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South China Sea Diplomacy: More Needs to be Done

By Zha Daojong

Synopsis

Ongoing high-level diplomacy between China and the Philippines as well as Vietnam points to de-escalating tension over the South China Sea. A change of assessment in Beijing and Washington of each other in the region is a contributing factor. More diplomatic engagements between China and other claimant states are desirable.

Commentary

DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS among China, the Philippines and Vietnam over the South China Sea are showing signs of abating, however short-lived they may turn out to be. From 7 to 9 July 2001, Foreign Secretary of the Philippines Albert del Rosario visited Beijing reportedly to pave the way for President Benigno Aquino III's China visit that may take place within weeks.

In late June, in the wake of diplomatic talks between Hanoi and Beijing and pledges of peaceful resolution of disputes, the two countries held two days of joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin. This exercise is a clear signal of mutual goodwill, even though the gulf area lies beyond the disputed waters. Such developments, in light of the renewed tensions over the South China Sea, are significant: they point to a desire in the respective Asian political capitals for an amicable resolution. A key issue is what to make of the geostrategic competition between China and the United States that looms in the background.

The Beijing-Washington Nexus

Among the many possible events that bring the South China Sea back to regional and international media headlines is how China has been reacting to United States military access to South China Sea waters and airspace. In Chinese discussions on this aspect, two issues tend to surface: firstly, the uninvited presence in waters close to Hainan Island of a US Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft on 1 April, 2001; and secondly, the US Navy's surveillance ship Impeccable 8 March 2009. Both serve as powerful reminders of China's anxiety.

The prevailing common-sense reasoning among Chinese circles goes like this: It is US military vehicles that came to waters close to the mainland of China. Would Americans be unconcerned in the event of unannounced Chinese naval appearances close to the west coast of the US, or even Hawaii? Do they not reinforce the view of sceptics that the US tends to disregard Chinese sensitivities?

Against this backdrop, when US Secretary of State Clinton, at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, publicly took issue with China over the latter's handling of the territorial disputes with other claimants,

analysts in China saw a return of “divide and conquer” tactics. Indeed, for much of the past year, Chinese diplomacy towards the entire Southeast Asian region demonstrated a tendency to prevent states from siding more firmly with the US camp.

Heart of the Issue

At the heart of the South China Sea issue that stands between Washington and Beijing is what the US insists is freedom of navigation. There are two sides to this coin. For commercial and other non-military use of the South China Sea waters and airspace, there exists little room for contention. Indeed, China’s economic wellbeing cannot be separated from maintenance of that freedom -- now and into the indefinite future. The bone of contention between Beijing and Washington is squarely rooted in competing definitions and interpretations of military use of Exclusive Economic Zones. The conceptual and legal gaps between them are wide and the possibility for their narrowing low.

What should be emphasised, meanwhile, is that the recent gestures of diplomacy between Beijing and Washington over Southeast Asia in general and the South China Sea in particular may well have resulted from mutual perceptions of each other’s standing in the region. There is much talk in China about the financial crisis signaling a decline of American power and the weakening of US will and capacity to act in defence of its interests and influence in the western Pacific region. Such perceptions, however, cannot stand up to rigorous analysis. Unfortunately, such headline-grabbing rhetoric has created undue alarm in Washington. By the same token, talk by American diplomats about the US “returning to Asia” has been wrongly interpreted in China as designed to weaken Beijing’s cultivation of harmonious ties with its Asian neighbours.

In actuality, the US has never left Asia. Its forward projection capabilities continue to be unrivaled and several decades ahead of China. Just witness the speed of the US Navy’s delivery of emergency aid in the wake of the Aceh earthquake and tsunami in 2004 and again after the powerful earthquake in northeastern Japan in 2011. China not only lacks the material capacity to match the US on this front; it also has a long way to go in winning goodwill from its Asian neighbours to allow for even non-combat use of its naval capacity. Southeast Asian states provide little room for a rise in Chinese influence at the expense of the Americans’.

The short conclusion is that the dynamics in geo-strategic relations between Beijing and Washington need to be better understood as a continuous search for levels of comfort in co-existence in the western Pacific. The South China Sea then, features as an occasional component of a larger set of uncertainties between the two capitals.

Not Sustainable

A fairly firm recognition between Beijing and Washington has emerged that the past year’s state of affairs over the South China Sea issue is not sustainable. The holding of the first official US-China dialogue on the Asia Pacific in late June served as a visible testimony of that changing calculation. Barring unforeseen developments, the coming ASEAN Regional Forum of 2011 is not likely to see the same showdown between Chinese and American diplomats over the SCS issue.

The route of China’s diplomacy to the Southeast Asian capitals does not have to go through Washington. An ideal development to follow is for high-ranking officials and even the head of state of China to pay reciprocal visits to capital cities of the other claimant states, beginning with Manila and Hanoi. Such exchange of visits may not produce immediate results on dispute resolution over the South China Sea. But public shows of both sides reaching out to each other are necessary for cooling down temperatures.

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