

Asia Pacific's maritime situation fraught with tension



SUMATHY PERMAL

China, Asean and external powers should focus on risk-reducing measures and confidence-building initiatives among claimants in the South China Sea

Geo-strategic interests, military developments, major power relations and rules-based legal orders were the major issues that dominated maritime Southeast Asia last year.

This is expected to continue with tense United States-Sino relations thrown in and how the new US leadership would deal with security challenges. The US's Asia Policy under pres-

ident-elect Donald Trump is likely to be complicated and unpredictable in the next few years.

Thus far, Trump's foreign policy views point towards the provocative, with reversals being bandied on long-standing issues which, when combined with new ideas, present an increasingly cloudy and doubtful year ahead.

Trump's victory has opened up new and uncertain scenarios, and cast questions on how things will pan out in the regional and global environment. A case in point is his tweets on the highly sensitive "One China Policy" and the status of Taiwan, an area with the highest potential for conflict in East Asia, besides the Korean peninsula. The status of Taiwan as an integral part of mainland China is crucial. China has repeatedly stressed that the Taiwan issue is related to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and is at the core of China's interests.

Taiwan is also strategically important because US support for Taiwan symbolises American influence in the

Change in US leadership continues to dominate security dynamics

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region, besides being significant for economic reasons. Strategically, Taiwan is an important factor in US-Sino power relations in the Asia Pacific. There are already some concerns since China reacted by sending an aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Straits as part of an open sea exercise and also deploying a surface-to-air missile system from the mainland to Hainan Island that is expected to be placed in features occupied by China in the South China Sea.

Matters relating to China's activities in the reclaimed islands, which include the installation of weapons systems and guns on the seven features occupied by the People's Liberation Army, seem to complicate the management of South China Sea issues by both China and Asean. It appears to be a highly sensitive move

as far as militarisation in the Asia Pacific is concerned. The US, Japan, Australia and some European countries will undoubtedly raise the alarm on such moves, and this would have much impact on peace and stability in Asia. It is no exaggeration that such developments will negate the efforts by scholars, security institutions and Track Two initiatives on managing potential conflict in the South China Sea and widen the gap of insecurity among countries.

In the South China Sea region, countries are becoming increasingly pessimistic about the regional security order that seems to be spiralling into a state of disorder. These dynamics, if not handled constructively, may lead to greater instability as the South China Sea will remain a key element in the new geo-political equation and present the threat of military engagements in this region.

Asean has reaffirmed its commitment to bring its members and dialogue partners in a meaningful forum and work on security cooperation through multilateral platforms such as the Asean Regional Forum, the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM Plus.

A major challenge in such arrangements is the evolving regional power distribution and how it influences leadership with independent policies in shaping geo-strategic directions. In this regard, Asean unity is essential to ensure that rule-based order dominates its power-based counterpart.

The maritime situation and dynamics in the Asia Pacific, including in the South China Sea and East China Sea, are so fragile and fraught with tension and that requires crisis management as countries in and outside the region would want to avoid conflict. In that sense, Confidence Build-

ing Measures (CBM) and Preventive Diplomacy are particularly more desirable actions than actually preparing for crisis management. China, Asean and external powers should focus on risk-reducing measures and confidence-building initiatives among claimants in the South China Sea, with crisis prevention being the favoured mode. To achieve this, new methods on enhancing CBMs through engagement among law enforcement agencies, militaries, and para-military elements are needed.

Identifying the major issues confronting the region, such as geo-strategic factors and military activities, the change of US leadership and its impact on US-Sino relations will continue to dominate security dynamics in Southeast Asia. This includes prioritising crisis prevention plans and utilising existing crisis management tools. These tools in-

clude the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea; International Maritime Organisations's Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea; International Civil Aviation Organisation's rules of the air; US-China hotlines; China-Asean (10+1) cooperation hotlines; 2014 US-China Agreement on Rules of Behaviour; and, the 2015 memorandum of understanding on Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters. These are practical tactical level mechanisms translated from policies as well as political engagements at various levels among the players in this region. Taken together, they will provide some semblance of stability in a region and future that is increasingly volatile and fraught with potential for open conflict.

sumathy@minna.gov.my

The writer is a senior researcher at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia

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