



ASSESSING THE FUTURE MARITIME ENVIRONMENT IN ASIA

Event Report
12 November 2015

Event Report

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Organised by:

The Maritime Security Programme,
Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS),
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS),
Nanyang Technological University (NTU),
Singapore

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This report summarises the proceedings of the conference as interpreted by assigned rapporteurs and editor of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this report.

The conference adheres to a variation of the Chatham House Rule. Accordingly, beyond the points expressed in the prepared papers, no attributions have been included in this conference report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This workshop discussed factors that could determine the future maritime environment of Asia. It reviewed the strategic outlook for the region identifying the assertive actions by China, the strategic rivalry between China and the United States (U.S.), the lack of strategic trust in the region, the difficulties of resolving sovereignty disputes, and questions about the roles of India, Japan and Russia as important factors. Most participants tended to be optimistic about the future mainly because of the high levels of economic inter-dependence.

The workshop also assessed key issues that could influence the future maritime environment, including regional naval developments, marine environmental threats, and the ability (or inability) of existing regional institutions to manage the maritime challenges in the region. Concerns were evident about the ability of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its associated forums to handle these challenges. The lack of strategic trust was extensively discussed with some ideas developed about the potential for considering trust at different levels—strategic trust at a higher political level

and operational trust at an operational level to allow maritime cooperation on issues such as search and rescue, environmental protection and law enforcement to progress. Freedoms of Navigation (FON) emerged as a key issue at the workshop with some differing views being expressed as to their meaning and purpose.

The major challenge with determining the future maritime environment of the region is to develop measures that might move the region from the current trajectory of competition to one of cooperation. Two issues are significant—first, there is a need for a forum to take charge of civil maritime cooperation in the region (potentially the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum or EAMF), and second, there is a need to manage the consequences of larger and more capable navies in the region. This second requirement might fall to the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) forum.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the workshop was to assess the future maritime environment in Asia, including maritime developments over the next decade, shifts in the maritime balance of power, and particular threats and challenges in the maritime domain. In a dynamic strategic environment, such as in the region at present, it is useful to step back from current events and try to look at the implications of current strategic trends and

where they are heading. The geographical scope of the workshop's considerations was East Asia, the Western Pacific, South Asia and northern Indian Ocean, or what is now often referred to as the Indo-Pacific, but omitting the Eastern Pacific and Gulf sub-regions. Inevitably, however, much of the discussion at the workshop was about the South China Sea (SCS).

SESSION 1 : STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

This first session of the workshop addressed the perceptions, expectations and strategies of major regional stakeholders with speakers providing views from China, India, Japan, Russia, Southeast Asia and the U.S.. Key questions for the session were: How are these major stakeholders seeking to promote their long-term interests amid uncertainties over the future shape of the regional strategic environment? What are the factors that may prevent the achievement of these interests? Is the overall outlook for the region one of optimism or pessimism?

The most basic considerations flow from the strategic ramifications of China's phenomenal rise with some participants expressing a pessimistic view of the future while others were optimistic. The pessimistic outlook envisages more or less the same Chinese assertiveness unfolding in the context of the region's maritime disputes. The overall strategic outlook of the future maritime environment in Asia is a mixed picture of cooperation and competition.

Some participants saw prospects for optimism. It was noted that Beijing's policy stances included responding positively to evolving circumstances along with its economic initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road. Notwithstanding the Chinese government's assertive stance, there is already a nascent form of debate emerging in China's domestic arena on the legal merits of resolving the SCS disputes. Given the strong domestic and external pressures, Beijing may seek to harmonise its national interests with the rules-based international order.

The rivalry between China and the U.S. warrants close attention. Major power rivalries are a big problem throughout the region. Following the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)

conducted by the U.S. Navy in the SCS, this rivalry has come to the forefront of long simmering SCS tensions. It does not help that both countries tend to hold worst-case beliefs of each other. First, Beijing views Washington as imperialist and attempting to undermine its growth. One speaker observed that the SCS situation had been relatively peaceful at least until 2010, and only deteriorated after Washington enunciated its rebalancing strategy in Asia. Seen in this light, the recent FONOP may be seen as challenging China's claims in the SCS while also conducting military surveillance on Beijing. Moreover, notions of the "Malacca Dilemma", the "String of Pearls" and "core interests" can be represented as American, not Chinese, geopolitical constructs devised as a Washington's strategic rationale to contain Beijing's quest for Great Power status.

At the same time, Washington views itself as a guardian of the existing "rules-based" international order, which Beijing allegedly seeks to reconfigure and expel the U.S. from the Asia Pacific – not just a merely revisionist but a "nefarious revolutionary" project, as one speaker puts it. On the other hand, the U.S. could perceive China as a new challenger to its preeminent world position and view the latter's vision of "new type of major power relations" as an attempt to assert leadership in the region. This perception drives the evolution of the U.S.' policy towards Asia, which includes building the economic and military capacities of its allies and partners in the region. Strategic trust between these two countries will only be achievable if both are security seekers. Furthermore, accommodating China's interests also means Washington having to roll back its own interests in Asia. This is an unacceptable proposition for many in Washington.

SESSION 1 : STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

But there are grounds for optimism. The powerful impact of economic inter-dependence provides these grounds and dampens the risks of conflict. Moreover, China and the U.S. are unlikely to attack and invade each other's homelands. Unlike Europe where the conflict is terrestrial in nature, China and the U.S. are separated by the Pacific Ocean. Both countries have broader, more important domestic and international issues to address. Finally, both countries share common interests in preserving economic freedoms and inter-dependence. Hence, Beijing and Washington need to find better ways to engage each other in order to engender strategic trust. The alternative, albeit not a viable long-term one, to such a measure will be to maintain the current status quo and "muddling through", as one speaker opined.

The entry of other extra-regional powers adds complexity to the on-going Sino-U.S. rivalry. One of the key regional players is India, whose involvement in the Asia Pacific brings with it attendant unresolved issues of contention with China. In order to ameliorate the current "security dilemma" between Beijing and New Delhi, it is necessary for both countries to demonstrate willingness not to undermine each other's interests in their respective spheres of interest, i.e. the SCS and the Indian Ocean. But these two Asian giants appear unwilling to accept each other's presence in their "backyards". So long as the land disputes between China and India are not resolved, it is difficult to envisage bolder steps beyond existing, limited efforts to build bilateral trust.

Japan was also seen by participants at the workshop as a potential key regional player, including in its role in assisting Southeast Asian countries to build their maritime security capacities. However, Japan's role in the SCS

disputes looks set to remain limited. For one thing, as one of the participants pointed out, the SCS remains outside Japan's military responsibilities which are traditionally focused in Northeast Asia.

The last prospective regional player is Russia, given Moscow's apparent interest in reinvigorating its presence in the region. Unlike in Europe for example, the "Indo-Pacific vector" of Moscow's strategic policies has been characterised by cooperation and engagement, particularly with China, rather than deterrence and defence. Nonetheless, the picture is a murky one at best as to whether the Russian-U.S. rivalry in Europe will be extended to Asia.

Finally, it is important to consider Southeast Asia's role in the future maritime environment given its pivotal geographical position and the regional countries' heavy reliance on the sea for national survival and prosperity. Besides the tensions between the major powers, three other key challenges are apparent. First, the unresolved territorial disputes and sovereignty issues in the SCS. Second, the on-going military build-up in Asia. And finally, the uncertainty revolving around the U.S.' future presence in Asia.

These challenges complicate the ability of Southeast Asian countries to project their future strategic policies. This is compounded further by the lack of capacity in some of these countries, such as Indonesia, to respond to the on-going rivalries, thereby leaving few strategic options available. As one of the speakers puts it, ASEAN is essentially a "coalition of swing states", given that these smaller and weaker regional countries do not possess fixed policies and are prone to be manipulated by extra-regional powers to further their own interests.

SESSION 2 : INFLUENCING FACTORS

The second session of the workshop covered a range of factors that will influence how the regional maritime environment might evolve over the next decade. Speakers addressed specifically: the prospects for resolving the sovereignty disputes in the region, technological developments, marine environmental issues and the prospects for building strategic trust. There were many questions for consideration: What are the prospects of resolving regional maritime disputes over the coming decade? What are the environmental issues that should be addressed? How might higher levels of strategic trust be achieved? What are the kinds of capabilities being acquired for regional navies and coast guards to these and other ends? What major developments are likely with maritime technologies over the coming decade? Is a regional naval arms race developing in the region?

Notwithstanding the myriad challenges to the future maritime environment in Asia, participants at the workshop were generally optimistic about the future outlook, albeit with reservations. While a full-scale war is deemed unlikely, various factors that may shape the regional challenges warrant closer attention.

A major influencing factor concerns the growth in Asia of naval forces and civilian maritime law enforcement agencies, dubbed “proxy fighters” in the regional maritime disputes by one of the speakers. Despite increased force projection capabilities, enhanced maritime domain awareness (in the form of both manned and unmanned surveillance assets) and growing subsurface capabilities, the development of requisite command, control, communication, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities remains embryonic. This limits the operational effectiveness of the new capabilities. Nonetheless, the enhanced precision, endurance, range and firepower of these capabilities remain significant technical improvements that will see future wars in the region characterised as faster-paced, more intense and lethal. This could further destabilise current tensions.

The need to preserve and protect the marine environment and conserve fish stocks are important considerations. Heavy landfill and associated coral dredging activities in the area, such as the massive land reclamation works performed by China for the purpose

SESSION 2 : INFLUENCING FACTORS

of constructing artificial islands on disputed features in the Spratly Islands, have significant environmental impacts. Regional countries and external stakeholders all have responsibilities under international law to protect the marine environment, including obligations to manage straddling and migratory fish stocks. However, these obligations are not necessarily adhered to by various parties in the SCS. Compounding the problem is the lack of a viable regional mechanism to enforce obligations to conserve fish stocks.

The lack of transparency over strategic decision-making in various Asian capitals contributes to a less-than-optimistic outlook for the future maritime environment. Media sensationalism also does not help where it comes to often confusing or mixed strategic signals from rival regional governments. The “Thucydides Trap” was seen by some of the participants at the workshop as especially relevant in characterising the future potential risks from the on-going Sino-U.S. rivalry.

It also does not help that so-called “nationalistic netizens”, as pointed out by one of the speakers, constitute another form of complication in times

of interstate tensions. In the age of widespread proliferation of social media, policy elites have become increasingly influenced by nationalistic sentiments in cyberspace. As such, official stances on territorial disputes and sovereignty issues are regarded as “key performance indicators” for political/regime legitimacy. This may consequently compel policy elites to “play to the gallery” as a means of diverting public attention from domestic problems elsewhere.

Lastly, besides the issue of strategic trust, influencing factors of an organisational nature should also be considered. For instance, the existing Sino-ASEAN framework for maritime cooperation is administered by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs instead of specialised maritime or oceanic affairs agencies. This partly explains the observed “low take-up rate” amongst ASEAN member states on the Chinese funds available for their maritime capacity-building programmes under the ASEAN-China Maritime Cooperation Fund, for example.





PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The last session of the workshop consisted of a panel discussion and open forum. There were many questions for consideration: What can be done to promote stability in relations between the major powers? What concrete steps can be taken to cultivate trust and confidence as well as further enhance maritime cooperation between regional countries? What practical steps can be taken to strengthen the existing regional security arrangements and processes? Will the U.S. be able to sustain its rebalancing? What are the implications of it not being able to? How might regional security forums become more effective in managing regional maritime security? Are there any factors that mitigate the likelihood of the threats and challenges identified in earlier discussions? How to build maritime cooperation in the absence of resolution of the sovereignty disputes and the presence of strategic distrust? What are the implications of maritime connectivity initiatives such as “China’s Maritime Silk Road” and “Indonesia’s Global Maritime Fulcrum”?

Role of ASEAN

Much discussion revolved around the future role of ASEAN in fostering regional cooperation in the maritime domain. One of the speakers pointed out the apparent frustration displayed by some ASEAN member states and extra-regional powers in the organisation’s ability to maintain its centrality in the regional security architecture. While ASEAN continues to be generally well regarded for its role in managing regional

security, its utility remains at best tenuous. For example, Washington views ASEAN centrality as just one of managing and controlling the agenda. Beijing views some of the ASEAN member states as mere “chess pieces” of the U.S. to further the latter’s agenda in Asia.

However, it would be too early to dismiss ASEAN just because of its recent failures, such as the non-issuance of a joint declaration at the last ADMM-Plus held in Kuala Lumpur. The regional bloc remains capable of drawing various major regional players together and giving each of them a role in regional security deliberations while ameliorating major power rivalries. Moreover, extra-regional powers generally respect the normative space created by ASEAN, and they have vested interest in ensuring that it remains a viable platform to promote dialogue.

Some of the participants cautioned against creating new mechanisms. Instead, it is more practical to build on existing ones. A broader, Indo-Pacific version of ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation could be a way forward. One speaker proposed that “mixed multilateralism”—an amalgamation of “command multilateralism” that envisages an institution akin to the European Union and “laissez-faire multilateralism” that symbolises the business-as-usual, loose ASEAN-centric architecture—looks set to be the way forward in view of existing impediments. “Mixed multilateralism” will likely work alongside the profusion of “mini-lateralism” at the sub-regional levels, pertaining to specific regional issues. Now that it is finding itself at a critical juncture

1 Available at <http://www.asean.org/images/2015/November/10th-EAS-Outcome/EAS%20Statement%20on%20Enhancing%20Regional%20Maritime%20Cooperation%20-%20FINAL%2022%20November%202015.pdf>.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

of retaining its centrality, ASEAN can no longer stick to the line of “not choosing sides”. Instead of allowing it to be potentially exploited by extra-regional powers seeking to further their own agendas, the regional bloc needs to decide on and articulate a definitive vision for the region.

Code of Conduct

One of the ways forward is for ASEAN to push for the speedy conclusion of the proposed, legally-binding Code of Conduct in order to manage future tensions in the SCS. However, the question remains on whether the code, even if successfully negotiated, can be effectively operationalised and implemented.

Strategic and Operational Trust

The issue of trust was another significant topic during the panel discussion, including issues such as what “trust” actually meant, the possibility of different levels of trust and whether it preceded or followed cooperative action. In this regard, future scenario planning for the maritime environment in Asia needs to take into account the interplay between the strategic and operational aspects of trust-building. Not all participants, however, were hopeful about the feasibility of building greater trust in the region because of the “finger-pointing” on all sides. One participant thought that trust was rather a “brick wall”.

But strategic trust-building efforts also need to continue in order for operational initiatives that manage regional seas and activities with them to gain traction. It was noted by some participants that operational initiatives can actually form the basis of a “bottom-up” approach for strategic trust-building which can potentially reap long-term political dividends. Besides military-to-military exchanges, China and the U.S. for example can further intensify political dialogue, especially with respect to conflict management including discussions about their respective national positions regarding the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) regime for instance.

The operational aspect remains a promising area to cultivate. In this regard, such initiatives as hotlines and other joint maritime security activities conducted between not just navies but also civilian maritime law enforcement agencies can be created or expanded, as well as cooperation for managing the marine environment and fish stocks.

The bilateral memorandums of understanding reached recently between Beijing and Washington governing military encounters have resulted in more professional behaviour of their respective forces. This new initiative counts as one of the more successful confidence building developments in the region, along with the Sino-Japanese agreement to expedite the promulgation of a crisis management mechanism in the East China Sea.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Freedoms of Navigation

FON were much discussed at the workshop with some differing views being expressed. While there is a clear general interest in FON, there was some uncertainty about what were the actual interests of regional countries and external stakeholders in FON. One participant thought that the recent FONOPs by the U.S. Navy in the SCS were really about the “freedom of military power”.

There was some scope for ASEAN to consider positing itself as a dialogue platform, for example to clarify legal terminologies on FON and other law of the sea issues so as to foster mutual understanding between the disputants and concerned stakeholders in the SCS. This would help preserve ASEAN’s centrality and enhance its utility in promoting regional security.

Cooperation rather than Competition

There is a clear requirement to move the region from the current trajectory of competition to one of cooperation, but the real challenge is to devise ways and means of achieving this. Discussion ranged over which forum was most appropriate for having oversight of regional maritime cooperation, particularly the civil maritime cooperation that is both an obligation of regional countries and a necessity to ensure the effective management of regional seas, including pursuit of the concept of the Blue Economy. It was thought that the EAMF offered potential in this regard.

In a significant development subsequent to the workshop, the East Asia Summit (EAS) held in Kuala Lumpur on 22 November 2015 approved the EAS Statement on Enhancing Regional Maritime Cooperation. This statement encouraged the notion of elevating the EAMF to include a Track 1 Forum in addition to the existing Track 1.5 of the EAMF to provide a basis for consultation and consensus among EAMF participating countries.

Track 2 activities can also be an area worth further exploration, for example pertaining to specific areas such as joint efforts to protect the marine environment. Joint investment and developmental initiatives, involving governments and corporate entities, covering for example, coastal protection and aquaculture projects, may help reduce resource competition in the disputed Asian waters, promote cooperation and foster greater strategic trust.

Managing larger navies

The risks of more warships, military aircraft and submarines, as well as more intensive sovereignty protection and law enforcement activities by coast guards, in disputed waters were well recognised by the workshop. These risks are exacerbated by the lack of effective C4ISR capabilities. The ADMM-Plus appears to be the most appropriate forum to develop measures to reduce and manage these risks.

WAY AHEAD

Despite the overall optimism of most participants at the workshop about the future maritime environment, considerable reservations and uncertainty are apparent. Some key questions remain unanswered. Participants saw merit in a follow-up workshop to address the unresolved issues and areas of uncertainty further. These issues include the general issue of strategic

trust and how to go about improving trust, a better understanding of FON in the region, and the implications of China's "One Belt One Road" initiative and Indonesia's "Global Maritime Fulcrum". Both these initiatives have the potential to have a strong impact on the future maritime environment of Asia.

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

0830hrs	Registration	1330hrs	Session 2: Influencing Factors
0900hrs	Opening Session		Moderator
	Welcome Remarks		Professor Geoffrey Till <i>Visiting Senior Fellow, Maritime Security Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>
	Professor Tan See Seng <i>Deputy Director and Head of Research of IDSS, RSIS</i>		Panellists
	Setting the Scene – Scenarios for the Future		Prospects of Resolving Sovereignty Disputes
	Dr Sam Bateman <i>Adviser and Senior Fellow, Maritime Security Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>		Dr Dong-Wook Kim <i>President, Institute of International Law on the Korean Peninsula</i>
0930hrs	Session 1: Strategic Outlook		Technological Developments
	Moderator		Mr Richard A. Bitzinger <i>Senior Fellow and Coordinator of Military Transformations Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>
	Ms Jane Chan <i>Research Fellow and Coordinator of Maritime Security Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>		Building Strategic Trust
	Panellists		Assistant Professor Evan Resnick <i>Coordinator of United States Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>
	Chinese Perspective		Managing the Marine Environment
	Professor Zha Daojiong <i>School of International Studies, Peking University</i>		Ms Youna-Lyons <i>Senior Research Fellow, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore</i>
	Indian Perspective	1500hrs	Discussion
	Assistant Professor Anit Mukherjee <i>South Asia Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>		1500hrs Coffee Break
	Southeast Asian Perspective	1515hrs	Session 3: Panel Discussion
	Dr Shafiah Muhibat <i>Senior Researcher, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Jakarta</i>		Moderator
	Japanese Perspective		Dr Sam Bateman <i>Adviser and Senior Fellow, Maritime Security Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>
	Professor Tsutomu Kikuchi <i>Department of International Politics, Aoyama Gakuin University</i>		Panellists
1030hrs	Coffee Break		Professor Geoffrey Till <i>Visiting Senior Fellow, Maritime Security Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>
1045hrs	Continuation of Session 1		Professor Tsutomu Kikuchi <i>Department of International Politics, Aoyama Gakuin University</i>
	Panellists		Mr Carl Baker <i>Director of Programs, Pacific Forum CSIS</i>
	Russian Perspective		Associate Professor Li Mingjiang <i>Coordinator of China Programme, IDSS, RSIS</i>
	Dr Alexey Muraviev <i>Head of Department, Social Sciences and International Studies, Curtin University</i>		Professor Tan See Seng <i>Professor of International Relations Deputy Director and Head of Research of IDSS, RSIS</i>
	U.S. Perspective		
	Mr Carl Baker <i>Director of Programs, Pacific Forum CSIS</i>		
1200hrs	Lunch	1700hrs	End

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