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The East Asian Tinderbox: No Rules of the Game?

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Synopsis

Recent diplomatic and military moves by China and the US have raised tensions in East Asia. Several factors increase the risk of unintended war in the region.

Commentary

GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS in East Asia have ratcheted up considerably in the last several weeks. On 23 November 2013, the Chinese government announced the creation of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, covering the contested island chain that China refers to as the Diaoyu and rival claimant Japan calls the Senkaku. A week later, the Obama administration authorised the flight of two unarmed B-52 bombers through the ADIZ without previously informing Beijing. On 5 December, the US guided missile cruiser Cowpens, which was shadowing China's sole aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, in the South China Sea, nearly collided with a Chinese warship that was accompanying the *Liaoning*.

Although it is possible that all concerned parties in the region will be sufficiently jarred by this most recent spate of sabre-rattling and near-misses to refrain from future acts of brinkmanship and settle their differences at the negotiating table, this is not a safe bet. Rather, the hair-raising events of the last several weeks are almost certain to keep recurring and continue raising the risk of an accidental or unintended war. This more ominous prediction is based on five distinct yet mutually reinforcing factors.

Five factors of war risk

The first factor is China's relative ascent. Since it began to open itself up to foreign trade and investment in the late 1970's, China's economy has skyrocketed to become the world's second largest and its Gross Domestic Product appears set to eclipse that of the United States on the basis of Purchasing Power Parity within the next decade. Chinese military spending has kept pace with the country's fast-growing wealth. Between 2001 and 2011, China's military budget has risen at an average annual rate of 10.3%, and in 2012, it exceeded US\$100 billion for the first time.

It is almost a truism in international politics that rising great powers seek to maximise their security by expanding their influence and control over their immediate neighbourhoods, and in many cases, far beyond. China's adoption of expansive sovereignty claims and its increasingly brazen efforts to bully its local rivals into accepting those claims must be understood in this context.

Second, the Obama administration has embarked on a more assertive policy towards East Asia, dubbed the "rebalance". Under its aegis, the White House has not only ramped up military deployments to Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Singapore, but also sought enhanced defence relations with a host of regional partners, including India, New Zealand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and even Myanmar.

Notably, the administration has also adopted a more robust position in the ongoing maritime dispute between China and several of its neighbours regarding the Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea, and has declared that the US defence alliance with Japan applies to the fiercely contested islands in the East China Sea.

Mutual deterrence more difficult

Even in the absence of the rebalance, it is almost certain that China would have still exhibited considerable insecurity, rising to great power status in a region that is not only militarily dominated by the US, but is also replete with US allies and strategic partners. The rebalance will only compound such anxieties, even as the Chinese armed forces become increasingly capable of lashing out at their multiple sources.

Third, existing US security commitments to its regional allies have emboldened those allies to harden their bargaining positions toward Beijing. The most recent crisis over the Diaoyu/Senkaku was sparked by Japan's provocative September 2012 decision to "nationalise" three of the disputed islands by purchasing them from a private owner. Meanwhile, in the South China Sea, the Philippines has adopted a highly adversarial posture towards China, even filing an unprecedented arbitration case against Beijing with the United Nations' International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea.

Fourth, although the military balance of power in East Asia strongly favours the US, the balance of interests in the region strongly favours China. On the one hand, the US continues to field the most lavishly funded, highly trained, and technologically advanced fighting force in the world, one which dominates East Asia's skies, sealanes, and even its outer space. On the other hand, the various diplomatic and territorial quarrels roiling East Asia are of much greater salience and concern to China than to the US, as their outcomes more profoundly affect the national security of the much closer China than the more distant US.

This asymmetry renders mutual deterrence more difficult because in any test of wills, the governments in Washington and Beijing will both believe that they possess dominance vis-à-vis the other. Consequently, each side will be sorely tempted to call the other's perceived bluff.

No rules of the geopolitical game

Fifth, to date the US and China have failed to elaborate a set of explicit or tacit rules of the game that would help moderate their geopolitical competition. By contrast, during the Cold War, the US and Soviet Union developed an array of both implicit and explicit norms of mutual restraint that helped prevent the superpower rivalry from boiling over into a third world war.

These factors are especially pernicious because each one exacerbates the others, producing a positive feedback cycle. For example, China's continued rise fuels the US urge to rebalance, which in turn, further emboldens America's allies and enhances US military capabilities in the region, thereby compounding China's insecurity and resolve to prevail in local territorial disputes. The lack of any clear rules of the game lends additional volatility to this dangerous dynamic by adding an element of unpredictability to it.

Although the rise of a newly assertive China in a region long dominated by the US is bound to engender a certain amount of instability and tension, policymakers in both Beijing and Washington will be unable to begin reducing both until each accepts certain uncomfortable realities. Decision makers in Beijing must accept that the regional balance of military power remains strongly tilted against China, which means that the Chinese will suffer disproportionately from any war that its counterproductive muscle-flexing may spark.

At the same time, US decision makers must accept that China's growing power and acute insecurities necessitate a more circumspect and less heavy-handed US approach to the region that reflects a more refined conception of America's vital interests there.

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