

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

The Terrex Vehicles Issue: China Seizes Asia-Pacific Initiative

By Benjamin Ho and Dylan Loh

Synopsis

The seizure of nine Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Terrex Vehicles on 23 November 2016 is a grim reminder of the reality of international politics: power matters. China's recent behaviour towards Singapore is part of a purposive attempt to exert its influence in the region.

Commentary

THE RECENT seizure of nine SAF infantry vehicles in Hong Kong en route from Taiwan to Singapore following a military training exercise has generated considerable attention in Singapore, with Singaporeans from various walks of life weighing in on the reasons behind the incident.

While there are some who view the incident as a calculated move by Chinese policymakers to send subtle signals to Singapore's foreign policymakers, others prefer not to infer beyond administrative reasons, and argue that the entire issue has little to do with diplomatic ties. Given the sensitivity of the matter, the "truth" may not be clearly evinced, and the reasons offered at the end not sufficiently convincing. Yet, regardless of the eventual outcome, there are some key lessons that can be learnt.

"Tragedy" of Great Power Politics

According to University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer, international politics has, and always been a "ruthless and dangerous business, and is likely to remain that way". As great powers fear each other and always compete with each

other for power, they are unlikely to be content with the current distribution of power but would attempt to modify it in their favour.

While Mearsheimer's central thesis has been challenged on numerous occasions, it would seem that events as a result of China's rise – on present evidence – has validated Mearsheimer's core argument. Yan Xuetong, who heads the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University, argues in his recent book "*The Transition of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition*" that there was a need for China to pursue international leadership on the basis of "moral realism" (*daoyixianshizhuyi*), in contrast to American leadership, which was premised on hegemonic designs.

But given recent incidents, particularly over the South China Sea, it would seem that Beijing's posture is closer to that of Mearsheimer's predictions: a great power cannot help but act in a manner of a great power (hence the "tragedy") in its international relations – particularly if its neighbours are deemed as "small" vis-à-vis itself.

Asia-Pacific: Precarious Balance of Power

Given global uncertainties over American international leadership under President-elect Donald Trump as well as perceived problems over Western political systems (as seen in Brexit and EU integration issues), an increasing number of scholars are calling into question the entire edifice of the Western-led international system and whether alternative models of global governance were viable. To this end, the rise of China has led to observations that a power transition (from West to East) was underway and raised concerns regarding whether such a transition would indeed be peaceful.

While state behavior is by no means predetermined and there exists a number of factors that would lead major powers to act one way or another, countries – particularly smaller ones – cannot make their foreign policy on the basis of assuming that bigger states are always benign in their intentions.

As the 20th century political theorist Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, "there are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals which makes it *impossible* for them to grant to others what they claim for themselves". In other words, policymakers have to sometimes assume the worst, and hope for the best in the course of their diplomatic relations.

Relating this to the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific, a realistic appraisal of China's foreign policy must surely include the possibility that conflict is not entirely impossible. While some scholars have warned that we ought not to be unduly pessimistic in our geopolitical outlook (which could result in a self-fulfilling prophecy), the alternative option ought not to be a naïve optimism arising from soft sentimentalism over the perfectibility of human nature or the plausibility of the present international system in constraining conflict.

Sign of Greater Assertiveness?

Singapore's longstanding military exercises with Taiwan since 1975 is no secret and

China has long tolerated it - albeit grudgingly. And surely, it is China's prerogative to modify its leniency if it were to punish Singapore in a bid to stop such military cooperation. But would it be in its interest to do so? Despite protestations to the contrary, observers have noted a trend of increased assertiveness from China circa 2009 in the Asia Pacific region which has been arguably more pronounced in Southeast Asia.

Militarily, there is evidence pointing towards increased military activities in both the South and East China seas. Diplomatically, one can point towards this assertiveness through its purported diplomatic meddling in ASEAN. Just this year in July, Cambodia, widely seen as acting at the behest of China, blocked any reference to the South China Sea disputes at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

China's recent behaviour towards Singapore should not be seen entirely as directed towards Singapore alone but should be read as part of a larger more purposive attempt to exerting its influence in the region. The message is clear – acquiesce to our position or, if not, keep quiet.

It should not be lost on observers that this instance provides a timely re-assertion of the ability of Beijing to exercise complete control over defence and foreign affairs of Hong Kong as laid out in the Basic Law of Hong Kong. While it is, perhaps, coincidence that this took place when Hong Kong is undergoing profound political upheaval amidst attempts to disqualify pro-democratic law makers from Hong Kong's legislative council, the message to pro-independence and localists elements is clear - Beijing is in charge.

As the region grapples with a possible retrenchment of American presence in the region at worst or more unpredictability at best, China sees a gap and is attempting to capitalise on it. There are two ways for it to do so: It could court, persuade and lead by example or it could strong arm, cajole and insist on its dominance. Unfortunately, the signs seem to be pointing towards muscle-flexing rather than leadership by example.

Benjamin Ho is an associate research fellow in the Regional Security Architecture Programme at RSIS and a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of International Relations. Dylan Loh is a PhD candidate at Cambridge University, Department of Politics and International Studies and previously a researcher at the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
