

Mutual threats won't do

BY BUNN NAGARA



Territorial claim: Soldiers of China's People's Liberation Army standing guard in the Spratly Islands. Disputes in the South China Sea, including but not limited to those over the Spratly Islands, have festered for years with little open conflict. – Reuters

ON Thursday, the US navy dispatched a fleet of warships to the South China Sea, which China sees as an escalation of tension in a hotly disputed area.

The aircraft carrier *John C. Stennis* was accompanied by two destroyers, two cruisers and the *Blue Ridge*, command ship of the 7th Fleet, departing their respective ports in Japan and the United States to sail into a contested zone. This is on top of the US Pacific Fleet based in Hawaii.

The new armada follows China's own build-up of naval assets in the area amounting almost to a tit-for-tat action-reaction between the two major powers. Countries in South-East Asia are at once strangely assured by the seeming balance of forces, yet disturbed by the clearly rising tensions.

Besides Taiwan, four Asean countries are in dispute with China over the Spratly Islands: Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Since China regards Taiwan as its province, Taipei's territorial claim is not at issue for it.

The larger problem concerns Beijing's regard of the South China Sea as a "Chinese lake". China claims nearly all the sea, including areas within the other countries' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under international law.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos, 1982) defines the EEZ as waters around a coastal state up to 370km from shore. Ironically, China signed and ratified Unclos but the US signed it without ratifying it.

Disputes in the South China Sea, including but not limited to those over the Spratly Islands, have festered for years with little open conflict. But there is no guarantee major conflict or war will never erupt.

To minimise that prospect, a Declaration On the Conduct (DOC, 2002) of Parties in the South China Sea was established with a view to develop a Code of Conduct (COC), and even a naval hotline between the US and Chinese fleets. But tensions are now rising again before these can be achieved.

China was a relative latecomer in occupying some of the disputed islands in the 1980s. However, there was little tension as other claimant countries had also occupied some islands and the activities were generally deemed low key.

But by 2014, China was actively reclaiming land, building artificial islands on disputed rocks and atolls to set up military and civilian facilities. This was accompanied by Chinese vessels entering disputed waters and harassing fishing boats and other craft of coastal nations.

Still, these other countries tended to have a weak case against Beijing's actions when they were doing the same thing themselves, albeit on a smaller scale. The scale and pace of China's actions, - together with intimidating ship intrusions, added to the concerns in the region.

Last May, there was talk in Washington for US warships to challenge China's claims, but little was done.

Then in October, US, Indian and Japanese naval forces held a week-long joint exercise off India's - eastern coast. "Malabar" was a full-spectrum operation involving surface ships, aircraft carriers and submarines.

Days later, the US destroyer *Lassen* sailed within the 12-mile territorial sea of China's disputed artificial "territory" in the Spratly Islands.

In January this year, another US destroyer *the Curtis Wilbur* sailed around Triton Island in the Paracels that China also claims together with Taiwan and Vietnam.

The following month, the head of US Pacific Command (Pacom), Admiral Harry Harris, testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee that China was militarising the South China Sea.

He said China had installed surface-to-air missiles as well as sophisticated radar equipment that could detect US stealth aircraft. He asked for more funding to enlarge the US navy's combat capabilities.

US naval forces have long presided over the Pacific Ocean and adjacent seas. In allowing the continued safety of innocent passage in the East and South China Seas, this is seen as part of the regional status quo.

Officially, the US is challenging China's moves so as to ensure freedom of navigation for all peaceful vessels. Unofficially, Washington is keen to prevent any other power from rising to a level that can challenge its naval superiority – zero equivalence being a core Pentagon doctrine.

On the surface, China and the US seem at opposite poles in the geopolitical stakes. But to other countries, each is uncannily more like the other than it cares to admit.

Both the US and China want to have naval superiority in the South China Sea, if not the entire Pacific.

For China, this is because historically its strategic weakness has been here, where foreign vessels traversed before landing on and subduing the mainland. For the US, it is a matter of retaining its tactical advantage.

At the same time, each country wants to display its strength to make its point clear, yet officially play down the significance of its naval presence. Each cites the other's actions as provocative but denies the same of its own actions.

Last year, US Naval Operations chief Admiral John Richardson said the *USS Lassen's* presence near China's facilities was normal. This year, the spokesperson of China's Parliament, Fu Ying, said the same of China's naval exploits.

The US and China both want freedom of navigation, fearing that the other may restrict that freedom to it. And the more each tries to assert itself in the region, the more that fear of restriction.

When two giants jostle and rub against each other, smaller countries need to be out of the way. Playing anyone's favourite is no solution.

There are also important differences between China and the US, of course.

China is very much a part of East Asia, while the closest part of the US is still far away in Hawaii. Having security treaties with allies like the Philippines is not the same as having to govern the homeland itself.

Over the longer term, China is also a rising economy while the US economy is increasingly dependent on China's, if not having levelled off itself. The US to-do list in East Asia as a whole is likely to be - shorter.

Manila's default action of tugging on Washington's military sleeve whenever it feels anxious about China, therefore, has limited application. An ally of a superpower is supposed to assist it rather than be assisted by it unconditionally.

The US stake in China's economic future is still greater than any economic bounty for any country from resources at the bottom of the South China Sea. Any US administration knows that, particularly one profoundly informed by business priorities.

Chinese policymakers may already be imagining what deal they can offer a (prospective) President Trump by November. Again, it could be another event between giants likely to sideline all other countries.

As the Philippines prepares for its own elections in May, several presidential candidates are already saying they are prepared to negotiate with China (and other countries) over disputed maritime territories. This is seen as an alternative to more confrontational approaches evident so far.

All disputes still need to be resolved diplomatically by political means. Military manoeuvres have their limits, as does the rising tensions currently experienced in the South China Sea.

The common priority is to avoid a mutual escalation of threats that can easily spiral out of control, even for superpowers.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.