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A New Arms Race in Sight? A Qualitative Assessment of the Current Geopolitical Rivalry in East Asia

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A New Arms Race in Sight? A Qualitative Assessment of the Current Geopolitical Rivalry in East Asia

East Asia today seems to be witnessing a new round of arms race. With its rapid military technological upgrade and blue-navy buildup over the past years, China is leading the increase of military spending in the region, and many others are following suit. The rebalancing posture of the United States has further prompted the trajectory of regional military buildups and political contention. Many observers thus posit the escalating geopolitical rivalry in East Asia and growing possibilities of acute conflicts among disputant countries over territorial sovereignty or maritime rights and interests. Before lamenting this gloomy future, however, we should look beyond general perceptions and ask: Is an arms race truly dawning on East Asia? A qualitative answer is required because it is the key to sober understanding of the current trends of geopolitical rivalry in the region, only on which basis can a sustainable and effective regional strategy be made.

I. Rivals are in the eyes of the beholder: Why do people opine differently?

Despite the perceived lack of transparency in some countries' military spending and the different statistical methods applied, observers actually look at the same data and openly-reported facts, yet come to very different conclusions. There are mainly three contending views on whether an arms race is arising in East Asia,[1] namely, the pessimist, the optimist, and the uncertain.

[1] Although "East Asia" is a vague geographical term, most scholars would agree that, in geopolitical sense, it covers 19 sovereign countries including China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, the ten ASEAN members, the United States, Russia, India, Australia and New Zealand — the 18 members of East Asia Summit together with North Korea.

The pessimistic view is shared mostly by strategy-related or military-related think tank researchers, who not only refer to the climbing military spending of East Asia as a whole vis-a-vis other regions, but also emphasise the phenomenal investment of regional powers in sea-denial capabilities, mainly including anti-ship missiles and submarines. They notice that East Asia's total military expenditure has risen from US$222 billion in 2007 to US$329 billion in 2014, compared with a meager rise from US$386 billion to US$391 billion for Europe and a remarkable drop from US$625 billion to US$596 billion for North America during the same period.[2] Some further point out that nearly all major players in the region — the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Vietnam and Indonesia, to be more specific — are engaged in an ever more intense competition for the latest models of, if not outweighing numbers in, aircraft carriers, submarines and jet fighters.[3] While Chinese analysts who acknowledge the emerging arms dynamics tend to attribute the trend to the lasting security dilemma in the region and especially the US military pivoting to the Asia-Pacific, most from other countries trace the accelerating regional military buildups to the rapid rise of China's strategic power.[4] As portrayed in a *Wall Street Journal* essay, "From the Arabian

[2] SIPRI Military Expenditure Database: 1988–2014.

[3] Hundreds of papers have been written on the East Asian arms race since 2009. For example, see Christian Bedford, "The View from the West: Asia's Race for Carriers," *Canadian Naval Review*, Spring 2009, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 33–5; Mackenzie Eaglen and Jon Rodeback, "Submarine Arms Race in the Pacific: The Chinese Challenge to U.S. Undersea Supremacy," *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, No. 2367, Feb. 2010; Bates Gill, "From Peaceful Rise to Assertiveness? Explaining Changes in China's Foreign and Security Policy under Hu Jintao," SIPRI Conference Paper, 19 April 2013, available at: http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRI-Hu%20Gill.pdf; Desmond Ball, "Asia's Naval Arms Race: Myth or Reality?" paper for the 25th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, 1 June 2011, available at: http://www.isis.org.my/files/25APR/paper_cs_2_desmond_ball.pdf.

[4] Most Chinese scholars believe that it is the US rebalancing to Asia that has deteriorated the security dilemma and triggered upwards the regional military buildups. See, for instance, Tang Yongsheng, Li Li and Fang Ke, "Evolution of the Strategic Situation in the Asia-Pacific and Its Implications to China's National Security," *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol. 8, 2013, pp. 1–5; and Lin Limin, "The 'Deficiency' and 'Supplement' of Security Mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific," *Contemporary World*, Vol. 7, 2012, pp. 22–6. For a critical review of China's role in East Asian military buildup, see Peter Shearman (ed.), *Power Transition and International Order in Asia: Issues and Challenges*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2014; Carlyle A Thayer, "The Rise of China and Maritime Security in Southeast Asia," *IDE-JETRO Policy Analysis*, February 2012; and Bruno Hellendorff, "Military Spending and Arms Transfers in Southeast Asia: A Puzzling Modernization," Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security (GRIP) Analysis, 20 June 2013.

Sea to the Pacific Ocean, countries fearful of China's growing economic and military might — and worried that the United States will be less likely to intervene in the region — are hurtling into a new arms race."[5] Therefore, in order to keep China in check and prevent a new Cold War, many analysts encourage the United States to keep investing in East Asia on military, diplomatic and economic dimensions, and, if necessary, even to work with Russia and other major powers to thwart China's rapid military modernisation plans.[6]

Standing on the opposite are mainly Chinese scholars, though a few analysts from other countries are also optimistic about the current trend of regional military buildups. According to them, the increasing military spending of regional powers owes more to their domestic concerns, such as anti-terrorism, long-term deficiency in military modernisation and inter-interest group political game, than to a fear of external threats. A comparative assessment of the military expenditure of major players over the past decade also negates the widely-held misperception of a tit-for-tat arms race among them.[7] Besides, some observers correctly point out that, given the huge power gap between China and the United States, China's rapid military buildup does not aim to seek regional dominance, but asymmetric deterrence against the United States instead, thus should not be overestimated.[8] In short, before a truly tit-for-tat arms race has taken place, it is dangerous to hype up the concept not only because it

[5] Amol Sharma et al., "Asia's New Arms Race," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 February 2011.
[6] Henry D Sokolski (ed.), *The Next Arms Race*, U.S. Army War College SSI e-book, July 2012, pp. 1–23. Also refer to Josh Wineera, "Can Today's Great Powers Avoid a Cold War in a Warm Pacific? From the Fulda Gap to Walu Bay," University of New Zealand Research Paper, May 2012, available at: http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Massey%20News/2012/6/docs/Wineera-Pacific.pdf.
[7] Guo Rui and Wang Xiaoke, "An Analysis of the Driving Forces of East Asian Military Buildup Since the End of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 3, 2013, pp. 109–25; and Geoffrey Till, "What Arms Race? Why Asia Isn't Europe 1913?" *The Diplomat*, 15 February 2013. See also, Kurt Amend, "Cross-Straits Series: The Coming Asian Arms Race," talk at the Atlantic Council Conference, Washington, D.C., 22 August 2013, available at: http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/en/events/past-events/cross-straits-series-the-coming-asian-arms-race.
[8] Joseph Gerson, "Countering Washington's Pivot and the New Asia-Pacific Arms Race," *Z Magazine*, 27 January 2013; and Kara Hawkins, "China and the Asia Security Balance," *Journal of Australia-China Affairs*, Vol. 3, 2013, pp. 26–32.

might end in a self-fulfilling prophesy, but also because of the crying-wolf effect, where people become so accustomed to phony warnings that they will lose a sense of urgency facing real security threats in the future.

Between the optimists and pessimists are those who remain uncertain of where the current trend of regional military buildups is heading. On the one hand, they recognise the accelerating military expenditure — especially in naval buildup and military technological upgrade — of major regional players, and agree that the outbalancing military buildup of China may induce others to bind together or even launch a preventive war against it. On the other hand, they maintain that most regional players still refrain from keeping up with the frontrunner, and the region as a whole invests more in the quality rather than the quantity of armament, hence not an arms race yet.[9] Moreover, some argue that the nature of an arms race is not to be decided merely by the increasing military spending, but "it is the combination of defense spending with behavior, with rhetoric, with perceptions of intentions that ultimately determines the destabilizing or stabilizing effect of military modernization."[10] In other words, East Asia can avoid a serious arms race by averting the prevailing contentious mentality and strengthening security cooperation among regional players.

From the above analysis we can see that, although the three major views are based more or less on the same data concerning military expenditure of East Asian countries, and they all notice the relatively faster military buildups of a few key regional players, especially China, yet they differ greatly in three observations: (i) momenta behind the rising military spending — is it mainly triggered by China's rise, the US rebalancing or diverse domestic concerns?; (ii) major growth points of military

[9] Felix K Chang, "More Is Not Enough: Arms Buildups, Innovation, and Stability in the Asia-Pacific," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, November 2013; and Richard A Bitzinger, "A New Arms Race? Explaining Recent Southeast Asian Military Acquisitions," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2010, pp. 50–69.

[10] Ely Ratner, "Cross-Straits Series: The Coming Asian Arms Race," talk at the Atlantic Council Conference, Washington, DC, 22 August 2013.

spending — is the bulk of military investment put in expanding or upgrading the arsenal?; and (iii) modes of the concurrent military buildups — to what extent are they following a tit-for-tat spiral upward? Holding such diverse perspectives, the three views naturally see very different trends of geopolitical rivalry in East Asia and, therefore, drive at different proposals for peace and stability of the region.

Interestingly, the three diverging observations nearly correspond to the three basic criteria by which to define the genuine occurrence of an arms race: the more or less matchable sizes of competing parties, their deliberate endeavours to outpace each other in specific or overall capabilities, and the tit-for-tat dynamics of military buildups.[11] Thus, we can examine the current regional geopolitical rivalry by focusing on the three dimensions — key players involved, major driving forces behind their military spending, and more importantly, their respective strategic goals — in a much clearer framework.

II. Not all about the elephant: To what extent is China's rise changing the arms dynamics?

In a sensational best-seller a decade ago, China was depicted as an elephant in a china shop — even its subtle movements would arouse great anxieties from others.[12] Indeed, it is widely believed that it is China's rapid rise and assertive behaviour to its neighbors that triggered the new rounds of military buildups in the region. By such logic, East Asia is inevitably entering an arms race, for other players will try their best to keep pace with the rising Chinese military power almost by instinct.

[11] Richard A Bitzinger, "A New Arms Race?". A simpler interpretation is given by Dr David Robertson, a renowned Oxford professor: an arms race is in essence "a central part of balance of power theory: any technological advance by one side threatens the other, which then tries to build better weapons, forcing the first mover to improve its weapons, and so on." See David Robertson, *A Dictionary of Modern Politics*, 2nd Edition, London: Europa Publications Limited, 1993, p. 28.

[12] Erik Izraelewicz, *Quand La Chine Change Le Monde* (translated by Yao Haixing et al.), Beijing: CITIC Publishing House, 2005, p. 6.

However, such assumptions do not cohere with either statistical evidence or the official lines of all regional players.

Above all, by the matchable-size criterion, only a few players qualify for an arms race, and there is clearly no arms race going on among them. As indicated by a comparison of the changing military expenditure of major East Asian geopolitical players since the end of the Cold War, only five are potential parties of an arms race in terms of military power and historical ties with the region — the United States, China, Japan, Russia and India (see Figure 1). Other players either have very limited power or lack a regional ambition such that their military buildups serve mainly self-defense and domestic-stability objectives. Of the five potential competitors, the military expenditure of the United States and Japan remained the same level between 2005 and 2014, while those of China, Russia and India rose by 119.5 per cent, 97.6 per cent and 38.5 per cent, respectively. Considering the fact that majority of Russia's military forces are deployed in Europe and Central Asia, and that India's high military spending is mostly targeted at its periphery (despite its growing engagement with East Asia on security issues in recent years),[13] we can reasonably say that China's lasting military investment has not triggered similar responses of potential competitors. In other words, the major powers in East Asia have not entered into an arms race. Similarly, of other smaller players, only three countries' (Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand) military spending underwent a significant increase mainly due to the complementary upgrade of its increasingly faded military capacities, thus reputing the widely held misperception of a lesser-scale arms race among the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[14]

[13] Yi Ming, "An In-depth Analysis of the Implications of Military Expenditure in the Asia-Pacific to China's Security," *Contemporary Economics*, Vol. 2, 2014, pp. 78–80.

[14] Such misperception does not only cover the front pages of public media, but often appears in more scholarly works as well. See, for example, "PLA Thinktank: Countries around the South China Sea Speed up Military Purchases Accelerating an Arms Race," *Xinhua News*, 30 May 2013; and Du Qinghua, "An Economic Analysis of the Arms Race in Southeast Asia after the Cold War," *Productivity Research*, No. 11, 2011, pp. 100–2.

Figure 1: Military expenditures of selected East Asian powers (1992–2014), in 2011 constant US$ (billion)

	1992	2001	2005	2009	2011	2013	2014	% of total GDP, 2014	Growth rate 1992–2014
US	489.2	397.3	579.8	701.0	711.3	617.9	577.5	3.5	18%
China	25.3	45.4	71.5	128.7	147.3	174.0	191.0	2.1	655%
Japan	52.5	60.3	61.3	59.7	60.5	59.4	59.0	1.0	12%
S Korea	16.4	20.6	24.7	30.1	30.9	32.4	33.1	2.6	10%
Russia	62.3	33.7	46.4	64.5	70.2	84.9	91.7	4.5	47%
India	16.8	28.6	36.1	49.0	49.6	49.1	50.0	2.4	198%
Australia	16.0	18.7	21.4	26.7	26.6	25.4	27.2	1.8	70%
NZ	2.0	2.0	1.9	2.2	2.1	2.0	2.2	1.2	10%
Vietnam	0.7	----	1.6	2.6	2.7	3.3	3.6	2.2	414%
Singapore	4.2	7.5	8.6	9.4	8.9	8.9	9.1	3.3	117%
Indonesia	1.9	1.9	3.6	4.3	5.8	9.0	8.1	0.8	326%
Malaysia	2.4	3.0	4.5	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.9	1.5	104%
Thailand	4.7	3.3	3.1	5.8	5.5	5.6	5.7	1.5	21%
Philippines	1.8	2.1	2.3	2.5	2.7	3.1	3.0	1.1	67%
Total	696.2	624.4	866.8	1091.3	1128.9	1079.8	1066.1	----	----

Figure compiled by the author. Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database: 1988–2014.

Next, the arms dynamics in East Asia is driven by many forces other than a shared concern to balance the rising Chinese power. Many observers have noted that, instead of the pressure from geopolitical competition or external threats, domestic concerns have grown to be the major driving force behind the military buildups of most East Asian countries, including the replacement of outdated capabilities, bigger military budget corresponding to the booming economy, domestic security demands as well as bureaucratic and interest-group politics.[15] For example, despite China's double-digit increase in military spending over the past decade, its

military modernisation level had remained quite low by 2010, with a modernisation rate of 56 per cent for submarines, 40 per cent for air defence forces and only 26 per cent for the air and naval surface forces, thus calling for more investment to overhaul its military system.[16] The case of Indonesia, one of the only ASEAN member with a significant increase in military spending over the past years, also reflects increasing prosperity and the impact of domestic politics rather than a reaction to the rise of China (as many believe Australia to be their key external threat).[17] Furthermore, out of the expectation of many for a more intense competition of military buildups after the US rebalancing strategy was announced in 2011, the arms dynamics in East Asia has not changed much, as indicated by statistics in Figure 1.

Finally, no country intends to engage itself in an overt armament-oriented geopolitical rivalry in East Asia. On the contrary, they all take every opportunity to downplay the concept. A most revealing proof is the low rate of military expenditure out of the total gross domestic product (GDP): of the 14 selected countries in Figure 1, only Russia (4.5 per cent), the United States (3.5 per cent) and Singapore (3.3 per cent) spend more than 3 per cent of their GDP on military buildup, while other major powers all keep their military spending at a rather low rate, with Japan (1 per cent) and Indonesia (0.8 per cent) as the lowest. This marks a sharp contrast to the 7 to 10 per cent, sometimes even a double-digit percentage, of the total GDP spent on military buildup by the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War era. On official aspects as well, all countries have adopted a more peace-oriented and cooperation-oriented foreign strategy instead of a unilateral military buildup-focused strategy, and they ardently advocate common and sustainable security on all public occasions, such as Chinese President Xi Jinping's proposal of the new Asian security concept at the Fourth Summit Meeting of the

[15] Guo Rui and Wang Xiaoke, "An Analysis of the Driving Forces"; and Bruno Hellendorff, "Military Spending and Arms Transfers".
[16] Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Development Involving the People's Republic of China 2011*, Annual Report to Congress, p. 43.
[17] David C Kang, "A Looming Arms Race in East Asia?" *The National Interest*, 14 May 2014.

Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA) held in Shanghai in May 2014, and the declaration by the 25th ASEAN Summit to "promote the primacy of diplomacy…and adopt peaceful international and regional dispute settlement mechanisms to address differences and disputes in the region and beyond."

In all, we can see that neither China's rising military power nor the US rebalancing has changed the course of East Asian military buildups so far. The elephant-aroused chaos about the impact of China's rise on East Asian arms dynamics is, to much extent, a myth. Although numerous tensions remain unresolved in the region, and the geopolitical competition especially among China, Japan and the United States is on the rise, yet "all countries are seeking ways to manage relations with each other that emphasise institutional, diplomatic and economic solutions rather than purely military solutions."[18] How long the relatively stable arms dynamics will continue, and whether the trends of geopolitical rivalry can proceed in a benign way, largely depend on how East Asian countries work together to prevent the political and economic bifurcation of the region and develop an all-inclusive framework for common peace and development.

III. Escape the Thucydides Trap: Can East Asia avoid militarised geopolitical rivalry?

A few years ago, Professor Graham Allison of Harvard University coined the term "the Thucydides Trap" — meaning that a war is inevitable between the established leading power and a rising challenger — to warn of the US-China geopolitical rivalry.[19] As many pessimists believe, despite the good will and efforts of related parties, East Asia will ultimately fall into war among those major geopolitical players because of the "deadly combination of calculation and emotion that, over the years, can turn

[18] David C Kang, "A Looming Arms Race in East Asia?".
[19] Graham Allison, "An Interview with Graham Allison," *The National Interest*, 8 October 2013.

healthy rivalry into antagonism and worse."[20] However, no modern war can be fought without long-term preparation and military buildups. Other than the above-mentioned peace-oriented foreign policy and official rhetoric of all East Asian countries, there are five key mechanisms that prevent the regional geopolitical game from escalating into a militarised one.

The first is a balance of fear of war. Throughout history, the overwhelming security concern of an established power over its presumptuous challenger has been the major cause for an ascending spiral of hostility and tit-for-tat arms races. As Thucydides famously wrote more than 2,400 years ago, "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable." In other words, it is the overriding unilateral fear of one party of a geopolitical rivalry, rather than one shared by both, that leads to the road of war. Today, however, owing to the extensive stakes all major powers hold in each other's wellbeing, the high costs of war, and the advance of weapons or technologies of mass destruction, there is a mutual understanding in all parties involved that a war has become increasingly unbearable if not totally unimaginable, hence a balance of fear of war.

The second is the ever-deepening complex interdependence. Compared with the rather low level of economic interdependence between Britain and Germany a century ago and between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War, major powers today such as China and the United States depend on each other much more broadly in economic, political and social aspects, let alone their common task to tackle the myriad global security and developmental challenges. In fact, they now share such close ties like knotted gears that none can do well without the proper functioning of all.

[20] David E Sanger, "Superpower and Upstart: Sometimes It Ends Well," *The New York Times*, 22 January 2011.

The third is the shifting focus of government spending on domestic objectives. Since the end of World War II, the military expenditure of all major powers have constituted an ever-smaller proportion in their total government spending with, for instance, the US statistics dropping from around 60 per cent in the 1950s to below 20 per cent in the 2000s, and China's statistics dropping from 20 to 30 per cent in the 1950s to 8.66 per cent in 1998 and further down to 6.49 per cent in 2009.[21] Apart from public demands for better welfare and health systems, the increasingly democratised domestic political process in almost every country also constrains the government's deliberations in investing more in "guns" over "butter".

The fourth is the relatively easy attainment of asymmetric deterrence. Modern weapons and technologies are extremely expensive: a late-model jet fighter costs US$20 to 40 million and an aircraft carrier costs billions, let alone the huge budget for daily maintenance and functioning. Although a leading power with a robust economy can relatively easily afford such costs, yet it is even easier for a contender to neutralise its numerical advantage by introducing a new and vastly more effective combat system.[22] As the British historian Geoffrey Till points out, "technological transformation is much steadier, and the importance of maintaining an edge over rivals more debatable, given the rise of asymmetric technological/political/legal alternatives and strategies."[23]

The fifth is the prevalent bilateral, regional and global platforms for security cooperation and crisis management. Take the Sino-US military relationship as an example. Notwithstanding China's perceived investment in anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) capabilities and the US air-sea battle plans, both countries have developed dozens of military

[21] Office of Management and Budget, *Historical Tables: Budget of the U.S. Government* (Fiscal Year 2013); and The Information Office of China's State Council, *China's National Defense in 2010*, 31 March 2011.
[22] Felix K Chang, "More Is Not Enough".
[23] Geoffrey Till, "What Arms Race?".

exchange institutions and have begun to conduct regular joint military exercises, augmented with new agreements every year, such as the Memorandum of Understanding signed by both defense departments on 12 November 2014 on instant notice of major military actions and on codes of conduct for naval and air encounters. Such institutions, together with the developing international legal regime for dispute settlement, greatly inhibit and even outdate the arms-building impulse of major powers.

In conclusion, it can be said that geopolitical rivalry in East Asia has undergone fundamental changes from previous times in history: rather than racing for a more formidable arsenal and stronger military blocs, geopolitical players are competing with each other mainly in diplomatic, economic, cultural and institutional arenas. Instead of seeking to monopolise power and larger spheres of influence, they are learning to share power by peaceful and rule-based approaches. Indeed, East Asia over the past decade has enjoyed the most stable and prosperous era in history and, with the function of all the mechanisms mentioned above, is very likely to maintain such benign trends of geopolitical rivalry in the years to come.

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