

Banyan

The devil in the deep blue detail

Fiendishly complex disputes in the South China Sea dangerously simplified

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THE South China Sea and its myriad disputes have spawned academic analysis on an industrial scale. But as an attention-grabbing international issue, the wrangling has an image problem: so many contested, arcane technicalities; so many conferences and research papers—in sum, so much talk; but so few shots fired in anger. That may be why commentators tend to paint the disputes in an almost apocalyptic light: “The South China Sea is the Future of Conflict” shrieked an article last September in *Foreign Policy*, an American journal. The author, Robert Kaplan, forecast that “just as German soil constituted the military front line of the cold war, the waters of the South China Sea may constitute the military front line of the coming decades.”

He may well be right. The disputes over the sea are no nearer a resolution than ever. But they have persisted for decades without threatening global peace and need not inevitably become the main focus of tension between China and America. There is a danger that putting the sea in the same

sentence as the cold war too often is self-fulfilling. A recent publication (“Cooperation from Strength”) from the Centre for a New American Security (CNAS), an American think-tank, uses the sea to argue for an American naval build-up. And some Chinese observers seem all too keen to become maritime cold warriors.

Take, for example, some of the reaction in the Chinese press to the news at the end of January that the Philippines wants to “maximise” its mutual defence treaty with the United States, with more joint exercises, and more American soldiers rotating through. Explaining the decision, officials referred to threats arising from “territorial disputes”. America is not going to bully Malaysia over the Philippines’ historic claim to Sabah in Borneo, so this must have meant the South China Sea. Of all the claimants to islands, reefs, rocks and waters there, the one with which the Philippines is in active dispute is China. That was certainly how the news was taken by China’s *Global Times* newspaper, which called for sanctions against the Philippines.

Philippine governments also pay a political price at home for security ties with America. The current one may have felt provoked by China’s seeming to ignore its protest about the incursion in December of three Chinese vessels in what it calls the “West Philippine Sea”. Such spats are commonplace. China and Taiwan (as the “Republic of China”, and largely irrelevantly) appear to claim almost all the South China Sea, citing an old map showing nine disconnected lines around its rim. Vietnam claims the Paracel chain in the north, from which China evicted it in 1974, and the Spratlys in the south, where Brunei and Malaysia as well as the Philippines have partial claims. In the past there have been flare-ups—between Vietnam and China in 1988, and between China and the Philippines in 1995. In normal times, conflict is waged partly through the competitive building of structures on occupied islets and the harassment of fishing and oil-exploration vessels. But it is mainly waged through diplomacy.

The stakes are high, because of the enormous economic significance of the sea. It accounts for as much as one-tenth of the fishing catch landed globally; around half the tonnage of intercontinental trade in commercial goods passes through; and, in a phrase that haunts the academic literature like the ghost of Christmas future, it is the “new Persian Gulf”—a claimed treasure chest of hydrocarbons that China, anxious about the vulnerability of its own supplies, sees as its own.

With plenty to argue about there are three reasons why the arguments are becoming more strident. The first is that the America-Philippines “reinforcement” of their defence arrangement has to be seen in the context

of the much touted “pivot” of American strategy towards Asia. Following the announcement in November of a permanent presence of American marines in Darwin in northern Australia, the shift fuels Chinese fears that America is seeking to contain its rise, both through its own military deployments, and through alliances with “small” countries such as the Philippines (population 100m-odd). Second, both the Philippines and Vietnam may soon start extracting oil. China will not want such facts under the water to set precedents.

Third and most important, China’s position continues to unnerve the other claimants. It is unclear, for example, what the dotted-line claim is based on. And, refusing to countenance serious negotiations with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), to which four of the claimants belong, China appears to want to pick off its members one by one. Until recently, its fiercest rows were with Vietnam. That relationship seems to be going through a relatively mellow phase as it bullies the Philippines. And last July it did agree with ASEAN on “guidelines” for implementing a “declaration” on a code of conduct agreed on by the two parties back in 2002 to reduce tensions in the South China Sea. Last year ASEAN was under Indonesian chairmanship. Neither the new annual chair, Cambodia, nor the next two, Brunei and Myanmar, are likely to risk antagonising China by making the sea a multilateral issue.

How cold wars start

Already, last July’s “breakthrough” looks more like a stalling tactic. Not only is a settlement of the disputes not in sight; no mechanism that might eventually lead to one is even under discussion. China seems to calculate that, although all the countries involved are building up their armed forces, it has so much more capacity for military spending that it will soon be lording it over them all. So the chances are that America, with its mighty navy and abiding interest in the freedom of navigation and commerce, will become still more involved in what the CNAS report calls “the strategic bellwether for determining the future of US leadership in the Asia-Pacific region”. China, after all, seems determined to put that assertion to the test.