

## U.S. REFOCUSING ON EAST ASIA

### America faces familiar dilemmas in region

#### Regional allies will blow hot and cold in ties with Washington, even as they worry about China

By Evelyn Goh, For The Straits Times

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US Marines and their Philippine counterparts 'storming' a beach during their annual joint military exercise north-west of Manila, Philippines, last month. The mock assault took place near a South China Sea shoal disputed by China and the Philippines. -- PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

NOVEMBER saw three significant developments in the East Asian security landscape: The US launched a 'new generation' of comprehensive regional trade talks with the Trans-Pacific Partnership; Australia agreed to provide bases for American troops in Darwin; and the East Asia Summit was expanded to include the US and Russia and broached sensitive security issues like territorial conflicts in the South China Sea.

The notion of a 'US return to Asia' - currently popular in China - is misplaced, because the US never left. A more helpful reading may be - as Professor Kishore Mahbubani (dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy) suggests - that a new 'great game' has commenced in the region. While this game is not necessarily new, there is certainly a resumption of great power competition because of the Obama administration refocusing on East Asia.

But this region is not merely a chessboard upon which the US and China play out their inevitable power struggle. The US refocusing is crucially facilitated by the active policies and preferences of East Asian states themselves.

First, there has been a coincidence of threat perceptions in the US and key South-east Asian states in the South China Sea.

In explaining its strategic reassertion in East Asia, the Obama administration has been explicit about its concerns over China's stance on maritime security. These American worries have been brewing over the last two years, since the Impeccable incident in March 2009, when Chinese vessels confronted the US surveillance ship in the South China Sea. Throughout 2009 and last year, a string of naval commanders and other experts testified to China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea and South-east Asia to various congressional committees.

This heightened attention and growing impatience in the US coincided with growing concern among some Asean states about difficulties in discussing with China a code of conduct in the South China Sea, and reports of Chinese references to the South China Sea as an area of 'core national interest'.

Since then, there have been other causes for concern: The stand-off in the East China Sea after a Chinese fishing boat collided with Japanese Coast Guard vessels in October last year, the revelation of new Chinese submarine and naval facilities on Hainan island in February, the sea trials of China's first aircraft carrier in April,

and Chinese patrol boats cutting the cables of Vietnamese and Filipino survey ships in the South China Sea.

Against this background, South-east Asian states have turned to the US for demonstrations of military commitment to and cooperation with partners in the region. Philippines President Benigno Aquino and his defence minister have publicly sought US help to stand up against China, and have secured two large second-hand US Coast Guard ships for their aged naval fleet.

Annual military exercises held with US forces have also been used to send messages: This year, the Filipino and US forces chose to locate their joint exercises, including live fire drills and amphibious landings, in and around Palawan, on the edge of the South China Sea.

Vietnam, which has conducted bilateral exercises with the US since 2003, persisted with the scheduled exercise in July that involved two US guided missile destroyers, in the midst of tensions with China.

This year, the longstanding Malaysia-US bilateral exercises involved a US attack submarine, and Malaysia joined the multilateral Cobra Gold exercises for the first time. Singapore has agreed to base new US littoral combat ships suitable for rapid response to low-intensity conflict operations.

Elsewhere in the region, domestic politics and external threats have caused key allies to pull closer to the US, even as they feel the strain of accommodating Chinese sensitivities.

In Australia, against intensifying domestic debate about a strategic realignment between the US and China epitomised by Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal for an 'Asia-Pacific community' led by a concert of great powers, Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government appears to have made a decisive choice in favour of strengthening the US alliance on strategic, historic and ideological grounds.

Japan's fundamental security reliance on the US is even more persistent. Japanese threat perceptions of China rose markedly after last October, reinforcing domestic proponents who are convinced that China has already overtaken Japan to become the leading regional great power. They argue that Japan can deter potential Chinese adventurism only by strengthening the US alliance. The Noda government's decision to seek membership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership despite serious domestic opposition indicates the priority placed on the US relationship.

After the alleged North Korean sinking of the Cheonan warship followed by the shelling of Yeonpyeong island last year, South Korean President Lee Myung Bak too adopted an increasingly explicit pro-US stance. He sent troops to Afghanistan and spent significant political capital on the bilateral South Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, against domestic criticism that this unnecessarily antagonises Beijing, which is worried about an indefinite US presence even on a reunified Korean peninsula.

It is important, therefore, to note that the US refocusing on East Asia is 'by invitation'. It is not, as many Chinese analysts are wont to portray, unilateral imposition. The fact of the matter is that Washington has significant allies and supporters in the region willing to facilitate and legitimise its leadership role in the Asia-Pacific. And China's behaviour sometimes contributes to the reasons for these states' pro-US choices.

Washington and Beijing are also playing somewhat different strategic 'games'. As the incumbent superpower with established alliances that are by definition exclusive, the US does not need regional consensus, just enough supporters and allies to make credible its forward military presence and leadership.

In contrast, China has bound itself to a model of 'peaceful rise' through confidence-building, strategic reassurance and mutual benefit, which obliges it to play the inclusive institutional game and leaves it open to being blocked by neighbours who watch and worry about its every act. For China, the problem is an apparent misconception that 20 years of avowed 'peaceful rise' regional diplomacy and economic interdependence have assuaged its neighbours' threat perceptions altogether. Yet, the accrual of so-called 'soft' power does not take away the edge when blunt instruments of 'hard' power are nevertheless wielded.

For East Asian states that are US allies and security partners, the myth of 'hedging' remains dangerous. For formal allies especially, their strategic choice has already been made in aligning with the US, and the belief that they can nevertheless avoid a security dilemma with China is perhaps naive.

For the US, the challenge is to understand that the current climate will not last, because East Asian states remain convinced that they can have their great power cake and eat it too, and because governments change. Regional allies and partners will blow hot and cold on Washington - will US commitment then wane?

These are familiar dilemmas, and they call to mind the old adage that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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