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China a big worry for next generation

By Jim Nowlan

Some in China are rattling the saber over a string of tiny, uninhabited islands that both Japan and China claim. Expect to see more muscle flexing by China in years to come, as it tries to establish military primacy in Asia, pushing the U.S. to the sidelines somehow.

This will bring China into direct conflict with the U.S., which is pledged to defend bustling Taiwan (right off China's coast) as well as Japan and South Korea.

Unless an incident spirals out of control, I don't expect significant military clashes in the foreseeable future, as there is too much for every country to lose. But America's next generation will have its hands full with potentially earth-shaking, violent conflict in Asia.

Typically in this space I write about Illinois, yet China has fascinated me ever since I taught in Shanghai and lectured throughout China several years ago.

The immediate dispute centers around several relative specks of rock in the East China Sea called either the Senkaku (Japanese term) or the Diaoyu (Chinese name) Islands. The Chinese claim the islands were ceded to them in the treaty that sealed the end of World War II; the Japanese disagree.

The Chinese have no love for the Japanese, who humiliated and brutalized the then somewhat backward Chinese in the 1930s and during World War II.

When I lectured in Nanking (now Nanjing), infamous in history as the object of "The Rape of Nanking" by the Chinese, I visited the somber memorial museum to the Chinese

occupation of that city. The photographic record of savagery against the residents is horrific beyond words.

So, the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has brought Chinese protesters into the streets, where Japanese businesses and autos have been torched (with no loss of life to this point).

Attendantly, the Chinese Communist Party is to hold its big convention soon to name a new leader for the next ten years. Thus anything that distracts the people from corruption and excessive wealth among party leaders, as well as from a slowing economy, is a relief.

The Chinese are a very proud people, aware that throughout much of history their country was the most advanced and successful in the world.

They are also sensitive to the humiliation that western countries imposed upon an isolated, backward nation in the 1800s, when England, Germany, Russia and the U.S. played with China as if it were some kind of toy to be exploited for commercial gain.

Chinese pride drives a strong nationalistic interest in regaining its place among the great nations of the world. The PhD students I taught were bright as new pennies, polite and friendly, and immensely proud of their country. They also revel in the miraculous economic growth of China since 1980, growth that might in a few years eclipse the economy of the U.S.

On the one hand, the Chinese leaders don't want anything to upset their economic growth, which they see as central to stability among their people, so military conflict at this time is to be avoided.

On the other hand, their pride, overwhelming size, and interest in the apparently great oil and natural resource treasures in the contested South China Sea induce the Chinese to assert their latent power in the region.

This poses long-term problems for the U.S., which is pivoting its military strength from the Middle East to Asia, which angers the Chinese.

In a new book on “The China Choice,” Australian Hugh White suggests the U.S. has three options: try to maintain primacy over China in Asia; yield to Chinese regional dominance, or negotiate “a new order in which China’s authority and influence grow enough to satisfy the Chinese, and America’s role remains large enough to ensure that China’s power is not misused.”

All three options are fraught with major problems. Maintaining primacy, as we do now, would require immense resources in a region far from home for a U.S. where budget deficits are already depleting our economic strength. Yielding to Chinese dominance would mean abandoning our allies, and an uneasy balance of power would be tested continually.

As I suggested at the beginning, our next generation of leaders will face daunting challenges to keep Asia from burning.