Three-Way Illusions in the South China Sea (1/2)

The geopolitical temperature over the South China Sea is on the rise. Part I

Clearly no stranger to regional rivalry, this vast sea has been the subject of long-standing territorial claims, in whole or in part, by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. More recently, the situation has taken a new turn, characterized by growing great power jostling, alliance realignment, and region-wide strategic manoeuvres. In a little over one year, there have been a spate of maritime standoffs between China on the one hand and Vietnam and the Philippines on the other.

There have also been more open rifts between China and the United States over the issue. In July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US had a 'national interest' in the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The US hereby effectively departed from its previous approach of non-involvement. As it turned out, this growing US interest in the region was just a prelude to Washington's new 'pivot to Asia' strategy. Fully unveiled during President Barack Obama's trip to Indonesia and Australia in late 2011, a key part of this strategy is to step up US presence in the region after its decade-long focus on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The re-emergence of the South China Sea as a geopolitical flash point is hardly surprising. Dubbed the modern-day 'hydrocarbons Eldorado', the South China Sea is said to contain resources too valuable to ignore. Not only the oil and mineral deposits and fish stocks are at stake for all claimants, but also the issues of sovereignty and national pride. Furthermore, its 'choke points' and waterways prove essential to the strategic and commercial interests of the US and China as global powers. Not only is the US concerned with its continued 'right' to operate warships in the South China Sea, but it perceives China's behaviour over the disputes as a litmus test of this rising power's broader strategic intention. Little wonder that all eyes are now converging on the South China Sea.

Indeed, some tangible interests and hard-nosed strategic calculations are at play in the new dynamism in the region. But interests and strategic imperatives aside, the South China Sea also represents a classic clash of illusions. The increased frictions have been driven as much by illusion as by 'reality', and it seems that no parties are immune from this phenomenon.

Illusions 'Made in China'

China has long claimed that about 80% of the South China Sea is Chinese territorial waters. The nine dashed line on its official map testifies to this stance. Backed by historical records and archaeological evidence, this claim may well have some level of legitimacy and credibility.

Yet, as with most territorial disputes, historical records are seldom exclusive to one claimant. History, unlike mathematics, is rarely amenable to scientific testing and quick consensus. In this sense, China's belief that once its historical evidence is made public, its territorial claims will be automatically vindicated is little more than a naively illusion.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) has further complicated this delusional position. By setting a 12 nautical mile limit from the baseline for territorial waters as well as allowing for an exclusive economic zone up to 200 nautical miles, the UNCLOS creates a situation where territorial claims in the South China Sea will inevitably overlap. This makes the demarcation of territorial waters among adjacent countries an extremely complex task. In this context, geography, like history, is not subject to neat mathematical solutions. As a result, China’s territorial claims will be automatically vindicated is little more than a naively illusion.

Beijing has yet to wake up from the illusion. It may never be able to fully deliver the promise of regaining all the territorial waters in the South China Sea, nor...
National pressure has prompted another illusion. Popular mostly among the Chinese military and some nationalistic citizens is the belief in military power for settling the disputes. As China’s military becomes modernized, its naval power will grow into a force to be reckoned with. Yet, its increasing ‘area-denial’ capability is one thing, coercing the other claimants to sign up for whatever conditions Beijing dictates is quite another.

As China’s power grows, so does the combined power of Southeast Asian nations. ASEAN countries involved in the disputes have increasingly resorted to multilateral forums to pressure China. To that end, they are also looking to the US as a counter-balance against China. So long as the US remains a formidable Pacific power, China will not be able to enforce a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine in the South China Sea without risking a naval confrontation.

The Chinese illusions are not the only factors, however. The other two parties, Southeast Asian claimants and the United States, are to varying degrees operating under certain illusions of their own. Unless their illusions are equally laid bare, the new dynamics in the South China Sea will be difficult to fully comprehend.

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