

# Japan should play part in protecting Red Sea shipping

in International Shipping News 28/05/2024



Japan is facing a growing challenge as military power becomes a regular currency of coercion in the maritime Indo-Pacific region.

The magnitude of what it is facing was evident last week as Chinese military forces launched major exercises around Taiwan to express Beijing's displeasure with the inauguration address of Lai Ching-te as the island's new president.

The event was a visually remarkable reminder of the maritime demands of a contested world in which states set the yardstick for proficiency in military statecraft.

At the same time, as Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has said, challenges to the global order are increasingly interconnected.

As a country poised to play a growing role in maintaining international security, how should Japan allocate its resources to meet the demands of contemporary regional deterrence and broader global stability?

This is a particularly relevant question in the wake of Kishida's reaffirmation in Washington last month of Japan's ambition to expand its role in the defense of the international order in cooperation with the U.S.

In a joint statement summarizing his weeklong visit, Kishida and U.S. President Joe Biden pointedly defined their countries' partnership as "global."

Yet in regard to the maintenance of global maritime order, the bilateral statement was striking for its narrow political ambitions. While the two leaders emphasized the importance of global maritime freedoms, their pledges were regionally focused on the South China Sea. This was somewhat surprising since in January, Japanese Ambassador to the U.N. Yamazaki Kazuyuki had noted how "alarming incidents" in the Red Sea were causing serious disruptions to global maritime transportation.

Soon afterward, Japan joined the U.S. and 12 other countries in a joint statement calling attacks on shipping by Yemen's Islamist Houthi movement "illegal, unacceptable and profoundly destabilizing."

Aside from Japan and South Korea, all the other signatories to the statement have joined Operation Prosperity Guardian, a U.S.-led mission to address the Houthi threat, or the EU's parallel Operation Aspides.

Japan's lack of active participation might be the result of not having vessels in the region able to play an air defense role or a political hesitancy about potentially upsetting diplomatic relationships in the Middle East.

Yet Japan's reticence is significant for three reasons.

First, it marks a departure from an established behavior of confronting issues of global maritime relevance. Since joining efforts to counter piracy off the Somali coast in 2009, Japan has repeatedly acted as a key stakeholder in global maritime security.

In 2014, with piracy remaining a serious challenge and tensions with China in the East China Sea increasing, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe linked East Asian disputes to the importance of the rule of law at sea globally.

A few months later, Abe visited the Bahrain headquarters of the Combined Maritime Forces, a 40-nation regional maritime security initiative. Japan subsequently took rotating command of the group's counterpiracy task force in the Gulf of Aden, between Yemen and Somalia. Japan continued to maintain its commitments to the group even as security demands increased in waters closer to home.

Second, the Japanese decision to abstain from action in the Red Sea is significant because of the potential global consequences of the evolution of maritime security. The frequency and character of the attacks in the Red Sea is symptomatic of how nonstate actors can now access sophisticated weapons that can be used to hold open economies to ransom.

Often acting as seeming proxies for authoritarian regimes, such groups represent a serious threat to physical and digital maritime connectivity in ways that can affect Japan directly. Indeed, a cargo ship operated by Japan's Nippon Yusen line was seized by the Houthis in November.

Tokyo's current reticence caveats ambitions for a global profile in an age of more contested maritime security.

Lastly, events in the Red Sea are offering an important opportunity for navies to tactically test systems and proficiency, while ensuring that challenges to the global order at sea mounted by authoritarian regimes and nonstate actors are not normalized.

The use of air and naval drones to attack shipping and attempts to sever critical undersea infrastructure could be dangers in the South China Sea, East China Sea or Taiwan Strait in the future.

For a country like Japan, the crucial importance of preventing such behavior from spreading cannot be understated. This is particularly true as Tokyo continues to develop close working partnerships with like-minded countries such as Australia, the U.K. and France, as well as the U.S.

A global security profile in contested times is a commitment of very tall order. Yet at sea for more than a decade, Japan has established a track record of what can be expected from a maritime country with global ambitions.

Today, as this crucial domain stands more challenged than ever, Japan should not be holding back given its expressed commitment to upholding global order.

Source: Nikkei