THE ROLE OF ASEAN IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFLICT

DR. BRUCE GILLEY, PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

Address to Konrad Adenauer Foundation Seminar on ASEAN, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, March 25, 2019
MAIN POINTS

• The U.S. is withdrawing from leadership in the South China Sea
• The South China Sea is an Indo-Pacific vs. China conflict (not a U.S.-China conflict)
• China’s elite politics is unstable which raises the risks of external aggression
• ASEAN will never have a unified strategy
• ASEAN’s role is to maintain mutual support for individual deterrence initiatives
THE U.S. IS WITHDRAWING FROM LEADERSHIP IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

• Renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command (includes 7th Fleet) as Indo-Pacific Command in 2018 reflected a strategic shift to a broader and leaner approach to Asian security

• U.S. cannot risk war with China and is more concerned about Middle East

• U.S. is now withdrawing to a support role for Indo-Pacific countries
The U.S. is withdrawing from leadership in the South China Sea

- Trump administration has signaled shift in U.S. policy away from willingness to provide global public goods to allies and partners who do not provide their own fair share.
- General U.S. policy shift in last 10 years has been to prioritize avoidance of major war with China by setting priorities around core national security interests and downgrading “small stakes” disputes including South China Sea.
- “Indo-Pacific” terminology puts Indo on equal footing with Pacific in U.S. security strategy as regards China’s expansion (i.e. Maldives, Sri Lanka, Djibouti, Belt and Road, etc.).
- Indo-Pacific also signals a revival of Quadrilateral Cooperation (U.S., Japan, Australia, India) towards a democratic ring-fencing of Chinese authoritarianism to Southeast Asia.
- As a result, the South China Sea is now a lower priority concern.
- Asia Reassurance Initiative Act has centered on North Korea, Taiwan, and counter-terrorism.
China’s maritime and air power expansion in the South China Sea is primarily driven by great power attempts to establish a zone of primacy within its near-abroad. Economic activities are a means to this end.
FACTS ON THE GROUND

China has established three military and air bases in the South China sea through reclamation at Fiery Cross Reef (bottom) Mischief Reef (left) and Subi Reef (right). This has changed “facts on the ground” in Beijing’s favour while it “negotiates” with ASEAN.
FACTS ON THE GROUND

- China is increasingly using “blue-hulled” (Maritime Police) and “white-hulled” (Coast Guard) methods rather than “grey-hulled” (PLA Navy) in order to avoid drawing in other navies.

- The Tian Kun Ho dredging vessel is the largest in the world. It is 140-meters long and can dredge up the equivalent of 80 large (40 ft) containers of sand per hour.

- China has conducted chartered commercial air flights by Hainan Airlines and China Southern Airlines to all three new air strips as well as a regular service to Woody Island (Yongxing Island) (NOTE: REGULAR FLIGHTS ARE INCORRECTLY IDENTIFIED IN THE TALK AS GOING TO FIERY CROSS REEF) in order to emphasize their inclusion in domestic territory.

- China likely has plans for more airstrip reclamation islands in the South China Sea.

- China would like “negotiations” on a Code of Conduct to be completed after it has completed militarization/annexation of islands in the South China Sea.
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA IS AN INDO-PACIFIC VS. CHINA CONFLICT

- Deterring China’s Expansion
- Neutral
- Facilitating China’s Expansion

Taiwan
Pacific Islands recognizing Taiwan
Japan
Australia
South Korea
Vietnam
Philippines
Malaysia
India
Indonesia
Singapore
Thailand
Burma
Cambodia
Pacific Islands recognizing China
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA IS AN INDO-PACIFIC VS. CHINA CONFLICT

- Key Pacific Island countries that recognize Taiwan (denying China naval access in the Pacific) are: Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu.
- Indonesia has reinforced its runway and facilities at Natuna Island and asserted an EEZ with U.S. support.
- Key Pacific Island countries that recognize China (offering the threat of China naval access via China-built ports) include Papua New Guinea (port interests at Manus, Wewak, Kikori, and Vanimo) and Micronesia (port interest at Chuuk) (NOTE: CHUUK IS INCORRECTLY IDENTIFIED IN THE TALK AS IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS).
CHINA’S ELITE POLITICS IS UNSTABLE WHICH RAISES THE RISKS OF EXTERNAL AGGRESSION

2022 Succession Crisis

• Political elites try to force Xi Jinping to retire
• Xi tolerates PLA Navy’s harassment of Vietnam-U.S. joint exercises
ASEAN WILL NEVER HAVE A UNIFIED STRATEGY TOWARDS CHINA’S EXPANSION

Divergent interests, ideas, and identities

Weak states, internal challenges

Intra-ASEAN security tensions

Divergent doctrines and strategies
ASEAN’S ROLE IS TO MAINTAIN MUTUAL SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUAL DETERRENCE INITIATIVES

- Divide and rule by China
- ASEAN distributed deterrence
- ASEAN unified strategy

Current balancing

- Under-balancing
- Over-balancing
ASEAN-U.S. TIES

ASEAN countries maintain broad-based and permissive military-to-military ties with the U.S.

This signals that ASEAN rejects China’s primacy in the region.
ASEAN-U.S. TIES

- Thailand now wants to join the CP-TPP because U.S. absence makes agreement more likely.
- Vietnam is a major new player in ASEAN-U.S. ties as a result of lifting of U.S. arms embargo, participation in Rim of the Pacific exercises, and rapidly improving U.S.-Vietnam ties.
- Under-balancing can be avoided by participating in freedom of navigation operations with U.S. and other Indo—Pacific nations.
ASEAN countries continue to expand military-to-military links with countries in South Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Northeast Asia. This signals that ASEAN countries can activate varied responses to China’s aggression.
ASEAN-INDO/PACIFIC TIES

• Revitalization of Quadrilateral Cooperation means ASEAN nations can bandwagon with Quadrilateral countries and their allies

• ASEAN support of Taiwan is critical both as a litmus test of ASEAN’s rejection of non-peaceful solutions to territorial disputes and because a failure of ASEAN to support Taiwan draws U.S. resources away from South China Sea and towards Taiwan (Israel syndrome because U.S. recognizes it is alone in supporting the country)
ASEAN faces a critical choice as U.S. withdraws from Asia

Business as usual will lead to a de facto PRC annexation of the South China Sea given U.S. withdrawal. Business as usual is not an option.

Collective security will probably be over-balancing that might trigger a more aggressive China and in any case is highly unlikely.

Under-balancing through “negotiations” and “rules” will fail to deter China.

Optimal balancing is a decision to be made by ASEAN without China’s input.
HAVE A NICE FLIGHT!

gilleyb@pdx.edu

www.web.pdx.edu/~gilleyb