

Security in the Asia Pacific: what the inhabitants are saying by Ron Huisken

Ron Huisken (Ron.Huisken@anu.edu.au) is Adjunct Associate Professor, Strategic & Defence Studies Centre, ANU and Editor of CSCAP's Regional Security Outlook.

The *Regional Security Outlook 2017*, prepared by the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and available at www.cscap.org, conveys an unmistakable sense of despondency. The *Outlook* includes a cluster of assessments by regional analysts of the security picture across the region as a whole and two smaller clusters focusing on what CSCAP deems the most acute challenges to stability and order in the region – North Korea's nuclear weapon program and the dispute in the South China Sea.

The *RSO 2017* contends that both principal actors – the US and China – believe themselves to be too wise and wily to stumble into a replay of the Sparta-Athens drama of 2,500 years ago but now stand exposed as capable of exactly that. Geopolitical contest, so stoutly denied over a number of years, intensified markedly, and was at last more openly acknowledged. We can, and should, take some reassurance from the fact that the tilt in the balance of power and influence in Asia is likely to be neither quick nor decisive. Although the drift of the US-China relationship toward difficulty and coolness inescapably heightens the risk of inadvertent incidents, neither side has any interest in conflict.

In the broadest terms, the outlook for the Asia Pacific is for a prolonged period of geopolitical contestation that will at best yield gradual change and probably feel like a hazardous stalemate. This will occur against the backdrop of an international community that senses and is reacting to a loosening of the disciplines inherited from World War II, the advent of nuclear weapons, and the Cold War – China's resurgence and Russia's new activism being key examples – as well as ongoing stresses that stem from Islamic extremism.

In the US, the incoming Trump administration is likely to be far less radical than the campaign rhetoric would suggest. That said, we should anticipate that the United States will present a new mood and a new orientation that is in many respects at least broadly representative of that rhetoric and the consequences are likely to be far-reaching. There has been a significant transformation in the distribution of power and influence in the Asia Pacific. And it is ongoing. It is widely anticipated that this transformation will also reshape the regional order in its more concrete dimensions.

The relationship between the region's two primary generators of power and influence – the US and China – has progressively succumbed to the instinct to be at the forefront of this process and to be the primary architect of any new order. The Asia Pacific now has no more important business

than to address what will or should be the shape of this new order and determine how to get there peacefully. These issues are closely entwined. There are powerful incentives to keep the process peaceful. Equally, however, history teaches that the capacity of peaceful adaptation to cope with changes in the international order is not unlimited. This is another way of saying that states must both commit to peaceful adaptation and manage the visions generated within their own borders on rights and expectations so that these do not overwhelm the capacities to engineer peaceful adaptation.

As this crucial process may be getting away from the two central players, there may be merit in a small coalition of other resident powers offering an independent view on the desirable characteristics of a future regional order and on the modalities of both achieving these characteristics and making them durable. In the meantime, two focal points for contestation constitute a growing menace to the peace and stability of our region. Over the longer term, both need to be defused in a manner that develops and reflects the parameters of an enduring regional order. The more immediate priority is to agree on ways to change the current trajectory of these disputes so that they begin to trend in the direction of dialogue, cooperation, and stability.

Korean Peninsula

The 1950-53 conflict on the Korean Peninsula both emphatically confirmed the state of Cold War between East and West and proved to be an inexhaustible source of belligerence and tension, particularly for the subregion of Northeast Asia. The Korean Peninsula has long had the dubious distinction of being the most highly militarized real estate in the world. Moreover, the forces on and around the peninsula are kept in high states of military readiness and exercise sustained vigilance. The relentless hostility that has characterized relationships on the peninsula is difficult to comprehend, especially after more than 60 years. On several occasions over these years, the peninsula has hovered at the edge of renewed open warfare, testing the patience, resolve, and diplomatic skill of all the immediate players but especially that of the US.

This state of sustained anxiety in a highly militarized environment now faces the prospect of the DPRK conducting its affairs while possessing a functioning but rudimentary and possibly quite fragile and erratic missile-based nuclear weapons capability. The political and military anxieties of the past 60 years will then be intensified very sharply and pressures to pre-empt will follow suit. South Koreans, in particular, are confused, angry but, above all, in despair as the North accelerates its drive for an operational nuclear arsenal. There is an urgent need to either reverse the DPRK's nuclear weapon program or to build more dependable political relations, especially between the two Koreas.

South China Sea

This issue has arisen somewhat surreptitiously. After all, a claim to ownership and effective administration of distant ocean features that are under water at high tide every day must have initially been viewed with some bemusement by other littoral communities both 2,000 years ago and in more recent times. The South China Sea issue has been in the vanguard of the more assertive posture that China has presented to the world since around 2009, peaking in 2014-15 with the frantic but spectacular conversion of seven low-tide elevations in the Spratlys into substantial artificial islands, some with airstrips and harbors and, therefore, military potential.

Then, in July 2016, came the award of the Arbitral Tribunal on issues raised by the Philippines on maritime rights in the South China Sea. As former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans observed, the Tribunal's award "cut the legal heart out" of China's position on these matters.

China had pre-emptively declared the Tribunal, and any judgments that it might make, to be invalid and therefore of no consequence. The region has been left holding its breath on this issue. China may see the island-building blitz as transformative and irreversible, calculating that no other interested party will find the will and the means to put these gains at risk. This is not a stable situation. Nor is it desirable as a template for how issues are to be addressed and resolved in the Asia Pacific (or Indo-Pacific). The widespread hope, confirmed by this *Outlook*, is that the confluence of the Arbitral Tribunal award and the ramifications of the aggressive erection of artificial islands will alter the political calculus in key capitals and give new traction to one or more of the collegial ways forward identified in these pages.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.