

Maritime Security Forum for Asia Pacific Region: A Good Idea

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The reverberations of the tensions between China and some of the Southeast Asian claimants of the South China Sea have touched Japanese shores. The Japanese government has drawn plans to urge the Asia Pacific countries to support its idea of establishing a 'maritime security forum', which would be subordinate to the East Asia Summit (EAS), to 'discuss rules regarding maritime safety, such as international laws and regulations, as well as freedom of navigation'. The initiative is explicitly targeted against China who is averse to any multilateral solution to the South China Sea disputes and has in the past challenged freedom of navigation through these waters.

Building Consensus

In that context, the Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba visited Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Significantly, the visit comes before the forthcoming East Asia Summit scheduled for November in Jakarta. The Japanese minister apparently hoped to build a consensus on the idea of establishing a 'maritime security forum' for multi-lateral negotiation to deepen maritime security cooperation among the regional countries.

Japan has been working closely with Philippines on the evolving security situation in the South China Sea. Last month, Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda had indicated to the visiting Philippines President Benigno Aquino III in Tokyo that both countries should improve bilateral relations and upgrade the 'vice-minister dialogue' to a 'strategic dialogue'. Japan also offered to assist the Philippines to strengthen its coast guard.

Japan also hopes to raise the issue of maritime security forum with Vietnam during Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to Japan later this month. Similar discussions could also take place between Japan and Singapore next month.

Likewise, Indian Defence Minister A. K. Antony and External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna are scheduled to visit Japan in November prior to Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's visit to India in December.

Both India and Japan have been working closely to enhance maritime cooperation bilaterally and multilaterally and the idea of a 'maritime security forum' is sure to find favour among Indian policy makers. The navies of the two countries are expected to engage in joint exercises in the Indian Ocean in the coming months. It may be recalled that Japan had to pull out of the trilateral Malabar Exercise between India, the U.S. and Japan early this year due to Fukushima nuclear crisis. These exercises were planned to be held in the East China Sea.

Containing China

China has rejected and warned external powers such as the U.S., Japan, and India to stay away from the South China Sea disputes. It is averse to any idea of internationalizing the South China Sea issue and has cautioned that such a move will make the South China Sea issue more complex and complicated.

Although the Japanese proposal of a maritime security forum is a 'good idea' and will surely find favour among several Asia Pacific countries including the U.S., there are bound to be sharp reactions from China who is likely to view the initiative as a 'containment strategy'.

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