

China at sea, advantage Europe



Behind The Headlines by **BUNN NAGARA**

When China cannot develop relations with countries in its neighbourhood, it tries Europe for now, especially when business deals beckon

WHILE spats over disputed maritime territory spiral between China and Vietnam, and between China and the Philippines, China goes on a charm offensive in Europe.

Prime Minister Li Keqiang has just completed his visit to London, focusing on bilateral trade deals. LNG agreements with BP alone were worth £20bil (RM110bil).

Li and his wife also met Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle. It was all part of a grand British reception billed as London having “pulled out all the stops.”

Apparently there had been no plan to meet the Queen, but reports indicated China lobbied for it to showcase Beijing’s stature.

So if anyone were to ask where Mr Li Keqiang had been, like Dick Whittington in English folklore, he’d “been to London to see the queen”. That was another feather in Beijing’s cap.

Since that could be arranged, it was. Unlike countries in territorial disputes with China, Britain has only trade and more trade in mind, with more deals reportedly in the pipeline.

Li rounded off his London tour with a talk hosted jointly by two leading British think tanks, the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) and the Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS).

He assured his audience that territorial expansion was “not in China’s DNA.” He referred to China’s rise over the past three decades as proof of peaceful and harmonious ascent.

Earlier in March, President Xi Jinping was in Paris to make similar assurances.

Mindful perhaps of Napoleon’s quip that others should be wary of a China that would one day awake and shake the world, Xi said “the lion that is China has awoken, but it is a peaceful, amiable and civilised lion.”

Some in East Asia prefer to liken a valiant country to a lion rather than a dragon, because lions as kings of beasts are supposed to be noble and courageous while ambivalent dragons breathe fire, burn things and are ultimately slain by heroic knights named George.

Xi was taking no chances. China's global image was at stake, particularly at a time when it was taking a beating half a world away in the South China Sea.

When Dick Whittington said he'd been to London to see the queen, the next question was what he did there. The answer was that he had "frightened a mouse under the chair."

That was the kind of situation with the smaller countries of East Asia when Xi and Li were "doing Europe." It is a situation that persists even after their return to Beijing.

With the Philippines, the wholly unnecessary spat over Pag-asa Island in the disputed Spratly group is a test of political wills, nationalistic fervour and frenzied stamina. As both countries hold their breath, which would blink or turn blue and faint first?

This insane "game" cannot be good for either country or the region. Perhaps Beijing is depending on the Philippines' clapped-out navy to pull the plug on Manila's stand, despite its defence treaty with the US, but the Philippines is holding fast.

The spat between China and Vietnam is even more surreal. Their on-off talks over China's oil rig allegedly towed into Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone are a gruelling roller-coaster ride for any diplomat.

At issue is the disputed Paracel Island group, where the controversial oil rig is anchored. Although Vietnam, like China, has a fraternal ruling communist party, China's long historical memory cannot fail to remember that it had been given a thrashing or two by the smaller country before.

China surely cannot be courting another bloody nose from Hanoi. For now, rounds of tough rhetoric on both sides have been alternating with assurances to third parties about diplomatic breakthroughs.

None of it happens to be convincing, of course. Even more disorienting is China's simultaneous moves depicting it as a neutral party.

During the week, a stern report from a People's Liberation Army (PLA) research unit warned of grave risks of unintended incidents at sea or in the air because of the continuing disputes.

The issues include the questionable legality of US reconnaissance flights over China's claimed waters, Japan's apprehensions about China's naval activities, and China's own self-declared Air Defence Identification Zone that makes exceptional demands of foreign aircraft even when only transiting the zone.

Perhaps the biggest factor to heighten the risk of open conflict is the vast expanse of China's claimed maritime territory. Based on its claims, not only is the sovereignty of the Spratly Islands disputed between China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia, but waters up to 50 nautical miles from Bintulu's coastline in Sarawak are also claimed by Beijing.

At the same time, Chinese leaders have been appealing to the rest of the region for a new, inclusive security agreement that would safeguard the legitimate interests of all countries in East Asia.

In the perspectives of other countries, particularly those with territorial disputes with China, Beijing's antics make no sense. They are even more inexplicable when assertive moves by the PLA or China's Coast Guard put Beijing in a poor light.

However, in Beijing's perspective things can look very different. They, in fact, have to seem very different to both motivate and rationalise their actions.

As some Chinese government analysts see it, China's assertive moves have been the result of insecurity. The South China Sea has historically been the country's weak point, as all the European colonial ventures that had annexed or devastated parts of China came through this waterway.

Their view is that while the Cold War had seen a balance between the Soviet Union and the US in East Asia, with a Soviet ally in Vietnam, that time is past. There is now only the US as sole superpower in the region.

It is also a region vital to China's key interests in both its imports of fuel and raw materials, and its exports of manufactured goods to world markets, by sea freight. No other country depends more on shipping in the region for both its growth and its survival, especially since China's domestic markets are still underdeveloped.

Now the Obama administration appears to be turning the screws on a rising China, at least potentially, by shifting two-thirds of its naval force to the region. Meanwhile, its "pivot" policy is backed by a string of military allies, from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to Australia, that appears to contain China.

For Chinese strategists, Beijing's natural response would be to enhance its "area denial" naval assets. And that is what the PLA Navy is undergoing now – steady growth.

A richer China would be expanding virtually every sector anyway, including defence, thereby producing a larger and more capable military. Even so, the PLA Navy still has very limited capacity for a country of China's size and global importance.

This is particularly so in an archipelagic region where the navy naturally holds greater sway than any other branch of the security forces. The problem is that when other countries perceive things only in their perspective, threat perceptions are aroused which then leads to more China-unfriendly responses.

Then when China sees things only in its own perspective, the negative reciprocity is cumulative and becomes mutually destabilising.

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