

China in view of the U.S.'s "return to the Asia-Pacific"

Description

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China is facing a complex situation. North Korea's announcement of a moratorium on its nuclear programme gives a certain degree of relief. Relations with Taiwan are also in a good place, albeit under the shadow of the U.S.'s recent weapons sales to Taipei. However, the dispute with Japan over the East China Sea is still worsening and strategic tensions with South Korea have surged after Seoul's plans to build a naval base on Jeju Island. Still, the most important site of instability and tension is the South China Sea.

With the area being rich in energy resources equivalent to 30% of China's current oil reserves, the U.S. views this sea as a key strategic position for retaining its leadership in Asia. Washington is advocating the creation of a multilateral mechanism to manage the tensions in which it could play a leadership role. China's hegemony would be prevented by a new web of allies that would include Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines. The U.S. has already announced that it is setting up a U.S. Marine base in Australia and one for patrol boats in Singapore. Military co-operation with Manila will be stepped up. As the Chinese analyst Ding Gang wrote in the *People's Daily* on January 16th, China does not deny that the U.S. has interests in the area, nor does it reject its participation in any talks, but it will not allow the U.S. to control the situation.

However, Washington's initiative just may work. After its announcement last November, some countries have felt backed in their historical claims against China's outsized pretensions in the South China Sea. In the January 9th edition of the *People's Daily* Yu Jinghao and Han Shuo noted that the U.S. strategy might entail the possibility of greater militarisation in a region that is already unstable. Can this be avoided?

China's reaction has come on three main fronts: economic, diplomatic and defensive. In the first, trade between China and other Asian countries reached \$965.2 billion in the first 11 months of 2011, a 21% rise over the previous year. China is the largest trading partner of ASEAN, with which it has signed a free-trade agreement that entered into force in 2010. Negotiations for a similar agreement with Japan and South Korea are currently under way. China's strategy is being deployed in defiance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a project that in the words of Yu Miaojie, a professor at the National Development School in Beijing, was devised to offer the U.S. a dominant position in the integration of the Asian-Pacific economies. Beijing's hope is that fostering economic interdependence may neutralise the countries in the region or tilt them

in its favour.

In the realm of diplomacy, in recent months there have been increasing initiatives that aim to revitalise the decline of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which has just reached the ten-year mark. On January 10th this year the signatory countries met in Beijing, but little is known about this event. Just a few weeks later the Philippines publicised its plan to explore for natural resources near the Spratly Islands. Dai Bingguo, the top strategic affairs officer in Waijiaobu, recently visited Myanmar, while Xi Jinping visited Vietnam and Thailand before travelling to the U.S. On January 13th Zhong Sheng, the spokesman for the political bureau at the *People's Daily*, stated that "it is time to resolve the disagreement on the South China Sea", advocating further consultations. In line with a more incisive diplomatic strategy, Beijing is actively mobilising in the region with the goal of smoothing over its differences with its neighbours.

In terms of defence matters, China is trying to combine efforts on several different fronts. Firstly, it is fostering contacts with the other militaries in the region. Military diplomacy is a highly active front that has yielded major successes like the joint patrols of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar along the Mekong River, where rifts also prevail. Secondly, China is reinforcing its defensive abilities. The launch of the *Varyag* aircraft carrier is part of the project to create a strong navy. The number of operational exercises along its coasts has risen. IHS Jane's report on the growth in China's defence budget predicts steep rises in around 2015. In February Japan's National Institute for Defence Studies published a report that warns about the strengthening of China's military power to guarantee the safety of its trade routes and to counterbalance the U.S.'s offensive in the region.

The core issue is whether or not Beijing is capable of giving up its plans to totally appropriate the South China Sea. In July 2010 Da Wei, a researcher at the Institute of Contemporary International Relations, part of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote an article in the newspaper *Global Times*, which is under the aegis of the official *People's Daily*, stating that "sometimes even major powers agree to give up contested territories". Including this territory in the realm of China's strategic interests under the same conditions as Tibet or Taiwan poses enormous difficulties for negotiations, however.

Asia-Pacific is the most vital economic zone in the world. According to the Asian Development Bank, by the middle of this century the region will account for half of the global economy. The total gross domestic product of the continent will rise from \$16 billion in 2010 to \$148 billion in 2050. The ties that China and the U.S. can forge in the Asia-Pacific are so important that they will condition the overall tenor of the two countries' relations. Depending on whether a balance based on a commitment to the region's development or to military antagonism wins out, so will the possibilities for or factors preventing a conflict between China and the U.S. develop.

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