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Reciprocal Salami-Slicing in East Asia

By Harry Sa and Evan N. Resnick

Synopsis

China's land reclamation in the Spratly Islands has prompted critics to attack the Obama Administration for having been caught flat-footed yet again by cunning Chinese "salami-slicing" tactics. These critics fail to appreciate that the administration has actually been a more successful practitioner of those same tactics.

Commentary

EARLIER THIS year, the revelation that China's land-reclamation project in the Spratly Islands had progressed far more rapidly than had been previously believed sparked considerable anxiety throughout East Asia.

These activities are only the latest manifestation of China's frequent use in recent years of "salami tactics" to expand into disputed maritime territories in the East and South China seas. The term was coined by Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas Shelling, who proposed that a single large-scale act of aggression against an adversary (i.e., stealing a salami sausage) is more likely to provoke a massive countervailing response than a series of small-scale aggressive actions (i.e., slicing the salami piece by piece).

Slicing salami and peeling cabbage in regional seas

Chinese salami tactics—dubbed "cabbage slicing" by one People's Liberation Army general—have encompassed a range of activities. These have included: the use of non-military vessels to wrest Scarborough Reef from the Philippines; the declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands which are

also claimed by Japan; and the installation of a deep water oil rig in waters south of the Gulf of Tonkin claimed by Vietnam.

The various states targeted by these actions have initially offered token resistance, but have grudgingly accepted the changes. Several critics charge that the Obama Administration has been repeatedly caught flat-footed by China's incremental revisionism in East Asia. They claim that the White House lacks a proper strategy for confronting this behaviour, which left unchecked, will erode the dominant military position that the United States has held in the Western Pacific since 1945.

The hidden success of the Obama rebalance

Even as the administration's critics have lauded China's salami tactics, they have failed to notice that the White House has adeptly used those same tactics--under the aegis of its rebalance policy--to bolster the US' geopolitical position in East Asia. Since the rebalance was unveiled in late 2011, the US has sought to balance China's growing power by unveiling an array of small-scale initiatives to reinforce its already formidable military capabilities in the region.

Crucially, these initiatives have been undertaken in such a subtle and low-key manner that they have denied China a clear *casus belli*, rendering it exceedingly difficult for Beijing to retaliate without casting itself as the aggressor. They have also fulfilled the delicate task of reassuring the skittish small and middle powers in the region that are unnerved by Chinese saber-rattling, yet are also desperate to avoid being forced to side with either of the region's two great powers.

The administration's "hidden" balancing of China has consisted of several elements. First, senior officials have repeatedly and emphatically denied that the rebalance is about containing China. Rather, they insist that the policy aims to enhance the collective security of all the region's member states, including China, by focusing on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations.

On this score, in 2014 the US even invited Beijing for the first time to participate in its massive biennial RIMPAC naval exercise. Most recently, Pentagon officials professed that the weeklong deployment of a P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft to Singapore earlier this month was meant to facilitate joint HADR and maritime security operations, rather than to spy on China.

In addition, the administration has deployed additional military assets to the region in a gradual, painstaking fashion. To wit, the announced re-distribution of US naval forces from a 50/50 split between the Pacific and Atlantic theatres to 60/40 is not expected to achieve fruition until 2020. Meanwhile, the deployment of a Marine Air Ground Task Force of 2,500 troops to Darwin, Australia will not be completed until 2017-2018.

Freedom of navigation operations

Even on the few occasions in which the US has directly confronted China, it has done so in a minimally provocative manner. This was vividly demonstrated in the freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) conducted in late October by the US

guided-missile cruiser *Lassen* in the South China Sea. The *Lassen* defied Chinese claims that its artificial islands constitute sovereign territory by transiting within 12 nautical miles of one of those islands, Subi Reef.

Importantly, however, the *Lassen* engaged in the most benign type of FONOP, namely, an “innocent passage” operation. In such an operation, the warship’s passage is continuous and expeditious, entails no usage of on-board weapons and aircraft, and abstains from any attempt to interfere with the coastal state’s communications system or other facilities.

Moreover, the US has eschewed the establishment (or re-establishment) of permanent military bases in allied states. Most prominently, the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement concluded with the Philippines involves the rotation of US forces in and out of existing military facilities of the host state. This “places, not bases” approach opens up the prospect of an American military presence in non-allied countries that do not relish the idea of hosting permanent US bases. Finally, the administration has also quietly cultivated influence through arms transfers, which have underpinned an unprecedented level of strategic cooperation between the US and India.

Slower and steadier wins the race

Contrary to the assertions of critics, reciprocal Sino-US salami-slicing in East Asia has yielded greater geopolitical dividends to Washington than Beijing. The Obama Administration’s subtle efforts to shore up its military position in the region has produced steadily growing US security cooperation with formal treaty allies as well as crucial non-allied strategic partners such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

Although China’s piecemeal expansionism has marginally enhanced its control over contested island chains in the East and South China Seas, it has done so at the steep cost of alienating China from virtually all of its neighbours.

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