

Strategic Uncertainty and the Regional Security Order in East Asia

Written by Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Frans Paul van der Putten

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As rivalry between the United States and China (PRC) continues to intensify, regional security in East Asia is increasingly interconnected with global stability. East Asia, with various ongoing security issues that date back to the Cold War, is the region where geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing primarily manifests itself. The regional security order is therefore a matter of global consequence.

Two major uncertainties are shaping the regional order in East Asia. The first is uncertainty regarding the rise of China: Will it continue and, if so, how will this affect the relations between the PRC and other actors? The second is uncertainty about the future role of the United States: Will America continue to be a leading security actor in East Asia, and if so, what will this mean for the way in which Sino-US rivalry will play out? The strategic behaviour of all countries in the region, including the US and China themselves, is fundamentally influenced by these two major uncertainties.

Below we outline the sources of, responses to, and the implications of these two uncertainties for the evolving regional security order. What are current trends, and what is the outlook for the short to mid-term future? Geographically, this article defines East Asia as including the sub regions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. The article narrows the analysis further, by focusing primarily on those states that have supply lines and/or territorial interests in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS). It does so, because regional worries about China are, at present, largely related to the PRC's maritime security behaviour.

Sources of Strategic uncertainty in East Asia

Two fundamental uncertainties associated, on the one hand, with the US security engagement in East Asia in the long term, and, on the other, with China's future rise and use of its growing power, are underlying more specific short-to mid-term anxieties. These have become salient over the past five years.

The first dimension of regional anxieties is related to China's maritime security objectives. PRC's perceived assertiveness since 2010 in pressing its territorial claims in the ECS and SCS, as well as its naval modernisation, are the direct triggers of these uncertainties. Implicit or explicit concerns about PRC's aspirations for regional maritime domination have been expressed by the US and by many Asian nations. These include, most notably, Japan and Southeast Asia's maritime states, especially those having territorial disputes with China such as the Philippines and Vietnam, but also non-claimants such as Indonesia. The present China-associated anxieties appear to have become more pronounced as the US under Barack Obama embarked in 2012 on a policy of 'strategic rebalance' to Asia. Questions about Washington's ability to sustain its renewed engagement amid economic and fiscal difficulties, and in the context of China's growing economic, political and security role, have become increasingly scrutinised in various Asian capitals (Atanassova-Cornelis and van der Putten, 2014).

At the same time, the US' own uncertainties about its ability to defend allies and friends in East Asia have become more explicit as Chinese power has grown. American anxieties about China are now increasingly focused on the PRC's naval power and, in particular, its behaviour in the East China and South China Seas. This may be sending a

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signal to Asian states that one of the most critical aspects of the US security engagement in the region – namely, its ability to ensure the stability of Asia’s shipping lanes – is now being questioned. This, in turn, could pose a major challenge to the continuity of the US-led regional alliance structure altogether.

A second dimension of regional anxieties concerns US-China relations. On the one hand, Asian countries are worried about a more pronounced great power struggle, as this might necessitate ‘choosing sides’, i.e. siding with either Washington or Beijing. For the smaller Southeast Asian nations in particular, this would have detrimental implications for their economic development and nation-building. Most of these nations are economically dependent on the PRC, but rely on the US for security protection against the prospect of a more hostile China. On the other hand, both major powers such as Japan and the smaller members of ASEAN, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations, are concerned that Washington might decide to accommodate Beijing and strike some kind of a deal for jointly leading the region. This is a relatively recent and new concern directly related to regional perceptions of American decline in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. While countries in East Asia favour positive Sino-US relations for maintaining regional stability, they are wary of a joint US–China leadership that may disregard the voices and interests of the region’s other players (Van der Putten and Atanassova-Cornelis, 2014).

The final dimension of regional anxieties is related to specific US and Chinese concerns about possible exclusion from regional (ASEAN-led) multilateral arrangements. Washington is worried about how Asian states may choose to respond to Beijing’s growing economic and diplomatic influence, especially to China’s support for *exclusive* regionalism centred on ASEAN+3 (see, Van der Putten, 2013). PRC’s recent initiatives, notably the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and China’s (Maritime) Silk Road initiative, contribute to more broad American anxieties about regional exclusion. As for China, concerns about ‘strategic encirclement’ by the US under the rebalance appear to be dominant in the PRC. At the same time, worries about possible shifts in ASEAN’s China strategy, as well as ASEAN’s relevance as a driver of Asian institution building, are becoming more palpable. Indeed, ASEAN is growing increasingly divided due to the SCS disputes, with some of its members tilting towards the US. Beijing fears that this may affect the organisation’s traditional policy of non-alignment, which, in turn, could undermine ASEAN’s centrality in regional multilateralism. The net result could be a strengthening of US-led bilateral and multilateral (e.g., the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, TPP) arrangements in East Asia, or a more dominant American role in defining ASEAN agendas, and hence China’s regional isolation.

Regional Responses to Strategic Uncertainty in East Asia

Regional responses to strategic uncertainty have been broadly situated at three levels: the individual, the bilateral and the multilateral. While these dimensions are interrelated, for the purposes of clarity the discussion below will examine them separately.

At the individual level, and largely in the domain of maritime security, a common response includes Asian states’ increased emphasis on defence self-reliance through military modernisation. In the case of Japan, this has included a growing defence budget under the Abe Shinzo administration (2012-present), acquisition of capabilities to deal with potential ECS contingencies, and an overall expansion of Japan’s security role in terms of both geographical focus and security missions. In Southeast Asia, the trend of rising military expenditure and naval build up has accelerated over the past five years. Regional countries in the SCS region appear to be countering, in particular, China’s maritime advances there. As observed by Bitzinger (2015), the acquisition of previously lacking military hardware, such as longer-range warships, submarine fleets and vessels for expeditionary warfare, has significantly increased Southeast Asian navies’ power-projection capabilities and ability to safeguard territorial interests, while raising the risk of more ‘devastating’ potential military clashes.

The developments examined above have largely been a response to regional fears of Chinese maritime domination in the ECS and SCS, as well as to uncertainties associated with the US ability to deter or restrain a more assertive China. The PRC, for its part, has sought to minimise the risk of containment (by America and its allies) and increase Chinese freedom of action, especially at sea, by continuing with its own military modernisation programme with an emphasis on naval capabilities.

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At the bilateral level, a noticeable trend over the past five years has been the pursuit of diversification strategies by Asian states (as well as of the US itself), especially by those having (or concerned about) territorial disputes with China. This has included establishing new, and reinforcing existing, strategic (or comprehensive) partnerships with other East Asian countries. These bilateral engagements have ranged from holding high-level summits and defence talks, to military exchanges and exercises, and the signing of economic agreements. Some of the most recent developments in 2015 include the first joint naval drills in the SCS between Japan and the Philippines, the joint search and rescue exercises of the Japanese and Vietnamese coast guards, and the Japan-Malaysia agreement for raising the bilateral relations to the level of a strategic partnership. Most of these engagements have been pursued in tandem with Asian countries' enhancement of their respective ties with the US. The latter includes both traditional military alliances, notably US-Japan and US-Philippines alliances, and non-allied partnerships such as the new strategic partnerships (signed under Obama) with Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia, respectively.

These limited alignments between East Asian countries do not jeopardise their respective alliances/partnerships with Washington, and do not directly target Beijing either. Smaller and middle powers thus seek to deal with strategic uncertainties by increasing their strategic autonomy (see, Ciorciari, 2009), and by minimising their reliance on America, as well as their vulnerability in case of US 'abandonment' or a Sino-US strategic accommodation.

At the multilateral level, various regional platforms for security cooperation co-exist. Some of these are institutionalised and based on ASEAN. These include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Others are not linked to a multilateral organisation, such as the annual Shangri-La Dialogue. The main regional multilateral mechanisms bring together China, the US, and most regional states including the Southeast Asian countries, Japan and South Korea. Some major extra-regional actors besides the US are also involved, such as India and Russia. As mentioned above, both Washington and Beijing worry that they might become marginalized in regional multilateral organisations. In response to China's growing regional and global influence, the US under the Obama administration invested much diplomatic capital in joining and supporting these multilateral initiatives. For its part, China kept up an active approach to these platforms. Regional multilateralism in the security domain thus increased as a result of geopolitical competition between the US and China. At the same time, the ability of these regional mechanisms to prevent and/or manage a potential Sino-US conflict remains limited.

Impact of Current Trends on the Regional Order in the Short to Mid-term Future

While the previously mentioned diversification strategies may be primarily associated with China-related anxieties, where most of the partnerships are forged between countries having maritime concerns about the PRC, they do also address Asian states' uncertainties about possible US disengagement from the region and hence their search for alternative strategic options. The effects of strategic uncertainty on the regional order can be seen from two perspectives. On the one hand, strategic uncertainty between and about the US and China precludes the establishment of a stable regional order. Since East Asian perceptions of the strengths and intentions of China and the US are continuously changing, many regional actors are in a constant mode of assessing and potentially adjusting their foreign policies in response to these perceptions. As a result, the regional security order remains rather fluid, with a certain degree of unpredictability about the behaviour of most actors.

On the other hand, this fluid regional order appears capable – to some extent – of adapting to strategic uncertainty. This has resulted in the emergence of a hybrid multilateral system of interconnected regional institutions for communication and coordination on security issues. This hybrid system tends to mitigate tensions between the US and China. It also enables Washington to remain actively involved in regional diplomacy in the longer term, while stimulating Beijing to adopt regional norms in its behaviour towards its neighbours. According to Alice Ba, 'however contested, there remains a strong consensus that institutions serve a long-term interest in creating a community of relations in which all might find appropriate roles' (Ba, 2014, p.207). Still, for now working towards a regional community that as yet remains immature can only partially offset existing strategic uncertainty. Therefore, various other strategies to deal with uncertainty, including formal alliances, flexible partnerships, and the build-up of military power, will most likely continue to co-exist in the foreseeable future.

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Conclusion

What the future roles of China and the United States will constitute the two fundamental uncertainties that shape the regional security order in East Asia. These two uncertainties may well remain in the coming decades. As China's rise as a major power continues it will become increasingly clear how the PRC intends to use its growing power both at the regional level in East Asia and globally. At the same time, the international repercussions of potential economic or political disruptions within China, and the unpredictability thereof, will keep increasing. Regarding the United States, its resilience in terms of playing its role as off-shore balancer in East Asia will remain equally unpredictable. Nevertheless, if the economic and military gap between China and the US keeps decreasing, Washington will probably have to move beyond the alliance framework and embrace new approaches of providing reassurance to Asian countries in order to demonstrate its capacity and willingness to counterbalance China (see, Van der Putten, 2011). Ultimately, the strategic behaviour of the countries in East Asia with major maritime interests will continue to be defined by how they perceive these two major uncertainties.

Notes

NB: The authors of this article are editors of *Changing Security Dynamics in East Asia: A post-US regional order in the making?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

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