



## World Has Not Stopped for Syria

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Events around the world do not obligingly come to a halt while U.S. officials focus all their attention on the crisis du jour in the Middle East—this time in Syria. In fact, significant developments continue to take place, even in other portions of the Middle East. For example, the renewed sectarian violence next door in Iraq is escalating at a frightening pace, Sunni-Shiite tensions in Bahrain are at a vigorous simmer, Libya is imploding, and Egypt is perched on the verge of civil war.

Outside the Middle East, there are a number of important developments, both good and bad, involving countries that are far more significant than Syria to long-term U.S. interests. That is especially true in South Asia and East Asia. In the former region, the once-pervasive assumption that India would be the next country to enter the ranks of elite global powers has faded badly. Economic growth rates are stagnating, and the rupee is plunging in value on world exchanges, in part a victim of profligate spending by government leaders who assumed the soaring pace of economic expansion would never diminish and they, therefore, need not worry about small matters like budgetary discipline.

India's new financial woes are not merely a matter of concern for regional and global economic health, although they do have troubling ramifications on that front. If predictions of India becoming one of the world's great powers prove erroneous, or at least decidedly premature, that development also has important diplomatic and security implications. For well over a decade, U.S. policy makers have tended to view India as a possible security competitor to China and even as an emerging strategic counterweight. The crude version of that thesis envisioned New Delhi as a *de facto* U.S. ally in efforts to contain Chinese power. The more sophisticated version understood that Indian leaders might not be eager to play that game on Washington's behalf and would instead seek to play a more balanced role between Washington and Beijing. Still, India's economic and military rise, combined with the country's history of border disputes and other frictions with China, suggested that New Delhi's enhanced status would benefit U.S. interests and at least give Beijing some concerns to ponder. If India instead suffers the economic malaise that afflicts portions of the European Union, American calculations about that country's future security role will need to change.

In East Asia, tensions continue to simmer between China and several neighbors over the chronic territorial squabbles in the South China Sea. After a year or so of relative quiescence, tensions between Beijing and Manila are again on the rise. Philippines officials have accused China of planning to militarily occupy Scarborough Shoal, one of the chains of disputed reefs. Chinese ships have established an ongoing presence near the chain since April 2012, much to the anger of the Philippines and other claimants. Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario warns that China's latest move, starting construction on Scarborough Shoal, "places the region in jeopardy in terms of peace and stability." He added: "If the Philippines is the target of China today, another country could be the target tomorrow." Since the United States has a mutual defense treaty with Manila, the escalation of the quarrel between China and the Philippines ought to be a matter of some concern to Washington.

The Chinese foreign ministry brusquely rebuffed Manila's protests, describing the chain as China's "inherent territory." That attitude is not likely to reduce tensions between Beijing and its Southeast Asian neighbors. Building structures on Scarborough Shoal would also seem to violate a 2002 declaration of conduct involving the various claimants.

Worries about China's ambitions are probably a factor in another important recent development in East Asia—Japan's apparent determination to build a more robust defense. The country's defense ministry has applied for a three percent hike in the military budget—the largest annual increase in over two decades. It is likely not coincidental that the proposal comes on the heels of the nasty spike in tensions with China over the past fifteen months about the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Likewise, it does not seem coincidental that Japanese forces are participating in military drills based on the scenario of amphibious operations to expel invaders who have occupied an unnamed island.

The faltering of the leading democratic power in South Asia and the rise of tensions in East Asia both have a significant impact on short-term and long-term U.S. interests. Indeed, developments in those two regions are likely more relevant to such genuine interests than anything that happens in Syria. Unfortunately, Obama administration officials demonstrate few signs of ending their policy obsession with the Middle East and devoting more attention to these other, more important, issues.