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Uncertainty in ASEAN-China-US Relations on the South China Sea

BY NONG HONG

ASEAN's expectations regarding US engagement in the South China Sea (SCS) evolve in parallel to the organization's relationship with China and developments in the SCS itself. Though it has not defined China as a potential threat, in 1992 ASEAN recommended that the United States maintain its forces in the region because Chinese claims and advances in the SCS implied that Southeast Asia was not immune to the consequences of Chinese and American strategic choices. Some Southeast Asian states consider continued US military balancing of China a necessity, as Southeast Asian military capabilities are no match for those of China, and a unified ASEAN defense and security identity is absent. By the late 1990s, most Southeast Asian states had established some form of military cooperation with the USA, ranging from defense dialogues to alliance agreements requiring mutual defense against aggression. Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines constitute the core US partners in Southeast Asia. Cooperation agreements involve large-scale exercises, frequent visits of US troops, and — in Singapore's case — the permanent stationing of a small US logistics unit. US military cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei are more modest. This principally involves limited transit, refueling, and visiting rights, as well as joint training. Increased Malaysian and Indonesian support for a continued US military presence is particularly noteworthy because during the Cold War these countries tended to consider US regional engagement a potentially destabilizing factor.

Of the new member-states of ASEAN — Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia — only Vietnam has even considered establishing a military relationship with the USA. The three other states, constituting the periphery of ASEAN in terms of military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities, remain wary. The presence of these states in ASEAN, amenable to understanding and promoting Chinese concerns in the SCS, arguably reduces China's fears that its interests will be ignored in multilateral security settings. ASEAN's inclusion of Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia implies that Sino-US strategic competition in the region is becoming inevitable, with Southeast Asian countries recognizing that they cannot opt out of such competition. The states differ on the appropriate position of Southeast Asia within the framework of Sino-US strategic competition.

China's concern over increasing US engagement in the SCS started in early June 2009, when a Chinese submarine was found to be shadowing a US Navy ship — possibly undetected by sonar equipment being towed behind the American destroyer. The SCS, where the incident occurred, and where the US Navy operates amid a complex patchwork of competing territorial claims, is also a familiar backdrop for such incidents. According to a Malaysian military media outlet, the frequent US military exercises in Southeast Asia serve to acquaint its navy vessels with the geography and war environment in the SCS, the objective obviously pointing to China. Chinese analysts hold that the consistent presence of US warships in the SCS indicates that the US position is shifting away from neutrality on the SCS disputes. While not every incident gets reported, evidence suggests that they are happening more frequently, as Beijing flexes its improved naval capabilities and asserts its objections to US Naval activity in disputed waters. The Chinese, however, believe that US military exercises in Southeast Asia aim at blocking passage for Chinese submarines. Some Chinese analysts also suspect US influence in the SCS Arbitration Case.

Nong Hong, Executive Director, Institute for China-America Studies, explains that “Sino-US strategic competition in the region is becoming inevitable, with Southeast Asian countries recognizing that they cannot opt out of such competition.”

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Regional efforts helped to reduce the temperature in the SCS after July 2016, when the arbitral proceeding came to an end. One of these efforts was the pragmatic approach adopted by President Duterte to move to a bilateral dialogue with China without explicitly urging for the enforcement of the award. Philippine ships have been allowed access to Scarborough Shoal in the SCS. The coast guards of the Philippines and China lined up joint drills, including search and rescue, oil pollution management, boarding, and law enforcement — particularly on combating drug trafficking and other transnational crimes — to be conducted this year, implementing an agreement that President Duterte signed during his state visit to China in October 2016. General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Nguyen Phu Trong’s visit to China in early 2017 provided an opportunity for China and Vietnam to promote mediation in their SCS issues. ASEAN and China adopted a set of guidelines to establish telephone hotlines among their foreign ministries to be used in times of crisis. The two sides also agreed to apply the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) to the SCS so as to reduce the risk of potentially dangerous incidents at sea. ASEAN and China have committed to accelerate negotiations for finalizing a Code of Conduct for the SCS.

While China and ASEAN are cooperating to better manage the dispute, the role of other stakeholders, especially the United States, should not be ignored. In 2016 the United States increased the frequency of its naval patrols in and outside the 12 nautical mile zones of the Spratly and Paracel Islands under the name of innocent passage and freedom of navigation, without challenging China’s sovereignty claims. Compared with its strong reaction to the 2001 EP-3 incident and the 2009 Impeccable incident, during which a strong nationalism dominated public discourse, China reacted with low-profile official protests, without objecting to the doctrine of freedom of navigation itself. The behavior of the United States and China reflects the political willingness of both countries to keep the South China Sea dispute under control and to enhance maritime cooperation despite these divergent views.

Whether this balance will continue during the Trump administration is not yet clear. During his confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson took a tougher stance against China’s presence in the South China Sea. Recently, however, he reportedly pushed President Donald Trump to reaffirm the One China policy after the President had indicated that it should be reconsidered. Secretary of Defense James Mattis also seems eager to walk back the rhetoric a little, suggesting during his inaugural trip to Tokyo that there is “no need for dramatic US military moves in [the] South China Sea.” At the same time, however, Steve Bannon, the appointed senior counselor to the president, said “there is no doubt” that the United States is “going to war in the South China Sea in 5 to 10 years.” White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer claimed that “we’re going to make sure that we defend international territories from being taken over by one country.” Notably, the words “freedom of navigation” — the linchpin of Obama-era declamations of US interests in the South China Sea — did not appear at the briefing. Whether this absence signaled a departure from the former US approach to handling China’s territorial claims at sea remains to be seen. All these comments from key members of Trump’s foreign policy team suggest an uncertain US policy in the SCS.

China and regional states are not concerned about US freedom of navigation operations. Despite the divergence of legal interpretation, China and the United States are working hard to balance their respective national interests. There is a concern, however, that the uncertainty of Trump’s policy in the SCS, and the increasing presence of US naval power in this region will decrease trust and upset the balance of power in the SCS and Southeast Asia, which has been moving towards pragmatism. Whether the United States is playing the role of balancing regional powers as desired by ASEAN, or jeopardizing the existing ASEAN-China framework in managing the SCS remains to be seen.

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