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An Australian position on East Asia

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Australia needs to initiate, or at least contribute to, a solution to the tensions of East Asia, centred on the conflicting claims in the South and East China Seas. While some might argue that we lack the strategic muscle to influence the main players on these issues, we are in a unique position to bring a fresh perspective to such a discussion and have a strong interest in finding a solution. Ducking the problem and allowing the situation to escalate risks disruption to the peace and stability needed for trade and commerce. Worse still is the potential for Australia to be drawn into armed conflict.

Instability in the region stems from its history. The deep-set tension between China and Japan is mainly sourced from Japanese atrocities in World War II. Then there is the tension between Communist China and Nationalist China over Taiwan. Other countries are drawn into disputes over islands and reefs in the South China Sea and further north there is the sovereignty dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. While the North Korea/South Korea confrontation does not risk armed conflict among the main regional players, it acts as a diversion from wider co-operation for peace and stability. Underpinning all is the intransigence of national positions, deeply entrenched in Asian culture; and superimposed is the strategic competition between China and the United States, reinforced by commercial sentiment in the United States that discourages accommodation with China.

Surrender by any country of sovereignty of any of the disputed islands to another country would at present be unacceptable to national sentiment. If, however, national sentiment could be persuaded to make concessions on sovereignty, the risk of conflict could be eliminated and the recognition of mutual benefits of shared economic exploitation could prevail.

It should be clear to responsible leaders that nobody benefits from instability or conflict. One would hope that national leaders and the organs influencing national opinion could be deployed to make the needed adjustment, but there is no evidence that this is contemplated.

Is there a role for Australia in influencing attitudes towards reducing the tensions and in progressing the shared exploitation of disputed assets? Despite the vexed question of our conflicting alignments with China and the United States, a strong plus for Australia as a mediator is that we are not tainted by former colonial or extra-territorial intrusions. Neither are we located in the immediate region of conflict and, as result, we might be perceived to bring a more neutral perspective to the discussion. Further, our regional interests are quite evident – as should be our interest in reaching a peaceful outcome.

While some strategic observers maintain that Australia does not have the strategic critical mass to influence change, Australia's strategic strengths and location on the region's periphery attract the attention of the main players to the extent that its opinion and perceived alignments continue to be influential. Accordingly, we should not flinch from giving the promotion of harmony our best shot. We should make known our concern that the tensions, beyond disrupting the harmony needed for commerce and trade, risk tripping into armed conflict. We should guide thinking towards co-operative exploitation of disputed assets with prospects for longer term harmony.

Also of great importance to our interests is that by taking a position to promote the interests of all players, we would be seen to be avoiding alignment with any of the players, and so to be aligning ourselves with peace and stability.

Australia should not wish to be admonished by history for not trying.