ASIA'S TOP SECURITY THREATS

By Denny Roy

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In recent decades, East Asia has commanded increasing international attention as the center of world economic growth. The regional peace upon which that prosperity rests, however, is fragile.

Although there has been no major war for decades, several simmering conflicts have the potential to boil over into larger clashes with regional, if not global, consequences.

Here is a summary, in my view, of the top five security threats in the region:

#1 North Korea

The Kim dynasty, soon to enter its third generation, is trapped between economic stagnation and the fear that reform will lead to overthrow of the regime. North Korea's survival strategy of acquiring nuclear weapons and demonstrating a willingness to fight has made reconciliation with South Korea and the U.S. nearly impossible. In the meantime, the danger persists that Pyongyang will spark a war either by carrying out one too many acts of provocation against South Korea, or by providing nuclear material to a state or group that is hostile to the United States.

#2 U.S.-China friction

The U.S. is still the most influential power in Asia and the Pacific, and wants to keep it that way. China is a rising power that wants more of a say in the conduct of regional affairs. Managing this transition peacefully will require U.S. willingness to accommodate some of China's demands and Chinese willingness to be patient. This will not be easy for either government, especially under the pressure of public opinion. One particular rubber-meets-the-road issue is U.S. Navy surveillance near the Chinese coast; China insists that it must stop, while the Navy insists it will go to the mat to defend the principle of freedom of the seas.

#3 South China Sea territorial disputes

China, Vietnam and four other countries are involved in disputes over ownership of a number of small islets, reefs and rocks in the South China Sea, which are important because they anchor claims to fisheries and seabed fossil fuel resources. China's claims are the most expansive and the least clear. In 2010, China perceived that Vietnam was growing bolder in its moves to recover resources in disputed areas and that the U.S. had intervened on Vietnam's side. This produced an alarming outburst from Beijing, and recent weeks have brought even more escalating rhetoric and nationalist public demonstrations on both sides. Meanwhile, China is steadily building its capacity to seize and hold disputed islands, including plans to deploy its first aircraft carrier.

#4 Taiwan

Cross-Strait relations are much calmer since pro-independence Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian was succeeded in 2008 by Ma Ying-jeou, who supports the principle that Taiwan is part of China. The economic relationship is booming, and Beijing hopes this will lead to political unification. Ma, however, has no interest in negotiating political issues with Beijing and insists that Taiwan must continue to buy arms from the U.S. China's patience has limits, and Chinese missiles are still aimed at Taiwan. In addition, the pro-independence opposition party has a chance to get back into power in the January 2012 election. Thus, the real problems have been kicked down the road rather than solved.

#5 Japan's strategic future

Lacking resources or a large population, Japan is a medium-sized power. Its historical rival China, by contrast, is growing fast and seems to have almost limitless potential. If China becomes the strongest power in the region, Tokyo will face the choice of sticking with the U.S. alliance (assuming that option is still available) or appeasing China, which would mean Beijing would have veto power over major Japanese policies. The Chinese would certainly demand the expulsion of U.S. bases.

The Japanese have aligned with Britain and the United States in the past, but they clearly are not comfortable with the idea of submitting to domination by an authoritarian country they perceive as anti-Japanese. The outcome could conceivably be a nuclear-armed Japan and a Sino-Japanese cold war.

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