

VARIOUS STRINGS OF PEARLS: RECENT SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND BEYOND

By Tilman Pradt

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in a recently published article that this century will become 'America's Pacific Century.' In her text she declared that a strategic shift was underway in America's foreign policy, a shift away from former hotspots of geopolitical attention towards the region of Asia-Pacific. Further, this newly increased engagement of the United States in the region shall be understated through activities in security related issues, too. Clinton made it clear that despite the need to limit expenses in dire economic times, the importance of the Asia-Pacific region will justify the reallocation of resources away from former areas of engagement (e.g., Central Asia).¹

Secretary of State Clinton's remarks were further emphasised by the performance of President Barack Obama at his late 2011 official journey to Asian summits. It was the first time that the US president attended at the East Asia Summit (EAS), a forum formerly existing of 16 East Asian nations which in 2011 accepted the USA

and Russia as new members. At this Summit, President Obama seized the opportunity to express the US' will to establish a new base for US Marines in Australia to secure the waterways. Additionally, he suggested that the various claimant states to disputed areas in the South China Sea should meet at a round table to discuss the disputes multilaterally and that the US would be happy to play a facilitating role in resolving the protracted disputes.²

The reactions from Beijing were instantaneous and unsurprising in its manner. China has been an engaged proponent of excluding outside powers from Asian regional affairs, therefore it strongly supported the EAS as an inclusive Asian organisation. Furthermore, China has been a strict opponent of multilateral discussions in respect of territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS). Both standpoints were well-known and it is interesting to analyse what Washington might have affected to undertake these actions when China's displeasure was guaranteed.



Relevance

The SCS is known for its busy waterways. Especially the Strait of Malacca, through which nearly half the annual shipping tonnage passes, is notorious for the vast implications in case of any blockade, disruption or the like. These sea lanes connect the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean via the straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok. Most of European-Asian trade is shipped via this connection, and thus not only Asian states are interested in guaranteed free passage but also the world economy altogether. Bernhard D. Cole, professor at the National War College in Washington, D.C, classifies the importance of this sea-lane in the following way:

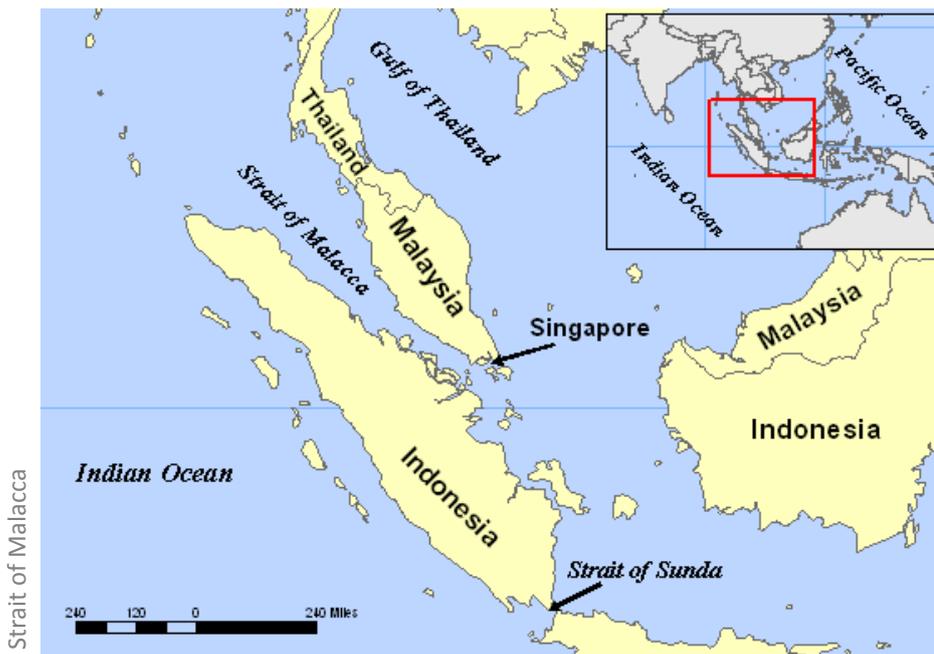
“The Strait of Malacca is the most important shipping lane in the world, more important than either the Suez or Panama Canals in terms of both geopolitical significance and because of the numbers of ship and amount of tonnage that pass through it.”³

Piracy attacks during the past years have demonstrated how vulnerable these sea lanes are. In this view it is not surprising that many states are engaged in securing the sea lanes and founded various programmes to counter piracy and terrorism hazards (e.g., the Eye in the Sky programme, initiated in 2005 is an aerial surveillance programme in the Strait of Malacca, conducted jointly by Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand).

The sea lanes are especially important to China and Japan because they are the waterway connection to Africa and the Middle East, the origin of the majority of their oil imports. Any interruption of the supply of crude oil would have immense impact on the world's second and third biggest economies, respectively. China and Japan are therefore both very interested in securing the sea lanes through the SCS and the Indian Ocean, unfortunately, they are suspicious of each other to interrupt the oil supply in case of any future confrontation. This suspicion is based on still existing territorial disputes of sovereignty over islands (i.e., Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands) and because of their generally ambivalent relations in history.

China is furthermore not sure about the behaviour of the US in an assumed future conflict in the Taiwan Strait, a blockade of Chinese oil supply could be the means of choice in such a situation.

These insecurities in combination with China's reliance on a steady oil supply through the Strait of Malacca were acknowledged by policy-makers in Beijing for several years. In 2003, after a



statement of Chinese Premier Hu Jintao on the problematic of this vulnerability, the phrase of the “Malacca dilemma” was coined.⁴

Military developments

The United States established a group of military alliances in the region after the Second World War. The strategic alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia plus the military bases on Guam and the Philippines allowed the US to control the sea lanes in the SCS and to hedge China in times of the Cold War. After the shift in the perception of China from foe to partner against the Soviet Union during the 1970s, this motivation waned and at the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the strategic importance of the whole region lost significance. The US closed its military base at Subic Bay in the Philippines and reduced its overall presence in the region.

Nonetheless the military partnerships and joint military exercises continued and were even expanded. Via the continuation of joint exercises the US Navy ensured its compatibility with allied navies in case of severe confrontations in the region. It is observable that the efforts to conduct joint military exercises with navies in the region increased during the years of the 1990s when the US removed parts of its forces from Southeast Asia.

In 1995, the US established the Cooperation Afloat Readiness And Training (CARAT) programme, designed to enhance regional cooperation among navies and to prepare for joint real-world operations. Sponsored by the US Pacific Fleet and scheduled by the US Seventh Fleet, this bilateral military exercise

programme is comprehensive in its manner and aims at increasing the professional skills of participating navies. Since 1996, the navies of Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines participated.

The trainings include amphibious raids, live-fire exercises, jungle survival training, military operations on urbanised terrain, and joint anti-submarine exercises.⁵

In 2010, Cambodia and Bangladesh joined the CARAT and enlarged the circle to eight participating armies in the Southeast Asian region.

Additionally, the US conducts maritime exercises with the six navies of Thailand,

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Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, the Southeast Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism (SEACAT) and annually a six-week military exercise with Thai soldiers, designated Cobra Gold.⁶

The standing US Seventh' Fleet in the Asia-Pacific including thirty-six attack submarines is the paramount naval strike force in the region with bases in Japan and Guam.⁷

The deployment of US Marines to the military base at Darwin, Australia, is remarkable insofar as this is the first move to strengthen the US military's presence in the region after two decades



of declining the military personnel in the region. One motivation behind this newly move is certainly to continued upgrading of the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) over the last two decades. The increased military might of Chinese forces, above all its naval forces, has caused worries among smaller states in the Southeast Asian region, especially in view of unresolved disputes with China over territorial sovereignty rights in the South China Sea.

China is modernising its military forces at an impressive pace. The official numbers of China's defence budget are admittedly dubious but it is common sense among security analysts that China possesses the most powerful armed forces among Asian countries and that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is even on the global scale second only to the US Army. The focus of China's military build-up efforts was on strengthening the naval and air forces. In this respect, especially arms purchases from Russia are of

significance. During the 1990s, China began upgrading its armed forces with arms purchases from the former Soviet army. The focus was obviously not on the ground forces but on acquisitions for the airforce and navy.

China ordered Russian Su-27 fighter aircraft until in 1996, China arranged a licence agreement with Russia about the co-production of 200 modified Su-27s (Su-27SK) labelled as J-11 (or F-11) in China. For its naval forces, China purchased a total of four Russian Sovremenny class destroyers and Kilo class diesel-electric submarines. Additionally, China increasingly succeeded in developing indigenous weapon systems assumably thanks to Russian technical support. China's Luhu class destroyers, Jiangkai class frigates, Song class submarines and especially the J-10 fighter aircraft are evidence for Chinese improved prowess in view of indigenously developing military equipment.⁸

In the new millennium, China continued its way of upgrading its armed forces via the acquisition of weapon systems from Russia and increasingly developing indigenous technologies. The motivation behind these military programmes is first of all China's ability to do so thanks to its prolonged economic boom. One should bear in mind that China is not at all overstretching its financial abilities to upgrade its military forces in an arms race with a malign neighbour or the like. China is on the one hand experiencing the least threatening security environment for the last century, on the other hand, it is in the most promising economic situation for the same given period. The combination of these two facts is qualified to raise certain worries among China's neighbouring countries about China's future intentions

Emblem of the People's Liberation Army



and especially about the driving force behind China's military upgrading programmes.

Officially, the PLA is focused on a potential Taiwan Strait theatre in case of Taiwan unilaterally declaring its sovereignty. For the purpose to deter Taiwanese policy-makers, the PLA has installed some 1,000 missiles aiming at Taiwan and furthermore enhanced its capabilities of amphibious landing forces.

The second maxim of the PLA in view of its external threat perception is increasingly the goal to secure the above mentioned oil supply sea lanes which are pivotal for the Chinese economy. To reach this goal, China took efforts to increase its power projection capabilities to enable in-time reaction to potential conflicts along these sea lanes. The means of choice has been the development of a blue water navy, capable to patrol the concerning waters and to upgrade its air force for quick reaction capabilities. For the first purpose, China ordered guided-missile destroyers and the above mentioned Kilo class submarines from Russia. The probably most controversial part of China's navy modernising programme is the development of China's indigenous aircraft carrier programme. As early as in the 1990s, China purchased a semi-completed aircraft carrier from the former Soviet satellite Ukraine. The labelled 'Varyag', a Kuznetsov class aircraft carrier, was at first designated to become a swimming casino resort towed in Macau but eventually was refurbished and completed. In June 2011 it completed its maiden voyage off the Chinese coast and thus demonstrated Beijing's great ambitions for its naval forces.⁹

In respect of the air force, China purchased some 200 Su-30s from Russia and began in 2003 to produce indigenous fighter jets labelled J-10 assumably based on experiences made with the Russian Su-30s.

Additionally, China sought to partner with littoral states along the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean to ensure replenishment facilities far away from Chinese ports. Over the past years, China has thus initiated port modernisation or completely new established port facilities in Myanmar (Hianggyi, Akyab, Mergui), Bangladesh (Chittagong), Pakistan (Gwadar), and Sri Lanka (Hambantota). This row of ports has been phrased as 'China's string of pearls' and is entirely defensive in

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Beijing's point of view, but also causing feelings of a Chinese encirclement among certain nations in this region. For these states it is further unsettling to recognise that China's increased amphibious capabilities and power projection forces would also allow an engagement in, for example, a potential conflict over islands in the South China Sea.

Thus, while China is upgrading its armed forces to secure its energy supply, at the same time, it causes security concerns in the region with the very same weapon systems it considers as defensive.

Security outcomes

The above outlined engagement of the United States and China to secure the



important sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea have surely one positive outcome: these sea lanes are increasingly less vulnerable to non-traditional security threats, i.e. piracy and terrorist attacks.

On the other hand, the upgrading of military forces has the potential to trigger an arms race in the region. This would be the characteristic outcome of a security dilemma. The efforts undertaken by a party to enhance its (perceived) security environment leads to an increase of the threat perception of another party and thus motivates the latter to upgrade its forces, too. By this development, the former feels confirmed in its threat perception and encouraged to further invest in its military forces which leads to the expectable reaction of the other party and so on.

In this case, the Chinese efforts to secure its oil supply might concomitantly threaten the Japanese that they can no

longer control their oil supply. China's establishment of port partnerships in the Indian Ocean might be perceived by India as interference in India's sphere of influence. The US' engagement in the South China Sea is surely perceived by Beijing as an interference in China's sphere of influence but at the same time welcomed by smaller Asian nations which fret too much dominance of China in the region. The result of this rising tension in the region is quantifiable in sober numbers. China started its military modernization and upgrading programmes in the early 1990s with arm purchases from Russia. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's southeastern neighbours have been heavily invested in arms purchases and thus becoming the world's second biggest arms trade region, second only to the Middle East.¹⁰ Especially the armies of Malaysia and Vietnam have used their increased income from oil extraction to upgrade and modernise their armed forces. Both



countries acquired modern attack submarines (French Scorpene class by Malaysia and Russian Kilo class submarines by Vietnam) and fighter aircraft (Su-30s from Russia). And although the littoral states of the SCS have overlapping claims among themselves, it is evident that China's military modernising programme has spurred the weapon systems acquisitions in the Southeast Asian region.

The other big spender in terms of arms purchases and military modernisation has been India. The Foreign Policy magazine headed an article "The Stories You Missed in 2011" in which the number one of ten overlooked developments in 2011 is the increasing military spending of India. Accordingly, in 2011, India has been the world's largest weapons importer, "accounting for 9 percent of the world's international arms transfers -- most from Russia -- between 2006 and 2010."¹¹

The article states that the focus of India's military modernisation and acquisition is on its naval forces, caused by an increased perception of a Chinese threat.

Conclusion

China has been modernising its military forces for several years, especially its naval forces and airforce have been upgraded substantially. This development was not unnoticed by security analysts in concerned nations, China's development of an indigenous aircraft carrier was only the latest event in a row of impressive breakthroughs in China's efforts to develop indigenous military technology. These developments have caused concerns, initially among China's southeastern neighbours which fear China using its newly military might

to resolve open territorial conflicts in its favour. Therefore, the navies of concerned littoral states have been upgraded by weapon systems acquisitions. The other big Asian power, India, was also increasingly worried by China's military rise and ambitions to project power into the Indian Ocean. Thus, India also invested immensely in military technology and became the world's largest arms importer. Last but not least, the US as the remaining dominant naval force in the region (and in the world) has re-emphasised its engagement and declared to deploy additional forces to Australia. It is difficult to imagine a sudden decrease in these efforts of military upgrading and it is far more probably that we are attending an

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arms race in the Asian region which is only gaining speed and severity

China is about to establish a series of port partnerships in littoral states along the sea lanes connecting Africa and the Middle East with Northeast Asia. The pearls in this 'String of Pearls' are harbours in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, and China's Sanya base on Hainan. These ports are not military in nature but qualified to raise worries in states like India which feels increasingly encircled.

The United States' 'String of Pearls' stretches from its (leased) naval base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, over port facilities in Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan, supplemented by



military bases at Guam and prospectively in Darwin, Australia. Additionally, the US Seventh Fleet is deployed to the Asian region, a standing force of permanently 70 ships, 300 aircraft and 40,000 sailors and marines. To think that the immense concentration of armed forces in the region, both Chinese and American, will only lead to the increased security of sea lanes is naïve at best.

The Asian region has shifted into the spotlight of geopolitics over the last years. The recent declarations of the US President and Secretary of State, respectively, about the increased importance of the Asia-Pacific region for US foreign policy were only the latest pointer to a longstanding development. The contemporary security threats to the sea lanes of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean do not justify the military efforts described in this article and the concerned nations know it. Aircraft carriers and attack submarines are not the appropriate means to patrol sea lanes and chase pirates. Rather, the perceived interference of outside powers will urge the regional actors to overreact and respond with further military buildup efforts, thus destabilising the security of the whole region.

The US' motivation to deploy marines to the base at Darwin was assumably to present the Chinese a stick beside the carrot. The offer of President Obama to facilitate multilateral discussions among the claimants to disputed islets in the South China Sea was all too easy declinable for the Chinese.

Beijing has stated for decades that it was unwilling to even discuss these territorial disputes multilaterally but would only bilaterally negotiate with the other claimants. During the time of passed

possibilities, the claimants upgraded their military capabilities, erected military outposts on the disputed islets, and thus created precedents for later negotiations over sovereignty. This development increasingly entailed the risk of military confrontation and is a danger to the important sea lanes. By its move to deploy forces to the region, Washington demonstrates Beijing a possible outcome of prolonged irreconcilability in view of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. If China is not able to solve the problems in its region on its own, the message goes, the US are willing to secure the stability. Maybe this is motivation for China to put new efforts in finding a solution to the SCS disputes. An increased military presence of the US in the region might be frightening enough for Beijing to bite the bullet.

Notes:

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1. (Clinton, 2011)
2. (Grammaticas, 2011)
3. (Cole, 2008) p.20
4. (Storey, 2006)
5. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/carat.htm> (accessed 2012-06-1)
6. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/cobra-gold.htm> (accessed 2012-06-1)
7. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/navy/c7f.htm> and <http://www.c7f.navy.mil/forces.htm> (accessed 2012-06-1)
8. (Pradt, 2011)
9. (BBC, 2011)
10. <http://www.sipri.org/>
11. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/the_stories_you_missed_in_2011 (accessed 2012-06-1)