

Coping with China's strategic rise

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By William Choong

GIVEN their recent disputes with China over the the South China Sea, Vietnam and the Philippines must be kicking themselves for what they did to the United States years ago.

In 1975, Communist North Vietnam sent American troops packing after a decade-long war. Thirteen years later, more than 70 Vietnamese sailors died after an armed clash with Chinese forces over Johnson Reef in the Spratly Islands. Today, Hanoi's war of nerves with Beijing over the South China Sea continues.

In 1992, Manila kicked the US off Subic Bay naval base. Over the next seven years, China started building structures on the disputed Mischief Reef - moves that Manila could do little about. Earlier this year, the Philippines was seen to be the loser again after its dispute with Beijing over the Scarborough Shoal.

American officials would feel pretty smug with Filipino and Vietnamese officials now keen to bolster Washington's presence in their backyards.

The South China Sea dispute has brewed for many years, but several things have become clear: Beijing has become more assertive about its territorial claims in recent years, with a coherent strategy to pursue such claims. Most importantly, it can afford to bide its time.

Granted, Beijing has moderated its behaviour in the past year, following widespread concern over China's growing assertiveness.

Beijing is getting the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to moderate its tone. In July last year, it also signed the China-Asean Agreement on the Implementation Guidelines for a Declaration of Conduct (DOC) in the South China Sea - a move that could lead to a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC).

That said, Beijing insists on negotiating with disputant countries on a one-on-one basis, and it has still not accepted the dispute settlement mechanisms under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

According to Associate Professor Robert Beckman, director of the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore, Beijing is becoming more assertive with regard to its South China Sea claims.

Late last month, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) said that it would open nine blocks in the South China Sea for joint exploration with foreign firms. All the blocks lie within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. A few days later, Beijing said it would launch 'combat-ready' patrols in the South China Sea.

Prof Beckman said the CNOOC announcement might be a 'significant turning point'.

'It seems to confirm the suspicion that although China is only claiming 'sovereignty' over the islands and their adjacent waters, it is also claiming 'rights and jurisdiction' to the resources in and under the waters within the nine-dashed lines.

'If so, this puts China on a legal collision course with the Asean claimants,' he adds.

The fact that China has become more assertive over its South China Sea claims is not entirely new. What is new, however, is that it can afford to get more assertive without explicitly crossing the boundaries of political acceptability.

In an April report aptly titled 'Stirring up the South China Sea', the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) said that China has become adept at using civilian maritime agencies to enforce the country's South China Sea claims.

These 'nine dragons' compete for a bigger slice of the budgetary pie and attempt to expand their economic activities in disputed areas. The implications of their actions are 'increasingly international', ICG noted.

For China, the use of such civilian agencies is useful. The PLA is largely left out of territorial disputes, thus preventing such disagreements from escalating into a full-on conflict.

Countries like Vietnam and the Philippines know full well that while the PLA is left out of the foreground, it stands ready in the background.

Writing on the China Internet Information Centre, a state-run website, PLA Major-General Luo Yuan said that the assumption that China's 'peaceful rise' will preclude military action is incorrect.

'To safeguard our sovereign and territorial rights, we will never hesitate to face up to any military challenge,' he wrote in April.

In the end, such a sublime blend of policies - greater assertiveness in disputes and the use of civilian agencies to enforce China's claims - also help China to execute what Manila has called a 'creeping invasion'.

The classic example of such salami tactics is Mischief Reef on the Spratly Islands.

In 1994, China built structures on the reef, which is located just 210km from Palawan. Manila protested, but China said the structures were for fishermen. In 1999, China added fort-like structures on the reef.

The same applies to CNOOC's recent opening up of blocks for joint exploration.

Taken together, China's strategy is not only rational, but beneficial to its interests.

In April 2010, The New York Times reported that Chinese officials told their American counterparts that the South China Sea was a 'core interest'.

Since then, Chinese scholars like Beijing University's Professor Zhu Feng have clarified that Beijing meant that 'the peaceful resolution of the South China Sea (issue) is the core interest of the Chinese government'.

That China has not sought to clarify the 'core interest' question officially has only stoked suspicion among Asean countries.

In the end, the best way forward is for Asean to push through a binding COC for the South China Sea dispute. More importantly, China needs to clarify exactly what is its nine-dashed (or U-shaped) lines claim to the South China Sea.

A Chinese scholar in a recent paper noted that Beijing had not given up its claims. It has also attempted to consolidate its claims based on the U-shaped line.

That said, Beijing needed to clarify its position, wrote Dr Hong Nong, a deputy director at the Hainan-based National Institute for South China Sea Studies. 'China needs to address its formal position and clarification of this map, in order to avoid the misunderstanding on China's position on the South China Sea dispute.'

Therein lies the tension for China: It has the muscle to stack the odds in its favour over the South China Sea dispute; but if it pushes too hard, the image of China's 'peaceful rise' will take a hit.

In the past two decades, the US has been thankful for two 'heaven-sent' events, said an Australian academic at a recent seminar here.

He and his colleagues had met senior PLA and Foreign Ministry officials in Beijing earlier this month, and discussed Chinese perceptions of America's recent 'pivot' or rebalancing to Asia.

The first heaven-sent, the academic said, is the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis, a China-Taiwan spat which allowed the US to demonstrate the credibility of its security guarantees to Asia by the deployment of two Nimitz-class carriers near the strait.

More recently, he added, China's recent assertiveness over the South China Sea issue has given the US a political window of opportunity that Washington was more than happy to take up.

China cannot be too deterministic about its practice of 'soft power', said the Australian don, who spoke under the Chatham House Rule (a principle that governs the confidentiality of the source of information received at a meeting). Soft power - a concept coined by Harvard don Joseph Nye - involves a country getting others to do its bidding with co-option, not coercion.

'China defines soft power as though one can assemble it at the border and export it like a box of toys,' he added. 'That is light years away from Prof Nye's original concept.'

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