

Contemporary Conflicts in the Asia Pacific Region

Professional Lecture by Walden Bello

The Asia Pacific has entered a period of intense destabilization. This has multiple causes, but in my view, there are three principal causes of instability: (1) the so-called US Pivot to Asia; (2) China's aggressive territorial claims in the South China Sea West Philippine Sea; and (3) resurgent right-wing nationalism in Japan.

US PACIFIC PIVOT

I want to make three points on this. First of all, the Asia Pacific has always been an American Lake. At its height in the in the post-Second World War era, the US presence was a transnational garrison state spanning seven countries and political entities in the Western Pacific and Australia.

Second, nevertheless, the Pacific Pivot has intensified the already intense militarization of the area. There has been a redeployment of troops within Okinawa and from Okinawa to Guam and Australia. There is also an intensification of joint military exercises, continued US participation in campaign against radical Islamists, and increased logistical use of the former US base at Subic in the Philippines.

There is also increased support for the building of South Korean military base in Jeju Island, which may become US missile defense site, and the transfer of 60 percent of US naval strength to the Pacific.

Third, in terms of aims, the Pivot to Asia is meant to contain the rise of China. But more broadly, it represents a retreat from the comprehensive global military dominance that the neoconservative faction of the US ruling class attempted under Bush. It really is a feint—a maneuver to serve as a cover for a limited retreat from America's disastrous intervention in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The Pivot is an attempt by Washington to retreat to an area for imperial power projection that it sees as more manageable than a Middle East that is running out of control.

CHINESE AGGRESSION

The US has taken advantage of China's unfortunate threatening moves in the Western Pacific to justify its increased military presence. The most blatant of these moves is China's 9-Dash-Line declaration, saying that the whole South China Sea or West Philippine Sea belongs to it despite the fact that four other countries border this body of water and are within their 200-Mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

Basically, China is saying that this international body of water that is 3,500,000 square kilometers or 1,350,000 sq. miles large, that apparently holds massive oil and gas resources, and through which transits one third of the world's shipping, is an inland or domestic waterway like Lake Michigan in the US. To enforce its claims, Chinese surveillance ships have banned hundreds of Filipino fishers from the Scarborough Shoal, a rich fishing area just 137 kilometers from the Philippines (and 700 kilometers away from China) and harassed Vietnamese ships exploring for oil in areas within the country's 200-mile EEZ.

Where is China coming from? Two theories. First theory: China is insecure. China's increasingly aggressive rhetoric stems less from expansionist intent than from the insecurities brought about by high-speed growth followed by economic crisis. Long dependent for its legitimacy on delivering economic growth, domestic troubles related to the global financial crisis have left the Communist Party leadership groping for a new ideological justification, which it has found in nationalism.

Second theory: China's moves reflect the cold calculation of a confidently rising power. It aims to stake a monopoly over the fishing and energy resources of the West Philippine Sea in its bid to become a regional hegemon. But whatever the source, China's moves have alarmed its neighbors, and are forcing them into the hands of the US by allowing the latter to portray itself as a military savior or "balancer."

Except perhaps for Cambodia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, has increasingly become critical of China. What there is of a left in these countries have either become critical as well or silent, a stance that derives from a view that China has become a capitalist power that has lost all interest in maintaining the spirit of solidarity that animated the Bandung Conference. My view is that even if China exhibits hegemonic tendencies, it is important not to automatically impute this to imperial dynamics owing to its having

developed structures associated with the capitalist mode of production. China is a complex social formation.

RIGHT-WING RESURGENCE IN JAPAN

The third source of destabilization is Japan. Right-wing elements in Japan, including the current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have taken advantage of China's moves in the West Philippine Sea and Japan's dispute with China over the deserted Senkaku Islands to push for the abolition of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which prohibits war as an instrument of foreign policy and prevents Japan from having an army. While outwardly declaring fealty to the US, the right wing seeks to use the US-China conflict as a means of becoming a regional military power with nuclear capability that pursues an independent foreign and military policy.

What worries Japan's neighbors is that the country is susceptible to a reactionary nationalism because it has not carried out the national soul searching that in Germany embedded responsibility for the atrocities of Nazi Germany in the national consciousness. This failure to institutionalize and internalize war guilt is what allows such right-wing elements as the mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, to brazenly say that the estimated 200,000 Korean, Chinese, and Filipino comfort women or sex slaves were "necessary" for the morale of Japanese troops during the Second World War.

"Anyone can understand that the system of comfort women was necessary to provide respite for a group of high-strung, rough and tumble crowd of men braving their lives under a storm of bullets," Hashimoto said, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Although the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and other political figures quickly distanced themselves from Hashimoto's remarks, Hashimoto was simply putting into words what many Japanese elites—and many in the Japanese public more broadly—believe to be true.

The Osaka mayor's remarks came in the wake of another scandal: a mass visit in April by some 170 sitting legislators and members of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet to the Yasukuni Shrine, the home of Japan's war dead, which includes among its honorees fourteen convicted war criminals. Many have condemned the ritual as a sign of the country's unrepentant attitude for its conduct during the Second World War.

For those with an interest in regional stability, what should be the response to this? Not balance of power politics, or using one power against the other. Balance of power politics, like that which took place before the First World War, ends up encouraging arms races and superpower conflicts that bring conflict nearer. Once superpower dynamics takes over, the territorial issues tend to get marginalized, so self-defeating. Among the key points of an alternative approach are: demilitarization of the Western Pacific, starting with shutting down of US bases, pushing states to resort to diplomatic solutions and multilateral fora to solve territorial disputes instead of force, and forceful citizen diplomacy for peace. The perspective we are coming from is that Washington's military withdrawal from Asia is overdue. Instead of normalizing relations between China and its neighbors, the US presence has long prevented the emergence of mature post-Cold War relations among them. Left to themselves, China's neighbors will be forced to cooperate to come up with ways of dealing with the challenge posed by China. One must not forget that China's foreign policy is the product of over two centuries of Western intervention, a history that is shared by other countries in the region. In short, one must not underestimate the capacity of China and its neighbors to work out a new regional order that does a better job of promoting peace, harmony, and respect for sovereignty, than the current regime of US military hegemony.

WALDEN BELLO is a member of the House of the Representatives of the Philippines and author of *Capitalism's Last Stand?* and *Food Wars*.