NOREF
NORWEGIAN PEACEBUILDING RESOURCE CENTRE

Expert Analysis

January 2014

Great power conflict in the western Pacific: reprise of the First World War scenario?

By Walden Bello

Executive summary

The Asia-Pacific region has entered a period of destabilising conflict. In the last few weeks, China's unilateral imposition of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over a large part of the East China Sea has been the centre of controversy. Beijing's ADIZ declaration came in the wake of worsening relations with Japan owing to rival claims over the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands.

Further south, the attention of geopolitical analysts has focused on the Philippines, which is quickly becoming a frontline state in the U.S. strategy to contain China, the central thrust of the so-called pivot to Asia promoted by the Obama administration. In the most recent development, the Philippine government has offered the United States greater access to its military bases.[1]

Serving as a convenient excuse for a heightened U.S. military presence in the region have been China's controversial moves in the western Pacific. In particular, Beijing's claiming the whole South China Sea, or West Philippine Sea as Chinese territory has allowed the United States to come in and appear an indispensable actor to protect the region's smaller countries against Chinese hegemony. A former U.S. colony and ally, the Philippines have been especially receptive to Washington's siren call.

However, China's moves and the U.S. counter-moves, with the Philippines as a pawn, are not the only major sources of destabilisation. Japan is another, with its current right-wing government seeking to rewrite the history of the Second World War, departing from an apologetic stance on Japan's war guilt, adopting a more militant stance vis-à-vis China and covertly seeking a nuclear capability.

This paper will first discuss China's moves in the West Philippine Sea, also known as the South China Sea, move on to the United States' "pivot to Asia" and then end with Asia's Japan problem.

July 24th 2013 marked the first anniversary of the creation of Sansha City by Beijing to administer the whole West Philippine Sea and the islands and terrestrial features that it claims belongs to China. Among these are the Spratly Islands, nine of which are claimed and occupied by the Philippines, along with Scarborough Shoal, Ayungin Shoal, Panganiban Reef and Recto Bank, all of which are claimed by the Philippines. The last few months have seen a series of provocative Chinese moves, including occupation of Scarborough Shoal, or Bajo de Masinloc by up to 90 Chinese ships, which have barred Filipino fishers from the area, an increased Chinese military presence at Ayungin Shoal and a Chinese general's brazen presentation of the so-called Cabbage Strategy. The thrust of the Cabbage Strategy, Major General Zhang Zhaozhong explained, was to surround Bajo de Masinloc, Ayungin Shoal and other Philippine territories with a massive Chinese naval presence to starve Filipino detachments and prevent reinforcements from reaching them.[2]

The Nine-Dash Line maritime grab

What China adduces as a legal basis for its aggressive moves is a *note verbale* that Beijing submitted to the United Nations on May 7th 2009, which unilaterally asserted China's "indisputable sovereignty" over all the islands in the West Philippine Sea and their "adjacent waters/relevant waters". Accompanying the note was the infamous "Nine-Dash Line" map. No official explanation for the Nine-Dash Line was provided at that time or has been since, though

1 The negotiations, however, have stalled, owing principally to the U.S. demand that the arrangement between the Philippines and the United States be a treaty ratified by the Senate of the Republic of the Philippines instead of simply being an executive agreement (personal communication from a member of the cabinet of President Benigno Aquino III who wishes to remain anonymous, December 14th 2013).

2 A good account of China's Cabbage Strategy in action in the West Philippine Sea is provided by Jeff Himmelman (2013).

there have been unofficial references to the islands and waters of the West Philippine Sea being ancestral Chinese territories or to their inclusion in old maps of the defunct Nationalist Chinese regime that date back to the late 1940s.

Among the brazen claims of the Nine-Dash Line document is that the nine Spratly Islands and terrestrial features that have long been a municipality of Palawan belong to China. The Kalayaan Island Group is about 370 km (230 miles) from Palawan and some 1,609 km (1,000 miles) from China.

Another clear implication is that the Bajo de Masinloc, which is 137 km (85 miles) from the province of Zambales and is an integral part of it, also belongs to China, which is 700 km (434 miles) away.

Yet another assertion is that the Philippines and the four other claimants to the West Philippine Sea are not entitled to their 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), since the whole area falls under China's "undisputable sovereignty". What most of the other claimants are left with are only the territorial waters that extend 12 nautical miles from their coast.

If allowed to stand, the Nine-Dash Line claim will probably be the most brazen maritime territorial grab in history.

The Philippine position

In contrast to China, which is threatening to use force to enforce its claims, the Philippines has actively resorted to peaceful methods to resolve the territorial disagreements. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to which four of the claimants belong, also favours a peaceful resolution, as shown by the declaration of the recent ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Brunei (ASEAN, 2013):

> We discussed the situation and recent developments in the South China Sea. In this regard, we appreciated the exchange of views on the issues including initiatives and approaches to enhance trust, confidence and dialogue, and address incidents in the South China Sea. We also noted suggestions for a hotline of communication, as well as search and rescue of persons and vessels in distress. We further reaffirmed the importance of peace, stability, and maritime security in the region. We underscored the importance of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), ASEAN's Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea, and the ASEAN–China Joint Statement on the 10th Anniversary of the DOC. In this regard, we reaffirmed the collective commitments under the DOC to ensuring the resolution of disputes by peaceful means in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, without resorting to the threat or use of force, while exercising self-restraint in the conduct of activities.
>
> We looked forward to continued engagement with China in the full and effective implementation of the DOC in all its aspects. We would continue carrying out mutually agreed joint cooperative activities and projects in accordance with the Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC. We stressed the need to maintain the positive momentum on dialogue and consultations following the 19th ASEAN–China Senior Officials Consultations and 8th ASEAN–China Joint Working Group on the Implementation of the DOC. Taking into account the importance of the 10th anniversary of the ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership in 2013, we look forward to the formal consultations between ASEAN and China at the senior official level on the Code of Conduct with an aim to reach an early conclusion of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, which will serve to enhance peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

Also in contrast to China, which wants only bilateral talks in which it can bamboozle its much weaker neighbours, the Philippines has advocated and resorted to multilateral diplomacy to resolve territorial disagreements among several rival claimants. Again, ASEAN has supported this stance of the Philippine government.

With the exhaustion of all possible bilateral approaches to address the issue and to show its commitment to the use of peaceful methods to resolve its disagreements with China, the Philippines recently brought its case over Bajo de Masinloc to the United Nations for international arbitration. The process would allow China, the Philippines and the other claimants to clarify their maritime entitlements under UNCLOS, paving the way for a truly peaceful and lasting settlement of the West Philippine Sea disputes. The five-member United Nations Arbitral Tribunal formally began the hearing on the Philippine petition on July 11th China, however, refuses to participate in the process, a clear indication that it realises that international law is not on its side.

Why steadfastness matters

The Philippines' and ASEAN's moves have placed China on the defensive, making it realise that it is losing the battle for global public opinion by coming across as a regional bully. Thus, in the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Declaration in Brunei Darussalam on June 30th, it was announced that China had belatedly agreed to participate in talks to come up with a Code of Conduct to govern the behaviour of the different claimants to the West Philippine Sea, something for which the Philippines had been pushing for a long time. This was a step forward, but Filipinos are, like their government, cautious, waiting to see if Beijing is really serious about holding constructive talks.

The Chinese retreat showed the importance of being steadfast in defence of national interests. However, the significance of the Philippine stand goes beyond the Philippines, and beyond the ASEAN countries that have claims in the area. As Ambassador Erlinda Basilio, the

Philippines' envoy to Beijing, has stated, "the Philippines is not just protecting its national interest but fulfilling its international responsibilities in assuming its diplomatic stance". For what China is saying with its Nine-Dash Line claim is that a body of water that is 3,500,000 km^2 (1,350,000 square miles) in size, which borders six states and through which transits one-third of the world's shipping, is a domestic waterway like Lake Michigan in the United States. Such a claim is simply unacceptable to all countries with a stake in freedom of navigation in the world's seas and oceans.

Reproducing colonial behaviour

China's behaviour in the West Philippine Sea dispute is a far cry from that of a state rectifying borders that were violated by colonial rule, as the People's Republic of China did in dismantling Manchukuo and reclaiming Manchuria after the Second World War. It is that of a state that is behaving like a colonial or imperial state, imitating the expansionist conduct of the Western powers and fascist-era Japan that it condemned in international fora.

Why is China behaving this way? Where is China coming from? There are three theories on the source of Chinese behaviour. The first says it stems from insecurity. China's increasingly aggressive rhetoric stems less from expansionist intent than from the insecurities brought about by high-speed growth followed by economic crisis. The Communist Party has long been dependent for its legitimacy on delivering economic growth, and domestic troubles related to the global financial crisis have left the leadership groping for a new ideological justification, which it has found in virulent nationalism.[3]

The second theory, my view, is related to the first. It is that China is poised to make major changes in its domestic political economy from which new winners and new losers will emerge owing to the exhaustion of the old export-led development model. An aggressive, nationalist stance of pushing territorial claims in the West Philippine Sea and the western Pacific, near Japan and Korea, would, in this view, be a way of containing centrifugal forces as the party carries out a comprehensive programme of reform.

The third theory, the conventional view, is that China's moves reflect the cold calculation of a confidently rising power. It aims to stake a monopoly over the fishing and energy resources of the West Philippine Sea in its bid to become a regional and, later, global hegemon.

Whatever the reason for its provocative posture, Beijing's moves have alarmed its neighbours. As noted earlier, ASEAN, at the meeting of its foreign ministers at the end of June, reminded China of their

> collective commitment under the [2002] Declaration of Conduct [of Parties] to ensuring the resolution of disputes by peaceful means in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), without resorting to the threat or use of force, while exercising self-restraint in the conduct of activities.

More disturbing is the fact that Beijing may be forcing other regional states, including Washington's former enemy, Vietnam, into the hands of the United States by allowing the latter to portray itself as a military saviour or "balancer" to Beijing. If China feels threatened by the closer military relations the U.S. is developing with its neighbours, it has only itself to blame, many in the region feel.[4]

The pivot

Obama's so-called pivot to Asia is not novel. It is simply a return to the global military posture of the G.W. Bush administration before September 11th 2001 (9/11), which redefined China as a "strategic competitor" instead of a "strategic partner". The "contain China" strategy was, however, put on hold after 9/11, owing to Washington's drive to win allies for its "War on Terror". However, although it is not new, there is an urgency to the containment strategy under Obama as a result of developments in the intervening decade. To many analysts, the pivot actually represents a retreat from the comprehensive global military dominance that the neoconservative faction of the U.S. ruling class attempted under Bush. It is a feint, a manoeuvre to serve as a cover for a limited retreat from the United States' disastrous intervention in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. It is an attempt by Washington to retreat to an area for imperial power projection that it sees as more manageable than a Middle East that is running out of control.

To be sure, the western Pacific has always been an American lake. At its height in the era following the Second World War, the U.S. presence was a transnational garrison state spanning seven countries and political entities in the western Pacific and Australia.

Nevertheless, the Pacific pivot has intensified the already intense militarisation of the area. Some 60% of U.S. naval strength is being shifted to the western Pacific. This has been accompanied by the accelerated deployment of U.S. Marine units from Okinawa to Guam and Australia. U.S. Special Forces continue to participate in the campaign against radical Islamists in the southern Philippines, while conducting amphibious and naval exercises with Philippine military units near the disputed Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal. The most recent development is that the Philippine government will allow greater U.S. access to Philippine bases, including the massive former U.S. naval complex at Subic Bay. Twenty years after giving up its bases in the country, the U.S. is back with a bang in the Philippines. Also apropos of recent events in the Philippines, you can be sure that Washington's massive aid effort

3 This view is expounded by Robert Ross (2012).
4 Yo-yung Chen (2013) provides an interesting analysis of the contradictions in Chinese foreign policy that are eroding the goodwill it had carefully cultivated.

in the aftermath of Supertyphoon Haiyan has not only humanitarian but also geopolitical aims, to remind what colonial Washington called America's "Little Brown Brothers" that they have no more reliable ally than Big Brother (see Medcalf, 2013).

The U.S. build-up in the Philippines, some Filipino commentators have pointed out, is self-defeating for the Philippine government if its aim is to get Washington's presence to help settle Manila's territorial dispute with China. The dynamics of conflict between the superpowers have set in, marginalising an effective resolution to the territorial disputes that Washington's military presence was supposed to facilitate in the first place.

Tokyo's opportunism

The sparring between the U.S. and China is worrisome enough, but there is a third source of destabilisation in the region: Japan. Right-wing elements there, including the current prime minister, Shinzo Abe, have taken advantage of China's moves in the West Philippine Sea and Japan's dispute with Beijing over the deserted Senkaku Islands to push for the abolition of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which prohibits war as an instrument of foreign policy and prevents Japan from having an army. Their aim is to have a foreign and military policy more independent from the U.S., which has managed Tokyo's external security affairs ever since Japan's defeat during the Second World War.

Many of Japan's neighbours are convinced that a Japan more independent of the U.S. would develop nuclear weapons, and they fear the prospect of a nuclear-armed Japan that has shed its post-war pacifism and not yet carried out the national soul-searching that, in Germany, embedded responsibility for the atrocities of Nazi Germany in the national consciousness. This failure to institutionalise and internalise war guilt is what allowed the mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, to assert earlier this year that the estimated 200,000 Korean, Chinese and Filipino "comfort women", or sex slaves, were "necessary" for the morale of Japanese troops during the Second World War (see, among other reports, *The Independent*, 2013).

The Osaka mayor's remarks came in the wake of another scandal: in April, some 170 sitting legislators and members of Prime Minister Abe's cabinet took part in a mass visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, the home of Japan's war dead. Among those it honours are 14 convicted war criminals.

Japan's neighbours, in particular China and Korea, have long condemned the ritual visit of Japanese leaders to Yasukuni as a sign of the country's unrepentant attitude for its conduct during the Second World War. However, there are disturbing signs that long-held stances towards Japan's remilitarisation are softening. The foreign secretary of the Philippines, Albert del Rosario, for instance, has gone on record recently to support Japanese rearmament in order to contain China's hegemonic behaviour (see, among others, Pilling, Landingin and Soble, 2012). Still, it will not be easy to change attitudes in South Korea, where Japan is deeply hated, certainly much more than China. As one newspaper account has noted, Japan and South Korea are barely speaking to each other, and this gulf between its two key allies in Northeast Asia is said to be the fly in the ointment in the U.S. strategy to contain China.

North Korea must certainly be added to this brew, but I shall not discuss this at length except to say that we can be sure that its calculus of survival includes a scenario of stoking a conflict between China and the Washington–Seoul–Tokyo alliance.

Conclusion

China's aggressive territorial claims, the United States' pivot to Asia and Japan's opportunistic moves add up to a volatile brew. Many observers note that the Asia-Pacific military-political situation is becoming like that of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of a similar configuration of balance-of-power politics. It is a useful reminder that, although that fragile balancing act worked for a time, it eventually ended up in the conflagration that was the First World War. None of the key players may want war. On this there is consensus. But neither did any of the Great Powers during the First World War. The problem is that, in a situation of fierce rivalry among powers that hate one another, an incident may trigger an uncontrollable chain of events that may result in a regional war, or worse.

References

ASEAN. 2013. Joint Communiqué, 46th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, June 29th–30th.

Chen, Yo-yung. 2013. "China's hit-and-hide foreign policy." *The Nation* (Bangkok), December 21st, p. 8A.

Himmelman, Jeff. 2013. "A game of shark and minnow." *New York Times Magazine*, October 31st.

The Independent. 2013. "Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto: sex slaves were necessary to 'maintain discipline' for Japanese military." May 14th. ‹http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/osaka-mayor-toru-hashimoto-sex-slaves-in-world-war-two-were-necessary-to-maintain-discipline-for-japanese-military-8614959.html›.

Medcalf, Rory. 2013. "Typhoon Haiyan and the geopolitics of disaster relief." ‹http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/11/Typhoon-Haiyan-and-the-geopolitics-of-disaster-relief.aspx›.

Pilling, David, Landingin, Roel and Soble, Jonathan. 2012. "Philippines backs rearming of Japan." *Financial Times*, December 9th. ‹http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/250430bc-41ba-11e2-a8c3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2oHWZV9z9›.

Ross, Robert. 2012. "The problem with the pivot." *Foreign Affairs*, 91(6), November–December, p.70–83

THE AUTHOR

Walden Bello is a member of the House of Representatives of the Republic of the Philippines.

NOREF

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre
Norsk ressurssenter for fredsbygging

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on
www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or
@PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32