



THE JAPANESE SELF-DEFENSE MARITIME FORCE : « *QUO NON ASCENDET ?* » ¹

On November 10, the Chinese president and the Japanese prime minister held talks outside of the Asia-Pacific economic cooperation forum. During the meeting, Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe pledged to control tensions in the East China Sea and to prevent escalation to military confrontation. However, this does not prevent Japan from continuing to develop its Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). Ranked fourth in terms of tonnage, JMSDF can now deploy a large enough fleet to enter the closed circle of navies capable of operating across the globe.

THE PRINCIPLE OF "ACTIVE PACIFISM"

Considered a founding element of Japanese post war democracy, Article 9 of the Constitution states that the country forever renounce armed intervention. But this article involves more than just limiting the offensive capabilities of the country: it is the basis for eased relations between the countries affected by the Mikado and the new Japanese government. If public opinion remains committed to the concept of pacifism, recent statements by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe show Tokyo's willingness to play a more assertive role on peace and regional security in a context marked by China's rise to power.

The evolution of JMSDF's utilisation concept is one example of it. The Japanese indeed moved from a peaceful vision of their maritime force to a non-aggressive use. This distinction seems subtle, but it demonstrates the desire to apply pacifism within the limits of realism. This is what Abe calls 'active pacifism'. An illustration of it is given in the new interpretation of Article 9: the intervention range of JMSDF is no longer limited to the Japanese territory in the strict sense, but extends to the defence of its allies. It now links the concept of national security to one of global security to allow JMSDF to act in international crises and thus have influence regionally and even globally.

OFFENSIVE CAPACITY?

Japan as an insular power is seeking to develop the protection of its maritime area to prevent hostile intrusion while ensuring the safety of its trade routes - the country imports 99% of its raw materials.

The power of its industry, its technological lead and its alliance with the United States allows Japan to focus on the qualitative aspect of its fleet. Japan gradually developed an independent shipbuilding industry. Today, with over 40 senior units including two Hyuga class helicopter destroyers of about the size of a small aircraft carrier, and two Atago class guided missile destroyers, almost exclusively of national conception, Japan has a significant surface navy both in tonnage and operational capacity, in particular offshore. It is the same for



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its large (22 units), modern and effective submarine fleet, renewed at a rate of one ship per year, with submarines of the Soryu class, among the best in the world. Anti-submarine warfare capabilities are another major asset of JMSDF.

The Japanese fleet remains however limited in its onshore projection and action capability. While the country has good amphibious assets, doctrine does not provide for the use of these forces except in a humanitarian context. Similarly, the question of a Japanese carrier remains problematic from the standpoint of Article 9. Such a ship, however, would allow Japan to take advantage of truly offensive and deterrent capabilities amid tensions with China about the Senkaku / Diaoyu islands. JMSDF thus remains limited in the conduct of operations.

The fact remains that Japan has been able to develop military capabilities but also legitimize with neighboring countries for the operations of JMSDF. Without compromising its special relationship with the US, the country develops new partnerships and alliances, including with India, South Korea, Australia and the United Kingdom. This allows it to become a leading regional player for safety. Although some tensions persist, especially with South Korea on the sovereignty of the Takeshima / Dokdo islands, these alliances enable Japan to play a strategic role in the region, even vis-à-vis China.

"What heights will he not scale?" Motto of Nicolas Fouquet, former French superintendent of finances (1653-1661)