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South China Sea Clash: Asia's Dangerous Game

It is time for East Asia to step up cooperation to check expansionist tendencies.

By Sreeram Chaulia
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Collisions between ships of Vietnam and China following the latter's installation of a deep water oil rig in the disputed South China Sea mark a dangerous escalation of simmering tensions. Simultaneous to this fracas near the contested Paracel Islands, maritime authorities of the Philippines have arrested Chinese fishermen close to another coveted portion of the South China Sea, the Spratly Islands, triggering a war of words between Beijing and Manila.

China, Vietnam and the Philippines represent a triad of instability and tension in the Asia-Pacific with their incompatible nationalistic claims over islets and energy-rich water bodies. (The South China Sea is estimated to hold 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.) So deeply entrenched is the animosity among the three that even the nomenclature of the terrain on which they make their shows of force is subject to controversy. For the Vietnamese, "South China Sea" is an affront; they prefer to call it the "East Sea," i.e. the waters to the east of Vietnam's coast. For the Philippines, the part of the South China Sea that falls within its exclusive economic zone should be called the "West Philippine Sea," a term China dismisses. Beijing's dreaded "nine-dash line" or "cow's tongue" is based on arguments that the South China Sea waters and islands fell under its suzerainty during medieval times, evoking memories of an imperial past.

Although the South China Sea has long been a hotbed of rival nationalisms, the genesis of the current troubles lies in China's post-2008 reincarnation as a more assertive regional power. Prior to that, Beijing had maintained an accommodative and non-provocative posture vis-à-vis its smaller Southeast Asian neighbors. The Chinese leadership that inherited the economic pragmatism of Deng Xiaoping around the turn of the millennium had placed a premium on avoiding hostilities with its ASEAN neighbors as it sought to deepen trade and investment links.

By showing that mighty China could assuage the fears of weaker neighbors with maturity, Beijing burnished its "peaceful rise" argument, as it sought to assure the rest of the world that there was nothing to fear from China's ascent. However, this non-confrontational regional diplomacy began to erode from 2008, giving way to a more hawkish and aggressive China given to hectoring its neighbors, deploying economic warfare, and relishing showpiece naval incidents and skirmishes.

The reprogrammed DNA of the Chinese civilian and military leadership expresses itself as a post-Deng confidence that the time has come for China to throw its weight around and for smaller countries to fall in line. The infamous remark of China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to his Southeast Asian counterparts in 2010, that "China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact," captured the mood in Beijing: discard the niceties and bring out the knives.

Running parallel to China's unabashed willingness to scare off Southeast Asian countries is its ever-widening fissure with Japan in Northeast Asia. Although U.S. President Barack Obama has trivialized the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, one of the major bones of contention between China and Japan, as a mere "piece of rock," Beijing and Tokyo have been drifting towards conflict, one amplified by historical grievances about Japanese atrocities during World War II.

Since 2010, China and Japan tensions have featured fishing boat collisions, radar locks on naval vessels, and a unilateral air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the disputed islands. The close coordination between the U.S. and Japanese navies and the willingness of Japan's highly nationalist Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to answer Chinese fire with fire have added their own heat. Obama's reassurance to Japan last month that their mutual alliance treaty covers the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands was received with outrage and bitterness in China, which aims to preserve its comparative power lead over its competitors in the Asia-Pacific without "outside interference."

A disturbing pattern has now clearly emerged in Chinese behavior vis-à-vis Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan. Beijing makes provocative naval and aerial thrusts along the edges of disputed terrain with a view to literally testing the waters and gauging how each country will respond. The ease with which China grabbed the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea by walling it off from the Philippines has only emboldened Beijing.

China is now trying the same "cabbage strategy" of planting civilian vessels, wrapped in layers and layers of military protection, in waters claimed by Vietnam and Japan and then staying put despite howls of anger.

The only instance where China developed cold feet in this game of establishing dominion was with its ADIZ in the East China Sea. Japanese and American military aircraft ignored China's line in the sky, regularly entering the zone with impunity. Faced with a scenario of having to walk the talk of its quarantined zone, Beijing instead quietly backed off and stopped announcing Japanese and U.S. "violations." The lesson is clear: China is amenable only to counter-mobilization of equal or greater force by its opponents.

This finding has national security implications for India, too, which was shaken by a Chinese military incursion deep inside India's side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Daulat Beg Oldi area of Ladakh in 2013. The same pushy approach, with an eye to testing the mettle of neighbors and sensing how far the red lines can be breached, that China is employing against neighbors in East Asia applies to its strategy towards India. The bilateral border talks between Beijing and New Delhi may drag on endlessly but the former is scanning the LAC region, looking for opportunities to seize an advantage and test India's reaction.

Beijing's objective of promoting a "harmonious, secure, and prosperous neighboring environment" is now threatened by its own transmogrification into a malevolent neighbor that extracts its pound of flesh using its asymmetric power advantage. And the net result of China's uncompromising attitude could be that the entire East Asian region inches closer together as a group and forms a new balance of power to check Chinese moves.

For the moment, East Asia presents a divided and scattered picture, which works in China's favor. India, a member of the East Asia Summit, must play a decisive role in constructing an alternative bloc that is able to work together to check expansionist tendencies. India's state-owned oil major, ONGC Videsh, is already cooperating with Petro Vietnam in the South China Sea. Joint maritime business consortiums that rope in companies from smaller claimants who are being harassed by China will be worthwhile investments for India to propose and initiate. The region needs to be able to offer the proverbial "equal and opposite reaction" to China's actions, if the Asia-Pacific is to breathe easier.