

Responding to Trends of Maritime Power Projection: Managing Mistrusts and Anticipating Future Scenarios - A Perspective from the Philippines

Maritime geopolitical flashpoints mark the principal arenas of competition pressures in Southeast Asia and will shape the regional countries' foreign relations and geo-strategic decisions. Given the region's fragmented terrestrial and maritime geography, initiative and responsive maritime power projection will demonstrate the concerned States' competitive behavior as they attempt to mold the geopolitical landscape and seascape to their advantage.

As a rising global power, China is actively developing and projecting its maritime power in many different forms throughout Southeast Asia. The trajectory of China's military development is dictated by the demands of its immediate geography and its perceptions of security around its borders. China's military strategy, represented by the so-called Two Island Chain Strategy, requires Southeast Asia to be converted into a security buffer with which to protect China's perceived vulnerable southern and eastern coastline. Of particular importance are controlling southern and western approaches from the Straits of Malacca/Singapore, and Philippine and Indonesian archipelagic waters, which shelter the sea lines of communication vital to many external powers like Japan, Korea, India, Australia, and the United States. China's ongoing attempt to impose its claimed territorial and other rights within the area of the Nine Dashed Lines in the South China Sea through coercive and unilateral actions, is driven by this strategic imperative. The eastern approaches, on the other hand, would be covered by combined PLAN, PLAAF, and PLARF assets and capabilities, to secure sea and air routes from the East, and particularly those connecting Japan, Guam, and the South Pacific. Further out in the Western Pacific, the South Pacific Island States would also be attractive as forward bases for defending against approaching forces from further east.

For the near term, China's increasing assertiveness and belligerence over Taiwan will be the main driver of its power projection within and against the region as its 2050 milestone for reunification draws near. Consolidation of its hold on the SCS, increasing multi-domain operations to encircle and enclose Taiwan, and establishment of a soft, broad defensive barrier in the West Pacific to the far south, will be the basis of China's continuing military expansion. Military exercises at sea are expected to increase with both training and political objectives in the area around Taiwan, as well as the SCS and West Pacific.

The Philippines will remain a geopolitically "contested terrain" between China and the US on account of its proximity to the SCS, West Pacific, and Celebes Seas, all approaches to the Chinese coast, as well as being country closest to Taiwan. Among Southeast Asian nations, the Philippines also faces the greater probability of territorial seizure in its northern island areas bordering the Luzon Straits. Should an armed conflict take place over Taiwan, control of the Luzon straits will be a strategic objective achievable only taking both sides of the straits. This highlights the strategic value and location of the Philippines, straddling all the principal passageways to Taiwan, as well as a gateway to the South China Sea.

China's artificial island bases in the SCS will play a key role in extending Chinese maritime operations into the southwest, particularly Indonesian and Malaysian waters that straddle the approaches to the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore thus stand next in strategic value due to this essential maritime transport node that China requires to be open and accessible to Chinese maritime trade and mobility. It is also strategically important for interdicting unwanted or undesirable maritime traffic. Trade and military forces bound for Taiwan could also be more easily controlled and disrupted in their relatively confined waters. Malaysia and Indonesia will thus be the likely next targets of direct power projection in the next few years.

The sovereignty and independence of the Southeast Asian States requires that the region not be a mere playground of the major powers, thus they need to have a greater role in interceding in and managing the competition. But Southeast Asia can act as a bridge and mediator

between the major powers only if it demonstrates true agency and collective unity as an influential and independent geopolitical actor. This means being able to stand up as a group to both competing powers when needed. Fragmented, it becomes merely part of the geographic arena for major power contests. Southeast Asian States need to be able to set aside their differences, and between themselves seriously address the broader and longer-term risks of individually kow-towing to either one of the principal geopolitical competitors. Subservience to one or the other increases the risks of unfortunate unilateral action as each great power tries to gain greater control of the region.

Southeast Asian States should cultivate even more relations with independent Middle Powers capable of decisions and policies autonomous and independent of either the US or China. Together, they should also assist each other diversify their economic linkages and find realistic alternatives to economic over-dependence and accompanying political influence. More economically resilient members should help wean the more vulnerable States away from over-dependence on any of the major powers.

Mistrusts between the major powers will manifest as military maneuvering while forces jockey to command maritime choke points and enclosed sea areas, and as competition for firm economic and political investments to bind interests between them and the major powers. Regional states can make use of this competition to their advantage, leveraging their location and markets to attract commitments that can be funnelled toward national development goals, but with a conscious effort to balance the risks and to maintain genuine autonomy and agency despite improvement of economic and political relations.

Future scenarios will be more generally defined by the current strategies of the competing external powers. Whether in armed conflict or trade wars, regional States should try to anticipate and visualize how the major power competition will develop and evolve. Forecasts should be collectively developed and shared, so that the region can produce its own comprehensive, balanced, and nuanced understanding of what is likely unfolding. This can enable the region to more clearly

determine and decide on its collective options.

To prepare for this, ASEAN first needs to work on developing the basis for unity against geopolitical pressures, even if it means sometimes risking individual national interest to pursue the region's greater good. Demonstration of collective commitment to common positions despite pressures from the external powers is essential to re-establish its goal of ASEAN centrality. At present, divide-and-conquer tactics work on account of short-sighted geopolitical calculations based on fragmented, self-centered visions: each ASEAN member essentially looks out for its own interests only and without regard to how they interact with those of others, and how they may share and pursue interests cooperatively.

There is a need for regular ASEAN-members-only dialogue on geopolitical conditions, how they affect ASEAN members individually and collectively, and how collective interests may be pursued. Creating and nurturing a common geopolitical outlook can help to enable wider and longer vision that could be the basis of collective action. An ASEAN dialogue should take a very frank and decidedly regional perspective of developments and regularly produce objective, critical, constructive, and impartial assessments of the major powers' and members' geopolitical strategies, maneuvers, and effects.

Maritime power projection by China will continue to press across the ASEAN region and further into the Pacific, and become more intrusive with possibly more disruptive collateral effects. US and Western activities will also increase in frequency, although they will be highly transitory in nature due to logistical constraints and geographical realities, in order to preserve navigational interests. ASEAN cannot sit idly by in the background and should have more robust responses and push back against activities that impact collective interests in stability, peace, freedom of the seas, and international law. To support policies and positions about major power activities, members need to develop their own independent and strategic maritime military and constabulary capabilities and then work toward coordinating and unifying them in the name of ASEAN. If necessary, like-minded members with shared interests (e.g., maritime *vis-à-vis* continental States) should pursue their own separate and sub-regional efforts, while others should not impede them under the principle of non-

interference.

A fully independent, unrestricted, ASEAN-only Track Two discussion may be considered to develop a decidedly Southeast Asian “geopolitical model” to clarify and understand intra-regional and extra-regional interactions of interests, powers, and influence. ASEAN diplomats and leaders may be able to benefit from seeing how individual national decisions and policies affect individual and collective prospects within an ongoing geopolitical competition by non-regional major powers. This might be a learning tool to help create unity and coordination, which will be the basis for strengthening ASEAN centrality and influence over the geopolitical competition. ASEAN need not be a mere arena, but a pro-active agent that the major powers must reckon with.

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