Is China failing SE Asia's test?

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With all the bombast surrounding the 60th anniversary of China-Indonesia relations in the last few months, many seem unaware of recent developments in the South China Sea. In the last fortnight, details have emerged regarding the Chinese Navy's growing assertiveness and naval projection capability in the region.

According to a recent report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a flotilla of six ships from the North Sea Fleet sailed on March 18 on a "long-distance training exercise" in the vicinity of the Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands - and reportedly near the Malacca Strait as well.

In mid-April, the Japanese media reported a second taskforce of at least 10 ships from the East Sea fleet (including destroyers and frigates) sailed through the Miyako strait, stopped east of Taiwan, and conducted anti-submarine warfare exercises.

The group apparently stopped when Vietnamese fishermen surrounding Chinese fishing patrols in the South China Sea - which they might have been sent to rescue - withdrew from the area.

The North Sea Fleet Commander was quoted saying that "China needed to protect its maritime territorial integrity through long-distance naval projection."

These developments signify China's growing naval capability - and its intention of possibly using them in territorial disputes. After all, studies have shown that while Chinese leaders clearly view China as a defensive power, Beijing has been willing to use "calibrated force" in the past, especially when it comes to territorial disputes.

It should be noted however, China resolved most of its border issues peacefully (17 out of 23 disputes since 1949) - which Chinese leaders believe is necessary in order to focus on economic development and to show the world that they could be a responsible world leader.

Although, given the current complexities surrounding China's defense policy-making, it remains difficult to fully assess under what conditions would China today use force to defend what it sees as its "undisputed sovereignty".

The March and April training exercise also demonstrate the Navy's ability to organize and conduct distant operations with multiple platforms and the growing integrative capabilities of its three fleets.

This allowed the Navy for the first time to move beyond the "First Island Chain" (a term used to describe the line formed by the Aleutians, the Kuriles, Japan, the Ryukyus, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo) - which will have huge strategic ramifications for the regional balance of power in the coming years.

Regional expert Michael Auslin argued that this is part of China's new "far sea defense" strategy - a departure from its traditional "Offshore Defense" - that may signal its intention to play "an expanded role in the region".
China's decision in December 2008 to join the international anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, its Navy's continued expansion, and the 2009 USS Impeccable incident, seem to add further weight to this argument.

It would be difficult therefore for Southeast Asian countries to positively welcome China's growing naval assertiveness. Especially with the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area already causing domestic discontents within some member states.

Thus, while the growing economic interdependence between ASEAN and China has been a positive force in dissuading regional fears - which Beijing's diplomatic "charm offensive" also helped facilitate - the ultimate litmus test of China-Southeast Asia's mature relations lies in the South China Sea.

This decades-old dispute (involving Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Taiwan, and China) is critical not just over sovereignty, but it also entangles marine and energy resources with the geo-strategic significance of the waterways controlling the Sea Lanes of Communication between the Pacific and Indian oceans.

For Indonesia, the waters surrounding the Natuna islands are also at stake here.

Given these interests, it would be counter-productive for any disputant country to use, or threaten to use, military force to resolve the dispute.

However, as the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was not legally binding, and existing mechanisms of dialogue avoid "tough questions", the strategic trust between Southeast Asia and China is resting on shaky grounds.

For one thing, China's rapid naval modernization, its aggressive and seemingly insatiable drive for energy sources, and its seemingly tough stance when it comes territorial disputes, makes it harder to dissuade regional fears in the long run.

For another, the political and economic gap within Southeast Asia, and the differing strategic interests of its key member states in handling China, has made it hard for ASEAN to present a unified front in assisting its member states to deal with the South China Sea dispute.

More importantly however, Southeast Asian countries need to understand China's fear that compromising on the South China Sea may send the wrong signal to Taiwan and Tibet, while its growing energy demands and huge dependence on the Malacca Strait necessitates the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to consider military options to secure them.

China on the other hand also needs to understand why using military force in any fashion cannot be peacefully understood by Southeast Asia.

And why diplomatic and economic "charm offensive" alone will not suffice to sustain long-term strategic trust in a growing region where nationalism and sovereignty remains a political trump card.

This of course is easier said than done. But avoiding the tough questions simply means postponing the inevitable.

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