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Chinese Strategic Miscalculations in the South China Sea

BY HOANG ANH TUAN

Just less than a decade ago, China ranked as the world's fifth largest economy. Since then, high domestic economic growth has enabled it to surpass Japan as the second largest global economy, and China is now poised to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy, possibly within the next 10 to 20 years. With a huge population and a dynamic economic foundation, there is every reason to believe that China could very well one day become the world's largest economy. However, attaining that level of economic prowess is no guarantee of superpower status. It took the United States over 75 years and two world wars to become a global superpower in terms of both economic and military supremacy.

Hoang Anh Tuan, Director-General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, explains that “Regrettably, China does not yet recognize the extent to which its aggressive course in the South China Sea is damaging its diplomacy with neighboring countries.”

This suggests that even if China does ascend to become the world's largest economy, it will not automatically transform itself into the most powerful nation. The key lesson for China is that it needs to develop a technologically advanced economy enhanced by good governance, effective policy making, and respected global citizenship supported by level-headed diplomacy. Sustaining superpower status is no small challenge. History is full of accounts of failed superpowers that collapsed into obscurity by virtue of succumbing to competitors, committing strategic blunders that squandered resources, compromising the interests of their citizenry, or misjudging the intentions of rivals.

For China, the South China Sea dispute represents the kind of challenge that could determine whether or how China will indeed ascend to superpower status. Regrettably, China does not yet recognize the extent to which its aggressive course in the South China Sea is damaging its diplomacy with neighboring countries.

First, sovereignty disputes with some ASEAN neighbors have severely weakened China's standing in the region and beyond. The deterioration of China's relationship with the West after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident should be a strong reminder to Beijing of its recent strategic errors in judgment. During that period, ASEAN played an important role as a conduit for China to the outside world. Indeed, it is in large part due to China's relationship with ASEAN that China was able to gradually resume normal diplomatic relations with the West.

China's current assertiveness in the South China Sea is now slowly but surely eroding its positive image with its ASEAN neighbors as a peacefully rising power. Without exception, countries within Southeast Asia and beyond are very cautious of China's rise. Even as China's national economic and global stature increase, its influence, image and “soft power” abroad is declining dramatically.

Second, China's aggressiveness has resulted in the United States reprioritizing its global strategy with its “pivot” or “rebalance” toward the Asia-Pacific region. This policy adjustment by the United States has given Chinese policymakers serious reason for



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concern and activated the fear that China might again end up being contained in much the same way as the former Soviet Union during the Cold War.

China now sees “US hands” in both its internal and external affairs. Examples this year of US influence in China’s domestic affairs include Wang Lijun, Chongqing’s former police chief, applying to the US Consulate in Chengdu for political asylum and the blind lawyer, Chen Guangcheng, fleeing to the US Embassy in Beijing. Throughout the region, US allies including Japan, South Korea and the Philippines have all upgraded their already strong military cooperation with the United States. If China continues to ignore the interests or concerns of its neighbors who have a stake in the South China Sea, its aggressiveness is likely to galvanize increased regional cooperation with the United States.

Third, troubles with close neighbors also affect the image and position of China in the world. The most important condition for any country aspiring to ascend to global power status is to maintain good relations with its neighbors. However, if China is unable or unwilling to maintain a cordial relationship with its closest neighbors, how can countries further afield trust and respect this aspiring superpower? As long as China is unable to maintain a significant level of trust and friendship with its neighbors, benevolent global power status for China is likely to remain a pipe dream.

Fourth, China’s dramatic assertion of unilateral sovereignty over the South China Sea has adversely affected the peaceful environment China desperately needs to become a global power. If conflict does break out, it is likely to have a sustained, widespread and long-term detrimental impact on the regional economic and security situation in the region. China itself would severely be impacted as nearly 80 percent of its oil imports and the majority of its goods, imports and exports, flow through the Strait of Malacca and other South China Sea routes.

Central to the dispute is China’s claim of sovereignty over the U-shaped line that it claims to have inherited from the Kuomintang government, and which was only officially submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2009. As the lines are not based on any legal foundation and have no specific geographical coordinates, they leave room for inconsistent explanations from China. It should be noted that the Chinese U-shaped line covers 80 percent of the South China Sea, while China only administers 15 percent of that area.

China’s unilateral claims of sovereignty over the years to the South China Sea has made the majority of Chinese citizenry mistakenly believe that China does indeed own the entire area within the U-shaped line and that the line makes up China’s southern border. However, newly discovered maps in 1904 dating from the Qing Dynasty do not show the Paracel and Spratlys Islands. Instead, it is Hainan Island that is depicted as China’s southern most border. Unfortunately, this U-shaped line is now very much like a bone in China’s throat that it cannot swallow or remove.

A respected characteristic of a truly global power lies in its ability to admit and move beyond historical misadventures. US efforts to normalize relations with Vietnam are a case in point. China is a great civilization which gave birth to great men like Laozi, Confucius, and Li Shizen, and by following the teachings of these renowned philosophers China should be capable of overcoming its miscalculations in its South China Sea policy.

First and foremost, China should take constructive steps to bring about an amicable conclusion to negotiations on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea, and implement a face-saving policy renouncing once and for all its U-shaped line. Obviously, this will be a difficult decision for China to take. However, the international dividend and return for China’s peaceful rise would ripple far beyond the neighborhood and confines of the South China Sea.

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