

ASEAN's blind spot against China

By Osmund Kwong Kin Ming, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, MPhil.

Contrary to the consensus among sinophone circles, the central thesis of Richard J. Heydarian's latest work 'Asia's New Battlefield' is that China's expansionist ambitions persisted throughout the modern era. Though there had been a surplus of commentaries on the political quagmire in South-China Sea, little attention was spared for voices from the Southeast Asia (SEA), let alone analysis of regional politics from a national diplomatic perspective.

In the first half of his book, the author harkened back to China's rise in power and its evolving relationship with America since the eve of Cold war, and, saw a Communist China striving to grow its presences and control in the South Sea since then. Its attempts were less explicit only because Beijing was wary of the regional reaction and the United States Seventh Fleet, thus adopting different approaches to express its ambitions in accordance to its comparative strength.

Already in the 1970s, China had been preparing for strategic expansion in the South China Sea by taking the critical atolls from the then Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). In 1974, China clashed against South Vietnam in the Battle of the Paracel Islands. Afterwards, Beijing kept a low profile for a while and maintained stable relationships with Indonesia and the Philippines. Again in 1988, China took several strategic atolls in Spratly Island from Vietnam, such as the Fiery Cross Reef after the Johnson South Reef Skirmish.

Heydarian argued that these smash-and-grabs were in fact meticulously planned beforehand and carried out with perfect timing: while the Battle of the Paracel Islands was sounded when the United States was desperate to pull out of Vietnam, Johnson South Reef Skirmish erupted when Communist Vietnam was isolated by ASEAN and the West and the West warming up with China. After the conclusion of Cold War, when the States evacuated from Philippines, the Chinese Navy sprang into action around the Spratly Islands, extending their control to Mischief Reef after clashing a few skirmishes. What is happening now, Heydarian argued, is that China wanes into a new phase of expansionism in the South China Sea while the United States was encumbered in its War on Terror.

Philippines, with its numerous atolls and vast maritime borders, is naturally a flashpoint in the South Sea Dispute. Where there were conflicts between China and the Philippines, they were relatively sporadic from the 1970s to the 2010s and Sino-Philippine relations often remained undisrupted. Bilateral trade and military aid from China to the Philippines were climbing and the leaders of both countries conducted regular visits with each other. Reflecting Beijing's success in its charm offensive: in 2005, the former Chinese president Hu Jintao received a warm welcoming in his visit to the Philippines and established 'a strategic and cooperative relationship for peace and development' in the form of a multi-billion economic and military aid.

In the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Standoff, the Philippines backed down after capturing Chinese fishing vessel. Their retreat allowed China to capture the Shoal and its surrounding waterways and marked an abrupt turn in Sino-Philippines relations. Since then, China had devoted considerable resource in strengthening its grasp on maritime sovereignty: either by building artificial islands or by expanding its navy. The Philippines had exhausted all peaceful means of resolution yet bilateral talks nor multilateral diplomacy can halt China's expansion. This pushed the Aquino administration to bring the dispute to the International Court of Arbitration and to warm up to Obama's Asia Pivot policy.

This abrupt deterioration of Sino-Philippines interaction reflected a paradigm shift in the contemporary Chinese diplomacy: turning from Deng's policy of 'keeping a low profile', to Xi's bold attempt of 'making a difference'. From late 20th Century to early 21st Century, Beijing's diplomatic strategy had been focusing on trade and regional development while refraining from confrontational issues such territorial disputes, and, from exerting its influence in the disputed territories. This had created an illusion for the nearby countries and the United States, that, China would obey the existing international order and play by their books. With Xi's aggressive strategic expansion, all those would be bygone in both East Asia and West Pacific.

Facing an increasingly aggressive China, as a platform to resolve regional issues in SEA, ASEAN should have been a united front or at least able to formulate a coherent set of sino-specific diplomacy. However, the decision-making process and principles ASEAN adopted (the ASEAN Way), one that extol the virtues of extreme consensus, presents a critical weakness of the organization against a superpower.

When China influences a few ASEAN countries (Cambodia and Laos for instance) via economic investment or military aid, it may prevent the ASEAN from forming any opposing stances against the interest of China. Having doubts on the value of consensus on matters such as national security, [Professor Danny Quah](#) of the LSE and Heydarian suggested that those sharing a common interest and demand in the South China Sea dispute should form their own united stance outside of the ASEAN. They should also align themselves with non-SEA countries that share the same interest, such as Japan, Australia and the United States to begin with. Ranging from joint exercise of the freedom of navigation to a united contingency response mechanism, they should limit and counter-balance China's influence by further institutionalizing regional order in South China Sea based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

What further actions would China take in Southeast Asia and what would be the impact of such actions? In December 2016, Bloomberg published an article titled 'China Is Transforming Southeast Asia Faster Than Ever' which stated that China's relationship with Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar is growing ever more intimate and would eventually be integrated into China's supply chain. China had also imported more and more from these Southeast Asian countries. Their growing dependence on China would only threaten their sovereignty, increasing Chinese de facto influence in ASEAN.

However, the only thing that will not change is that power balance in international relations is always changing. In August 2016, a report from Reuters titled "[As Obama heads to Laos, signs of a tilt away from China](#)" stated that Laos was getting closer with Vietnam, an old rival of China in territorial disputes and relatively pro-United States. In fact, Vietnam exerted a greater influence on Laos than Beijing and the new leadership of Laos was ready to move away from China.

On top of that, in Indonesia, the most populated country within the region, its president Joko Widodo has been tough on Chinese fishing vessels operating in Indonesian waters, stating that there would be no compromise to the sovereignty of Indonesia and repudiated Beijing's claim on the Indonesian Islands (that these waters has traditionally been frequented by Chinese Fishermen. With Trump's presidency, comes a tougher stance against China from Washington. A Forbes article titled "[What Trump's Presidency Will Mean For Southeast Asia In 2017](#)" in December quoted Thai Scholar Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak keen observation, that unlike the Asia Pivot by the Obama administration that

came with all bark but little bite, Trump's return to SEA will pack a tougher punch. It is too early for Beijing to sleep safe and sound with Xi's Chinese Dream.

The 2017 East Asian Development Network (EADN) Policy Discussion Series consists of articles and short essays on policy analysis, and updates related to the geopolitics of Asia and the "Belt and Road Initiative". It aims to stimulate and contribute to the discussion in the region. The articles are written by young scholars from East Asia. More articles can be found [here](#).