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# NATO's global focus following the US Asian pivot?

## Introduction

In May 2014, then NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe met at the alliance's headquarters to sign a new cooperation agreement. Both stated that NATO and Japan were 'natural partners'. Both drew parallels between Russian activities in the Ukraine and Chinese activities in the East and South China Seas, with Rasmussen declaring that 'the security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions cannot be treated separately'. Abe's offer that Japan's military should play a greater role in international affairs was welcomed by Rasmussen, and both pledged to address global security challenges together in times of crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Barely two months later, Abe prevailed upon his cabinet to agree to the reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's constitution - the 'peace clause' - to allow the country's military forces to participate in conflicts beyond its borders for the first time since the Second World War. This was an historic reversal of the country's renunciation of war as a means to settle international disputes.<sup>2</sup>

The affairs of the Asia-Pacific region no doubt seem remote from our concerns in Britain and Europe, but, since 2012, a series of new NATO partnerships with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea is drawing its European members into the US 'Asian pivot'. The US has been calling on NATO to follow its own 'rebalance to Asia', and Britain, in particular, has declared itself 'at the forefront' of working to realise NATO's goal of 'delivering common security around the globe'.<sup>3</sup>

## Why is NATO forging closer links with Asia? What are these partnerships about? Why is CND concerned?

CND has long called for the dissolution of NATO, a military nuclear-armed alliance, committed to first use of nuclear weapons. CND has opposed the organisation's recent wars and military interventions and continues to campaign against its global expansion. With the US now concerned to maintain its primacy in the Pacific, as Mark Leonard – director of the European Council on Foreign Relations Institute – warns, British Atlanticism risks 'dragging

our security apparatus into a regional power struggle that we don't understand'.<sup>4</sup> Now NATO's effective endorsement of the US Asian pivot and of the historic shift in Japan's security stance is contributing to the region's destabilisation, with the danger that relations between the two nuclear-armed states, the US and China, may slide into a protracted rivalry.

## The Asia Pacific region

The Asia Pacific is the most economically dynamic area in the world, vital to international growth and financial stability. NATO members the US and Canada are Pacific powers whilst France and Britain also have interests in the region, France still laying claim to New Caledonia and French Polynesia and Britain to the Pitcairn Islands. Britain also maintains a military base in Brunei at the southern edge of the South China Sea as well as a small naval presence in Singapore. The Asia Pacific region is strategically significant as the only place where all five official nuclear weapons states, including Russia, meet.

The promise of future growth, however, is in jeopardy with the region riven by divisions and territorial disputes, set fast since the outset of the Cold War: the division of the Korean peninsula; the division of China and Taiwan; and the territorial disputes over islands in the East and South East China Sea. Any of these flashpoints could trigger a nuclear confrontation.

## The US Asian Pivot

Since 2000, China has more than doubled in economic size to become the second largest economy in the world. US concern over China's growing influence has clearly been increasing. In 2011, President Obama announced the 'Asian pivot', rebalancing US military, strategic and naval resources towards the Asia Pacific.

The Asian pivot builds on, and strengthens, the existing US bilateral security alliances in the region, with Australia, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and Japan, whilst reaching out further to other states. Japan, covered by a 'nuclear umbrella', serves as the lynchpin of the US presence. The US maintains around 100,000 troops across Japan, Australia, South Korea, Guam and Hawaii, with new bases continuing to open. It aims to build up its sea power in Asia with 60 per cent of the US's naval forces to be deployed in

the region by 10 years' time. A new naval facility, designed to accommodate US nuclear submarines, has just been built at Jeju Island, South Korea, less than 400 miles from the major Chinese port of Qingdao. Step by step, Japan, South Korea, Australia and Taiwan are being incorporated into the US global missile defence system, the aim here being to enable the US to project an overwhelming military power anywhere around the world.<sup>5</sup> This has led many commentators to believe that this is part of a plan for all-out war with China.

## **NATO's links with Asia**

NATO began to forge links with Asia-Pacific states through the 'coalition of the willing' that carried out the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. With these operations winding down, the question for NATO has been how to maintain military cooperation. At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, NATO adopted a new strategic concept to encompass a global role, and a new partnership policy was then approved in 2011. By 2012, NATO had concluded a series of partnerships across the globe (Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programmes) with Afghanistan, Australia, Iraq, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines and South Korea.<sup>6</sup>

The new partnership policy does not necessarily involve direct support for NATO-led operations but caters for more flexible cooperation to meet 'global challenges'. Programmes are individually tailored to each country, but cover a range of cooperative activities in areas from disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, piracy, cyber- and missile defence, to information and intelligence sharing and scientific and technical exchange as well as collaboration in military training, and other joint military activities. Whilst expanding practical cooperation and military and operational integration, the aim is to harmonise foreign and security policies and strategies, including on matters of military and nuclear weapons policy, through the development of common views on crises, their management and prevention.<sup>7</sup>

## **NATO and Japan**

As with the US, the key link for NATO in the region is Japan. The partnership has been upgraded twice since 2012.<sup>8</sup> With NATO states facing increasingly limited resources for military spending, the partnership with Japan has huge benefits, since Japan has funds and can also supply sophisticated technical expertise.

After years of engaging in unpopular and failed wars, NATO has been seeking to reinvent itself as a more equal partnership organisation to counter criticism that it is no more than a tool of US foreign policy. Its Asian partnerships are considered to be of great value here.

But the Abe administration has used the closer association with NATO to advance its policy objectives of remilitarisation despite opposition from the majority of the Japanese people. Since constitutional amendment in fact requires a two-thirds majority in both parliamentary houses and a national referendum, Abe has taken a back door route, dodging the democratic process, to

effectively nullify Article 9.<sup>9</sup> Some of Japan's neighbours – China and South Korea – are also very concerned about its remilitarisation; the atrocities carried out by Japan during the Second World War remain an unresolved tension in the region.

## **Regional flashpoints**

Although China-Taiwan relations have been improving in recent years, they still lie at the core of the Sino-US divide. On the Korean peninsula, negotiations on denuclearisation have remained in a stalemate for some years now, with no progress towards a peace treaty to end the Korean War and North Korea threatening a further nuclear weapons test.<sup>10</sup>

However, since 2012, it is the disputes in the East and South China Seas that have raised the most concern. These long-standing and relatively dormant maritime disputes have been revived in the context of the US Asian pivot. They concern the ownership of numbers of largely uninhabited islands – the Diaoyu/Senkaku in the East China Sea claimed by China, Taiwan and Japan, and the Paracels/Xisha and the Spratlys/Nansha among others in the South China Sea claimed variously by China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei. Since 2012, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam in particular have become more and more embroiled with China over the conflicting claims.

Despite the fact that the South China Sea is thousands of miles from the American mainland, Hillary Clinton, when visiting Asia in 2010 as US Secretary of State, declared the area to be of national interest for the US, giving tacit backing to the island claims of the ASEAN states.<sup>11</sup> In April 2014, Obama signed a 10-year defence agreement with the Philippines which will allow US armed forces access to bases, supporting a stronger US presence in the South China Sea. This marks a further historical reversal for the region since the Philippines closed US bases after 1991 following years of mass protests.<sup>12</sup> With regard to the East China Sea, the US has confirmed on several occasions over the last three or four years that islands under Japan's administration are protected under the US defence agreements.<sup>13</sup> The US is thereby treaty-bound to come to the defence of Japan and Philippines in the event of a conflict developing with China over the contested territories.

These maritime disputes are concerned less with the uninhabited rocky outcrops themselves and more with the territorial waters surrounding them which cover large reserves of oil and gas deposits. But a glance at the map demonstrates also the strategic significance of both sets of islands for China [see map overleaf]. Japan controls the chain of islands extending over two thousand miles from the Kuriles in the North to the Ryukyu Islands beyond Okinawa in the South, containing much of China's Eastern seaboard. The Diaoyu/Senkaku waters are a key access route for China into the wider Pacific. The islands of the South China Sea, meanwhile, are located at the crossroads of major sea lanes linking North East Asia through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East. These navigation routes carry 80 per cent of China's oil imports.<sup>14</sup> By strengthening its defence arrangements with both the Philippines and Japan, the US is securing its control over 'choke

## Map of disputed territories



points' which could be used to close China off from trade with the wider world.

### Accidents, collisions and 'crisis management'

The situations in the East and South China Seas are fraught with risk as warships, coastguard patrols and commercial fishing vessels skirmish around the islands. Meanwhile, the increasing frequency of US-led military exercises helps to stoke an all too inflammable atmosphere of mounting nationalism amongst the disputants with the danger that an 'accidental' collision may develop into a full-blown conflict.

One particular 'accident' occurred in 2001 when a Chinese pilot collided with a US spy plane over Hainan Island in the South China Sea. Since then there have been a number of similar close encounters in China's vicinity. The fact that the US routinely spies on China from the sea and air is highly provocative. According to Chinese sources, US jets carry out close reconnaissance of China around 500 times a year.<sup>15</sup> As American anti-war campaigner Justin Raimondo points out: 'imagine if Chinese military vessels suddenly appeared 75 miles off, say, southern

California, to survey the US West Coast naval bases'.<sup>16</sup> China has repeatedly requested that the US desist from such military surveillance, but to no avail.<sup>17</sup>

China is now fast developing the capacity to challenge US sea and air control over these waters. According to Dennis Blair, the former Pacific commander who headed the US intelligence services in the first Obama administration, 'Ninety per cent of their time is spent thinking about new and interesting ways to sink our ships and shoot down our planes'.<sup>18</sup>

Following a commitment made in the US Department of Defense 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, the Pentagon released a document in 2012 called 'Joint Operational Access Concept' aimed to facilitate 'crisis management' of the region.<sup>19</sup> This sets out a two-phase Air-Sea Battle plan (ASB), whereby, in a conflict situation, the US would first aim to knock out the enemy's cyber and space capabilities at a stroke, followed by a physical attack to eliminate its military facilities. This would involve launching extensive bombing raids across mainland China, risking destruction of dozens of major cities. ASB is an all-or-nothing battle plan, which seeks nothing less than complete Chinese capitulation. Its

rationale of surprise attack leaves little scope for diplomacy and, as such, it is a recipe for rapid conflict escalation, increasing the odds that a dispute will turn violent and risking a nuclear crisis.<sup>20</sup>

So, whilst it is frequently argued that the regional tensions stem from China's growing economic and military influence, it is the build up in US military activity in the region that is the destabilising factor. Notwithstanding the fact that the US itself has failed to sign up to the UN Law of the Sea rules on freedom of navigation, it claims to be acting to protect this right as it deploys a vast array of spy planes, destroyers equipped with Aegis radar systems and missile interceptors, nuclear submarines and Aircraft Carrier Battle groups in the oceans and skies around China. China's longstanding nuclear posture of 'no first use' is under pressure whilst the US maintains its 'first use' posture, covering Japan.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the rising tensions are driving the region's militarisation with total defence spending on the part of the South East Asian states forecast to rise from \$24.5 billion in 2011 to \$40 billion by 2016.<sup>22</sup>

### **A Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone for the South China Sea**

The US, Britain, Russia and France all refuse to ratify the protocol of the Association of South East Asian States Treaty of Bangkok for a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone which would cover the South China Sea. Their reservations are firstly that maritime disputes in the South China Sea create 'uncertainty over the scope of the Treaty'; and, secondly, that ASEAN's requirements would restrict the passage of nuclear submarines. China, the fifth officially recognised nuclear weapons state, has been prepared to sign up for a nuclear free South China Sea.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The disputes in the East and South China Seas have a real potential to blow up into a direct military confrontation between the contending states. If Japan, free of the constraints of Article 9, were to engage in war with China, or if the Sino-Philippines dispute were similarly to escalate, possibly drawing in Japan's support, the US would be obliged to go to their defence. These disputes then set the stage for a dangerous rivalry between the two nuclear-armed superpowers of US and China. Especially given the complications of the Sino-Japanese relationship and the US-Japanese treaty obligations, the scope for misunderstanding and miscalculation between China and the US is huge, their relations potentially more volatile than those between the US and USSR in the Cold War. As Australian defence analyst, Hugh White, has argued, 'America and China...are [increasingly] seeing regional questions, like the South China Seas disputes, more and more through the lens of rivalry [and] the further this goes on, the harder it will be to change course and choose cooperation...the more each contact becomes a test of strength...the harder it will be to prevent crises escalating'.<sup>23</sup>

### **Britain in the Asia Pacific:**

Britain could also be drawn into the US battle with China for Pacific primacy through its links with Commonwealth states on the South China Sea: Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore. The Five Power Defence Arrangements between Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, which conduct regular naval and air exercises, have found a 'new relevance' according to recent statements.<sup>29</sup> Britain also has a defence agreement with Brunei and maintains a permanent military presence on the island. Both Brunei and Malaysia have disputes with China over islands in the South China Sea, although so far these disputes have remained dormant. Heightening tensions in the region are pushing ASEAN states away from their pledges to resolve the maritime conflicts through peaceful dialogue. Britain could take significant steps to ease the situation by ceasing arms sales and military exercises, and by signing up to the Treaty of Bangkok protocol for a Nuclear Weapons Free South China Sea.

NATO's regional involvement heightens tensions as members sell arms and carry out military exercises – between NATO and Singapore in Canada<sup>24</sup> and between Britain, Brunei's Armed Forces and the US military. Its partnership with Japan brings further complications beyond Asia in opening up new ground for competition over control of the Arctic. It also brings added reinforcement to the doctrine of strategic nuclear deterrence and the 'first use' posture.<sup>25</sup>

Abe's constitutional reinterpretation now aligns the country with NATO's aims of collective defence. This means not only that Japan can now actively join in NATO-led wars, for example, in the Middle East, it also clears the way for military alliances with nearer neighbours, bringing the prospects of an Asian NATO closer. The Pentagon has long held the strategic Cold War goal of an East Asian collective defence organisation to partner NATO across the globe.<sup>26</sup>

Through engagement in new systems of sharing intelligence and surveillance, through gradual incorporation into a global missile defence system, and through foreign policy coordination, NATO and its Asian partners are together becoming deeply embedded into the US global strategy and military operations, bolstering US global offensive capacity as attempts are made to reverse the superpower's relative decline.

The NATO-Asian partnerships are an endorsement of the US Asian pivot and of Japan's remilitarisation, implicitly subscribing to the view of China as the 'aggressor'. NATO's European members may find themselves deeply embroiled in US 'crisis management' battle plans in the Pacific. Commitment to protect the 'freedom of navigation' could lead into interdictions of shipping and aircraft or naval blockades at 'choke points' to cut off China's vital shipping routes, for example, at the launch of an Air-Sea battle. It is of little reassurance that the written agreements rule out direct

military intervention: NATO's increasing involvement adds to an emerging Cold War scenario in Asia; it complicates and escalates already highly fraught situations at the risk of precipitating a nuclear crisis.

CND, through its links with Asian peace organisations, has supported campaigns against Japan's remilitarisation as well as popular protests in South Korea against the construction of a naval base for US use on Jeju island. President Obama's recent reassertion of US primacy with his declaration that 'America must always lead on the world stage' appears to have set the US and China on collision course.<sup>27</sup> The international peace movement must be alert to the dangers. A conflict between the two powers,

even a small one, could lead to a prolonged nuclear standoff which would have serious consequences for the global economy and delay the global abolition of nuclear weapons for decades.

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