

Ostracized China would lash out

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Sunday, 28 April 2019 05:02

The US' Marine Corps University on Monday conducted a World War III simulation that had Taiwan as one of the fronts, with China, Russia and North Korea as belligerents.

The university said that the exercise was not intended to be preparations for war with those countries, and that the main focus was the European front, where the majority of US forces were sent in the simulation.

There is no doubt, given regional tensions and China's militarization of the South China Sea, that US military officials are seriously thinking about potential conflict in the region.

However, US preparedness relies heavily on its partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, which is where doubt remains.

At the Five Power Defence Arrangements meeting in Singapore on June 2, 2017, regional leaders discussed potential security arrangements that would bolster cooperation and reduce dependence on the US.

"We have to take responsibility for our own security and prosperity, while recognizing we are stronger when sharing the burden of collective leadership with trusted partners and friends," then-Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull said at the meeting.

Singaporean Minister of Defense Ng Eng Hen (李显龙) said that his country welcomed cooperation with the US, but was concerned about policymaking at the top levels of the US government and was worried about the US being the only nation "powerful enough to set red lines with China."

In a poll cited in a report published on the Foreign Policy Web site on Jan. 8, respondents in ASEAN said that they lacked confidence in the US' policies in the region.

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The US' freedom of navigation exercises in the area had not deterred China from obstructing economic activity by those nations in their own waters, the report said.

A report published by the National Interest Web site on Nov. 6 last year cited the growing challenges US businesses face in the Chinese market as "an underlying driver of bipartisan willingness to get tough on China."

However, a heavy-handed approach would not work, because the US' allies in the region still heavily depend on Beijing economically, it said.

The US needs to be more flexible and needs a clear strategy, it said, adding that US allies in Asia do not want to take sides in a US-China conflict.

Resolving the South China Seas crisis would require multiparty dialogue and it is imperative to bring China to the negotiating table.

China wants to be respected, and it sees the area within the "nine-dash line" as its territory, so there is no way it will agree to remove bases from it.

Regional leaders should seek to negotiate an agreement with China that protects their economic interests in those waters, and should seek shared responsibility to protect those operating in the area from conflict, piracy and other illegal activity. If China is to have military personnel stationed there, why not put them to use? Drug trafficking, human trafficking and piracy are major problems along major sea lanes, and China could work with other regional governments to combat this.

If China were to be in partnerships, it would be less likely to antagonize.

Taiwan could also participate in shared policing of the South China Sea.

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The US and its partners in the Indo-Pacific — including Taiwan — must engage China in productive ways, while reducing their dependency on China's market.

A strong China in itself is not a threat, but if it feels alienated or ostracized, it is likely to lash out. Therefore, cooperation that holds China accountable is needed.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2019/04/28](#)