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Bracing for the game of thrones in Asia's future

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"We're back, Asia Pacific. Don't worry about China's bullish behavior. Our leadership -- underpinned by our growing military presence and new economic ties -- will lead to regional stability and prosperity. Sure, we have our economic problems and two wars that continue to drag our feet, but Asia is our future and so we will be around."

In a simplified and stylized nutshell, this seems to be the oft-cited mantra coming out of Washington these days with regards to the United States of America's renewed engagement of Asia.

Little wonder that some pundits are looking favorably at the recent announcement by US President Barack Obama on the eve of the East Asia Summit in Bali this week that the US will expand its defense ties with Australia and would in the future "permanently" station around 2,500 Marines in Darwin.

Others, however, believe such engagement, especially when directed at "containing" China, may further polarize Asia. Perhaps even to the point of potentially reviving a supposedly defunct bipolar Cold War logic in the region. Though more moderate views deny such possibility and argue instead that America's "dual" economic and military engagement in Asia may further "socialize" China into accepting and behaving by the "rules of the game".

Regardless, China is not warmly embracing this development. In response to Obama's announcement, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman was quoted: "It may not be quite appropriate to intensify and expand military alliances and may not be in the interests of countries within this region." Indonesia has also expressed its concern about the decision to station US Marines in Darwin.

With the South China Sea and other regional tensions continuing to brew, these debates are worth exploring. But as it stands now, I fear they may have missed the mark on some points.

First of all, while the expansion of US military presence in the Asia Pacific has been ongoing for several years -- including the basing of some of its most sophisticated platforms such as the F-22s -- it is hard for Jakarta not to take note of Darwin in particular as the future center of operations for the coming deployment of the US Marines.

Not only has Darwin been described as a "frontier port and military outpost across the Timor Sea", which some in military circles view could strengthen Canberra's hand in Indonesia's soft eastern underbelly, but for others, Timor Leste's strategic value has not been entirely forgotten.

As during the Cold War where a "Cuban island" in Indonesia's backyard was among the cited fears and rationales for invading the area in the 1970s, unfinished border security issues as well as the growing presence and profile of China and other regional powers in Indonesia's backyard continue to worry some in Jakarta.

So, while a conventional direct threat from US Marines may have been an overblown fear in some local press reports, Timor Leste's strategic location and the ongoing "game of thrones" among regional powers attached to it means that Jakarta will take serious note of the US presence in Darwin. This is perhaps one of the reasons why

Indonesia has been a key proponent of Dili's inclusion into ASEAN.

Second, with regard to the region-wide dynamic in the Asia Pacific, a second "game of thrones" for influence and leadership between Beijing and Washington is increasingly exhausting other regional countries.

China's economic growth could benefit regional countries -- the ASEAN-China free trade area, if properly managed, could prove this point. And Beijing "charm offensive" in the past decade may have also helped alleviate some fears raised in the early 2000s.

But this should not be construed as a regional acquiescence of Beijing's increasingly assertive posture in the South China Sea and the lack of transparency in its offensive naval developments. A "Sino-centric" regional order or a Pax Sinica remains undesirable.

On the other hand, America's growing engagement with Asia -- either through its bilateral alliances, strategic partnerships, or military presence -- has indeed from time to time ensured regional stability. But there are times when they have ruffled some feathers and increased regional tension too. Domestic politics being what it is in Washington -- and economic pressures being the ultimate arbiter -- it is not surprising that not everyone is warmly embracing a future Pax Americana for Asia, too.

Why must it always be either an American or Chinese leadership that guides the region towards stability? What of regional institutions like ASEAN? What of a new "concert of powers" between the region's rising and democratic forces like Indonesia, Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea?

The answer is of course a question mark at best. But this does not mean that the nature of US-China relations, or some variation of leadership or hegemony of either one, should always determine Asia's future. Whether Beijing and Washington likes it or not, the Asia Pacific Century should belong to other Asian powers, too.

Finally, while US basing plans and the South China Sea continue to occupy the headlines on the eve of the signing of Bali Concord III, one cannot refute Jusuf Wanandi's recent remarks on Indonesia's accomplishments as ASEAN Chair this year.

But if Indonesia wants to move beyond ASEAN and lead the charge to redefine and reshape the Asia Pacific region for the 21st century, Jakarta should not shy away from standing up.

Our inability to forcefully speak up against China or fellow ASEAN friends when their actions in the South China Sea jeopardize regional stability for example, often makes us look timid and hesitant. And this unfortunately means President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono should stop playing his own domestic "game of thrones" and start making full use of his remaining years in office to step up to the plate of true regional leadership.

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