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Title	Abe Doctrine: US-Japan Alliance, International Law and ASEAN
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Citation	Singh, B. (2014). Abe Doctrine: US-Japan Alliance, International Law and ASEAN. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 127). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2014
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/39837
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No. 127/2014 dated 4 July 2014

Abe Doctrine: US-Japan Alliance, International Law and ASEAN

By Bhubhindar Singh

Synopsis

Japan PM Shinzo Abe's speech in Singapore highlighted three key principles for its foreign policy - uphold international law, strengthen US-Japan security relations and enhance relations with ASEAN. They signal Japan's intention to be a contributor of peace in the region.

Commentary

JAPAN'S PRIME Minister Shinzo Abe stole the spotlight at the recent Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore (also known as Asian Security Summit). He was the keynote speaker for this year's conference and delivered a much anticipated speech whose title read more like a chorus of a song than a title of a policy speech. The title was 'Peace and prosperity in Asia, forevermore, Japan for the rule of law, Asia for the rule of law, And the rule of law for all of us.'

Prime Minister Abe's speech was well-received by everyone except for China. It clearly highlighted the three key principles for Japanese foreign policy practice by his administration. First, Japan is committed and will strongly uphold international law that related to the freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight. Second, Japan will continue to not only maintain but strengthen the US-Japan security relationship. Third, Japan will strengthen its relations with the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) both as an institution and with the member states.

Together, these could be understood as the Abe Doctrine. With these principles, Japan will no longer be a bystander of regional security affairs, but a proactive contributor of peace and stability alongside its allies and partners.

An erudite choice

The focus on international law in the speech was an erudite choice. This gives Japan legitimacy in its crafting of an expanded security role in the region and beyond, and portrays Japan as a responsible state. This is an important point in light of the current tensions Japan has with China in the East China Sea.

For Japan, China is seeking to unilaterally change the status quo through the use of coercion. Its behaviour in the South China Sea and East China Sea is outside of the accepted boundaries of international law.

By raising the importance of international law and stressing the fact that there is consensus between Japan and its allies and friends in their commitment in this endeavour, Japan has shone a negative light on China. This strengthens Japan's position in relation to China.

The focus on the US-Japan security relationship is no surprise to Japan watchers. This has been a traditional practice for Japanese foreign policy. However, the inclusion of the US-Japan alliance has added importance in today's context for the following reasons. First, under Abe, Japanese security policy expansion is progressing fast. Along with the security policy expansion, Abe and his team are determined to revise the postwar agenda as well.

Revising the Peace Constitution

This entails the revision of the Peace Constitution (Article 9) to allow the Japanese Self-Defence Force (SDF) to undertake missions that fall under the collective self-defence category.

Though the eventual realisation of this mission would be attached with limits on the SDF's roles and responsibilities and the US has shown strong support for this development, Japan's neighbours continue to harbour some suspicion especially when it involves a revision of the Constitution. To appease its neighbours, Japan's measures to expand its security policy would only be supported with the continued existence of the US-Japan security relationship. Second, the US rebalancing strategy is at stake here.

Abe's statement suggests that Japan will undertake greater cooperative roles alongside the US military to ensure the successful realisation of the rebalancing strategy. The success of this strategy is critical for East Asia in the context of China's rise and North Korea's repeated acts of belligerence in the region.

ASEAN has gained greater focus in Japanese foreign policy strategy under Prime Minister Abe. This is welcomed by all ASEAN states. Abe's visit to all ten ASEAN states is a historical development and clearly illustrated the high priority Japan places on ASEAN in its foreign policy strategy. Abe's strong efforts to revive the moribund Japanese economy and offering support ASEAN states to ensure stability of the region in the maritime domain and beyond have been received positively by all ASEAN states.

The interesting point here was Abe's clear message to ASEAN that they could rely on Japan to ensure the current status quo is protected through the application of international law and the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance. This is a critical development for Japan-ASEAN relations.

Contributor of peace

Two policy recommendations are proposed to contribute to the actualisation of the 'proactive contributor of peace' policy proposed by Prime Minister Abe.

First, Japan should undergo a national conversation to resolve the history issue at home. Even though Abe's message in Singapore was positively received by most states in East Asia, the history issue continues to loom in the background and damage Japan's image in the region. Abe's questioning of the comfort women issue and suggestions to retract from the Kohno and Murayama statements are not regarded as behaviour of a responsible state. Such behaviour provides China with a legitimate reason to question Japan's intentions, in the same way Japan questions China's intentions.

The national conversation would hopefully result in an official narrative that would give Japan's neighbours confidence on Japan's expanded security role and its peaceful intentions. The history issue is not a domestic issue alone as some in Japan would claim. It has external repercussions as well.

Second, Japan has been a long-term partner of ASEAN. It understands the region well and ASEAN has always welcomed and supported Japan's involvement and presence in the region. However, Japan should be mindful to not divide the region especially in the expanded strategic competition between itself and China. ASEAN has always maintained that the institution would not take sides and Japan should support this neutral stance taken by ASEAN.

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