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CHINA MILITARIZES COAST GUARD IN SOUTH CHINA SEA



Xi's government accelerates its trampling on littoral states' rights.

Starting today (February 1), China's offensive in the South China/West Philippine/East Sea is being given an added dimension, further expanding its trampling over the legal and historic rights of the neighbors who own most of the sea's shores.

The ever-expanding presence in this sea of China's Coast Guard has long been in evidence. So has its use of so-called peaceful, white painted Coast Guard vessels to harass the fishing fleets of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. These ships are of a size and range far in excess of what is normally associated with coast guard vessels which are supposed to ensure the safety of waters rather than act as a naval force.

But China's pretense of any peaceful intent for its Coast Guard has been stripped away by Beijing's decision, effective now, to authorize this so-called coast guard to secure its claim to the whole sea within its nine-dash line. This incorporates most of the sea, which extends far to the south and east, close to the shores of its neighbor, to the coasts of Palawan and Borneo, Vietnam and Indonesia's Natuna islands. China's coast guard fleet exceeds the combined total of such vessels owned by those countries which have struggled to protect their waters and fishing rights against constant Chinese – and sometimes other – incursions.

Beijing's decision is yet another display of its contempt for any international rules or laws which impede its expansionist agenda. In particular, it makes a mockery of 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration supporting the Philippines and by extension other littoral states against China's incursions – and its invention of a history where Han China always **ruled** these seas. It is a direct contradiction to its neighbors' rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and its commitment to 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zones and of the archipelagic principle so important to Indonesia (which began its fight for them in 1957) and the Philippines.

The new law allows the Chinese coast guard to destroy any features established by its neighbors on the sea's rocks and shoals, to board and inspect any foreign vessels within these waters, and to support Chinese claims to all the fish, all gas, and other minerals within that vast area of sea.

This further extension of Chinese empire-building has attracted scant attention among neighbors, other than ever-defiant Vietnam, despite being in effect a declaration of war against their international rights and interests. It says much for the influence of Chinese money and lack of nationalism that pervades the region's leaders that they have stayed silent. Meanwhile, their diplomats engage in more meaningless waffling about a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea or nothing outside the Association of Southeast Asian Nations framework. In reality, because of the need *for* an impossible consensus, a divided ASEAN has become an opiate. The maritime states have become the losers from group unwillingness to see China for what it is, a state intent on expanding its geography, not just its influence.

Unwillingness to confront China is encouraged by foreign commentators who prefer focus on the US-China rivalry as the main issue, not China's invasion of the national rights of the 500 million non-Chinese peoples of the region. Or those who like to preach the wisdom that somehow "Asian ways" of resolving such issues would persuade China to pull back if only the US was not there.

There is a reluctance to recognize the Han Chinese chauvinism which lies behind Beijing's attitudes and assumptions, dating from two millennia, that the peoples to the south are inferior tribes with no history of their own, despite their having sailed these southern seas long before Han China ever did.

What the Biden administration makes of this is yet to be seen. His appointment of Kurt Campbell as his Asia expert will not thrill Filipinos who remember his role in losing Scarborough shoal, persuading the Philippines to remove its vessels on the promise that China would do the same. The naivete was stunning. But the Scarborough debacle did at least induce the Philippines under President Aquino to bring its case to the Court of Arbitration.

Aquino's successor's preference for Chinese money (or at least the promise of it) has negated much of the court victory. Meanwhile, a nation which loses hundreds of soldiers every year fighting insurgents at home has yet to lose a single one in defense of its islets and seas. It is easy to see why China is so contemptuous of its neighbors (Vietnam excepted) that it can make such brazen moves as using the coast guard as an attacking force meanwhile seeming to buy friends with a few does of unproven vaccine.

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