

# Asean pins hope on calmer seas

**SOUTH CHINA SEA:** Meaningful engagement may prevent potential for conflict

**T**HE end of the year is a time for celebration and festivity. It is also a time for reflection and to pen down the obligatory "new year's resolution". In this regard, the region has to take a hard look at its management of disputes and conflicts.

In the last month, China's announcement of the establishment of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) sent northeast Asia into a tailspin.

The United States gamely lined up at the front to challenge China's right to impose the ADIZ by dispatching two B-52 bombers to test Beijing's resolve. Japan, South Korea and Australia, among others, registered their protests through various diplomatic channels.

While the heart of the matter of the ADIZ revolves around the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the issue quickly took on Sino-US rivalry overtones. Vice-President Joe Biden, whose Asia trip followed immediately after the ADIZ announcement, was roundly criticised by the *China Daily* as "trying to present the image of being an impartial mediator, Washington has obviously taken Japan's side".

Just like Beijing, Washington desperately wants to keep the peace in East Asia. However, strategic trust is running scarce.

The near collision between a Chinese navy ship and the USS *Cowpens*, which was shadowing the People's Liberation Army Navy air-

craft carrier conducting its first sea trials, demonstrated again the dangers of the cat-and-mouse game played by both sides.

If the US is sincere in playing a constructive role in fostering peace and stability, it should refrain from actions that in its eyes are legitimate under international law, but in the eyes of the other party is plainly provocative.

The ADIZ issue is a symptom of the frail Sino-Japanese relations, especially on the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. The US should help Beijing and Tokyo to mend fences and not to build new ones. Understandably, the US had and should affirm its security commitments to Japan.

However, it should also understand that by doing so, it may have strengthened and deepened the discord between the disputing parties.

At a time when Beijing and Tokyo appear to be doing their talking through demonstration of force, Washington should avail itself as an honest broker for both parties to take a step back from brinkmanship.

If there is ever a case for US shuttle diplomacy in the region, it will be the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. Washington needs to convince Tokyo that a peaceful management of the dispute involves, at the minimum, the acknowledgement of the existence of the dispute itself.

The Sino-Japanese discord runs deep and the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute now registers as the region's most volatile flashpoint. There is a



China's first aircraft carrier docked at Dalian Port. There is concern that a miscalculation or mishap in Asia's crowded seas and skies can get out of control. Reuters pic

cautionary tale for Asean and China to learn from the unfortunate turn of events in the East China Sea.

At the time of the normalisation of Sino-Japanese relations in 1972, China and Japan had agreed to set aside the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. Deng Xiaoping had advised that "it does not matter if this question is shelved for some time, say, 10 years. Our generation is not wise enough to find common language on this question. Our next generation will certainly be wiser. They will certainly find a solution acceptable to all".

With regard to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, China appears to be leaning toward Deng's advice in shelving the sensitive issue on sovereignty until a suitable time in the future. While Asean and China appreciate the complexities of dealing with sovereignty issues, they should not leave the SCS dispute unattended.

There is an urgent need for progress on moderating and containing the SCS disputes and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) is key to keeping the powder keg dry in the SCS.

While the SCS dispute is not as volatile as the East China Sea, the potential for conflict increases with each passing day. One only needs to recall the Scarborough Shoal incident earlier in the year to appreciate how the tranquil waters in the SCS can turn stormy almost overnight. At the same time, China has stepped up its patrols and visits to the disputed maritime areas in the SCS, which makes the claimant states suspicious and nervous.

Regional perception of China may also be changing as it witnesses the other dimension of China's rise. Asean's engagement with China in the past decade has been largely based on the latter's eco-

nomical growth and development. In the coming decades, the region will have to contend with an economic powerhouse that is also a military giant. The advent of China as a military power is not fully appreciated as yet, but it is a development that will be hard to ignore.

It is China's commitment to the COC, moving from "negotiation" to "consultation", and its growing military power that has Asean pondering about China's strategic intent and sincerity as a partner. If Asean cannot convince China on the merits of COC when the latter's power is not yet in full bloom, what chance does Asean have when Chinese power is at its apex?

The SCS dispute represents China's golden opportunity to demonstrate to Asean, and the world, that the leadership's commitment to good relations with China's neighbours is not just rhetoric. The longer China stalls on the COC, the more questions will be asked of China's strategic intentions. Further delays will also give rise to the probability of miscalculations that will damage the good ties between Asean and China.

Ultimately, China will have to decide if it wants to be perceived as a contributor to or a cause for regional insecurity. Asean would welcome the former role and would work with China to construct a peaceful region based on a win-win formula. The onus is on China to bring about the realisation of these goals.

At the same time, other Asean states need to step up to keep the momentum on the COC, especially with Thailand distracted with national issues. Although the waters in the SCS are, at the moment, calm, Asean and China cannot take it for granted that it will remain so indefinitely.



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