

FISHING IN TROUBLED WATERS DURING A PANDEMIC

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Even as several countries struggle to cope with the challenges posed by [COVID-19](#), Beijing's military moves in the contested South China Sea continue to take place unabated. In recent days, China has conducted military drills and deployed large-scale military assets to the maritime area, while officially celebrating strides made in exploiting disputed energy resources in the sea.

The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported early this month that a Chinese Coast Guard vessel "rammed and sunk" a Vietnamese fishing boat carrying eight Vietnamese fishermen in the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. It maintained that this violates "Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, causes property losses and endangers the lives, safety and legitimate interests of the Vietnamese fishermen". It underlined that Chinese actions "also run counter to agreements reached by Hanoi and Beijing's leaders and the proposed Code of Conduct that would govern all interested parties in the South China Sea dispute." The Vietnamese government lodged a diplomatic protest with China's embassy in Hanoi, requesting the Chinese side to investigate the incident, strictly discipline the officers aboard the Chinese vessel aforementioned, prevent the recurrence of similar actions, and make adequate compensation for the losses of the Vietnamese fishermen.

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There have been incidents involving Chinese fishing vessels and the Chinese Coast Guard with Indonesian fishing vessels in waters around the Natuna Sea as well. In February, Chinese fishing boats flanked by Chinese Coast Guard vessels dropped their trawl nets yet again. China's illegal fishing near the Natuna Sea carries global consequences, reminding regional governments of Beijing's expanding claims to the South China Sea through which one-third of the world's maritime trade flows.

Besides these incidents, there were satellite images showing a Chinese military plane landing on Kagitingan Reef in the West Philippine Sea in late March. There are also reports that China recently opened a research station on Kagitingan and Zamora Reef, also in the West Philippine Sea, to gather data on the ecology, geology, and environment in the Spratlys.

It seems as though the COVID-19 outbreak in China did little to diminish the country's strategy of regional expansion. Routine operations of transport aircraft in the South China Sea indicate that the Chinese military is hardly affected by the country's health crisis.

Other claimant countries such as the Philippines have condemned the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing vessel. The Foreign Ministry of the Philippines issued a statement that said, "Such incidents undermine relations between Southeast Asian nations and Beijing." Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department also published a statement, "We call on the PRC to remain focused on supporting international efforts to combat the global pandemic, and to stop exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states to expand its unlawful claims in the South China Sea." These encroachments and advances by China in the South China Sea not only dampen China's image globally, and affect its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours, but also raise questions on why it continues its assertiveness in the disputed waters when most of the claimant states are having to contend with the challenges posed by COVID-19.

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While a military policy of expansion in the neighbourhood can be one way of shoring up the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party, which has been bruised by its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is also a response to what many in the party would view as a rare window of opportunity as the U.S. is grappling with the pandemic. American ties with Vietnam have been on an upward trajectory in recent times. Vietnam has been an ardent supporter of the U.S.'s freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) carried out in the South China Sea. China has always taken a strong stand against these FONOPS of the U.S. It has flexed its muscles to match up to these operations. In that direction, China also recently conducted anti-submarine drills in the disputed areas soon after the Pentagon deployed the U.S.-guided missile destroyer USS McCampbell in a FONOP in the South China Sea before the pandemic hit the U.S. mainland with full force.

At present, Vietnam is the chair of the ASEAN and will be presiding over the discussions on the Code of Conduct which has been a work in progress for long. Vietnam has always been in favour of non-claimant countries or external players having an active voice and calling out China for its growing assertiveness in these contested waters. Among all the claimant countries, Vietnam has always taken a strong stand against Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Unlike the Philippines, which has changed its stance quite often with respect to Chinese activities in the South China Sea, and Indonesia, which recognised the Chinese threat in the Natuna Sea rather late, Vietnam has held a firm stand against the China. Even with regard to its COVID-19 response, Vietnam was the first country in the ASEAN to suspend all flights to and from China as early as February. Hence, China has always kept a watch on Vietnamese manoeuvres in the South China Sea dispute.

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As China seeks to restore its global credibility, creating tensions in the South China Sea should be the least of its priorities. A more generous China during a global pandemic might go a long way in ensuring its global ascent. But that's a hope that has been belied many a times in the past and it's unlikely that the Chinese Communist Party would let go of its regional security agenda of expansion.

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