the proposition that "Asia is one".

When he was re-elected as PM at the end of 2012, Mr Abe returned with gusto to the many new ideas that were put across in the Delhi speech. The "confluence of the two seas" turned into a full-blown vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The call for a coalition of maritime democracies in Delhi – the so-called Quad that brings together America, Japan, Australia and India – has gained a new life in Mr Abe's second inning.

Continuing his geopolitical innovation, Mr Abe expanded the notion of the Indo-Pacific to include Africa, especially its eastern coast. He now talks about "two seas and two continents".

On the big theme of connectivity – now defined by Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Mr Abe has sought to build on Japan's much longer experience in building ports and roads in Asia. Japan has mobilised more than US\$100 billion under an ambitious project called Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI). Although the project is not comparable in scale to



China's plans, Japan is offering a valuable alternative to the BRI, which has run into some political and economic difficulties.

Japan's PQI could help nudge Beijing towards a more consultative, transparent and sustainable approach to infrastructure development in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. It will certainly improve the capacity of small states to bargain with Beijing on terms of the BRI.

Even as it competes with China on the BRI, Japan is exploring the possibility of working with Beijing. During Mr Abe's visit to China next week – the first by a Japanese PM in seven years – the two sides are expected to discuss the possibility of Japanese companies investing in China's BRI projects.

A day after meeting President Xi, Mr Abe sits down with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Tokyo to review their plans to develop an Asia-Africa growth corridor and strengthen their maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

At the heart of Tokyo's dynamic foreign policy is the new determination that Japan can't simply stand by and watch China unilaterally define the future of Asia. At the same time, Japan is fully aware that China is too large to be contained. And that no other member of the Quad – America, India and Australia – or Asean wants to join in. Japan, like the rest of Asia and the world, has a huge stake in commercial cooperation with China, which is set to emerge as the world's largest economy.

Mr Abe is also clear that Japan can't mortgage the security of its neighbourhood to the vagaries of increasingly volatile relations between America and China. As America oscillates between different conceptions of dealing with China – from condominium and co-evolution at one end to

confrontation and Cold War at the other – Japan recognises that Asia must do more on the security front to insure against the twists and turns in US-China relations.

These are the considerations that have shaped Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy. At the heart of it is a firm decision to hold on to the US alliance, despite Mr Trump's multiple provocations, and to bear an ever larger share of America's security burdens in the Indo-Pacific. Going alone is not an option for Japan.

NETWORK OF PARTNERS

Mr Abe has focused instead on strengthening Japan's military capabilities, modernising its national security decision-making, supplementing American alliance with security partnerships with other regional powers such as Australia and India, delivering security assistance to smaller littoral nations and boosting regional multilateralism. Japan is also actively contributing to the development of "minilateralism" – working in smaller groups – and promoting sub-regional cooperation.

Even as it promotes the Quad, Japan is trying to draw in France and Britain into the management of regional security in the Indo-Pacific. Japan has a trilateral forum with the US and India, and another with Canberra and Delhi. In the coming days, these minilateral mechanisms could gain further salience in Japan's international relations.

Tokyo's new focus on sub-regional engagement is evident in the annual summits with Mekong region countries. At the 10th iteration of the summit earlier this month in Tokyo, Japan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam agreed on elevating their partnership to a strategic level. Japan is also eager to promote connectivity and commerce in the

Bay of Bengal littoral.

As the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force's helicopter carrier heads home from Singapore, Mr Abe has an unfinished agenda. At home, he continues to face strong resistance to amending the Constitution to facilitate a sound domestic foundation for a strong regional security role. But he hopes to make a fresh bid for revision in the days ahead.

On the external front, he needs to overcome North-east Asian opposition to Japan's political rise. Mr Trump's pressure on Mr Xi has opened up some immediate space for Mr Abe to limit the bilateral conflict with Beijing. Next week's summit in Beijing between Mr Abe and Mr Xi might see some first steps towards confidence building. But if the conflict between Washington and Beijing escalates, managing the China relationship will become ever more demanding for Japan.

THE KOREAN PROBLEM

Mr Abe's deft diplomacy in the region has had one major blemish – the relentless hard line against North Korea. This has made him the outlier as Mr Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in warm to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Mr Abe needs a more creative approach to the changing geopolitics of the Korean peninsula if he wants to complete the making of Japan into a normal power. Lessening the tension with the two Koreas and reconciling with Korean nationalism will help liberate Japan to realise its full potential as a major power in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• C. Raja Mohan is director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.