

7. Trends in East Asian security

Overview

A number of significant regional military–security trends emerged in East Asia during 2014. A key aspect of these trends is China’s efforts to actively shape the regional security dynamic. Regional tensions have been increasing in East Asia since 2008, mainly because of concerns related to maritime territorial disputes, China’s strategic assertiveness, North Korean nuclear proliferation, military build-up in the region and the fear of a spillover of instability from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Regional military expenditure trends show that states engaged in territorial disputes with China have launched military modernization programmes. With the United States developing stronger military and security ties with allies in the region as part of its ‘pivot to Asia’ strategy, some analysts have evoked a ‘return of geopolitics’. This chapter identifies six major trends in East Asian security in 2014.

Section I addresses the evolving military cooperation between the USA and its allies in the region as part of the US ‘rebalance to Asia’ strategy and considers the impact of this cooperation on Chinese–US strategic interactions. Fuelled by China’s continued military modernization efforts, defence cooperation between the USA and a number of Asian states deepened in 2014. This cooperation has been viewed by China as a US campaign to enlist regional states in US efforts to counter China’s rise.

Section II focuses on maritime security in the East and South China seas, providing an overview of the current state of territorial disputes, the risk of incidents related to those disputes, and the evolving crisis management mechanisms aimed at managing them. While tensions remained high in the South China Sea, the security situation improved slightly in the East China Sea. Chinese oil exploration efforts and the acceleration of land reclamation activities in disputed areas of the South China Sea have led to repeated stand-offs with and protests by other claimants, especially the Philippines and Viet Nam. However, there was a reduction of Chinese Coast Guard patrols around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea in 2014, and a historic handshake between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November marked the resumption of high-level bilateral relations between the two countries.

Section III focuses on China’s new security diplomacy initiatives, which are based on President Xi’s ‘Asia for Asians’ concept. China is accelerating efforts to create economic, financial and political institutions that provide an alter-

native to the traditional US-led regional order. Within the area of regional security China is increasingly using its own forums to advance structures that water down the regional influence of the USA.

Section IV addresses the comprehensive Japanese defence policy reforms of the Abe administration. Abe has continued to promote institutional and constitutional reforms that pave the way for a 'normalization' of Japan's defence policies. Efforts to change Japan's pacifist post-World War II constitution have triggered negative reactions in China and South Korea, while the USA has encouraged the potential of a greater Japanese contribution to regional security.

Section V analyses China's regional counterterrorism efforts in the context of deteriorating security in Xinjiang, China's most westerly autonomous region. In addition to bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, Xinjiang also borders on Central Asian states, many of them former Soviet states. China has become increasingly active in regional counterterrorism cooperation as a result of a rise in domestic jihadist attacks, concerns about a spillover of instability from Afghanistan associated with the drawdown and closure of the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and the fear of jihadist fighters returning home to China from foreign conflict areas, especially from Iraq and Syria.

*Finally, section VI discusses Russia's diplomatic and security initiatives in North East Asia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Russia's relationship with the West has deteriorated significantly as a result of its *de facto* annexation of Crimea and its military involvement in eastern Ukraine. As a result, Russia has attempted to strengthen its strategic relations in North East Asia: it has sought to deepen bilateral ties with China at the same time as it is exploring closer economic and political relations with North Korea. However, Russia's attempts to raise its profile in North East Asia are unlikely to have a major strategic impact.*

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