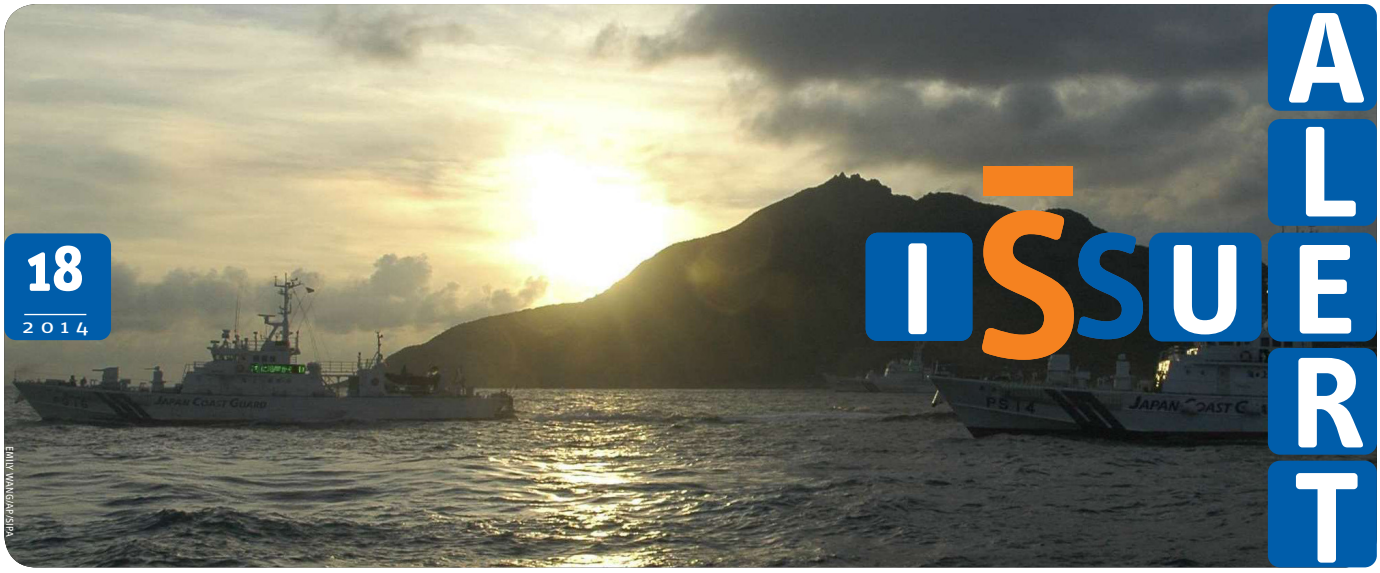

East Asia's security architecture – track two

by Eva Pejsova

Although East Asia's security environment has long been known for its instability, the recent escalation of tensions between China and Japan has been followed with unprecedented concern. Besides the real risk of accidental clashes in the disputed waters due, *inter alia*, to the disruption of communication channels, the way in which both Beijing and Tokyo have chosen to deal with the crisis is an indication of an emerging shift in strategic thinking that will most likely have an impact on the evolution of the whole region.

First, this escalation reaffirms the intransigence of Asian countries on matters of territorial sovereignty and integrity, most evident in the ongoing maritime disputes in the East and the South China Seas. Second, the accompanying military modernisation programmes – including the review of the legal and institutional frameworks for national defence policies – demonstrate a desire for greater self-reliance. These new strategic dynamics, triggered by the rise of China and the passing of the US 'unipolar moment', have prompted countries in the region to diversify their security options by strengthening relationships with various extra-regional poles of influence, including Europe. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it highlights the critical absence of an effective cooperative security mechanism in the region that could help mitigate tensions and manage potential miscalculations or actual crises.

As a result, debates on the need to rethink the security architecture in the region have become more frequent. Existing regional security-focused multilateral platforms could indeed contribute to stability in the region and in this context, various informal mechanisms – so-called 'track-two' diplomacy – often become invaluable channels for communication and interaction.

A changing power balance

The rise of China, including its military build-up and greater assertiveness *vis-à-vis* its maritime territorial claims, has been viewed with great suspicion by both the littoral states and all major powers with an interest in the freedom of transit through regional and international waters.

Relations between China and Japan began to deteriorate after the purchase by the Japanese government of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from a private owner in September 2012, and were further exacerbated last year by China's unilateral announcement of an ADIZ (Air Defence Identification Zone) which covers the Japanese-administered islands. To date, there still is no high-level dialogue between the two countries and very little communication exists even at the level of functional cooperation.

Against this backdrop, both capitals have decided to adopt more robust defence postures. The establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) by Tokyo and the State Security Committee (SSC) by Beijing underlines the perceived need by both

capitals to centralise decision-making in order to better manage possible crises. Among mutual accusations of unilaterally changing the status quo in the East China Sea, both powers have engaged in impressive public diplomacy efforts to garner international support for their respective positions.

The East China Sea dispute is also testing the limits of the US-Japan alliance and planting a seed of doubt over the ability of the US alone to ensure peace and stability in the region. Reactions in Japan as well as other South-East Asian countries show to different degrees a longing for greater security guarantees. In addition to strengthening their national defence capabilities, China, Japan, and other regional actors have sought to establish bilateral 'strategic partnerships', ranging from trade agreements to enhanced security arrangements with extra-regional actors such as India, Russia, or Europe. The resulting 'spaghetti bowl' of plurilateral relations, however, cannot substitute a stable security structure for the region. More than ever before, the evolving power dynamics highlight the need for redesigning the Asia-Pacific's security architecture, and all major regional players – China, Japan, as well as ASEAN countries – are putting forward their own visions of what form this should take.

Soft multilateralism

The rise of China and shared concerns over maritime security have led countries in the region to work closer together. In this respect, ASEAN and its multilateral cooperative mechanisms may offer a glimmer of hope. Through the assertion of its core principles of inclusiveness, non-intervention and consensus-building, the organisation has progressively managed to reach out to almost all Asia-Pacific countries – through the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Given the current and lasting political and diplomatic constraints, informal initiatives which gather experts and officials in a private capacity to discuss sensitive security issues can be credited with much of the progress in this domain. Although often dismissed as sterile talk shops, track-two mechanisms have become an increasingly popular alternative precisely for their non-binding, consultative nature; something which reflects the region's negotiation culture.

The most active multilateral forum, in this respect, has been the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), which has been debating security issues and providing recommendations to the ASEAN Regional Forum for over 20 years. In November 2013 CSCAP created a Study Group on Regional Security Architecture with a view to reconciling contending visions and streamlining existing arrangements to make them more effective in dealing with the emerging challenges.

CSCAP's unique, informal setting has managed to bring a wide variety of regional and extra-regional actors (including the traditionally absent North Korea) – along with the US, Russia, Australia and, recently, also the EU – to the same table. While the power of track-two mechanisms should not be overestimated, due to the lack of mutual trust across the region, such mechanisms do provide useful platforms for exchanging views (and occasionally jibes), promoting common understanding, building confidence and fostering cooperation.

A role for the EU?

As part of its own 'pivot' to Asia, Brussels has stepped up its efforts to reengage with the region both through bilateral 'strategic partnerships' (China, India, Japan and South Korea) and through multilateral cooperative schemes, e.g. by adhering to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and joining the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2012. Its recent accession to CSCAP, in December 2013, marks yet another step in this direction.

While it cannot be claimed that the EU as such is perceived as a fully fledged security actor in Asia, its added value has been seen in its neutral stance towards the region's territorial disputes as well as its proven experience in terms of regional integration, preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding. While its physical distance and the occasional lack of cohesion among its member states continue to be perceived as major weaknesses, it is precisely these shortcomings which paradoxically facilitate the Union's acceptance by some actors – traditionally wary of any greater security involvement of 'Western' countries – in the region. The Union's overall 'softer' approach to security – with an emphasis on capacity-building, functional cooperation and human development – is also highly compatible with the political cultures of Asian countries.

Perceived to be reasonably neutral and rather distant, yet at the same time a well-respected and much experienced international player, the EU has real potential to serve as a 'norm-setter' in the region, promoting the rule of law and principles of cooperative security – provided, of course, it acts consistently and with the support of its member states.

Eva Pejsova is a Programme Associate at the EUISS.

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