

A Sea of Tensions

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China heads into 2013 with a new set of leaders under Xi Jinping and much talk about domestic reform, but no plan to alter its foreign policy. Little wonder then that poor relations between China and its neighbours, fuelled by disputes in the East and South China Seas, look set to continue.

The leadership in Beijing has settled on a tactic in maritime border disagreements that turns perceived provocation by rivals claiming territory into a chance for changing the status quo in its favor. According to one Chinese analyst, the aim is to “turn crisis into strategic opportunity.”

This approach could be seen in China’s reaction to the Japanese government’s purchase of three of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islets in September; in its actions immediately after Vietnam passed a new maritime law covering the contested Spratly and Paracel Islands in June; and in measures taken against the Philippines after a clash in the Scarborough Shoal in April. In all of these cases, China’s disproportionate reaction gave it the upper hand over its rivals.

But China is also taking steps independent of external provocation. The government has started issuing new passports with maps displaying several disputed territories within China's borders, sparking protests from Vietnam, the Philippines and India. In November, the Hainan provincial government announced maritime regulations that allow its law enforcement vessels to inspect, detain or expel foreign ships illegally in Chinese waters. While the regulations may apply to ships within Hainan’s 12-nautical-mile maritime boundary, there is language that could allow China to increase policing zones up to the infamous 9-dashed line, the large swath of sea it contests with many of its neighbors.

In the East China Sea, after announcing baselines to demarcate its territorial waters, China started to regularly send law enforcement vessels to patrol in disputed waters around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. The intention is to establish overlapping administration with the Japanese vessels that had solely patrolled the area for four decades. Air patrols were added in mid-December when a Chinese plane penetrated Japanese airspace over the islands, the first such intrusion since 1958. Japan responded by sending fighter jets. While neither Beijing nor Tokyo desires a major conflict, their tacit agreement to set aside the dispute has been broken and there is deepening pessimism on both sides over the prospects of a peaceful settlement.

Such actions can be seen as part of China’s overall policy to develop from a land-focused economy into a “maritime power”, as underlined by as Hu Jintao in his final policy report at the 18th Party Congress in November. Three weeks into the new administration, the Defense Spokesman said Chinese action in maritime disputes is necessary for “safeguarding the country’s legitimate sovereignty rights and interests”.

On the same day, Xi Jinping gave a speech venerating the “Chinese dream” of a “great revival of the Chinese nation”. While visiting the South China Sea fleet in mid-December, he specified that this “Chinese dream” included “the dream of a strong military”. Such language risks encouraging domestic nationalism and will only raise tensions and uncertainty in the region.

Indeed, Beijing seems to have strayed significantly from previous policy that it “will always be a good neighbour, good friend and good partner of other Asian countries”. After years of dedicated confidence building with ASEAN countries, Beijing has managed in just the last several years to divide the organisation and alienate several members with its approach to maritime disputes.

The irony is that these actions are pushing countries into the arms of the United States, whose rebalancing toward Asia has become a near obsession within foreign policy circles in Beijing, where most believe that the US aims to encircle China. Beijing’s approach is also creating strange bedfellows among its regional neighbours. Philippine Foreign Minister Albert del Rosario went so far as to say that he would welcome it if former colonial power Japan rearmed in order to balance the region.

Despite all this, most in Beijing seem blind to the danger that China’s behaviour is undermining regional stability and harming its own strategic interests. Rather, the Chinese foreign policy elite largely blame rival claimants for starting the troubles. To those expressing surprise about the tough response in moments of tension, they say the world has underestimated China’s resolve to safeguard its interests.

With little sign of critical self-reflection in Beijing on the handling of territorial disputes, and with formidable domestic challenges looming, the new leadership is unlikely to alter course on foreign policy. On top of that, nationalism is spiralling, ASEAN is weak and divided, and emboldened rivals stand more ready than ever to challenge China on border issues. Expect heightened tensions over territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas to continue to rattle the region in 2013.

[Insight Magazine, American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai \(PDF\)](#)