

China takes the gloves off

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, CNN GPS | 25 Jul 2012

As tensions rise in the South China Sea, the gloves are coming off in Beijing. When it comes to exploiting the weaknesses of its rivals in Southeast Asia – smaller nations also laying claim to the South China Sea – China doesn't pull any punches.

Until recently, it followed a line of "reactive assertiveness" – responding forcefully to perceived provocations in this disputed body of water. Now, there are signs that China has shed the "reactive" part of its approach.

Beijing took reactive assertiveness for a test drive during the Scarborough Shoal standoff with the Philippines that began in April. While faulting the Philippines for turning a typical fishing run-in into a crisis by sending in a warship, China took the opportunity to defend its claim over the disputed shoal by deploying non-military law enforcement vessels and allowing them to linger in the area. Beijing also didn't hesitate to wield its clout over Manila's perennially struggling economy, tightening regulations on imports of tropical fruit that resulted in an estimated \$34 million in losses for the Philippines.

Beijing used reactive assertiveness again in response to a maritime law Vietnam passed last month that introduced new navigation regulations covering the disputed Spratly and Paracel islands. Before the ink on the law could dry, China announced the establishment of Sansha City, a sprawling administrative entity which incorporates some of the territory disputed by Vietnam and the Philippines. Earlier this week, Beijing authorized the Guangzhou Military Command of the People's Liberation Army to form a garrison in the newly created city.

Also part of this more forceful approach was Beijing's decision in late June to allow one of its state-run oil firms, the China National Offshore Oil Company, to invite foreign energy companies to bid for joint exploration in parts of the South China Sea that fall in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone. These moves not only signal that Beijing won't back down in the dispute, but they also show that Beijing will continue to reassert control over its once uncoordinated South China Sea policy. Coordination began to improve in mid-2011 when Beijing started to place greater emphasis on diplomacy in the sea. Previously, China's assertiveness in the area had been an outgrowth of discordance and a lack of restraint among its legion of self-interested military, maritime, corporate and local government actors.

As China increasingly outdoes the Philippines and Vietnam in this dangerous game of tit-for-tat, one would expect ASEAN states to stand behind its members. But quite the opposite has been true. At the foreign ministers' meeting held earlier this month in Phnom Penh, China pounced upon divisions already debilitating the organization. It used its sway over Cambodia, the organization's chair, to prevent meaningful discussion on the South China Sea dispute, which made even a standard joint communiqué impossible for the first time in 45 years.

As the meeting in Phnom Penh fell apart, reports surfaced that a Chinese navy frigate had run aground

near Half-Moon Shoal, a mere 110 kilometers from the Philippine island of Palawan. While an embarrassing blow to the Chinese military, the Ministry of Defense stated that the vessel was simply conducting routine naval patrols, albeit in an area squarely within the Philippines' EEZ. This frigate was likely part of the patrols, described by a defense ministry spokesperson as "combat ready," that Beijing started late last month in the South China Sea in response to Vietnamese air patrols over the Spratlys.

Sending military vessels to make rounds in disputed waters may well be an indication that China has shifted from using law enforcement vessels to respond to recent incidents like Scarborough. This is particularly troubling as a dispute involving an armed military vessel would undeniably be much more difficult for China to walk back.

China's more brazen approach can be explained in part by the fact that it wasn't satisfied by the gains from its tactical shift in 2011 to greater diplomacy, followed by reactive assertiveness. Domestic politics also contribute to China's hardening stance on the South China Sea. Previously, as the Chinese public was left bewildered by the Bo Xilai scandal, the Scarborough Shoal incident offered a convenient distraction. Now, China is once again flexing its muscles in the sea, partly to dispel fears of fragility stemming from its fast approaching change in leadership.

Yet China's leaders should be careful of what they wish for. A tough approach could easily backfire. It could give Washington's Asian pivot an added boost by pushing Vietnam and the Philippines further into the arms of the United States. Moreover, as territorial disputes strike at the heart of nationalist sentiments, a riled public could pressure the government to up the diplomatic ante. The Chinese government could find itself trapped in a position where it's forced to act aggressively, even if just for show. Being cornered, without a way to sidestep military confrontation, is the last thing Beijing wants.

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