



Threats to Security in East Asia

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The political and security situation in East Asia increases the risk of internal destabilisation in individual countries, regional militarisation and conflicts. It is likely that China will strengthen its position. The long-term effect might be a modification of regional order, which is currently based mainly on the presence of the U.S. as security guarantor. In the shorter term, the developments in Asia might convince the U.S. to increase its interest in the region at the expense of other parts of the world.

Since Xi Jinping assumed chairmanship of the PRC in 2013, China has been pursuing a more active security policy. The Chinese authorities are reforming the PLA and increasing its operational capabilities beyond its closest neighbourhood. These actions, confirmed and justified in new strategic documents, raise concerns in the region. There is a rising risk of short-termed destabilisation and the outbreak of local conflicts in East Asia. The other risk factors include the provocative nature of the Kim Jong-un regime in North Korea (DPRK), political instability in South Korea (ROK) due to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, cooperation between China and Russia as resistance to the U.S. presence in Asia, change in the policy of the Philippines, which now favours relations with China at the expense of the United States. An additional source of uncertainty is the shape of U.S. policy towards Asia. Its allies, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, are increasing defence policy activities, with negative responses from China.

Militarisation of the South China Sea. The South China Sea is the region's most important trade route, used for one third of world trade. It is also an area abundant in mineral resources and fisheries. For several years, especially during Xi Jinping's tenure, the territorial disputes in this region have been intensifying. There are disputes over the Spratly islands between China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan, and over the Paracels islets between the PRC and Vietnam. The tensions are increasing as China builds new artificial islands and reclaims the existing ones. The PRC uses this to justify rights to exclusive economic zones around the islands, and did not stop even after an unfavourable arbitration tribunal ruling in July 2016. China is being helped by the Philippines, which has changed its foreign policy. Their current President, Rodrigo Duterte, unlike his predecessor, who initiated the arbitration procedure, is interested in strengthening relations with China and Russia and weakening ties with the United States. Improved relations have been confirmed by Duterte's visit to Beijing in October 2016. He decided to put aside disputes to strengthen ties with China.

On the new and bigger islands, China is setting up infrastructure such as ports and lighthouses, which it calls public goods, along with what it says are purely defensive military installations. However, according to the U.S. and states from the region, this is all dual-use infrastructure, and China's actions mean the militarisation of the islands. This is vindicated by satellite pictures taken in February. The installations are supposedly intended to house surface-to-air missiles. Under Xi's leadership, China is pursuing "great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics," which means activities beyond its closest neighbourhood. This is why the PRC needs sea bases, in order to respond quickly to threats as well as to control trade routes. Furthermore, China also seeks full control over the South China Sea in accordance to its claims within the "nine-dash line."

China's actions are raising concerns in some countries from the region, and in the United States. In January, the U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, said that building artificial islands was illegal. ASEAN countries are also worried about China's military installations. This position was expressed by the ASEAN foreign ministers at the February meeting in Boracay.

The Situation on the Korean Peninsula. There are two main reasons for rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula. First are Kim Jong-un's nuclear ambitions. The current regime conducts nuclear and missile tests more frequently than the previous one, which may indicate its growing military capabilities. The latest two missile tests, in February, during Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the United States, and in March, on the day when the U.S. and Korea launched joint military exercises, could be perceived as a demonstration of power against the Donald Trump Administration. It seems that increasing threats from North Korea were among the reasons for Trump softening his language about China. During a telephone conversation with Xi Jinping on 9 February, the U.S. President confirmed the "one China" principle, which he had previously questioned publicly.

Deteriorating relations between China and South Korea, are the second source of increasing tensions. This is due to the decision to deploy the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) missile system in Korea, which China (along with Russia) opposes, claiming that the system could be used to monitor its airspace. As a result, the PRC has imposed economic sanctions on ROK. The sanctions are mainly directed Lotte, the fifth biggest Korean enterprise, present in China in many sectors, as the THAAD would be deployed on land belonging to the company. At the end of 2016, China started to impose additional taxes on Lotte, forcing it to close several divisions in China. After the final company's decision, on 28 February, about a land swap for the missile defence system, China announced a boycott of Korean products and services. A trade war cannot be ruled out.

Tensions in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. China has made an increasing number of incursions into Japanese territorial waters and airspace around the disputed Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. Chinese fishermen, striving for access to the fisheries around the islands, are often accompanied by Chinese naval forces. This was among the reasons for Abe's attempts to intensify confirmation of Japan's alliance with the United States. In addition, Trump said that allies are requested to take greater responsibility for their own security. From the U.S. perspective, threats emanating from the DPRK and PRC mean better relations with Japan are indispensable. As a result, Abe obtained confirmation from Trump that the Senkaku islands are covered by the security guarantees in Article 5 of the 1960 Japan-U.S. treaty.

Yet tensions in cross-strait relations remain. Taiwan's President, Tsai Ing-wen assumed office in 2016, and since then (contrary to her predecessor), has advocated looser relations with mainland China. Statements by Trump and his advisors (such as Peter Navarro), about closer relations with Taiwan including military cooperation and the suggested recognition of Taiwan's de facto independence, have also raised tensions. What is more, the U.S. plans to sell weapons to Taiwan, while China is deploying advanced medium-range missile systems in the Taiwan Strait, capable of breaking Taiwan's missile defences and reaching targets in Japan.

Prospects. Due to the tense situation in the region, the probability of destabilisation, including even armed conflicts, is increasing. In South Korea, the deployment of THAAD has been accelerated to finish it before the presidential elections (the candidate with the strongest social support is against the system, and has announced a review of the decision-making process about THAAD), which sparked social protests. This situation gives China an opportunity to exert greater pressure on ROK and Korean companies investing in China. In the case of the Philippines, it is possible that Duterte's position will be weakened if he continues his policy of strengthening relations with China. In North Korea, the murder of Kim Jong-un's half-brother in mid-February may indicate instability within the DPRK regime.

Due to uncertainty about U.S. policy towards East Asia, states from the region may be more prone to seek alternative means to counterbalance China's influence. Japan, which is more concerned about the PRC than North Korea, is ready for closer cooperation with Russia. There are also possibilities for closer ad hoc cooperation between several countries and China, with the aim of limiting U.S. influence. An example is the Philippines, which has alliances with China and Russia. There is also the question of close relations between China and Russia, both of which oppose THAAD. Those alliances might modify the regional order, which currently is based mostly on the presence of the U.S. as security guarantor.

There is a probability of further militarisation in East Asia. North Korea is developing its nuclear programme, and China is more active in the South China Sea and in talks about strengthening its nuclear arsenal. What is more, Japan suggests expanding its missile defence system under the framework of Abe's "dynamic defence" policy.

The situation in the region is a challenge for the United States, and may absorb its attention. This may be indicated by considerable diplomatic engagement in Asia in the first weeks of the Trump Administration. Abe was the first foreign leader to visit the U.S. after Trump was sworn in, the U.S. Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense visited East Asia, and Xi Jinping will visit the U.S. in April. A potential crisis in the South China Sea or on the Korean Peninsula may prompt the U.S. to strengthen its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region at the expense of the Atlantic Ocean.

However, this would not have to have a negative effect on U.S. military capabilities in relation to fulfilling obligations to strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank. Nevertheless, political tensions within NATO might be highlighted due to Trump's calls for Europe to increase its defence spending and to decrease the burden on the United States. Trump will probably mention this issue during the meeting of NATO leaders in Brussels in May. The U.S. may suggest that rising threats in East Asia are sufficient justification for changing transatlantic relations, which may mean Europe's greater responsibility for its own security.