

The Terrex Incident: Is an Asian Melian Dialogue in the Offing?

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* 이 글에 포함된 의견은 저자 개인의 견해로 제주평화연구원의 공식입장과는 무관합니다.

On 23 November 2016, Hong Kong's Customs authorities at Kwai Chung Container Terminal impounded nine Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Terrex infantry carrier vehicles (ICV), after what appears to have been a routine inspection. The Terrex ICVs were being shipped from the southern Taiwan city of Kaohsiung to Singapore, having taken part in routine training exercises that the SAF conducts in Taiwan.

This incident occurred against a backdrop of frosty relations between China and Singapore. This dip in the China-Singapore relationship started with Singapore's response to the 12 July 2016 ruling by the Arbitral Tribunal constituted under Annex VII to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the South China Sea dispute; China interpreted Singapore's response as an anti-China stance. It did not help that the United States has conducted a number of freedom of navigation operations (FONOP), in some cases involving P-8 aircraft that had taken off from SAF air bases.

The relationship further soured in September, when Singapore's Ambassador to China, Stanley Loh, issued an open letter on 26 September to the editors of China's Global Times newspapers, rebutting a Global Times report alleging that the Singapore delegation to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit meeting earlier that month had raised the issues of the South China Sea and the Arbitral Tribunal's ruling.

An underlying issue is also Singapore's unofficial relationship with Taiwan, and the SAF's maintenance of training facilities in Taiwan. In the past, China had maintained a studied silence with regard to this unofficial relationship. That did not stop China from attempting to "wean" Singapore

off this relationship, such as an offer to Singapore of access to training facilities in Hainan, which Singapore had refused.

Singapore's Response

Singapore's responses have been restrained. No mention has been made about the cooling in China-Singapore relations. Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan asserted that "Singapore will not allow any single issue to hijack its longstanding, multifaceted relationship with China." At the Straits Times Global Outlook Forum on 29 November, he further stated, "It's not a strategic incident; I don't lose any sleep over it."

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen reiterated Singapore's commitment to the One China policy; he was also careful to not speculate, at least publicly, on the reasons for Hong Kong's Customs authorities to inspect the cargo. Nevertheless, his response can be seen as somewhat more muscular, when he stated that Singapore will "exercise our full rights in recovering our assets."

Is China Becoming More Muscular?

It is certainly tempting to see this incident as further evidence of China adopting a more muscular stance with regards to East Asia. However, there are, as always, at least two sides to this.

Writing for The Straits Times on 6 December, Angela Poh and Chang Jun Yan have advocated caution against inferring too much into China's motives. After all, as they argue, it could have been a simple administrative error that led to the SAF vehicles being impounded by Hong Kong's Customs authorities. In his initial reaction to the incident, Defence Minister Ng also counselled against speculating as to the reasons for this incident.

Furthermore, the impoundment of the Terrex ICVs is not unprecedented. In 2010, Hong Kong Customs impounded a South Korean K-21 light tank that was being shipped back to South Korea after being part of a defence exhibition in Saudi Arabia; apparently, the shipping company had failed to file the proper import and export licenses for strategic materials. In 2000, five Soviet-made armoured personnel carriers ordered by China Aviation Industry Supply and Marketing and bound for Tianjin were impounded.

However, such a cautious interpretation of China's intentions, however politically and strategically admirable, may be counter-intuitive. To begin with, this is not the first time Singapore had shipped

military cargo from Taiwan to Singapore through Hong Kong. Up to this point, there had been no prior incident. The conjunction between this event and the backdrop of souring China-Singapore relations might plausibly be mere coincidence; however, the two could also be connected.

Furthermore, at the point of writing, no explicit reasons for the impoundment have been forwarded by either China's Foreign Ministry or Hong Kong Customs. If it was indeed an administrative error, this could have been quickly and clearly communicated, the shipping company could have taken the necessary steps to correct the error, and the cargo could have been on its way to Singapore. The fact that no explicit reasons have been forwarded thus far therefore undermines the "administrative error" argument.

Seen in the light of Chinese behaviour in East Asia in 2016 – its angry responses to the South Korean deployment of THAAD, its construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, amongst others – it is indeed difficult to escape the conclusion that China is becoming more muscular in regional affairs.

Options for East Asia

If this is indeed true, is East Asia on the cusp of a Melian Dialogue? If so, then what options do other countries in East Asia have?

A widespread concern in East Asia is the prospect, however likely, of the United States becoming less involved in regional security, with the looming inauguration of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. Trump, after all, had on occasions alleged that the United States' allies in Europe and Asia had been enjoying a free ride, that the United States had underwritten security in Europe and Asia without its regional allies committing sufficient resources to ensure their own security.

If the United States does disengage from East Asia, this then creates a potential vacuum into which an increasingly powerful China will surely step. For some countries – such as the Philippines under the Duterte administration – this is a potentially welcome development. However, for the United States' traditional allies in Asia – Japan and South Korea in particular – an East Asia dominated by China without the countervailing influence of the United States is surely a potentially negative development. For countries who believe that East Asian security is best guaranteed by an infrastructure that includes both the United States and China – and Singapore is paramount amongst such countries – a China-dominant East Asia is also not a positive development.

But what can such countries do?

Donald Trump had suggested – whether serious or otherwise – that Japan might become a nuclear weapon state. For Japan and the rest of East Asia, this is an unpalatable option. But if the United States disengages, Japan may have no choice but to transform its existing peaceful nuclear energy programme into a weapons programme. If nothing else, Japan – and South Korea, for that matter – will have to demonstrate to the Trump administration that it bears a concomitant burden to regional security efforts. This may be sufficient in persuading Trump to remain engaged in Asian security efforts.

For countries like Singapore, however, the options are rather more limited. Singapore, specifically, has always adopted a posture that emphasizes international law; this was precisely its response to the South China Sea ruling, that all states involved had to respect international law on the issue. International law, however, provides scant comfort in the event that China exercises an Asian Melian Dialogue, where China will do what it wants, and the rest of East Asia will suffer what it must.



Posted on December 14, 2016

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