

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 87):

The Situation across the Taiwan Strait and Australia

23 August 2022

The visit to Taiwan by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and the subsequent live-fire military exercises carried out in the vicinity of Taiwan by the Chinese People's Liberation Army, along with its launch of ballistic missiles and their descent into Japan's Exclusive Economic Zones, have garnered a great deal of interest in Australia. Hence in this edition of my newsletter I report about this, focusing on those points which have caught my attention, as detailed below.

1. The elimination of borderlines

Speaking from my more than 20 years of experience in liaising with members of the Australian Government and engagement in strategic dialogues with them, for a long time many Australians seem to have maintained a self-imposed line dividing the South China Sea and East China Sea. In sum, and to put it in simple terms, while Australia had no choice but to become involved in issues affecting the South China Sea given their close association with Australia's own interests, this differed to issues affecting the East China Sea which were further away in terms of distance and therefore Australia could refrain from becoming involved there.

Many experts have pointed to the 'fear of abandonment' as a vector that regulates Australia's diplomacy. In this context, while 'fear of abandonment' has been strongly applied to the South China Sea, in the East China Sea it is 'fear of entanglement' that has had a significant sway. As a result, it is pointed out that Australia's involvement with the East China Sea has been somewhat passive.

However, when examining the recent Australian reaction to events, one is left with the impression that the aforementioned mental borderline is gradually being eliminated given changes to the security environment. In the background to this lie developments in the situation in Ukraine, which has brought about a demand for an agile response to the security environment in the Indo-Pacific.

2. The Japan-Australia-US Foreign Ministers' Statement

A good example of this is the Joint Statement released by Foreign Minister HAYASHI, Australian Foreign Minister Wong, and US Secretary of State Blinken following the Trilateral (Japan, Australia, United States) Strategic Dialogue that took place on the margin of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Cambodia the other day (the text of the statement can be read [here](#)).



The Japan-Australia-US Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (5 August)

While expressing their concern at the large-scale live-fire military exercises being conducted by China as a retaliatory measure to the visit to Taiwan by US House Speaker Pelosi, they also condemned the launch of ballistic missiles which fell into Japan's Exclusive Economic Zones and urged China to immediately cease the military exercises.

Foreign Minister Wong, in response to questions from the Australian media, clearly indicated that China's unprecedented use of live-fire exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan in response to the House Speaker's visit were 'disproportionate' and 'destabilising' and demanded a calmer response from China.

3. "After Taiwan, the Senkakus are next"

This heightened interest and more active involvement in the situation in the Taiwan Strait did not spring up overnight but was a conspicuous stance of the former Coalition government. For example, in his address to the National Press Club, then-Defence Minister Peter Dutton (now Opposition Leader) sounded the alarm bells over the situation in the Taiwan Strait, declaring "if Taiwan is taken, the Senkakus are next". When referring to the Senkaku Islands, Mr Dutton only used its Japanese nomenclature "Senkaku", and made clear the position of rejecting the preposterous claims by the other party in light of international law.

Of course, in the background to this statement lay an acute recognition of a geo-strategic change in which Australia's most important ally, the United States has now come to see China as the biggest strategic challenge. This has led to debate about Australia's having little choice but to play its role as the United State' ally in the event of a Taiwan Strait crisis.

It has long been pointed out that China's response, given China's imposition of various forms of economic coercion against Australia, invited the stance taken by Australia.



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (Photo: Kyodo News)

4. Great interest in Japan's expertise and experience

The above flow of events probably helps you understand the reason why the Embassy received the continuous requests for comment from the Australian media concerning the latest military exercise.

In particular, during the Q&A session that followed an address by the Chinese ambassador to Australia at the National Press Club on 10 August, the ambassador strongly denied that ballistic missiles had landed in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zones, insisting that they were 'China's maritime territory'. As a result, the Australian media made a beeline to the Embassy of Japan to garner a reaction.

It was an address that was supposed to begin with part of China's diplomatic charm offensive and expectations for a 'reset' in Australia-China relations. Yet by the time it had finished, it had conveyed and emphasised a high-handed message that 'they don't hesitate to use force to unify with Taiwan'. An Australian opinion leader let slip their feelings that 'a reset is very remote'.

After receiving requests for interviews from reporters, and based on my motto of responding to all requests as far as physically possible, I was interviewed by major television stations such as Sky News, ABC News, and Channel 9. I also explained Japan's position in response to questions from leading newspapers such as The Australian, Australian Financial Review, and the Sydney Morning Herald (video of my TV interviews can be seen [here](#).)



(Being interviewed by reporters in the Parliament House Press Gallery)



5. Free and open-minded debate

Of course, Japan and China share a so-called narrow strip of water facing each other geographically, and have deeper and longer-standing historical and cultural exchanges than those of the Australia-China relationship. However something that I believe can

serve as a useful reference for Japan are the free and open-minded debates that take place here in Australia.

In relation to the recent developments, while there are certainly those dour-faced experts who knowingly argue that “House Speaker Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan was ill-advised”, it has also been pointed out that “...the trip itself is not at all a problem. A visit by an individual legislative member, and not a member of the government, doesn’t run counter against the ‘One China’ policy, and so the response to it has been an overreaction. Using the visit as a pretext to break through the median line and make large scale exercises a *fait accompli* is the problem.”

I think this, together with robust activities and debates by think-tanks, should serve as a great example to Japan, with its tendency for indulging in many cookie-cutter responses.

6. Towards a new dimension for cooperation

A series of preparations are being vigorously pursued by Japan and Australia at present to realise an early conclusion of the Reciprocal Access Agreement signed in January this year, starting with the enactment of domestic legislation to implement the Agreement. Moreover, close communications between counterparts across a broad range of fields, from diplomatic strategy officials, to members of the Self-Defense Forces, to intelligence agencies, are proceeding more vigorously than ever. People-to-people exchanges have become more active since COVID-related restrictions were eased.



The Japan-Australia Leaders’ Video Teleconference Meeting/
Signing Ceremony for the Reciprocal Access Agreement (6 January)

This is the Japan-Australia relationship, one in which we share fundamental values and strategic interests, and where we both work towards the realisation of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. We are now at a stage where a greater level of cooperation is demanded of us in order to respond to the common issues facing the region.

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