

Calming the waters in South China Sea

MOHAMED JAWHAR HASSAN



China's military exercise in the South China Sea, like this drill carried out by the South China Sea Fleet of the People's Liberation Army late last month, has heightened apprehensions over China's growing military clout. — AP picture

WHEN the Cambodian conflict was winding down in the 1980s and the Cold War was ebbing, it was fashionable for analysts to zoom in on the South China Sea as the next "flashpoint" in Southeast Asia. The military industrial complex, apprehensive about declining demand and shrinking markets for weapons of war, joined in ratcheting up the hype.

Fortunately for the region, that scenario did not come to pass despite the occasional tense moments and incidents such as Mischief Reef in 1995. Asean and China instead signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 aimed at reducing the potential for conflict and enhancing the prospects for peace.

The declaration, underpinned by common political resolve to develop friendly relations for mutual benefit, was successful in keeping the South China Sea peaceful and safe for the region and the world despite the continuing disputes over territory.

This relatively peaceful regime, however, is threatening to unravel. The South China Sea indeed looks more like becoming a flashpoint now. Various developments in recent years have converged to spike tensions in the area.

The immediate triggers appear to be Chinese and Vietnamese attempts to assert their claims more vigorously; concessions for exploration awarded by Vietnam to American oil companies in contested waters; and the Chinese navy's attempts to discourage United States surveillance in the area and monitoring of its submarine base on Hainan Island.

China's declaration of the South China Sea as a "core interest" and the US' declaration of the area as of "national interest" have further sharpened tensions, as have US calls for multilateralisation of the process for resolving the disputes at the recent Asean Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Hanoi.

These developments are taking place against a strategic backdrop of increased rivalry among major powers that has not been conducive to regional stability. Apprehensions regarding China's growing military clout and alleged US attempts to constrain China through strengthening defence ties with some countries neighbouring China have increased distrust and tensions.

The latest development has been China's military exercise in the South China Sea at the end of last month. Its scale was unprecedented, though it pales in comparison with the earlier exercise against North Korea that the US launched with South Korea. The exercise alarmed China because it was held in her northern vicinity.

It is difficult to point fingers at who was initially responsible for the heightened tensions. Each side blames the other and justifies its actions as necessary to protect its legitimate interests and as in accord with international law.

Some of the claimant states in Southeast Asia may understandably perceive aspects of the latest developments as not entirely unfavourable to their interests. For Asean as a whole as well as the global community, however, they should be a matter of grave concern.

A South China Sea that becomes an arena for major power contest and assertive behaviour on the part of claimants is not in the larger interest of any country. Increased militarisation in an area of strategic waterways and conflicting claims can lead to serious intended or unintended consequences.

Asean should reclaim the initiative for moderating the situation and restoring calm. Member states can undertake various initiatives individually and collectively. An urgent task would be to strengthen commitment towards observance of undertakings in the Declaration of Conduct that all parties including China signed in 2002.

This includes an undertaking to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes..." All claimants must be persuaded to comply with their responsibility to not build structures, grant concessions to foreign firms or undertake other activity in disputed territories that can be deemed as provocative and oblige others to respond.

Because the Declaration is not legally binding and lacks teeth, the political and diplomatic pressure for compliance should be high. Countries whose actions risk aggravation should be held accountable and sternly taken to task with minimum diplomatic fudging.

China has a legitimate right to develop its military capabilities to fulfil its perceived needs, like any other country. It is also not the only one in the region that is doing so. But Beijing would only ignite latent fears among its Southeast Asian neighbours if it raises its military profile in the area excessively and flexes its growing military muscle.

The US is a welcome and constructive player in the region's security. But Washington must guard against becoming too exuberant and intrusive in the region's affairs, and contribute to the problem rather than the solution. It will not be easy for a superpower that carries a big stick to speak and tread softly.

Finally, the ARF should become less a platform for some members to harangue each other and more the instrument it was intended for: to build trust, foster cooperation and facilitate resolution of conflicts.

The writer is chairman of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia. The views are his own