

By Invitation

China and the quest for foreign military bases

One effect of growing great power rivalry is the revived interest in stationing facilities in strategic locations



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For The Straits Times

Speculation about China acquiring a military base in Cambodia has been around for a while. Over the last few days, we have seen more definitive claims in *The Wall Street Journal* and other media outlets, based on the assessment of satellite imagery on China's construction of naval and air facilities on the Cambodian coast in the Gulf of Thailand.

Chinese and Cambodian officials have denied these reports. They insist Chinese activity under scrutiny is entirely commercial. Is this all smoke without any fire?

The Cambodian story has been part of a series of reports from across the Indo-Pacific on the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) quest for foreign military bases.

Besides its first and formally acknowledged base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and the recent focus on Cambodia, there has been some international discussion on Beijing's potential foreign military facilities in Vanuatu (South Pacific), Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka). As China develops infrastructure projects all across the Indo-Pacific, under its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, there is concern that some of these could end up as military bases.

Beyond this speculation is one important reality: A rising China is expanding its military footprint way beyond its borders. And there will be inevitable reaction from

other powers. The United States is reportedly looking for additional military bases in the region to cope with the emerging challenge from China. The European powers, including France, Britain and Russia, are reactivating their traditional military presence in the Indo-Pacific. Some Asian powers like India and Japan are following in China's footsteps.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF BASES

Common sense tells us that a 'foreign military base' describes the presence of one nation's military on the territory of another. But if you scratch the surface, you will find there are many variations of this basic definition.

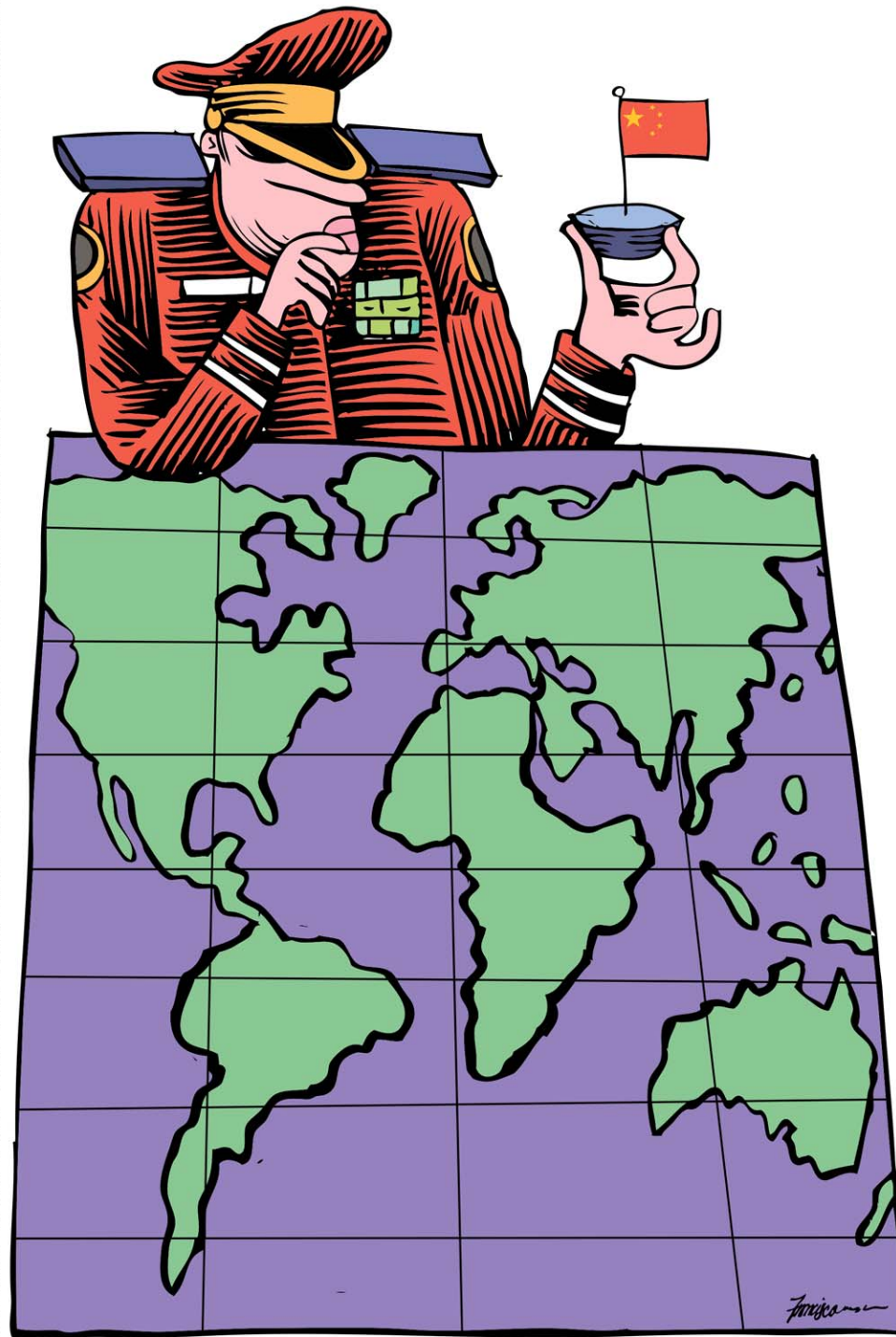
In some cases, a major power acquires the right to deploy armed forces and military equipment in another country under terms negotiated between the governments of the two nations. Sometimes these bases are for the exclusive control of a foreign power; in others they are used by both the host and guest nation.

There are some facilities which are commercial in peacetime but can be converted to military use in crises. Then there are far less obtrusive military communication stations, tracking radars, satellite monitors and military scientific research laboratories set up by a guest nation.

Major powers also send their ships to call on ports of another country, conduct joint exercises or simply use the military training facilities of another nation.

Reports on Cambodia and its denials by Beijing and Phnom Penh make sense if we use the term "dual-use facility" instead of a "military base".

A lot of the growing Chinese military activity was seen until recently as non-threatening "military diplomacy". As Beijing's foreign military profile rises amid



souring relations with Washington and its allies, there is growing strategic anxiety in the Indo-Pacific.

Many in Washington believe the Chinese quest for bases is about reordering the region in Beijing's interest and limiting America's historic security role in the Western Pacific. Canberra worries that Beijing is trying to undermine its influence in the South Pacific. Paris worries that Beijing is weakening its strategic primacy in the Western Indian Ocean. Delhi is concerned that China's military and dual-use facilities in the subcontinent are about containing India.

'THE STRING OF PEARLS'

Is China's quest for military bases a strategic surprise? Not really.

Nearly 15 years ago, a US consultancy firm – Booz Allen Hamilton – published a report that China was planning to acquire a network of military bases and facilities around the Pacific and Indian oceans. The objective,

American and Western scholars underestimated not only the speed of China's military modernisation, but also the scale of its strategic ambition. Put simply, China wants to be a great power that is capable of shaping its regional environment and has a decisive say in international security affairs. That is what great powers do, and China is now part of their ranks.

according to the report, was to secure its growing energy imports from different parts of the world. And it compared the planned network to a "string of pearls".

The assessment was greeted with derision, nowhere more than in the US. Many scoffed at the idea of China building a blue water navy and acquiring foreign military bases for energy security. They said market forces will take care of China's oil supplies, and that China had more immediate naval priorities like managing the tensions in the Taiwan Strait than to dispatch its navy to the Gulf. Many took Beijing's bland assertions that China will "never seek foreign bases" on face value.

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In 2017, China opened what it called a "logistics support base" in Djibouti that has facilitated China's naval operations in the north-western Indian Ocean. This is just the beginning. One of the PLA's specific mandates from the Chinese Communist Party is to secure China's overseas economic interests as well as the safety of its personnel around the world. Beijing also justifies its expanding military and naval footprint in the name of contributing to the public good such as international peacekeeping, maritime security, anti-piracy and disaster relief.

Strategic rivalry between great powers intensifies the quest for foreign military bases. The Cold War confrontation with the then Soviet Union saw the United States establish hundreds of bases, large and small, all across the world to sustain its global military operations. It deployed troops in Western Europe and North-east Asia to guarantee the security of its allies against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was constrained, but it deployed troops in Eastern Europe and developed military bases where it could in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

BENEFITS OF BEING A HOST

In highlighting the impact of great power rivalry on the quest for foreign military bases, we should not ignore the supply side of the equation.

Some nations want foreign military bases to ensure their security against internal and regional threats. After all, military alliances are very much part of statecraft. Some others see it from an economic perspective. For Djibouti, which has no resources except its strategic location in the Horn of Africa, foreign military bases are part of its revenue model. Besides the US and China, France, Italy and Japan have military bases there. Others may be welcome too.

Although many countries in Asia and Africa swear by non-alignment or neutrality and renounce foreign military bases, they have found a way to finesse it in practice.

After the Cold War, the demand and supply side pressures on military bases seemed to ease a bit.

But as great power rivalry returns to the Indo-Pacific and some Asian powers are now great powers in their own right, there will be renewed jockeying for foreign military bases and access to strategic locations throughout the region. As in the Cold War, this will present interesting leverage for those willing to offer bases, but will also trigger domestic political opprobrium associated with the idea of "ceding territorial sovereignty".

The reverse is also true. For China and other Asian powers, which once vehemently opposed foreign military bases, it is going to be a steep learning curve. They need to cope with many problems arising from the deployment of soldiers and ships in distant lands. They will be inevitably sucked into the domestic politics of the host nation, become the lightning rod to nationalist opposition and vulnerable to manipulation by the local elite.

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