

Camp Pendleton Exercise: Heralding the Future US-Asia Security Dynamics?

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30 April 2014

What does the recently held Camp Pendleton Exercise (Iron Fist 2014), between the US and Japan, portend for the US' role in the Asian security architecture?

Joint military exercises, particularly those involving combat simulations and live fire exercises are as much politico-strategic messages themselves as they are platforms to hone military talents. In the last week of January and through the most of February, the US and Japan conducted the Camp Pendleton Exercise off the California Coast. Significantly, this year's exercise had renditions different from its erstwhile counterparts. The month-long exercise came right after escalated tensions between Beijing and Tokyo over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Japanese soldiers and the US Marines practiced how to invade and retake an island captured by an enemy – a clear indication to China.

Iron Fist 2014: Role Reversal

This edition of the exercise had a role reversal of sorts between the US and Japan. Throughout the exercise, the Japanese forces, in several senses, took charge and led from the front, carrying each task with a heightened sense of purpose. Unlike 2006 when Japan sent only 25 soldiers, the 2014 edition involved 250 Japan Ground Self-Defense Force personnel. Japan also appeared more prepared as it carried its own ammunition, vehicles and other military assets in this year's exercise. The role of the US Marines, deliberately limited to support the Japanese soldiers in the exercise, sent a different message. Corroborating these observations, Lt. Col. John O'Neal, Commander, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, stated that this year, the Japanese team came with "a new sense of purpose."

The Exercise: A Signal?

The Iron Fist 2014 could be interpreted as a major US signaling to Japan that it is about time Tokyo assumes control of its security vis-à-vis Beijing. Probably for the first time in the history of this exercise, it seemed to have some agenda: that the US is keen on defining the extent to which it is ready to go for its allies in Asia. The Iron Fist 2014 could be a harbinger for a series of actions by the US in Asia that redefine the extent to which it will get involved in Asian security affairs, particularly those that concern China. The US's involvement in a direct military showdown with China, for a third country, seems out of question for now, despite Obama's contradictory promise to Japan during his latest visit.

US Push for an 'Each to His Own' Security Framework?

The 2014 Camp Pendleton military exercise can be seen as an explicit signal for an 'each to his own' security framework that the US is trying to push for in Asia. The US calculations posit a situation where it allows individual countries to take charge of their security situation while Washington remains on standby. The US' hesitation to act following previous Chinese assertive moves, including the Scarborough Shoal dispute, the USS Cowpens incident, and Beijing's declaration of the Air Defense Identification Zone, provides a better understanding of the retrofitting that is underway in the US' Asia policy. With increasing Chinese assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific, it will suit US' resources and strategy if it works with a concert of democracies in this part of the world and let individual countries strengthen their operational capabilities and readiness. Washington's suggestion is that it will be less meddling in specific Asian countries' dispute with Beijing but will continue to enhance their military competence vis-à-vis China.

To that end, the US security emphasis has rightly been on strengthening maritime capabilities of strategic countries in Asia. With Japan, the US cooperation is through the primary involvement of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force in various joint military exercises the two countries engage in. With Vietnam, one of the US' primary aims is to strengthen the Vietnamese Coast Guards for which it pledged \$18 million in 2013. The US-Philippines military relations too hinge on maritime cooperation through PHIBLEX & Balikatan exercises. With India, the US holds the Malabar Exercises every year.

What Next?

Although the US has tried to eschew a direct military rhetoric and has pushed for a milder concept of "collective defense" vis-à-vis China, it is getting clearer that the US security thrust in Asia rests on exhorting individual countries to develop and bolster their own response capabilities and military readiness. An erstwhile militarily hands-on US has, over time, realised its incapacity and the futility of restructuring the Asian security order. The US, after a long time, seems to be handing over the security baton in East Asia to Japan. Japan, a security shadow of the US throughout the Cold War, has surprisingly leaped at the opportunity with significant changes in its defence and security outlook since end of 2013. Others like the Philippines and Vietnam will probably take some more time before they bandwagon on this security framework which appears decoupled from Washington's direct interference.

Source (courtesy): <http://www.ipcs.org/article/east-asia/camp-pendleton-exercise-heralding-the-future-us-asia-security-dynamics-4411.html>