

Pnom Penh: Strategic Implications

Written by Marvin Ott

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MARVIN OTT, JUL 19 2012

The recently adjourned ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial in Pnom Penh highlighted a fundamental reordering of the strategic landscape on Asia's Pacific Rim – particularly Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. Over the last two years (since the ARF meetings of July 2010) it has become increasingly clear that the South China Sea will be the epicenter of a contest for strategic preeminence between China and the US with Southeast Asia as the contested middle ground.

The Backdrop

As a region, Southeast Asia came into geopolitical focus for the first time in World War II when Lord Mountbatten assumed leadership of the Allied "Southeast Asia Command." Following that global conflagration the region entered a new strategic era defined by the confluence of decolonization and the Cold War. It is easy to forget that the Cold War was actually hot in Southeast Asia with active Marxist insurgencies and urban guerrilla movements throughout the region – culminating in the epic struggle for the future of Indochina. The Vietnam War came to an end in 1975 just as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that convulsed China in the name of Mao's demented radical vision was nearing an end. With the subsequent emergence of Deng Xiaoping as paramount ruler and the winding down of Southeast Asia's internecine wars the greater region entered a new strategic era defined by the drive for economic development and modernization.

It has been a remarkable period – encompassing three decades and still continuing – that has seen the center of gravity of the world economy shift toward East Asia. In the process, the Chinese economy, which was a basket case in the 1970s, surpassed Japan as the world's second largest and is on track to supplant the US sometime before 2050. During this period the Southeast Asian countries not only built modern economies of their own, but also created something quite new – regional institutions centered on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that gave Southeast Asia a nascent collective identity. By the mid-1990s the stage was set for an increasingly robust relationship between Southeast Asia and China – with the US an interested but largely inattentive party.

In the 1990s the US was the dominant economic presence in Southeast Asia as the primary market for the region's exports and the leading source of foreign investment. By providing a market and a source of capital and expertise the US was widely recognized as the critical enabler of Southeast Asia's remarkable economic transformation over the previous three decades. But beginning with the Asian financial crisis of 1997-8 that picture began to change rapidly — driven by the historically unprecedented growth of the Chinese economy. China viewed Southeast Asia as a natural economic extension of southern and coastal China. Beijing's message to Southeast Asians was "if we work together we will all get rich together." And to a remarkable degree, they have.

Today, China has clearly supplanted the US as Southeast Asia's leading trade partner and is increasingly a source of foreign investment as well. And the pattern extends well beyond Southeast Asia; Australia, Japan, and South Korea all have China as their number one market. These trends are being heavily reinforced in Southeast Asia by ambitious infrastructure projects (road and rail networks, riverine transport routes, electrical grids, and communications networks) all linking Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Laos, and Malaysia with China.

But China's rise is about more than economics. The Chinese have staked an audacious claim that the South China

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Sea in its entirety is part of the sovereign territory of China. It's analogous to the US claiming the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean as American territory. The Chinese claim is backed by an ambitious buildup of naval and air forces – not to mention military outposts on coral atolls designed to establish “facts on the ground/water.”

By the beginning of 2010 the trend lines seemed clear. Southeast Asia and the seas that surround and abut it were to become an area of dominant Chinese influence – economically and militarily. In China's sphere American tourists, scholars and businessmen would be welcome, but the US Navy would not. As one senior Chinese defense official said to a small group of US strategists some years ago: “You Americans have lots of places where you can play your games; this playground (Southeast Asia) belongs to us and you have no business being here.”

Strategic Landscape

The ARF is a setting for the discussion of security/defense issues in Asia, primarily Southeast Asia. The Bush Administration, heavily preoccupied with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, paid little attention to it. The Secretary of State had a standing invitation to attend the “Ministerial” meeting that constitutes the centerpiece of ARF deliberations, but Secretary Rice declined citing more pressing business elsewhere. Meanwhile, in the 15 years of so from the mid-1990s to 2010 the strategic situation in Southeast Asia and the offshore maritime domain was changing – quietly but dramatically.

When Secretary Clinton went to the ARF meetings in July 2010 (the first attendance by a Secretary of State) she stated what to Americans seemed obvious – that the US had a vital national interest in preserving the major sea lanes through the South China Sea as a “global commons” beyond the control or ownership of any country. Southeast Asian Ministers spoke up in support of the US position. But the Chinese Foreign Minister (ordinarily cool and smooth as silk) went ballistic. His very public meltdown reflected a Chinese view that the US was suddenly and unexpectedly interfering in China's game plan for Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.

Suddenly, a new strategic era came into focus – a product not only of changing economic and military realities but also policy choices. America could arguably live with a power shift in which Asia's Pacific Rim becomes an arena of exclusive Chinese preeminence. The Southeast Asians would have to adapt make the best of it. But instead the US has chosen to challenge China's ambitions and claims. For its part, China could have accepted the strategic and territorial status quo in the region confident that it would accommodate growing Chinese power, influence, and economic interests. But China has apparently chosen to challenge the status quo with territorial claims that would upend Asia's strategic landscape. This leaves Southeast Asians between a proverbial rock and a hard place. Their economies are increasingly (but not exclusively) tied to China but the region's territorial and security interests increasingly align with the US.

Currently US strategy is embodied in Secretary Clinton's reference to an American “pivot” toward the Asia-Pacific. On the economic front the US is attempting to make the Trans-Pacific Partnership a vehicle for strengthened US trade ties with the region (excluding China). More dramatically, the Pentagon has made clear that the Asia-Pacific is America's new military priority. Budget curbs and force drawdowns in Europe and Southwest Asia (Afghanistan) will not affect US forces in the Far East. In fact some US naval assets will be redeployed from the Atlantic and Mediterranean to the Pacific.

Chinese strategy appears to have two major components: (1) play for time in the South China Sea by deflecting demands for clarity regarding the location and legal basis for the “nine-dotted” line while building and deploying greater military capabilities in the area as rapidly as possible; (2) employ a combination of economic inducements and intimidation to bring Southeast Asian countries into line (bilaterally, one at a time) with China's requirements.

The ASEAN countries are left attempting to negotiate a “code of conduct” that would establish binding limitations on the actions of all South China Sea claimants. China has resisted all efforts in this direction for years. A spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry has stated repeatedly that China would consider a code of conduct only “when conditions mature.” One obvious requirement for a more effective strategy would be agreements among the South China Sea claimants in ASEAN settling all disputes among themselves, thereby enabling ASEAN to present a

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common front to the rest of the world.

At the recently concluded ARF meetings we saw all this on display. The US stood firm with Secretary Clinton insisting on the need for multilateral negotiations regarding the South China Sea while decrying “worrisome incidents of economic coercion and the problematic use of military and government vessels in connection with disputes among fishermen.” China reiterated its insistence on bilateral negotiations while demonstrating its leverage by apparently enlisting Cambodia, the host and chair of the meetings, to prevent the Philippines from putting on the record its objections to China’s recent activities in the South China Sea. Cambodia went so far as to adjourn the meetings without the customary Chairman’s statement summarizing the outcome. Cambodia is heavily beholden to China for investment and economic assistance while Chinese dams on the upper Mekong could potentially control the flow of the river that is the lifeblood of the Cambodian economy and society. China’s willingness to use an ASEAN member to manipulate the outcome of an ASEAN meeting sent a sobering message concerning China’s future behavior toward the region.

The strategic future that is unfolding, while it will be unpalatable to many, will be familiar to those who lived through the Cold War. For the foreseeable future, peace and stability in the South China Sea will be maintained (if at all) by a US military presence sufficient to deter the employment of Chinese armed force in support of its claims. In this demanding effort, the US will be (and is) looking for partners and supporters. This presents the ASEAN countries with a fearful choice; most want US support but none want a US-China conflict. Over the longer term Southeast Asians and Americans alike have to hope that China will decide that the “nine-dotted line” is a bridge too far and that China’s core interests can be met without it. Whether that will happen is as yet unclear. What does seem clear is that Asia’s southeastern rim promises to be a primary focus of global geopolitics well into the 21st century.

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