

SOUTHEAST-ASIA : WILL WE SEE A NAVAL WAR?

The nations of Southeast Asia are rapidly equipping themselves with new naval capability and one may wonder whether this could usher a «fear of war». Some scholars draw a parallel with the "arms race", England and Germany's competition to acquire large military capacity in the early twentieth century.

ARMS RACE

During the early twentieth century, England and Germany competed for supremacy over the North Sea.

Huge cruisers and impressive dreadnoughts came out of shipyards, for the ultimate showdown - the famous "decisive battle" dear to the Mahanian orthodoxy. With China intending to increase its navy budget by 50% by 2016, or Japan's announcement of the commissioning of two additional helicopter carrier, the analogy is tempting, especially if considering the tensions surrounding the Diaoyu Islands / Senkaku or Paracel and Spratly archipelagos ownership.

Every Southeast-Asian country is gearing up, and submarines are the weapon of choice. Malaysia has acquired two Scorpene submarines from DCNS, while Vietnam bought six Kilos from Russia. Singapore has a slight advantage over its neighbours, and is continuing its purchase of submarines from Archer Sweden. Indonesia has placed an order with Korea and announced in June 2013 its will to have the necessary infrastructure to build their own submarines.

Some fear that the proliferation of those weapons in the semi- closed Southeast Asia basins could escalate into conflict. The South China Sea, with its system of straits, is a trap for potential Chinese SSBN based on the island of Hainan. While the submarines acquired by Southeast-Asian countries could rebalance the asymmetrical power structure that has increasingly shifted towards China, it could also make the region less safe.



Malaysian Scorpene-class submarine (© Marine nationale – Alain Monot)

Finally, the United States' eagerness to protect their interests in the region by ensuring stability and security could clash with Chinese ambitions and their focus on sovereignty claims. The increased US presence could be framed as unjust interference and feed Chinese propaganda.

CATCH-UP RATHER THAN GROWTH

Despite the appearance of an arms race, countries in the region may simply be trying to catch up. Indeed, their naval forces are outdated and crews need to be trained and readied to use newer equipment. Moreover, rather than encouraging any conflict at sea, Southeast-Asian countries such as China must first deal with serious internal conflicts - such as the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the Mindanao islands in the Philippines or the Tibet issue in China.

Beyond official declarations, Beijing's real motives remain difficult to de-cypher: discussions of the powerful Central Military Commission, the real decision-making body, are draped with the utmost discretion. Beijing's policies are also defined by the internal power struggles between institutions - the Communist Party, People's Army – as well as the country's economic development goals.

However, containing Taiwan remains the immediate goal, with further expansion into the Pacific Ocean being a longer-term objective, but the regions' geography makes it a real challenge. Finally, the Chinese fleet is aging, and rarely goes out to sea.

To avoid framing China as a lone wolf in the region, Washington maintains a dialogue with Beijing. The Chinese fleet was recently invited to participate in RIMPAC 2014. Regional infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia also create opportunities for local powers to communicate and network.

It seems that the surest way to avoid war would be to further involve China in political discussions while having it realise it now has responsibilities as a major player. For all countries of the region, a naval war would have immediate economic consequences, as they are dependent on sea routes for their growth.