



China Hedges over Wannabe Mare Nostrum

Nicolas Gosset¹

Once again tension has been rising up in the South China Sea of late, putting further strains on China's exceedingly complex relations with Southeast Asian countries and the US, and there is a sense in Beijing that the reassertion of the Middle Kingdom's global ascendancy is at hand. However, China's new assertiveness reflects weakness as well as strength. Far from oozing self-confidence, China is in a more precarious situation than many may think. The world is not bipolar and might never become so. Yet this should not obscure the fact that the PRC's relative power is plainly growing – and both 'the West' and China itself need to adjust to this. But certainly, China's behaviour is now being watched more and more closely, and reciprocally.

On July 21 in Bali, where she was attending Asia's largest security conference, US Secretary of State H. Clinton, underscoring the urgency of peacefully resolving disputes over resources and territory in Asia Pacific strategic waters, warned (once again) that increasing and sometimes violent encounters between China and its neighbours with competing claims in the South China Sea are driving up shipping costs and risk getting "out of control". Reiterating thus what she already declared last year while in Hanoi for the ASEAN Regional Forum amid heightening tensions at sea, Clinton also said, because the US "has a national security interest" in open access to Asia's maritime commons, it would be deepening its involvement in the region "to help maintain stability" and "avoid all rival claimants resorting to the threat or use of force to bolster their positions".²

Increasing Tension in Coastal Waters

On the scale of measuring China's 'civility' in the Asia Pacific regional security complex, the nation's behaviour in its offshore waters is high up on the list. In this regard, the year 2010 has been widely perceived as a turning point for China strategic behaviour in a context where suspicion about Beijing's agenda and countering moves from the outside are on the increase. Buoyed by expanding national power and growing confidence, China is now believed to be taking an increasingly assertive approach in the pursuit of its national interests, especially on the ocean, where the PLA's recent muscles flexing has generated considerable tension with the US and Southeast Asian nations.

¹ Research fellow at the Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID). The views expressed in this paper are only those of the author.

² Associated Press, "Clinton: South China Sea disputes need urgent work" (July 11, 2011)

As Beijing firmly reiterated its long-standing claims over most of the South China Sea, many in the Asia Pacific Region have demonstrated growing nervousness following some of China's actions obviously disregarding friction with the US and neighbouring countries in that highly disputed maritime domain that counts more than 250 contested features. Grouped into two major island-chains – the Paracels and the Spratly Islands, these features are like dots on the ocean connecting all littoral states with one another. Unsurprisingly, Beijing's sovereignty assertion is hard-fought by ASEAN member states (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam), and Taiwan as well, that each claim part of the islands or the sea. For decades now, interstate relations in the region have been severely astringed because of those unresolved territorial claims and longstanding maritime boundary disputes in which resource considerations and sovereignty question overlap. Though most of these disputed features are too tiny to even appear on Google Earth, they nevertheless loom large in the strategic interests of involved parties because they can serve as base points for an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) where claimants can enjoy their sovereignty to pursue all sorts of military and economic activities, fishing and hydrocarbons exploration chiefly, as they are believed to lie atop vast deposits.

Because these features touch the issue of territorial integrity, they agitate nationalist sentiments and encourage claimants to conduct military exercises around contested waters. This is nothing new. China and Southeast Asian nations have been wrangling for years over territorial claims to the South China Sea. Overlapping claims to EEZ have created a pattern of amity and enmity that shapes the region's security environment. Yet in recent years, the Southeast Asian maritime domain has become a source of renewed tensions and major power rivalry as disputes have become more closely associated with interrelated issues of energy, food, territorial and military security, all pervaded by rising expressions of nationalism at work in the region.

Since 2009, disputes over EEZ boundaries in the South China Sea have been significantly reigniting, even bringing naval forces into contact with each other. All over again, first half of 2011 has seen major developments that highlighted anew persistent difficulties of achieving stability in the region. On June 14, few days after the Philippines had accused Chinese forces of shooting at fishermen in an area claimed by both countries in the western Spratlys, deploying navy patrol boats to intimidate an oil exploration vessel and placing markers on some of the islets, Vietnam made public that Chinese ships had cut survey cables of a boat operated by PetroVietnam in Hanoi-claimed Spratlys. Couple of days later, Chinese vessels were told having opened fire on four Vietnamese fishing boats operating in the same area. Already, in May 2010, Chinese patrol guards had detained close to fifty Vietnamese fishermen in three separate incidents. Their vessels had also caused tensions to rise by engaging in standoffs with Malaysian and Indonesian navies over the operation of Chinese fishing boats in their waters.

Critically, the re-emergence of maritime disputes has to be understood in light of the stepped up activities of the Chinese navy in the waters and, because the US has clearly become involved in the issue, South China Sea is now being ascribed potential for taking on the dimensions of a US-China confrontation. For most regional capitals, Hanoi, Manila, and Taipei in particular – all having strong security links with the US, China's ongoing modernisation of its military and increased navy activity is, along with insufficient transparency, causing ever growing concern that China may use its growing capabilities in regional maritime territorial disputes, and so is certainly the case for the US, that views the sea lanes in the region as strategically important. As a matter of fact, for Beijing too, Washington's increasing involvement in regional maritime disputes is also matter of great concern.

Foreign Military Activities in Asian EEZs

Complicating the issue, indeed, is the role the US is playing in the disputes. Clearly, regional tension in and over South China Sea has become one of the most delicate diplomatic issues between Beijing and Washington. Perhaps no other point of tension (underrated *yuan* let apart) has been as revealing of the difficulties US officials have reading and responding to Chinese foreign policy. Herein, disputes arose not only over the traditional issue of Taiwan, but also over the 'new' issue of 'freedom of navigation' for US vessels in the EEZ claimed by Beijing.

From 2009 on, increasingly alarmed by China's behaviour, the US has been beginning to adopt a tougher stance oriented at openly opposing China's attempts to contain military operations in its offshore waters. Hence, when discussing these events that are likely to have significant impact on US-China relations hereafter, many analysts have been expressing the view that, as navies expand their reach and technology advances, the warships, submarines, and military aircraft of the two countries are increasingly likely to encounter and possibly to confront each other in and over the South China Sea.

In recent years, China's broadly buzzed 'military rise' has arguably become the major source of maritime security dilemma in the Asia Pacific Region as a result of many uncertainties associated with that rise. Not only has China increased the number of submarines and vessels operating into bordering seas and beyond; it strengthened its presence through patrols and exercises. In this regard, the PLAN's much commented completion of its first aircraft carrier, the *Shī Láng*³ (ex-*Varyag*), is often considered to be a sensitive barometer of China's new sea power ambition.⁴ While the threat posed by the vessel – a Soviet-era reconditioned carrier bought from Ukraine – is in fact nothing but symbolic, it is indeed raising alarms in the region as a symbol of the nation's military expansion. For Washington and its allies, indeed, though the US continues to be (by far) the most powerful and far-reaching military force in the region, the fact that Beijing seems now to be in a position to build strategic power projection capabilities that might challenge the US-dominated maritime system in the future is at least puzzling.

As Beijing is expanding its capabilities seaward, and intertwiningly, the US military is enhancing its presence in the area in order to keep the dragon at bay, US and Chinese interests have already clashed, producing much-commented albeit small-scale military incidents. While change in perception has been even more dramatic because China's challenge to the US principle was then accompanied by concrete action for the first time, tensions – resulting from a combination of advancing technology, increasing sensitivity, and fundamentally different interpretations of the applicable international law – are by far not confined to China and the US, as nations with a stake in the outcome view US power as a negotiating leverage with China. Common concerns of the US and Southeast Asian nations regarding what they consider to be China's confrontational actions at sea are steadily deepening their collaboration. Yet it seems that the US is now using tensions in the South China Sea to ratchet up its national security goals in the region – a strategy that raises strong protest on the part of China.⁵ This is simply the great power game. Whilst Washington does not want to overly antagonise its largest debt holder, trade partner and perceived military contender in the region, it considers nonetheless having strategic interests in Southeast Asia that would benefit by counter-balancing China's unimpeded military and economic expansion in the region.⁶ Gradually, the US military has been therefore establishing more contact with littoral countries standing to gain from greater US attention to their mutual interests. The presence of the Navy has been consequently growing in recent years, largely through expanded military exchanges with Vietnam, which is the country probably most affected by, and reacting to this intensified focus by the PRC, and particularly by its ratcheting up fisheries surveillance and large-scale military training exercises in the area.⁷

Contrary to what may appear at first, thus, recent nudge of fever in disputes between China and neighbouring littoral states, Vietnam and the Philippines most prominently, is arguably more than 'just' petty squabble over maritime sovereignty and fishing rights. These issues have in fact intensified the maritime security dilemma not only for littoral states, but also for other major stakeholders, chiefly the US, which is relied on by most of Southeast Asian nations as a stabilising force in the region's strategic lanes. To some extent, it can also be read as a landmark in the incremental shaping of a new East Asian reality – a strategic landscape in which China is progressively asserting its own security agenda, challenging the operational sanctuary US navy has enjoyed in the Western Pacific for the better part

³ *Shī Láng* (1621-1696) was a Ming-Qing admiral who had extensive experience in southeastern China. He was commander-in-chief of the Manchu fleets which conquered the Kingdom of Tungning (now Taiwan) in 1681.

⁴ See N. Lin, "China Aircraft Carrier Ambitions", in *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 63, n°1 (2010), pp. 13-21

⁵ "Gates on China: Speaking the Truth Makes the Pacific a Safer Place", in *China SignPost*, n°14, 26 December 2010

⁶ Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (Fiscal Year 2010), available online at www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2010_CMPR_Final.pdf

⁷ J. Long, "The 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defence Review: Implications for southeast Asia", n° 19, February 17, 2010

of six decades. Uncertainties about China's efforts to boost its military deterrence toward the US are aggravating secondary security dilemmas with other regional powers. In this sense, the South China Sea issue may be viewed through the lens of a soft proxy conflict: US-backed Southeast Asian nations standing up to what is perceived to be a markedly assertive Chinese territorial claim in a security complex where China's increasing assertiveness and spatial perception of its security needs conflict with ever more intrusive US intelligence probes. Mutual suspicion of intent intensifies the dilemma.

Clearly, a new dynamic has entered Sino-US strategic relations in the Asia Pacific security complex, in which an increasingly assertive Chinese leadership appears to be more determined to defend what it defines as its sovereignty rights and jurisdictional order. Still, China may display unique characteristics in its approach of convincing the international community that it is fast becoming a sea power which could durably alter the balance of forces in the region. What matters in this regard is that, at the perception level, the PLA gets away with its muscle-flexing at sea, tests with new hardware or firm positions before and/or during official meetings as it is used to do in recent years.

Sorting Through Chinese Motives

For making sense of that approach, we must sort through Chinese motives. Above all, Beijing's strategic decision-makers act in what they have defined quite narrowly as China's 'national interest', the definition of which has often left little room for co-operation on anything more than an instrumental basis. These sorts of realpolitik strategic calculations are particularly relevant to territorial claims, on which China's stance has been, in practice, nearly always inflexible. With growing naval power at disposal, Beijing can now be more assertive in bolstering its claims. And there can be little questioned indeed that some of China's recent moves in the South China Sea have been undergone that way.

Yet China's use of force in disputes has been somewhat limited to date, and is still widely considered to be calibrated.⁸ And, in fact, greater Chinese military capability in and of itself says virtually nothing about the likelihood of a Chinese use of force or, for all its surface noise about, may certainly not be automatically associated with a higher degree of dispute-proneness. Furthermore, region-specific assertiveness does not in and of itself imply strategic aggressiveness, and it is essential to temper systematic arguments that posit Chinese 'aggressiveness' as a sort of new grand mental paradigm of which the South China Sea cyclic convulsions would be the distorting lens of perception. By contrast, the South China Sea issue may well "offer an ideal case of how and why it is dangerous to read generalised strategic signals from specific situations that in fact involve multiple (and overlapping) Chinese motives".⁹ It is even more true that in this area of Chinese security practice the mix between sovereignty and other questions invariably blurs analysis. It is too easy after all, as underlines E. Feigenbaum, to examine China's actions in this area, deem them 'aggressive', and then ascribe some larger strategic purpose to Chinese behaviour – i.e., challenging the global maritime balance of power.¹⁰ This does not mean of course that the PRC does not intend to expand what it considers to be its vital interests for reasons of sovereignty and driven by resource considerations. In this regard, China's policy in the South China Sea calls for increasingly active political engagement. At stake is the establishment of a precedent over how these kinds of conflicts will be resolved in the future. Will China be able to convert its newfound economic and military might into the ability to bend neighbouring states to its will, or will it be hemmed in by the multilateralism that characterised its 'peaceful rise' up until now? Thinking the security dilemma in Southeast Asia outside the bow and maintaining peace and stability in that crucial region implies for concerned states to comprehensively engage rather than isolate or gang-up against China. Undoubtedly, how the US is managing its interactions with Beijing, establishes dialogue, and avoids miscalculations will affect greatly the balance of power in the Asia Pacific Region in the near future.

⁸ J. Holslag, *Trapped Giant: China's Military Rise*, London and New York: Routledge and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010, p. 23

⁹ Evan A. Feigenbaum, "China's military posture and the new economic geopolitics", in *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 41, n° 2, 2005, p. 82

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 84