



KEEPING THE BALANCE: U.S. SECURITY POLICY IN ASIA

by Felix K. Chang

There is no lack of security challenges around the world. Of them, probably the most pressing challenge for the United States is how to respond to the threat posed by international terrorist organizations. In Asia, their ability to exact heavy tolls was amply demonstrated in the resurgence of the Islamic insurgency in the southern Philippines and the attacks in Mumbai last year. Certainly, Washington should continue to use its intelligence assets and work with governments facing the same challenge to forestall future terrorist acts.

In Asia, problems of security arise from not only non-state actors, but also states themselves. Even though major international conflict has been avoided since the 1970s, tensions remain. The January 2009 North Korean saber-rattling that led South Korea to put its military on high alert is a reminder of the continued potential for such conflict. Thus, as Washington deliberates over what measures it wants to take in Asia to enhance the United States' safety, it should begin by considering how its role fits in a region where the balance of power is being reshaped, as the economic and military fortunes of the region's countries shift.

SHIFTING SANDS OF POWER

The last decade has witnessed significant changes in the relative power of many Asian countries. The most notable of these have been China and India, whose economic and military capacities have grown far faster than those of their neighbors. China's economy, ranked seventh in the world in the late 1990s, rose to third within a decade. That economic expansion has enabled Beijing to accelerate the rate of its military modernization by funding improved training and acquisition of new and more sophisticated weapons. Indeed, two months ago it revealed that it is seriously considering the development and deployment of its first aircraft carrier. It has also begun to probe its seaward boundaries, as evidenced by the increased number of intrusions into Japanese airspace and waters. And late last month, the Chinese navy embarked on its first operational mission outside the Pacific Ocean when it sent two destroyers and a supply ship to escort merchant ships in the Gulf of Aden.

While China's military strength attracts more international attention, India's military has been growing stronger as well. Though stagnant for much of the 1990s, it has steadily upgraded its air and naval armaments since then. No doubt India's unease over Pakistan's instability and occasional belligerence has contributed to the build up. But India has also cast a wary eye on China, as it invests in its armed forces, continues its intelligence-gathering from Myanmar, and builds a new base on Hainan Island that gives its nuclear-powered submarines better access to the Malacca Strait. As a result, India has rushed to modernize its own forces. That can be seen in its willingness to pay a steep price to purchase a refit aircraft carrier from Russia to add to the one it is building domestically, and to lease a Russian-made Akula-class nuclear attack submarine, despite a deadly accident during its sea trials. Meanwhile, India's air force has improved its bases near China and reequipped them with new Su-30 fighters. Still, both China and India have risen peacefully as stronger regional powers, in spite of their long-held rivalries with their neighbors and each other.

Not all countries have become more muscular. While Japan launched four reconnaissance satellites and pursued research and development on a theater ballistic missile system alongside the United States in the first half of this decade, its conventional forces have remained largely unchanged since the 1990s. The one exception has been its navy, which despite fairly constant force level has benefited from a regular construction cycle that has kept its fleet modern. South Korea has also had a gradual pace of modernization, which stalled temporarily in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. But since its recovery, it has resumed purchases of strike aircraft and warships, enabling it to keep pace with Japan. More recently, Seoul has moved to strengthen its ties with Beijing, as it looks forward to the day when North Korea's regime falls and it may share a common border with China.

But not all have seen their relations with China warm. Indeed, China has employed its newfound economic clout with major

arms exporting countries to halt or hinder military sales to Taiwan. Hence, Taiwan's qualitative edge over China has been eroded substantially, putting into question whether it can resist China without external assistance. Countries in Southeast Asia have also been hard pressed to match the military development of either China or India. Only a handful have been able to undertake broad modernization programs across air, naval, and ground forces, like that embodied by Singapore's Third Generation forces. While Malaysia has made selective improvements in only its air force and navy, it has fared better than many others.

Internal turmoil and budgetary constraints have dogged such Southeast Asian countries as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, leaving them with little to spare to bolster their external defenses. In the extreme, the Philippines has been wholly absorbed with the internal threats posed by insurgents in its southern islands and has practically no external defense capability. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to envision ASEAN claimants militarily opposing China over a South China Sea dispute either singly or together. With the onset of a global recession, it is unlikely that they will be able to support upgrade programs that will reverse their declining power soon.

AGE OF OFFENSIVE WEAPONS

Since the early 1990s, weapons development has increasingly focused on offensive capabilities. They include long-range strike aircraft, submarines, and ballistic missile systems. Though they all can be used defensively, they are most effective in an offensive role to achieve surprise or penetrate enemy defenses. Long-range strike aircraft have been favored for their multi-role capability, especially as the costs to buy and maintain individual combat aircraft have climbed. Submarines are valued as less costly and more survivable alternatives to achieve sea control, due to their stealthy operation, than more vulnerable surface combatants that need expensive defenses to simply survive the modern naval battlefield. And with technological advances, some countries have come to view ballistic missiles as not only reliable weapons with few countermeasures, but also increasingly inexpensive systems that can be deployed in quantity.

However, as more offensive weapons are deployed in Asia, the weapons themselves may become more vulnerable to offensive action. Since countries have an incentive to use weapons before they can be destroyed, that could create a destabilizing dynamic in a crisis. Hence, the proliferation of these weapons in Asia requires that governments pay closer attention to the stability of regional power balances so that miscalculations do not lead to conflict.

Strike aircraft. A number of Asian countries have bought strike aircraft along with aerial refueling tankers to extend their range. China's air force, which began its modernization in earnest during the 1990s, has since purchased 76 Su-27 fighters from Russia and produced another 120 under license as the J-11. It has also procured 100 Russian-made Su-30 fighters and is negotiating for the carrier-capable Su-33. Domestically, it designed and now manufactures the J-10, of which as many as 100 have been delivered so far. These were augmented with an order for eight Il-78 tankers in 2005. While India's modernization drive has a more gradual trajectory, it is no less ambitious. Its air force acquired 48 Su-30s in the 1990s and ordered 40 more in 2007; and its industry has a license to build 140 further aircraft at a rate of ten per year. Supporting these, India already fields six Il-78 tankers. Other Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam have also adopted small numbers of Su-27 and Su-30 fighters as their frontline strike aircraft.

Meanwhile, both Singapore and South Korea have been procuring variants of the F-15 fighter. South Korea already fields 40 such aircraft and Singapore plans on as many as 20 planes to bridge its air force requirements until the F-35 fighter is ready. Singapore also operates four KC-135 and five KC-130 aerial refueling tankers. Japan has long used the F-15 in its air superiority configuration and originally acquired over 200 aircraft, of which 150 are still in service. But Japan is now considering the F-22, Rafale, and Typhoon as possible replacements for its aging fleet of 70 F-4 fighters. All three planes have advanced strike capabilities. But the F-22 has superior stealth characteristics that add to its offensive capability. At the same time, Tokyo continues to procure Japanese-made F-2 fighters and will soon field four KC-767 tankers.

Submarines. Most Asian countries have eagerly sought submarines. China and India have had the most ambitious submarine acquisition programs, encompassing both diesel-electric and nuclear-powered boats. Over the last fifteen years, China's navy has procured from Russia 12 Kilo-class submarines and domestically built 13 Song-class and over a dozen Ming-class submarines to upgrade its fleet of diesel-electric submarines. Moreover, it recently commissioned its first Yuan-class boat that is thought to possess an air-independent propulsion (AIP) system, which extends the time a diesel-electric submarine can operate underwater from days to weeks. Even more potent are China's new Shang-class nuclear attack submarines that will likely replace the poorly performing Han-class boats. Combined with a new base to house them on Hainan Island, they will give the Chinese navy greater operational flexibility.

On the other side of the Malacca Strait, the Indian navy has been busy. It currently has multiple aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes, and submarines in various stages of construction. These include six French-designed Scorpene-class diesel-electric submarines, which will be equipped with AIP systems. But even before they are completed, India has requested proposals for a following class of six submarines. Eventually the new Scorpenes will join the ten Kilo-class and four Type 209 boats it already has in service. India has also leased an Akula-class submarine from Russia with the option for another, even as it continues to fund its own nuclear attack submarine program. To accommodate such growth, the Indian navy constructed a large base at Karwar, which opened in 2005, and is building another one south of Vishakhapatnam.

In the meantime, other Asian countries have also invested in diesel-electric submarines with AIP technology. South Korea was

the first to commission such a boat in its KSS-2 class, which is patterned on the German-made Type 214. South Korea plans on building at least three of this class before further submarines are built to an indigenous KSS-3 design. These will add to its existing nine Chang Bogo-class boats. Rather than a German-designed AIP system, Japan and Singapore chose to pursue a Swedish one. Japan's naval forces first tested Sweden's Stirling AIP system aboard a Harushio-class submarine in 2001, and have now begun to procure the new Soryu-class based on that configuration; the first Soryu-class boat will join Japan's 16-strong submarine fleet in 2009. Singapore took a more direct route. It acquired four Challenger-class submarines from Sweden in the 1990s and then ordered two Vastergotland-class submarines, which will be refit with Stirling AIP systems, in 2005.

Despite their financial constraints, Malaysia and Indonesia have also invested in submarines. Malaysia ordered two Scorpene submarines with an option to upgrade them with AIP systems. But Indonesia, which operates two older Type 206 boats, has been repeatedly frustrated from further purchases for lack of resources. Possibly even worse off is Taiwan. It has been unable to replace its aging Hai Lung-class submarines with modern ones because of not only China's obstructions, but also American industry's inability to build them at a reasonable cost. Yet, for countries that have acquired modern submarines, they are generally able to sail farther with greater stealth and can be armed with both torpedoes and submarine-launched cruise missiles, making them powerful offensive platforms.

Ballistic missiles. Although its nuclear weapons program is most often in the international spotlight, North Korea is also developing ballistic missiles as delivery vehicles. It claims one medium-range ballistic missile, the No-dong-2, which can hit targets throughout Japan, and continues to pursue a longer range one, the Taepo-dong-2, that can reach as far as Alaska and Guam. Another country that has invested heavily in ballistic missile technology is China. It has manufactured and deployed an array of missiles with varying ranges. While most, including the new DF-31 and its submarine-launched variant JL-2, are intended to be part of its nuclear deterrent, other models have been designed with conventional warheads. These include over 500 DF-11 and 300 DF-15 solid-fueled mobile missiles. Many of these are sited against Taiwan. In 1995–1996, China fired six DF-15 missiles into the sea near Taipei in a not-so-subtle intimidation scheme. But given China's effective efforts to stymie Taiwan's acquisition of foreign military equipment, Taiwan has sought, as some suggest, to further advance its own cruise missile forces to hold Chinese countervalue targets at risk.

In South Asia, India has put its efforts into developing the Agni family of ballistic missiles, creating short, medium, and intermediate-range versions. But not all its missile development has gone smoothly; in January 2009 its test of its new BrahMos supersonic cruise missile failed. Still, the cumulative effective of all these offensive weapons has been to create an atmosphere where miscalculation in a crisis could escalate quickly.

BALANCING ACTS

American military power is essential to maintaining a stable balance of power in Asia. As such, U.S. security policy should focus on those areas where the power balance has changed the most. Across the Taiwan Strait, Washington should recognize that the balance is tilting more towards the mainland. Thus, Washington should seek to complete the sale of \$6.5 billion worth of weaponry that was approved in 2008 and, even more importantly, continue to provide security assurances to Taipei. For when the United States is added to the balance, neither side can be assured that an offensive action would completely disable the other's forces—something that Taiwan has genuine cause to fear if it stood alone. Fortunately, those assurances from Washington are now easier to provide, given that Taiwan's new president's attempts to mend fences with Beijing has thawed tensions between the two governments.

Meanwhile, the danger from miscalculation is ever present on the Korea Peninsula, where forces on both sides of the demilitarized zone are forward deployed. Of course, Washington should continue its efforts to end Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program through the six-party talks framework and maintain cross-border stability through its alliance with Seoul. But as South Korea strengthens its ties to China, even at the expense of those to the United States, Washington must be careful to keep the regional power balance from shifting quickly. While it need not view Seoul's bridge building as inherently threatening, Washington should seek to deepen its own ties with Tokyo, whose sometimes contentious relationship with Seoul, might lead it to grow concerned over not only a future unified Korea, but also one with strong ties to China. Hence, a healthy U.S.-Japan security relationship would reduce Tokyo's urge to rearm substantially, which could in turn destabilize Northeast Asia.

But possibly the most challenging balancing act will come in Southeast Asia, where many of the region's countries have been preoccupied with internal struggles and, as a consequence, the balance of power has shifted towards the external powers of China and India. The wisest course Washington could pursue would be to support the efforts of ASEAN, particularly Singapore, to draw other external powers like Japan and the United States into the region where they can play a stabilizing role to offset gains by both China and India. Doing so would not only put ASEAN security in better stead and reduce the pressure on the region's countries to choose sides, but also would prevent either China or India from becoming more powerful relative to each other and thus help keep the balance between the two rising regional powers.

In pursuing these courses, the United States must be careful not to be perceived as if it is engaged in a containment strategy against any country. To that end, Washington should have close and ongoing dialogues with Beijing and New Delhi to avoid clear provocations whenever possible. It is important to do so not only to reassure China and India, but also for American allies in the region who are cautious about such strategies because of their own ties to those countries. Australia, for example,

is a critical U.S. ally and is conscious of China's growing power. But Canberra may choose to accommodate Beijing on a number of issues, given its robust raw materials trade with China.

Still, the United States must deal with the spread of offensive weapons in Asia. To do so, it should seek to reduce their effectiveness, while reassuring Asian countries of its stabilizing intentions. Thus, the United States should harden its military facilities on Guam and Diego Garcia to ensure their operability even after a surprise attack, given their vulnerability to not only accurate ballistic missiles, but also submarine-launched cruise missiles. Airfields should be equipped with runway repair kits and ports should have ample repair and replenishment facilities. Similarly, the United States should maintain its access to Singapore's air and naval bases at Changi as well as acquire access to other bases in Southeast Asia.

To counter the burgeoning submarine threat, the United States has already begun to rebuild its anti-submarine warfare capabilities, which atrophied after the Cold War. In 2004 the U.S. Navy recognized the seriousness of the problem and created a new command, fittingly named the Fleet Anti-Submarine Warfare Command, in San Diego to tackle it. (In 2006 it merged that Command with the Naval Mine Warfare Command to form the Naval Mine and Anti-Submarine Warfare Command.) Leaving aside whether a new command structure was the best solution, the U.S. Navy certainly needs to acquire new sonar systems and better hone the skills of its acoustic specialists. But unlike the open ocean confrontation that the U.S. Navy prepared for during the Cold War, its new challenge will be to cope with diesel-electric in littoral waters, where they can operate more stealthily amid higher background clutter.

Finally, given the proliferation of ballistic missiles, Washington should push forward with the development and deployment of a theater ballistic missile defense system in partnership with Japan. Such a defensive capability is needed to cope with not only North Korea's ballistic missile capability, but also China's short and medium-range ballistic missiles that could be used against Taiwan and even U.S. warships, once better targeting systems and warhead seekers are created. In doing so, Washington would reduce the pressure Tokyo might feel to develop its own nuclear deterrent or ballistic missile capability as well as enable U.S. forces to better function as a stabilizing influence in Asia.

CONCLUSION

Dramatic power balance shifts can result in conflicts, and the proliferation of offensive weapons makes miscalculation more dangerous. So far, the international system has accommodated the simultaneous rise of both China and India as increasingly influential regional powers. Throughout this time, Beijing's primary concerns have revolved around minimizing domestic political instability and furthering its economic development. As such, it has sought a peaceful international environment and accepted American power in Asia. China's behavior within international bodies, like the World Trade Organization, suggests that it is willing to accept many international norms. But it remains to be seen, with a reversal of its economic fortunes, whether China's leadership consensus on peaceful integration in the world will weaken and its government will pursue a more belligerent nationalist policy to sustain its domestic political legitimacy.

Similarly, India has shown restraint in its international relations in the last decade, particularly with Pakistan. Despite border clashes in Kashmir and elsewhere, the New Delhi bombings in 2005, and the Mumbai attacks in 2008, India has not retaliated with force. Surely Pakistan's nuclear arsenal has contributed to India's caution. But also, like China, it has valued the economic benefit from a peaceful international environment. Still that may not always be the case. If Pakistan continues to harbor terrorists bent on harming it, territorial disputes with China heats up, or Beijing establishes a permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi's security concerns are bound to rise.

Fundamentally, Washington should seek ways to lessen the likelihood the power balance will dramatically shift among the countries of Asia and reduce the effect that the adoption of more offensive military technologies may have on the stability of the balance of power. But in the end, U.S. security policy choices cannot prevent local disputes, such as the one that emerged between Bangladesh and Myanmar over offshore oilfields in the Bay of Bengal in November 2008. Nor will they determine whether the balance of power can be maintained over the long run, as the economic and military trends of the region's countries will ultimately decide that. Nevertheless, the United States is in a position to help create an environment that encourages conflict-avoidance behavior in the region--preventing small crises from becoming big ones--and in doing so enhance its own safety.

There are, to be sure, plenty of other international problems that vie for Washington's attention, ranging from cyber security to Islamic militants in Afghanistan, but traditional dynamics of the international state system will not vanish, if overlooked. The United States should not avert its eyes to what lies ahead.

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