



PHASE I, COMPLETE; PHASE II, COMMENCING SOON...

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With Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Cambodia and Laos coming to end on 17th November, his visit to all the 10 ASEAN member states has been completed successfully, marking the completion of first phase of his China containment strategyⁱ. This was the first time that a Japanese Prime Minister visited all the ASEAN nations while in office. His visit was primarily focused on promoting economic cooperation and rallying support for his push to counter China's growing influence and presence in the region. His visit to Cambodia and Laos is given more importance as these two countries are known to be pro-China and it certainly seems like a positive sign for Japan when Abe said at the joint press conference in Vientiane that "We've gained support (from Laos) for our policy of 'proactive contribution to peace.'"ⁱⁱ

China, as expected is not amused with Abe's visit to all these nations. The Chinese experts believe that the Japanese have been "hyping South China Sea tensions to gain popularity in the region."ⁱⁱⁱ They also said that Abe has been targeting China in his diplomatic strategy in Asia.

After his visit, Abe said in a statement to the media that he has been successful in garnering enough support for the policy of 'proactive contribution to peace.' Since LDP return to power in Japan last December, Abe has made security issues his topmost priority in discussion with other countries. He is very hopeful about getting strong support from

Vietnam and the Philippines, two other countries that are also involved in territorial dispute with China.

Japan has also decided to send 1,180 Self-Defence Forces personnel to the typhoon-hit Philippines to contribute to the relief efforts, marking one of Japan's largest emergency relief missions to date. Japan is also making a generous donation of \$10 million for the same. Abe has made use of ASEAN trips as avenues to explain his nation's security policy of promoting what he calls "proactive pacifism" to contribute to global peace and stability^{iv}.

At the same time Japan is also trying to counter China's influence in the region by investing in the four relatively poor countries of ASEAN-Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam as China is focusing its investment in these countries as a means to wield greater influence. The ASEAN countries have also asked Japan to establish a new form of partnership with them instead of just offering aid. A summit meeting scheduled for December, between Japan and ASEAN in Tokyo would try to address and discuss these requests.

Meanwhile Abe is also set to commence the second phase of his 'China containment strategy' when he undertakes the visit to India in late January. He is expected to be the chief guest for the Republic Day parade^v. His visit will follow the 6 day visit of Japan's royal couple, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko who are set to be in India from November 30 to December 5. As India is refraining from being part of any multilateral construct that may be viewed as anti-China coalition, Prime Minister Abe's move to follow the visit of royal couple is quite astute.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott called Japan, 'Australia's best friend in Asia' when he met Abe during the East Asia Summit held in Brunei in October this year. The Australian Prime Minister also extended an invitation to Abe to visit Australia and address the parliament^{vi}. Although the date for Abe's visit is yet to be finalized, Abbott is hopeful that Abe would visit Australia at "an early opportunity". It would be the first state visit to Australia by a Japanese leader in 11 years. Australia has already expressed its support to Japan in its efforts in making an increased contribution to international peace and security. Australia also believes that the time had come for Japan to be a "normal country" operating

under the same rules that other nations operate. Tony Abbott is likely to visit Japan in the first half of 2014 to recalibrate the foreign policy focus of Australia and to strengthen the strategic partnership with Japan. The former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had disappointed Japan when he chose to visit China instead of Japan for his first major overseas visit in 2008, so the visit by Abbott is being viewed as an effort from Australia to reinvigorate Australia-Japan relations.

Japan seems to be embracing a more active foreign policy, especially with regard to security matters, and much of the policy appears aimed at curbing China's power and influence in the region. For that matter, even the non-military measures seem to have the same goal. Japan's direct and bold moves regarding security issues have apparently spooked the Chinese leaders, in turn forcing China to soften its overall policy in East Asia in an attempt to appear more reasonable to its neighbours and to focus their attention [and suspicion] on Japan's intentions and ambitions^{vii}.

It would be interesting to now see how Abe is going to continue with the next phase of his "China containment Strategy" which clearly is targeted towards Asia-Pacific countries. Countries like South Korea have already started casting aspersions on Japan's military modernization program so it would be intriguing to see that to what extent Abe's Indian counterpart would be willing to support his strategy. Questions are being raised if US silence on the visits is a sign of their approval of Japan's actions. It is a very thin line that Tokyo is walking on and in order to take the skeptical countries into confidence, Abe needs to get more countries to support Japan in becoming a "normal" nation.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

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ⁱ "With visit to all 10 ASEAN nations, Abe's China containment strategy complete," *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 18, 2013. Available at ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/AJ201311180082

ⁱⁱ "With visit to all 10 ASEAN nations, Abe's China containment strategy complete," *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 18, 2013. Available at ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/AJ201311180082

ⁱⁱⁱ "Abe busy in ASEAN blitz aimed at Beijing," *China Daily*, November 18, 2013. Available at http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-11/18/content_17111189.htm

^{iv} "ASEAN ties pushed as China ties smolder," *The Japan Times*, November 18, 2013. Available at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/11/18/national/asean-ties-pushed-as-china-ties-smolder/>

^v "Japan PM Abe to visit India in January," *Japandailypress.com*, November 9, 2013. Available at japandailypress.com/japan-pm-abe-to-visit-india-in-january-0939256/00000

^{vi} "Tony Abbott invites Shinzo Abe, saying Japan is Australia's 'best friend in Asia'," *The Guardian*, October 10, 2013. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/10/aboott-invites-abe-japan-friend>

^{vii} Ted Galen Carpenter, "Japan's Containment Strategy against China," *China US Focus*, June 17, 2013. Available at <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/japans-containment-strategy-against-china/>