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US Rebalancing Strategy and the South China Sea Disputes

By Ralf Emmers

Synopsis

The US rebalancing strategy, or “pivot” towards Asia, has added a new dimension to the South China Sea disputes. Given China’s reaction and the rising temperature in the region, is there any more room for discussion?

Commentary

THE OBAMA administration has refocused its diplomacy and military forces toward the Asia-Pacific as part of a larger ‘pivot’ or rebalancing strategy. Besides deepening its military ties with the Philippines, the United States announced in late 2011 the rotational deployment of 2,500 US Marines in Darwin, Australia, and the deployment of up to four of its littoral combat ships (LCS) in Singapore.

In June 2012, US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta also declared that the US would commit 60 per cent of its naval capabilities to the Pacific Ocean. The US rebalancing strategy has added a new dimension to the South China Sea disputes.

US Policy on the South China Sea

The US has traditionally been unwilling to get involved in the question of sovereign jurisdiction over the South China Sea. For example, it has repeatedly stated that the Philippine-claimed territories were not covered by the Mutual Defence Treaty of 30 August 1951 which ties the Philippines to the US. Washington has consistently limited its interest to the preservation of the freedom of navigation and the mobility of its Seventh Fleet.

Yet, the incident involving the harassment of the ocean surveillance vessel USNS Impeccable by Chinese navy and civilian patrol vessels south of Hainan Island in March 2009 caused serious concern in Washington. While Beijing claimed that the Impeccable was involved in marine scientific research in its exclusive economic zone that requires Chinese consent, Washington argued that the activities of the surveillance vessel were legitimate under the freedom of navigation principle.

The US position on the South China Sea has not fundamentally changed since the Impeccable incident. Washington is still not taking a position on the sovereignty dispute and it continues to limit its core interest to the freedom of navigation in the disputed waters. Still, the US has become increasingly concerned over the rise of the Chinese naval capabilities and uncertain over China’s commitment to the freedom of navigation principle in

disputed waters.

US active diplomacy

At the 2010 Shangri-La Dialogue, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates declared that while Washington does not take sides in the sovereignty disputes it would, however, oppose any action that could threaten the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. A statement made by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 2010 declaring that the US has a national interest in the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea further angered China. Her comments were perceived by Beijing as a form of external interference. Clinton mentioned again the South China Sea at the ARF meeting in Bali in July 2011 where this time she encouraged ASEAN and China to conclude a code of conduct over the issue.

President Obama himself raised the South China Sea question at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali in November 2011. He restated that the US takes no sides in the disputes but that its interests include the freedom of navigation and unimpeded international commerce in the semi-enclosed sea. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao responded by reaffirming the freedom of navigation principle and calling for a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea disputes.

After the Vietnamese and Indonesian chairmanships of ASEAN, the next three annual chairs, Cambodia, Brunei and Myanmar, were expected to appease Beijing by minimising the internationalisation of the South China Sea issue.

This already occurred at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) held in Cambodia in July 2012 when the Southeast Asian states failed to issue a joint communique due to differences over the South China Sea question. While present at the ARF meeting that followed, Secretary of State Clinton did not interfere in this intra-ASEAN affair.

China's reaction

China perceives the US rebalancing strategy as an attempt by the US to contain its peaceful rise in Asia. From a Chinese perspective, Washington is seeking to contain China by strengthening its bilateral alliances and allocating more troops and means to the region. In particular, the US is enhancing its involvement in the South China Sea and thus interfering in what Beijing considers to be a bilateral issue with the Southeast Asian claimant states. China also considers recent Philippine activities in the disputed waters, for example over the Scarborough Shoal incident earlier in 2012, to have been influenced by Washington.

China and the US seek to prevent the over-militarisation of the disputes. Beijing and Washington view the South China Sea as an issue that requires a diplomatic rather than a military solution and they are content, for now at least, to let ASEAN lead the conflict management process.

Washington and Beijing do disagree, however, over where the South China Sea disputes should be discussed. While the US wants the question to be highlighted at international forums, this remains highly problematic for China. Beijing is increasingly concerned over any attempt at internationalising the disputes, preferring instead to discuss these matters bilaterally with the smaller Southeast Asian claimants. Great power rivalry and competition in the South China Sea should thus be expected to further complicate ASEAN's task ahead.

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