

Tide of hope in the region



Behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara

Policy challenges over the South China Sea exist alongside some possibilities, with everything riding on how countries choose to behave.

THE old Chinese description of experiencing a perilous phase as “living in interesting times” is familiar enough.

So is the expectation that doing so opens up new possibilities. Both apply particularly to East Asia today.

Unfortunately, a sense of dread rather than hopes of renewal seems to dominate this anticipation. Much of the negative energy relates to a realignment of naval forces in the region’s maritime zones.

What began as former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s naval “pivot” strategy has been redubbed a “rebalancing”. The term itself reveals a belief that the balance of forces in East Asia is somehow out of kilter, requiring correction by pouring in considerably more US naval forces to restore equilibrium.

However, such a major policy move tends to provoke similar reactions from other countries that are likely to unsettle any sense of stability. Once triggered, the sequence of action-reaction can acquire a momentum of its own with uncertainties about how or where or when it will end.

Advocates of a US rebalancing suggest that it is not altogether unrelated to the phenomenon of China’s relentless rise. But they also deny it has anything to do with perceptions of a newly assertive China, thereby limiting their own motivation and its persuasiveness right from the start.

All of this adds to the general air of uncertainty, which is bad for general policymaking, business confidence and mutual understanding. Nonetheless, some current developments are already clear enough.

The Japanese parliament has just passed a Bill on “collective defence”, tweaking its Constitution to allow its low-key military to intervene outside its territory more than before following its defeat in World War II. This was despite a poll of Japanese citizens showing a majority opposed such a plan.

The Philippines and Vietnam are both reported to be expanding their naval forces. Both have maritime disputes with China over rival claims to territory, with their navies being boosted with US assistance.

Australia, like the Philippines and Japan, is also a US military ally that has begun enlarging its resident US troop contingent. Although the numbers of US deployments are still limited, the prospect remains of more to come.

India, a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, has been wooed by the US as a strategic partner if not an outright ally. India's advocacy of the "Indo-Pacific" concept has the prospect of diluting China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific.

At the same time, many countries including India and Australia also appreciate the potential benefits of an ascendant China. How each country chooses to align itself with China, the US and the region's emerging realities will be for its government and people to decide.

Asean itself has accelerated the process of creating an Asean Community, bringing the date forward from 2020 to next year. But Asean's balanced approach prioritises the economic dimension over the political-security and the social-cultural dimensions for realistic, well-rounded regional community development.

All countries are anxious about recent altercations in the South China Sea and the East China Sea over rival claims to territory, but they differ over types of approaches and priorities.

Among the problems of responding militarily to perceptions of China's assertiveness is that it neglects other more important aspects of international relations like the economic and diplomatic, is open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding, increases mutual suspicions, and is likely to provoke more military responses.

More specifically, China's assertiveness in the region in recent years has been more economic than military. The questionable actions of its coast guard vessels in disputed maritime areas have been outpaced and dwarfed by the growth of trade and investment ties with practically every country in East Asia.

Thus, to respond militarily to diverse aspects of a rich and mutually fulfilling relationship would skew the relationship to nobody's real interests. Yet at the same time, any country's military assertiveness should be deterred such that nobody gets a "free pass" to intimidate others.

In such situations, the best option is usually better adherence to the rule of law. No government would belittle the importance of law and order domestically, so why should any country be reluctant to strengthen international law and order where the stakes are even higher?

Asean has been encouraging China to accede to a proposed Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea, after Beijing had signed up to the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) in the South China Sea.

The COC is based on the DOC and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), both of which China is already a signatory. At the same time, the US needs to ratify UNCLOS, or else its brand of reprimanding other countries like China would ring hollow.

Contrary to some conservative views in Beijing, the COC does not limit, compromise or prejudice a country's existing claims to territory. But it would help signatories to look good to the rest of the world, besides encouraging them to conduct themselves appropriately in international company.

During the Clinton administration, the US was instrumental in setting the terms of UNCLOS, but since then it has only signed up to it without ratifying it. Good faith and goodwill are always better demonstrated with action rather than promises.

It would also serve China's own interests to accede to the COC as early as possible. That way it can be party to setting the COC's terms, since the alternative is to face the COC later only after other countries have shaped and formed it.

Ideally, China should accede to the COC and the US to UNCLOS. Perhaps one of them has to make the move for the other to respond in like kind, but a start has to be made somewhere.

For the moment, nobody should want to see an escalation in tensions in the South China Sea.

Some essential actions for all parties concerned are already quite clear, although their acknowledgement and observance are limited or absent.

First, clear and consistent commitment to the spirit and letter of all previous agreements should be shown by all countries. There should be no doubts or ambiguities about another claimant's motives or behaviour.

Next, there should be less presumption and prejudice by any party towards another. That goes with more policy transparency in all operations by all.

Third, any military exercises should emphasise humanitarian aspects such as emergency relief and search-and-rescue operations over war manoeuvres. That in itself should encourage more acceptance and cooperation all-round.

At the same time, more multilateral exchanges at Track One (governmental) and Track Two (non-official) levels should be encouraged. All possible channels of communication should be kept open at all times.

There are also some "don'ts" besides the "do's".

All parties need to avoid pointless posturing, brinkmanship and bravado that only stoke national egos and more trouble. Realism in a very real sense is imperative.

When President Barack Obama visits Beijing in November, some of these issues may begin to see resolution. The opportunity will certainly be there, with any perils for now still limited.

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