



Defense & Security

## Crimea's Second-Order Effects: Lessons Learned by China and Japan

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As tensions in Crimea continue to mount, China and Japan are carefully watching the U.S. response (or non-response) to gauge the level of U.S. military commitment in defense of Crimea and applying lessons learned towards their own not-so-dissimilar situations. China has successfully pursued a [“salami-slicing”](#) strategy in the South and East China Seas in pursuit of its territorial claims. This strategy has challenged American military planners by using multiple, small, slow-paced aggressive actions seemingly calculated to avoid major conflicts at sea. China may look at the situation in Crimea as further confirmation that its territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific will continue to go unchallenged militarily by the U.S.; meanwhile U.S. inaction has stoked Japanese fears that they will have to defend the Senkaku Islands against a Chinese incursion without the assistance of its supposed ally.

Japan has pursued a defensive strategy in the Asia-Pacific region backed by its security alliance with the U.S. Despite recent assurances by [Defense Secretary Hagel](#), Japan has expressed concern that the lack of American military commitment in Crimea is indicative of how the U.S. will (or will not) respond to a potential future Chinese incursion of the Senkaku Islands. Although the U.S. is not bound by treaty to defend the Ukraine as it is Japan, there are still lingering insecurities amongst Japanese leaders. The first-order effect of the Crimea situation will be whether it emboldens China to the extent that it feels its salami-slicing strategy will work against Japan and that there will be minimal consequences from the U.S. The second-order effect and the question that is on the mind of Japanese leaders is: *What if Japan is attacked and the U.S. does not respond?*

Kunihiko Miyake, research director at the Canon Institute for Global Studies and former adviser to PM Abe, is [quoted as saying](#), “If Japan is attacked, and the Americans decline to respond, then it is time [for] the Americans to pull out” of their bases in Japan. “Without those bases, America is not going to be a Pacific power anymore.” Mr. Miyake is referring to a possible incursion by China into the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. There are three parts to this statement which deserve further thought to better understand the implications.

*“...and the Americans decline to respond...”*

It is highly unlikely that the U.S. will “decline to respond” to an attack on Japan. On April 8, Defense Secretary Hagel told Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan that the U.S. is fully committed to its obligations under the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty. A more plausible scenario involves a U.S. response which fails to completely satisfy Japanese defense expectations. It is important to understand and clarify how Japan and the U.S. would define a failure to respond to China. For example, if the U.S. does not prevent a Chinese occupation of one of the Senkaku Islands, that may be considered a failure by the Japanese even if the III Marine Expeditionary Force later helps to retake the island. It should be noted that in [February 2014](#), during the Iron Fist exercise in Camp Pendleton, California, Japanese soldiers and American Marines practiced how to invade and retake an island captured by hostile forces. Even if the U.S. provides communication and logistics support to Japan’s Maritime Self Defense Force to help repel a Chinese incursion, that may still fall short of some Japanese expectations of a U.S.-led defense of Japanese territory.

Statements by senior administration officials have led some Japanese leaders to believe that the U.S. defense of Japan's islands is not a foregone conclusion. Secretary of State John Kerry and his Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Danny Russel have said repeatedly that the "United States takes no position on competing claims to sovereignty over disputed land features in the East China and South China Seas." However, more recent [testimony](#) by Assistant Secretary Russel has attempted to reassure Japan and warn China by clarifying the U.S. position on competing sovereignty claims by saying, "While we are not siding with one claimant against another, we certainly believe that claims in the South China Sea that are not derived from land features are fundamentally flawed.... Any use of the 'nine dash line' by China to claim maritime rights not based on claimed land features would be inconsistent with international law."

As senior officials clarify and harden statements aimed at Japan and China, it is evident that the Obama administration strongly supports Japan's efforts to reexamine the interpretation of its constitution relating to the rights of collective self-defense. This would allow Japan to play a more proactive role in contributing to its own defense and the defense of its allies while alleviating some of the burden currently shouldered by the U.S. [Evan Medeiros](#), Senior Director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council, said the U.S. is "completely supportive of the bilateral Defense Guidelines review...and welcome[s] any and all actions that allow us to revise the Guidelines in ways that make our alliance stronger and, especially, more interoperable."

*"...it is time [for] the Americans to pull out..."*

A U.S. failure to meet Japanese response expectations in the event of a Chinese incursion will not result in the withdrawal of American bases from Japan. The U.S.-Japan relationship is "the cornerstone of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific," and U.S. bases in Japan serve as the most significant forward operating platform for the U.S. military in the region, with approximately 38,000 military personnel.<sup>[1]</sup> There would likely be a public outcry from the Japanese public if the U.S. does not sufficiently come to Japan's aid, but with the support of Japan's leadership, the U.S. military has for years weathered local Japanese opposition stemming from safety concerns about aircraft crashes and misconduct by American Marines, and it will continue to do so until Japan is willing and able to support its own defense. Pulling bases out of Japan is currently cost prohibitive because the U.S. Congress has blocked funds dedicated to the realignment of Marines from Okinawa to Guam.<sup>[2]</sup> In addition, the Abe administration in Japan seeks to remain under the U.S. security umbrella in the short term while taking domestic steps to prepare for the long-term defense of Japan, and until that time U.S. bases will remain.

*"...Without those bases, America is not going to be a Pacific power anymore..."*

In the short term, Japan is critical to U.S. power projection in the Asia-Pacific, but in the long term, the U.S. will be able to remain a Pacific power even without significant bases in Japan. The U.S. began diversifying its military assets throughout the Pacific Rim with the first rotational deployment of [U.S. Marines to Darwin, Australia](#), in 2012, followed by the inaugural rotational deployment of [U.S. Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore](#) in 2013. With the strengthening of [defense cooperation with the Philippines](#) in March of this year, the U.S. will also be able to increase deployment of U.S. troops, ships, and aircraft from Philippine military bases.

Mr. Miyake's assertions are extreme, but they raise valid questions about the second-order effects emanating from Crimea that have only exacerbated Japanese insecurities about U.S. commitments to its defense. President Obama will depart for Asia next week, and his first stop will be Japan, where he will seek to reassure Japanese leaders that the U.S. is fully committed to countering an increasingly assertive China. It is a sign of our complex, globally integrated times that his success may very well depend on actions taken over 6,000 miles away on another continent.

*Eric Wiener is an Analyst at Banyan Analytics. The views expressed are solely the author's.*

*Image courtesy of Chuck Hagel - Secretary of Defense via Flickr Creative Commons. Image cropped.*

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<sup>[1]</sup> Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian E. Rinehart, Congressional Research Service, "The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy," August 3, 2012, 2. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42645.pdf>.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid.