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

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For The Straits Times

Bylievitation

With the Japanese helicopter carrier Kaga docked in Chongsheng this week, it may be a good moment to reflect on Japan’s re-emergence as a power that could play a role 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 poor war Japan, which consciously limited its military role for decades, is now filling 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 issues its ways 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, unfortunately, is in North-east Asia.

The strong reservations of China and India about Japan’s military role in the region are well known, but that the rest of the Indo-Pacific no longer views Tokyo through the lens of the Cold War’s disastrous historical inequality.

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 remarkably, it is now in the driver’s seat, rather than following the lead of others.

To be sure, Japan is not without its own insecurities, and its rise is an issue for the region. But these are not the same as the hitherto uniformly negative sentiment about Japan’s rise that has typified the Indo-Pacific.

In a March 2018 speech titled “Japan’s role in the Asia-Pacific”, Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Toshimitsu Motegi said Japan is a “normal power” as it is doing “the right thing”.

In the case of the South China Sea, Japan’s peaceful attempt to rebalance the region, its desire to promote a rules-based international order and its desire to help build a peaceful, prosperous and resilient Asia is well intended.

In a recent speech to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Japan is determined to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific region, and that Japan will do so in a constructive and peaceful manner.

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

Japan’s plans, Japan is offering a valuable alternative to the US, which has run into some political and economic difficulties. Japan’s P3 could help bridge the trans-Pacific divide and offer 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 in the future.

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 in recent months, the two sides are expected to discuss the possibility of Japanese companies investing in China’s BRI projects.

In a way, this is Japan’s own “normal power” moment. Japan is now playing a constructive role in the Indo-Pacific, and it is doing so in a way that is consistent with the region’s common interests.

NETWORK OF PARTNERS

Mr Abe has focused on strengthening Japan’s military capabilities, modernizing its national security decision-making, supplementing America’s alliance with security partnerships with other regional powers such as Australia and India, delivering security assistance to smaller nations and boosting regional multilateralism.

This 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 issues in the Indo-Pacific. Japan has a bilateral forum with the US and India, and another with India and the UK, and the like. Japan’s influence in Asia is significant and growing.

With that move, Japan is becoming a more assertive player in the region, and it is doing so in a way that is consistent with the region’s common interests.

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