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The Japan Coast Guard (JCG) as a Foreign Policy Instrument in Southeast Asia

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Miha Hribernik, Non-Resident WSD-Handa Fellow with Pacific Forum CSIS, explains that “As Japan’s strategic competition with China intensifies, the Japanese Coast Guard is moving to the forefront of Tokyo’s growing security cooperation with Southeast Asia.”

The wide array of responsibilities of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) includes search and rescue, oceanography, and patrolling Japan’s territorial waters and exclusive economic zone. Even so, the JCG’s mandate appears to have become thoroughly securitized over the past several years. The Coast Guard’s budget request for a near-record ¥204.2 billion (\$1.7 billion) in the 2016 fiscal year – up from ¥187.6 billion (\$1.5 billion) the year before – was motivated by the ongoing expansion of its capabilities near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (ECS). The purchase of new vessels and aircraft, the construction of new bases, and the recruitment of additional personnel are turning the JCG into an increasingly important asset in Japan’s national security calculus.

The law enforcement agency also plays a substantial – but often overlooked – role in Japanese foreign policy. Indeed, this role may ultimately enable the JCG to have a much more substantial long-term influence on Japanese national security than its immediate impact in the territorial dispute with China.

Since the early 2000s, the JCG has spearheaded several multilateral initiatives focusing on non-traditional security threats in the Asia-Pacific. As a civilian agency under the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Tourism and Transport (MLIT), the Coast Guard has helped Japan expand its influence in Southeast Asia, where some countries remain wary of Japan-led security or defense initiatives. With memories of World War II lingering in the region, the gray hulls of the Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) project less diplomatic and soft power than the white hulls of the civilian JCG. This has allowed the Coast Guard to become an important element in Tokyo’s efforts to counter rising Chinese influence across Southeast Asia.

For example, the JCG established the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum (NPCGF) in 2000. The NPCGF brings together coast guards from Japan, the US, China, Russia, Canada, and South Korea. The forum allows the aforementioned agencies to cooperate on issues such as drug trafficking, fisheries enforcement, and maritime domain awareness. Other organizations in which JCG plays a prominent role include the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies (HACGA), which promotes practical cooperation between 18 Asian coast guards, and Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), the world’s first regional organization created solely for countering maritime piracy.

While many of these forums conduct basic interactions, they enable Japan to claim initiative in addressing threats to the global commons, such as maritime piracy and transnational crime. More importantly, they allow Tokyo to not only attract the cooperation of other countries, including China, but to also set the agenda and give prominence to issues it considers vital to its own economic and national security. In this

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context, prioritizing cooperation on topics such as drug trafficking, fisheries enforcement, and maritime piracy is understandable given Japan’s vital dependence on sea-borne trade and open sea lines of communications.

As Japan’s strategic competition with China intensifies, the JCG is moving to the forefront of Tokyo’s growing security cooperation with Southeast Asia. The Coast Guard serves as an important source of equipment and training for regional law enforcement agencies, particularly in countries embroiled in territorial disputes with Beijing. Prior to the 2014 lifting of Japan’s self-imposed ban on defense exports, the JCG served as a conduit for the export of unarmed Japanese-made vessels and equipment to other law enforcement agencies. A notable example is the 2006 donation of three armored patrol vessels to Indonesia and the Philippines respectively, which tread the fine line between development assistance and a circumvention of the export ban. While the subsequent lifting of restrictions has paved the way for more overt security cooperation, it did not diminish the JCG’s importance as a source of Japanese training and equipment.

Quite the contrary; such transfers have increased in size and frequency since the revival of Sino-Japanese tensions in 2012. The Philippines and Vietnam – both entangled in territorial rows with China – have intensified their security cooperation with Japan. In 2014, Tokyo and Hanoi signed an agreement for the delivery of six second-hand vessels, previously operated by the JCG. The Vietnam Marine Police received the first ship in February 2015, while the second one – the ex-JCG *Hayato* – was delivered to Vietnam’s Fisheries Resources Surveillance Department in August. The deal was made during a period of unprecedented bilateral cooperation, which continues to expand – as evidenced by the promise of two additional Japanese vessels and financial aid, made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in September 2015.

Cooperation with the Philippines is even more extensive, and is driven by Beijing’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. Between 2016 and 2018, Manila will receive ten new high-speed patrol vessels, built by the Japan Marine United Corporation and financed by a low-interest ¥19 billion (\$158 million) Japanese loan. The ships will be armed with machine guns and equipped with reinforced hulls that will enable ramming. The ten new units will bolster the overstretched Philippine Coast Guard’s (PCG) ability to counter Beijing’s growing presence in the South China Sea. Both the Vietnam and Philippine deals also include training for the ships’ crews, which will be overseen by the JCG. Additional training will be through ad hoc joint exercises, such as the large JCG-PCG anti-piracy drill held in Manila Bay in May 2015.

By combining the deliveries of new hardware with capacity building, Japan is attempting to ensure its efforts will have a long-term impact. Law enforcement agencies in partner states will use an increasing share of Japan-made equipment, which entails a degree of dependence on the provision of spare parts, maintenance and (potential) future upgrades. Furthermore, some personnel will be trained to Japanese standards and gain experience working with Japanese counterparts, increasing interoperability. Programs such as month-long training sessions in Japan, held annually by the JCG since 2001, also allow high-ranking officials from partner country coast guards to obtain first-hand experience in Japan. Apart from receiving training, such programs also serve a soft power role, increasing favorable views of Japan among participants, which persist after they return to their home countries.

The Japan Coast Guard’s growing activities in Southeast Asia highlight the often-overlooked utility of the agency as a foreign policy instrument of Japan. With its budget and capabilities set to increase for the foreseeable future, the JCG’s importance will only grow.

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