

## Resolve these anxieties

By BUNN NAGARA

*Tension in an already tense South China Sea region continues to rise, with every indication that things may get worse before they get any better*

FROM October 2011, senior US officials launched a “pivot” to the East Asia and Pacific maritime region.

The idea of President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to refocus US assets and strategies on this region was soon relabelled as a “rebalancing”. Soon, this largely military concept would become the stuff of an Obama legacy to be.

From December 2013, China stepped up its assertiveness in its territorial claims in the region in earnest. These efforts included building reportedly artificial islands in disputed areas.

Little, if any of this, had not previously been done by other countries in the region with claims to such rocks and islets. But China’s actions by far became the largest in scale and the greatest in pace.

In time, the official US narrative was that its strategic rebalancing had little to do with military operations. It was even said that it had nothing to do with China at all.

Last Thursday, US officials announced the planned visit of Defence Secretary Ash Carter to the aircraft carrier *USS John C. Stennis* in waters disputed by China.

On Friday, China announced that the No. 2 general in the People’s Liberation Army, General Fan Changlong, recently visited its controversial “artificial islands”.

On that day, Carter’s arrival on the *Stennis* made the news, and Beijing unleashed a torrent of criticism of what it called an insensitive act likely to fuel tensions in the region.

The fact is that US naval forces are the most formidable military presence in East Asian and Pacific waters. Of course, the United States wants to keep it that way with no other power even coming close in comparison.

China today happens to be a rising power and is expanding in all areas of endeavour, including its naval assets. And it wants to secure its place in the sun in this region.

But it is not as if this vast region is rushing headlong into a bilateral encounter between the world’s two largest economies, both of which also happen to be inextricably linked.

Other large interests are also at play.

Russia is now looking east, after many long years of looking west with little to show for it. But east is a direction that Moscow is still unfamiliar with, having long coveted its European component at the expense of its Asian element.



*Official visit: Carter, accompanied by Lt Gen Glorioso Miranda, arriving for the closing ceremony of the 11-day joint US-Philippines military exercise at Camp Aguinaldo in Manila, Philippines. - AP*

But after Russia's frustration with the hostile Western reception following Crimea's move to join the Russian Federation and the Western sanctions that followed, Moscow is now exploring its Asian options.

This has followed India's "look east" orientation under former prime minister Manmohan Singh and its follow-up notion of "act east" under current prime minister Narendra Modi.

India is no longer content to be a major power in the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea. It is also setting its strategic sights on the East Asia and Pacific region, including the South China Sea.

To what extent this interest will be translated into durable policy is a different matter. For now at least, Delhi is going through the motions of working on these notions.

Japan is another major player whose current economic underperformance has lowered its profile somewhat. But it is still the world's third largest economy with undiminished ambitions.

As a US ally, it has managed to keep some of these ambitions in check or under the shade of the superpower patron. But nobody would accuse the Abe government of lacking nationalist aspirations.

Australia is another US ally sometimes seen to consider itself an Asian country. It certainly has interests in Asia in general and China's rise in particular.

Its problem could be one of identity, including in its relations with the United States. Not long after the US rebalancing was said to include stationing more Marines in Darwin, Australia sold the port of Darwin to a China company with state interests.

The situation reflects that of Britain, reputedly the staunchest US ally. After Washington tried to dissuade friends and allies from endorsing the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank last year, Britain became the first Western country to sign up as a founding member.

That triggered other US allies in Europe and Australia to become fellow founding members. Britain pledged to be a world centre to help China internationalise the yuan.

Europe is generally concerned about rising tension in the South China Sea and surrounding regions. But the interest is varied, some of which include hopes of selling more arms in tense situations.

Perhaps the vast elephant in the room is Asean, the much misunderstood and often maligned Association of South-East Asian Nations.

One common criticism of Asean is why it has not appreciably, if at all, lowered tensions in the region. There are some problems with such criticism itself.

Firstly, Asean is not an instrument for lowering tensions involving non-members. That was not its purpose and is still not part of its design features.

Secondly, nearly half of the 10 Asean countries (four over the disputed Spratly Islands) are embroiled in their own disputed claims to territory.

Thirdly, successes on this front are harder to identify than failures. Here, Asean's signature reticence to parade its efforts hardly helps.

Add to the already heady regional mix institutions such as the Asean Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, Asean Plus Three, bilateral US alliance treaty partnerships as well as Asean themes, agreements, declarations and international laws and multilateral conventions, and the East and South China Seas can seem as crowded as the Straits of Malacca on a busy working day.

Probably the biggest problem for now is the ease with which perceptions of likely friction between the major powers, in particular China and the United States, can acquire a life of their own.

Yet this need not be. In very real and palpable terms, both these big powers have more in common than many realise or care to understand.

But some misapprehensions have to be taken care of first. There is no contradiction between the observation that much in China's recent assertiveness is a response to US re-assertiveness and China's claims to disputed territories in the region's waters.

Other countries also have their claims, so claims in themselves are not the problem.

However, assertiveness that undermines a regional consensus or jeopardises international law, which has not been seen before, is a real challenge.

Also, US actions set in the present and that seem to carry little historical baggage contrasts with China's actions set in the context of "face" and a history of humiliation. Different cultures have different priorities and approaches.

China should also not be too alarmed by US rebalancing, since it is unlikely to amount to much. Prohibitive costs and growing concerns in West Asia and Europe (Ukraine) have limited and reset US priorities somewhat.

The "Obama legacy" is also hamstrung by poor vision and planning. A report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies commissioned by the Defence Department, released in January, says about as much.

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