

Japan dangerously complacent about North Korea threat



The greatest failure of the Kishida government is that it has not taken any serious steps in revising the security profile of the Japanese themselves, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

The global power dynamics of North-east Asia are rapidly changing, but is Japan proactively adapting to new realities?

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For The Straits Times

While most of the world has its attention on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, those in North-east Asia have also been deeply concerned by the recent sabre-rattling by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as he continues to launch an assortment of missiles at an alarming rate.

In fact, Pyongyang has conducted 26 weapons tests involving ballistic or cruise missiles this year which, according to The New York Times, were more than in any other year. The latest test occurred on Oct 14, and that was the sixth in a span of one week. These missile launches pose a clear national security threat to South Korea and Japan – two stalwart allies of the US.

The tests reveal that North Korea has made rapid advances in missile technology and is clearly indicating its confidence as a nuclear-capable state. This also means that the nuclear non-proliferation regime has completely failed. In other words, US attempts to prevent Pyongyang from acquiring nuclear weapons capability, spanning nearly three decades, have been utterly futile. Now we must reckon with the stark new reality that it is not only Russia and China which seek to challenge the established international rules-based order; we also need to factor in North Korea as an existential threat with its ability to unleash weapons of mass destruction. Without a doubt, the global power dynamics of North-east Asia are changing rapidly. Thus, a natural and essential question would be: Is Japan proactively adapting to these new realities?

YES AND NO

The answer to this is both yes and no. Unlike the first North Korean missile tests conducted many years ago, when the perceived danger was greater and schoolchildren were taught to scurry and take cover, the Japanese public by and large have remained calm and collected. It is as if the Japanese have come to accept the missile launches – including those that flew across the country – as the new norm, much like the pandemic. The lack of public outcry has meant that the government in Tokyo feels less pressure to react forcefully. This is in stark contrast to South Korea, which has retaliated against Pyongyang with similar missile launches and artillery exercises near the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). Japan has done nothing of the sort, and has just resorted to condemning the North Korean moves in official statements and further expanding Japanese economic sanctions, which amounts to a mere slap on the wrist. On the other hand, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has repeatedly made known his intent on revamping the country's

national security strategy by increasing the defence expenditure. This will entail nearly doubling defence spending to approximately 2 per cent of gross domestic product. But, with the prevailing weak yen, a significant portion of Japan's foreign military hardware acquisition capability has already vanished in real terms. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the Japanese defence industry will commit the vast amounts of capital necessary to establish new production lines without assurances that the country's military budget will hold steady at the new level for at least a decade. Japan's Self-Defence Forces (JSDF), as its military is known, has not made large purchases in a long time and many munitions manufacturers in the country have determined that they cannot profit from the business and have either left the industry altogether or have greatly reduced their production capabilities. For these reasons, the doubling of defence spending will in no way equate to a twofold bolstering of Japan's military capabilities. But, more importantly, the greatest failure of the Kishida

government is that it has not taken any serious steps in revising the security profile of the Japanese themselves. Most still view the JSDF as a civil bureaucratic organisation that primarily exists to deal with natural disasters, rather than being a full-fledged military institution devoted to the defence of the country. Hence, the Japanese are aloof to the true fighting capabilities of the JSDF – as that is irrelevant – and do not lose any sleep over the fact that it is constantly undermanned. As a matter of fact, Japanese army divisions are among the smallest in the world, and all three branches of the armed forces struggle to meet their recruitment quotas.

CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION

What the current Kishida government needs to actively pursue is a revision of Article 9 of the Constitution, which will permit the country to possess a legitimate military force that is recognised as such, both internally and externally. This is the only way in which Japan's stubborn security identity as a peace-loving nation protected by

the US can be altered. This will also pave the path for Japan to play the role of a regional security provider in its own right, allowing it to provide direct military support to both South Korea and Taiwan when global events demand it. Moreover, this will also be the very moment that Japan's post-war national security policy – the so-called Yoshida Doctrine – will finally be jettisoned, and the country reborn as a normal power. Of course, such a drastic change will require vast amounts of political capital and, as the issue is a very divisive one, it will most certainly shorten the longevity of the Prime Minister. In hindsight, this is the reason why former prime minister Shinzo Abe was able to stay in power for nearly a decade; he did not forcefully push for constitutional revision. Similarly, I believe that Mr Kishida lacks the political will to revise the Constitution, and rather will opt for the much less arduous path which ensures that he – or his faction – remains in power for as long as possible. It is expected that the Japanese government will announce three key documents pertaining to defence by the end of the year. These are the New National Security Strategy, the National Defence Programme Outline and the Mid-term Defence Programme. All three will serve to clearly indicate the country's defence strategy and posture for the next decade. They will surely reflect the new global realities of Russian aggression, Chinese expansion, and a nuclear North Korea. But, looking back to the past, Japan has traditionally been very slow to adapt and change to new norms without a strong external shock. Unfortunately, the Japanese have by and large become accustomed to North Korean missile launches – perceived as almost routine now – and therefore the latest are no longer enough to bring about significant change, unless a missile actually does (inadvertently or not) strike Japanese soil. Thus, the central pillar of Japan's defence doctrine – senshu boei (exclusively defence) – will likely remain unaltered when the new documents are announced. So life goes on as usual here in Japan, with North Korean missile launches no longer perceived as being so menacing, interest in the fighting in Ukraine fading as it remains distant, and the situation in Hong Kong all but forgotten. But as the power rivalry between the US and China enters uncharted territory and with China and Russia increasingly realigning their interests, a tempest is surely brewing. One only hopes that Japan will be well prepared when this boils over.

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China's inevitable growing presence in the Middle East

Current substantive cooperation between the two sides will no doubt see ties between them grow in decades to come

Nabil Fahmy

One of the most frequently asked questions in the Middle East in recent years revolves around relations between countries in the region and China in the future. My immediate and recurrent response to it has been that China is already in the Middle East and that relations will only grow, possibly, exponentially. China is the main bilateral trade partner for Arab countries, with total trade between the two sides amounting to over US\$330 billion (S\$469 billion) in 2021. Trade relations with Israel reached US\$22 billion in the same year, a massive jump from just US\$15 million in 1992. In recent decades, China has also become the main source for foreign investment in the Middle East. The Belt and Road Initiative already includes 21

Arab countries and major infrastructural cooperation exists with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Egypt, Iraq and Syria. Chinese investment in Israel has also grown, peaking in 2018 to hit US\$4.6 billion. Iran, for its part, has been pushing for expediting the implementation of a far-reaching 25-year US\$400 billion economic and strategic partnership with China that was concluded in 2021 which includes developing industries, cyber capacities and military cooperation. Oil remains a key factor in ties between China and the Middle East. China imports almost half of its oil needs, totalling US\$176 billion approximately in 2020. Almost half or 47 per cent of imports came from the Middle East with the largest supplier being Saudi Arabia. Iraq, Oman and the UAE joined Saudi Arabia in the list of top 10 suppliers to China.

It is obvious, therefore, that substantial China-Middle East relations exist and will continue to be important for all the respective parties. Given the magnitude and nature of this cooperation, as well as growing demands, it is safe to assume that economic relations in particular will most probably increase in the decades to come. The real and more complicated question is how will all the Middle Eastern parties at the same time manage their strong relations with the United States, especially with Washington's increasing sensitivities regarding China. Another important question is how will China manage the delicate balance between not engaging heavily in Middle Eastern politics, while safeguarding its investments in the region and ensuring unobstructed maritime access for its exports and energy imports.

A LOOK BACK

A look back at the past will be instructive for the answer to the latter. The countries in the Middle East do not have any historic negative experiences with China as it was not a colonial power in the region, unlike the European states. Furthermore, over the past 50 years, Beijing has trumpeted a foreign policy that it insisted was different from the US or the former Soviet Union, both of which were superpowers during the Cold War. For decades, China postured itself modestly in the international arena, closely associating itself with the developing world. As China's economic weight increased exponentially, along with commensurate growth in demand for resources and market access, it was motivated and driven by the need to find common ground for cooperation. A measured but increasing interest in regional affairs in Beijing led to strong support for multilateralism. A friend of mine, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, has laid out China's

stance towards the Middle East, saying Beijing supported the construction of a collective regional security architecture based on equality, justice, multilateralism and comprehensiveness. This was recently conveyed for the first time to countries in the region. Some analysts believe China is ready to push for its aims in the light of the economic and political vacuum as a result of increasing American isolationism and decreasing Russian influence in the region. No Middle Eastern state expects or even wants China to play a security role equivalent to that adopted by the US or the former Soviet Union. Consequently, this will not be a point of contention for China with Middle Eastern states. But economic cooperation, geopolitical concerns and politics cannot be disentangled. There will always be a need to safeguard investments and trading rights. Hence, China will logically have to cast an eye on politics in the Middle East as it becomes more economically engaged. The recent statements issued by the Chinese Foreign Ministry regarding its vision for

the region is testimony to this. Against this backdrop, though, is apparent US hypersensitivity to any increased cooperation with China, even from among its strongest allies in the region. Washington has already put significant pressure on Israel to strongly curtail military, technology and infrastructural cooperation with China. Similar pressure was brought to bear on its Arab allies in recent years. My conclusion, therefore, is that increased Chinese engagement in the Middle East is inevitable and this is mutually beneficial and inevitable, irrespective of changing US and Russian postures. Closer ties are not seen by China or Middle Eastern states as being the result of changing priorities or postures of the US and Russia, or as an attempt to counter their influences in the region. Given the historical circumstances and heightened sensitivities in a world order in disarray, both sides will manage delicately the growth in their bilateral relations in a non-provocative constructive manner, as long as this does not contradict national security and strategic interests.

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