

Caught between China and the US

Written by Sushil Seth
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Australia is not a high roller internationally, except by virtue of its delicate position as one of China's biggest trading partners and one of the US' closest allies. This means Canberra is treading warily between the two in the midst of the storm clouds gathering over South China Sea islands, where China is expanding its territorial control and strategic influence and the US is now seriously seeking to challenge it. However, no matter how much Canberra might try to appear even-handed, it simply cannot because its strategic priorities by virtue of its US alliance leave no scope for any ambiguity.

Australia's white paper on defense, which formulates a large expansion and modernization of its defense forces, is largely couched against a backdrop of regional tensions from China's activities in the South China Sea, including building military facilities on reclaimed land from reefs and shoals.

In a broad statement, it says that "while it is natural for newly powerful countries [read China] to seek greater influence" but the problem is that some [China] "sought to challenge the rules that govern actions in the global commons of the high seas, cyberspace and space in unhelpful ways, leading to uncertainty and tension."

As US allies, Australia and Japan would hate to see China dominate and control the Asia-Pacific region. Other nations, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, contest China's sovereignty claims over South China Sea islands. It is a highly charged matter and has the potential of becoming a regional powder keg. Compounding it is the disputed sovereignty issue between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai Islands, 钓鱼台) in the East China Sea.

China's rising economic and military power, and the US' diminishing, but still considerable power, is creating a situation where they both are now competing and contending, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

The US' preoccupation with Middle Eastern wars and turmoil enabled China to expand its political and strategic space in the region, causing nervousness and fear among some of its neighbors as Beijing laid claim to sovereignty of and control over island chains in South China Sea that its neighbors also claim, and whose claims appear more valid by virtue of their proximity to these islands.

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The regional tensions over the South China Sea show no sign of easing. If anything, they are getting worse. China has built military structures on new and old islands. It regards the expanse of waters around them as its exclusive zone, and it is feared that it might start to regulate and interfere with the free movement of commercial shipping and right of passage.

To assert the principle of freedom of navigation through these waters, the US has sent a naval ship or two to test China's intentions. Australia is also being urged to assert its right of "freedom of navigation" and Canberra agrees with it, in principle. The US is keen that other regional countries should be part of such "right to freedom navigation."

Vice Admiral Jose Aucoin, commander of the US 7th Fleet based in Japan, was quoted as recently saying in Sydney that it would be valuable for other countries, including Australia, to challenge Beijing's assertiveness, rather than leave it to the US and having it "portrayed as the US versus China" issue.

"The scale and the speed of the reclamation of China has been alarming ... but ... we're [the US] going to sail, fly, operate in these waters and be prepared for any contingency," he was quoted as saying.

The US is determined to challenge, preferably with its regional friends and allies, China's unilateral claims in South China Sea.

China, of course, regards the US as an outside power bent on creating mischief and trouble and would like to edge it out of the region. While neither the US nor China is seeking conflict, they both seem to not only hold their ground but also to press ahead to assert their respective position.

Beijing wants the US and other regional countries to accept its claim and assertion of sovereignty as a historical fact, a kind of Monroe Doctrine that the US proclaimed in 1823 declaring domination of the American continent.

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China, it appears, hopes to establish domination of the Asia-Pacific region with its growing power.

As Beijing works on building a regional strategic architecture, it has said that its installations on newly reclaimed lands are for humanitarian reasons, for search and rescue and so on. However, the latest satellite imagery showed that China has deployed surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island (Yongxing Island, 永兴岛) in the Paracel Islands (Xisha Islands, 西沙群岛) that is also claimed by Vietnam. This is said to be in clear breach of Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) commitment-assurance that China would not militarize the island chains.

US Secretary of State John Kerry was quick to say that he would make "very serious" representations with Beijing over the deployment.

"When President Xi was here [on a US visit], he stood in the Rose Garden with [US] President [Barack] Obama and said that China will not militarize in the South China Sea," Kerry said. "But there is every evidence, every day, that there has been an increase of militarization of one kind or another. It's of serious concern."

There are now reports of stationing of radar systems and fighter aircraft and all sorts of military facilities on the islands. China is reported to have reclaimed more than 1,200 hectares on reefs and shoals in the area. This has led Admiral Harry Harris, head of the US Pacific Command, to say that China is "clearly militarizing" the disputed waters of the South China Sea, and he quipped: "You'd have to believe in a flat Earth to think otherwise."

Pointing to the dangers ahead, he said: "Regrettably there are missiles and fighter aircraft and guns and other things that have been placed into the South China Sea and this [is] of great concern to everyone who transits and relies on the South China Sea for peaceful trade."

However, China is steadfast. A Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman has said that "China's deployment of limited, necessary defense facilities on its own territory [islands in the South China Sea] is its exercise of its right of self-defense to which a sovereign state is entitled under international law."

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The problem, though, is that it is contested sovereignty, but such semantics are lost in international power play.

China feels pretty confident that it will have its way. When asked at a news conference if Australia and Japan, together with the US, were intent on containing China, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) said, with a straight face, that “I also don’t think that any country or power in the world can stop that rise.”

Sushil Seth is a commentator in Australia.

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