

GIGA and ESIWA Workshop

“Geopolitics, militarisation and risk - a new case for Confidence Building Measures in the Indo-Pacific”

November 27-28, 2023, Berlin and online

Workshop paper

Session 2: CBM regimes that respond to the dangers of emerging military technologies: transparency as a means to build confidence and reduce tensions

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Co-funded by the
European Union



Japan's CBM with two neighbors - Lack of communications

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Between Japan and two neighbors, there are different confidence-building deficiencies. One is a confidence-building framework that exists but is not working. Another is the absence of a confidence-building, even though both sides want it to exist.

Confidence-Building That Exists but Is Not Functioning

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1972, Japan has sought to strengthen its friendly relations with People's Republic of China (PRC) and has made gradual but steady progress in exchanges between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDFs). In particular, as China's national power has grown stronger in the 21st century, so has China's military power. As neighbors, Japan and China have overlapping national interests in the East China Sea and other areas. As a result, due to the increase in China's national and military power, the areas of operation of the People's Liberation Army and the JSDFs have gradually overlapped, increasing the opportunities for both forces to be present in the same area, and a conflict of national interests has become apparent.

After almost a decade of discussion, the two sides agreed on “Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism between the Japan-China Defense Authorities”, in 2018 to prevent both sides from falling into unwanted dangerous situations, and “Hotline between Japanese and Chinese Defense Authorities” aims to foster trust between Japanese and Chinese defense authorities as well as to avoid contingencies was finally created this year, in 2023. Unfortunately, the hotline is only a framework, or hardware, and it will take a considerable number of years to evolve to a situation where both sides can communicate appropriately and when necessary.

The reason for this slow progress in the confidence-building framework with China is that China's perception of concepts such as Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) and transparency seems to be very different from ours.

Their DNA, nurtured by the history of PRC and PLA from the birth of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to the establishment of PRC, through the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre to the present, makes it difficult for them to accept the need and methods for a confidence-building framework proposed by the international community. Transparency in modern Chinese society under the

leadership of the CCP is a “show up”, and credibility is not a two-ways, but rather the acceptance of one side's claims by the other. It is as if they see it as part of a "propaganda war" in which the CCP leadership unilaterally asserts itself against foreign countries, which are supposed to be its equals, just as it unilaterally indoctrinates the people within China.

Thus, it often happens that they stubbornly close the window on things that are not favorable to China. Countries that have established hotlines with PLA before Japan, such as the U.S. and South Korean armed forces, face similar problems. During periods of good relations when there are no problems between the two sides, they respond to the call through the hotline; during periods of not good, when the hotline is most needed, they do not respond to the call. This situation remains unchanged even though the People's Liberation Army has become the world's second largest military force after the U.S. military.

Under these circumstances, a two-way relationship of confidence cannot be established even if only a confidence-building framework is created. For this reason, since the beginning of the normalization of diplomatic relations with PRC, Japan continues to effort building mutual understanding between PLA and JSDFs through various layers and types of personal exchanges in order to create a climate of mutual understanding. In other words, Japan has provided opportunities for PLA personnel to come into contact with societies in other countries / Japan, which are quite different from those in China, so that they can understand the necessity and importance of mutual trust.

In the case of Japan, similar efforts have been made not only on a government-to-government basis, but also within the framework of Track 2. A prime example, in 2001, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF) established the Japan–China Field Officer Exchange Program, which arranges annual exchange trips for officials from the JSDFs and PLA to boost mutual understanding and foster dialogue. This effort has served as a last resort between the Japanese and Chinese defense authorities, even during times of strained intergovernmental relations.

Trust building that does not exist despite mutual desire for it

Another lack is the relationship between Japan and Taiwan. Both Japan and Taiwan are societies that respect freedom and democracy, and both have strong security ties with the United States. Both also face the overwhelming military power and coercive measures of China in recent years. However until the early 2000s, the military balance in the Taiwan Strait was stable in the form of Taiwanese superiority due to the qualitative superiority of Taiwan's military over China and overwhelming U.S. power, and there was little feasibility of a Chinese armed invasion of Taiwan. As a result, Japan's security interest in

the Nansei Islands and the Taiwan Strait was low, and there was no need for the Self-Defense Forces to be aware of Taiwan's military.

It is already clear that the military balance between China and Taiwan has reversed with the Chinese military's increasing maritime expansion beyond the First Island Chain, and there has been much discussion about the direct impact of the Sino-Taiwan conflict on Japan's security. Still, researchers on security issues at universities and think tanks, as well as retired SDF officers, visit Taiwan to engage in academic exchanges.

Since the Cold War, various efforts have been made mainly by the U.S. and the Soviet Union to avoid critical situations arising from unforeseen collisions and accidents that both sides do not want, let alone intentional aggression.

The "Incident at SEA" concluded in 1972 is a typical example. It provides a framework for practical solutions between the navies of both sides, even if an accident should occur, without escalating it into a diplomatic issue. Since the end of the Cold War, there is a common understanding that it is important to know each other in order to contain and minimize crises, and this has led to bilateral and multilateral communication at multiple levels, including ministerial and chief of staff level exchanges, port calls, joint exercises, and exchange of students.

An example of a regional Confidence-Building Measures at the naval level is the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). In addition to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the U.S. Navy, the Russian Navy and PLAN are also members of the WPNS, which shares CUES (Code of Conduct for Unforeseen Encounters at Sea) that stipulates rules to be followed by commanding officer of warships to avoid unforeseen accidents.

Japan is also actively participating in such efforts, and through various opportunities, many JSDFs officers have come to get up close and personal with the personnel and equipment of various foreign armed forces including China and Russia, and have come to understand who they are and what they can.

While various bilateral and multilateral frameworks for such mutual understanding and confidence building are widely spread in the international community, the JSDFs knows nothing about the military power in Taiwan, which is located only 110 km away from Yonaguni Island the westernmost island of Japan. One reason is that Taiwan's military is not participating in those frameworks due to China's various interventions. Another reason is that since the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and PRC, Japan-Taiwan Relations has been maintained as working relations on a non-governmental basis. Therefore, Japan eliminated the communication framework between defense authorities with Taiwan.

China's repeated advocacy that it "firmly opposes any form of official exchange or military contact between countries that have diplomatic relations with PRC and the Taiwan as a part of China" has impeded communication between the Japan and Taiwan defense authorities.

Just because they share universal values such as freedom and democracy, or because they share a perception of China's various efforts to change the status quo through force, does not mean that they can trust each other. Neighborhood relations are particularly sensitive. Looking back at history since World War II, it should be easy to understand that armed conflict can easily occur between democracies and even between allies. In the past, the "Cod Wars" between the United Kingdom and Iceland, both NATO members, escalated into an artillery battle over fishing rights. More recently, a dog fight between Turkish and Greek fighter jets over territorial rights to small islands in the Aegean Sea occurred in 2015. Both Turkey and Greece are members of NATO.

Both the MSDF and the ROK Navy are members of the WPNS. Japan and South Korea signed the GSOMIA in 2016, and both are allies with the United States. And also neighbors who share common values such as freedom and democracy. Believing this to be the case, Korea's response stunned not only the MSDF officers but also many in Japanese society.

Even when a relationship is based on a series of multilayered communications to understand the other party and international agreements for the exchange of military information, unforeseen accidents and situations can still occur. On the other hand, the Taiwanese navy has not even been invited to the WPNS as an observer.

It is nothing but a selfish dream to think that JSDFs and Taiwan Armed Forces (TAFs), which have no international commitments or even a regular communication framework, will somehow be able to cooperate and work together when the time comes.

On the other hand, Taiwanese warships have almost accidentally entered Japanese territorial waters, and TAFs has conducted live-fire missile exercises in waters that include Japan's contiguous zone. Going further back in history, in 2012, then-President Ma Ying-jeou revealed that the Taiwanese military had a landing operation plan for the Senkaku Islands at least until the 1990s. In addition, in 2008, in which a Japan Coast Guard patrol vessel and a Taiwanese fishing boat collided in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, then-Premier Liu Zhao Xuan was recorded as saying, "We are willing to open war [against Japan]." President Tsai Ing-Wen has also stated that "Taiwan has sovereignty over the Diaoyutai (Senkaku Islands)," and Taiwan's claim to the Senkaku Islands has not changed with the change of administration.

As neighbors, the absence of a framework for communication is a dangerous state of affairs that robs the opportunity to foster trust. Neighbors, especially those with overlapping mutual national interests and overlapping areas in which their militaries operate, need to ensure security at a minimum.

Even if the Japan-Taiwan relationship is a non-governmental working relationship, the time has come when, as neighboring defense forces, there is a need for communication that can address safety at a minimum, such as dialogue and exchange at the field level.