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Stability in Northeast Asia: Bolstering Defence Diplomacy

By Bhubhindar Singh

Synopsis

Despite the recent escalation of tensions in Northeast Asia sparked by the territorial disputes, there are reasons to argue for its stability. One way is to bolster defence diplomacy between China, Japan and South Korea.

Commentary

AUGUST AND September 2012 were explosive months for Northeast Asia. The region's territorial disputes over the Takeshima/Tokdo and Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands erupted – the former being a dispute between Japan and South Korea and the latter between Japan, China and Taiwan. It began with Lee Myung-bak's visit to the disputed Takeshima/Tokdo Islands on 10 August – the first by a sitting South Korean president. On 15 August - the anniversary of Japan's surrender during World War II - Chinese activists landed on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. A few days later, Japanese nationalists responded likewise. In September, this territorial dispute caused further problems in Sino-Japanese relations when the Japanese government decided to purchase - or nationalise - three of the five islets of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Caution to Pessimism

This outbreak of territorial disputes strained Japan-South Korea and Japan-China relations in the political, economic and security domains. Strong words were exchanged between the three governments in defence of their individual positions. Official visits and exchanges between them were also cancelled. Most visibly, Japan's purchase of the islets led to widespread protest in more than 100 cities in China, which in many instances turned aggressive.

As a result of the strained relations affecting Japan, China and South Korea, numerous pessimistic analyses, especially on the future of Northeast Asia, emerged. Caution is advised here for two reasons.

Firstly, pragmatism and level-headedness are defining features in the manner in which the governments of China, Japan and South Korea deal with each other – even on issues related to the controversial historical legacy. Historically-motivated issues - the territorial disputes are just one of the many sensitive ones -- have long featured in Northeast Asia's national security debates. All states know that these issues are not going to be resolved anytime soon. Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing clearly recognise this and expect these issues to emerge regularly, perhaps more now than ever.

However, these states also realise that these issues should not hamper the stability of the region, as this is an essential element for economic development. This is a shared objective held by all three states, which has brought them together leading to strengthened economic interdependence. This is also the impetus for the three states to strengthen Northeast Asian regionalism through the trilateral arrangement, which has become an annual event.

The presence of the United States is another important factor to mitigate the pessimism about Northeast Asian stability. The Obama administration's announcement to pivot towards Asia is a message to all Asian states that the US economic, political and military presence in the region will not only be maintained but strengthened through its rebalancing strategy. The US presence in the region will continue to serve as a source of stability and China, Japan and South Korea welcome this stabilising influence of the US.

Following President Lee's controversial visit to the Takeshima/Tokdo Islands, the US urged Japan and South Korea to exercise restraint so as to restore stability in the bilateral relationship. While the official policy is not to take a position on sovereignty issues, the US officially declared that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are covered under the US-Japan Security Treaty. This means that the US will protect Japan in the event of an armed attack. This declaration serves as a deterrent against any escalation of tensions into a conflict between Japan and China.

Bolstering defence diplomacy

One of the significant repercussions of the strained relations in Northeast Asia, however, has been the interruption of defence diplomacy efforts between China, Japan and South Korea, namely in the area of military exchange and cooperation. This area of regional cooperation is already the weakest and hence, the further waning of these efforts is certainly not a positive sign.

Defence diplomacy is critical in ensuring stability for the region for two main reasons. Firstly, the straining of relations is largely motivated by domestic politics. Various factors, such as President Lee's attempt to raise his declining popularity, Chinese leadership transition and the push by Tokyo's Governor Shintaro Ishihara to purchase the islands from a private Japanese owner were largely responsible for the deterioration of Japan-South Korea and Japan-China relations.

This situation is further complicated by the growing nationalism in all three countries leading to stronger policy positions on issues related to the historical legacy and the weak political channels of communication in the region.

Secondly, the military has the responsibility to defend the national security and protect the lives of its citizens. In the event of a conflict, the military personnel are deployed to the frontlines and face the consequences of what could be negative judgments made by politicians that could lead to the unfortunate loss of lives.

Both reasons make it imperative that the militaries of China, Japan and South Korea maintain regular contacts at all levels. This would preclude miscommunication resulting in the unnecessary escalation of politically-motivated issues into a conflict and maintain a stable line of communication between them. Defence diplomacy efforts should be elevated at the bilateral, trilateral (along with the US) and multilateral levels (at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), for example, through military exchange and cooperation, naval ship visits and military exercises in addressing humanitarian and disaster relief crises.

China, Japan and South Korea face leadership transitions either at the end of this year or at the beginning of next year. Strengthening defence diplomacy efforts between them should be a top priority of the new governments.

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