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South China Sea Series

South China Sea Tensions: Unlikely to Lead to War

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

Recent naval and land activities in the Spratlys have highlighted growing tensions and the risk of conflict in the South China Sea. However as China and United States seek to manage their differences the escalation of such incidents to war is seen as unlikely.

Commentary

RECENT NAVAL manoeuvres and land reclamation activities in the Spratlys have drawn attention to the risk of incidents at sea leading to growing tensions and even conflict in the South China Sea. On Tuesday 27 October 2015, the United States Navy sent its state of the art guided-missile destroyer USS Lassen into waters within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef, which China claims. Chinese naval vessels shadowed the USS Lassen until it left the waters around Subi Reef and Mischief Reef.

China's extensive land reclamation in the South China Sea was described by the Malaysian Chief of Defence Forces General Tan Sri Dato Sri Zulkifeli bin Mohd Zin as 'provocative' when he spoke at the defence-focused Xiangshan Forum in Beijing on 18 October. China has built a helipad, wharfs, a weather observation station and a four-storey building on Subi Reef after extensive land reclamation. China also appears to be reclaiming land for the building of a runway estimated to be 3,300 metres long, as well as a parallel taxiway, capable of meeting any military requirements.

US and Chinese concerns

The possibility that such a combat-capable runway is being built as well as similar facilities on Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratlys and Woody Island in the Paracels has raised concerns among defence analysts that China would be well-placed to enforce an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea if it chooses to establish such a zone, as it has done over contested waters in the East China Sea.

The US move was an attempt to assert freedom of navigation in the contested South China Sea, an important waterway that carries almost 30 per cent of global trade, including nearly 60 percent of Japan's and Taiwan's energy supplies, and 80 percent of China's crude oil imports. The US navy has reiterated that it will continue with such patrols in the South China Sea.

China's response was immediate but low-keyed. The Chinese Foreign Ministry summoned the American Ambassador to China Max Bacaus to protest the American action. Executive Vice Minister Zhang Yesui told Bacaus that the US had acted in defiance of repeated Chinese objections and had threatened China's sovereignty and security. Chinese public opinion has also been critical of the American action, highlighting the risk that growing nationalist sentiments, especially among younger Chinese, could reduce the Chinese government's freedom of action in future.

For Southeast Asia's littoral states, the American and Chinese positions draw attention to the increased risks of conflict in the South China Sea. There is also the possibility that regional claimant states could miscalculate and take stronger action to pursue their claims in the belief that they would have the support of the US. The firmest support for the US came from Philippines President Benigno Aquino III who saw "no issue" with the US exercising freedom of navigation.

Among American allies, Australia's Defence Minister Marise Payne strongly endorsed the right of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga declined to comment directly on the patrol but highlighted Japan's general commitment to "the aim of preserving free and peaceful waters" and opposition to land reclamation, militarisation, and other unilateral attempts to change the status quo. South Korea did not address the issue but only made a general statement supporting freedom of navigation and stressed the importance of the 2002 Asean-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

China's strategy

China has never defined whether it claims all the waters within its 'nine-dash line' map or only the features within it. Southeast Asian states would question whether such artificial "islands" as Subi Reef are entitled to territorial waters of 12 nautical miles around the land features from the low water elevation, based on the definitions in the Law of the Sea Convention. Both China and Southeast Asian states have ratified the convention. But the US, which has not acceded to it, will rely on its interpretation of customary international law.

China's strategy of creeping de facto control over the South China Sea has resulted in growing resistance by the Philippines and Vietnam among claimant states. They have moved closer to the US, which is seen as the only power capable of balancing China. It has encouraged rising defence expenditures, especially on the navy and air force, a trend also seen in other regional states such as Indonesia.

However, as major powers, the US and China will focus on the management of their differences. Already, on 30 October, the US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson had a video conference with the Chief of the Chinese Navy Admiral Wu Shengli. Although Admiral Wu told Admiral Richardson that there is a risk of "a minor incident that sparks war", significantly both sides agreed to maintain the dialogue and to follow agreed protocols to prevent clashes. Scheduled port visits by US and Chinese ships and planned visits to China by senior US Navy officers remain on track.

War not likely

Regional claimant states hoping for a strong American response should bear in mind that it will be difficult to convince a weary American public to embark on another major overseas conflict. This factor, together with China's interest in avoiding war so that its leadership can continue to focus on economic development, makes it unlikely that China and the US will miscalculate and rush headlong into war.

My assessment is contrary to the view of those scholars and policy-makers who believe in the considerable risk of war as China, the rising power, challenges the dominance of the US, the global superpower. An increasingly confident China has promoted economic policies designed to strengthen Southeast Asian linkages with itself, popularising the slogan "One Belt, One Road" to establish a Maritime Silk Road linking East Asia to the Middle East.

On the other hand, China's security strategies run the risk of alienating regional opinion and have made it easier for competitors such as the US and Japan to reinforce their ties with states in the region. The exception are states bordering China like Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, which regard the conflicting claims in the South China Sea as a distraction for ASEAN and have been happy to receive Chinese aid and investments.

While Myanmar has shared the perspective of other mainland Southeast Asian states on South China Sea issues it has recently been critical of China for interfering in attempts to reach an umbrella peace agreement with separatist groups on Myanmar's border with China. A senior Myanmar negotiator claimed that China had persuaded the Kachin Independence Organisation and the United Wa State Liberation Army (UWSA) not to sign the peace agreement.

Southeast Asian states should anticipate that they will have to deal with a more assertive China in the years ahead. One harbinger of this trend was a warning by the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia Huang Huikang during a visit to Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown in October that "the Chinese government opposes terrorism and any form of discrimination against races and any form of extremism".

China's primary risk westwards lies in support for Uighur separatism by their co-religionists speaking similar Turkic dialects and demands for the independence of Tibet. These two threats are primarily domestic and containable, even though there is a worry that groups such as Islamic State may incorporate Uighur nationalism within their Islamic radical framework for a global jihad.

On the other hand, as Chinese power rises, Chinese policymakers recognise that the only power with the capacity to threaten Chinese interests is the US, the sole superpower, and its web of alliance relationships. This has resulted in a Chinese re-balancing with a tilt eastwards towards the Pacific.

In the decade ahead, there will be a strengthening of Chinese air and sea defence capabilities and a growing emphasis on building closer economic and political ties with the littoral states on the Maritime Silk Road. However, as the US will remain a Pacific power, the effective management of the US/China relationship will be the critical issue for maintaining global peace and security.

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