

RAJA MANDALA: IT'S NOT ABOUT AMERICA

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Why has [China](#) precipitated a fresh military crisis with India in eastern Ladakh? Among the many explanations making the rounds in Delhi, there is always the easy and attractive one — it's all about America. Delhi has incurred Beijing's wrath by moving closer to Washington, goes the argument. India's renewed enthusiasm for the US-led Quad, it is said, is encouraging China to teach a lesson to Delhi.

How does this theory hold up in relation to other countries having problems with China? Let us turn to the South China Sea, where China is on a bold and ambitious drive to expand its control over the disputed waters. Let us start with gathering tensions over the territorial dispute between Beijing and Jakarta.

To talk of a territorial dispute between two countries so far apart from each other seems strange. But distance is no guarantee of an escape from territorial problems with Beijing, at least in the South China Sea. To be sure, Jakarta says it has no territorial dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea. But there is a problem nevertheless.

You may not want to court trouble, but trouble has a way of knocking at your door, especially when it involves a great power. Remember the Aesop's fable about the wolf that accused the lamb of muddying its waters. The lamb's protests that it was only drinking downstream did not, of course, stop the wolf from eating it up.

Over the last year and more, Jakarta is coping with a Chinese challenge in its waters off its Natuna Islands. The Natuna are nearly 1,500 km from the Chinese mainland. Yes, you read that right — 1,500 km. The Natuna themselves lie outside Beijing's nine-dash line that claims nearly 80 per cent of the South China Sea. The dispute is over the exclusive economic zone that the islands confer on Indonesia.

China says it has historic rights to these waters and has been dispatching its fishing fleet into these waters. Jakarta has tried many things — persistent diplomatic objection including a letter to the UN Secretary General last week, a presidential visit to the Islands to underline Jakarta's sovereignty, and an occasional sinking of the Chinese fishing boats. All this has had little impact on Beijing.

The spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry summed it up unambiguously when matters came to a head earlier this year: "Whether the Indonesian side accepts it or not, nothing will change the objective fact that China has rights and interests over the relevant waters."

Indonesia has consciously taken a moderate tone on the territorial disputes between its fellow [ASEAN](#) member states, including Vietnam and the Philippines on the one hand, and China on the other. Jakarta has promoted a peaceful resolution of the disputes in the South China Sea. Maybe China sees a problem with Jakarta-Washington relations.

Jakarta did not support the US approach to the Indo-Pacific and went to great lengths to develop a concept of its own and get it endorsed by the ASEAN. Indonesia is not a member of the much-maligned Quad. Its foreign policy is wedded to non-alignment. And as the host of the historic Bandung Conference in 1955, Indonesia is a founding member and champion of Non-aligned Movement.

The story of the Philippines — one of the oldest military allies of the US in Asia — nicely complements the non-aligned Indonesia's troubles with China. When he came to power in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte decided to distance the Philippines from the US and embraced China with the hope of finding a reasonable settlement to the substantive maritime territorial dispute with Beijing.

In February this year, Manila announced the decision to terminate the agreement that lets American troops operate in the Philippines. But last week, the Philippines "suspended" the decision to terminate military cooperation with the US. The reason: The PLA's relentless military pressure on the South China Sea islands claimed by Manila and including them in a new Chinese administrative district.

Neither Jakarta that is scrupulously non-aligned nor Manila that was ready to break its alliance with the US has been spared from Beijing's current muscular approach to China's territorial disputes.

While intellectuals can argue about the sources of Chinese conduct, peasants with their common sense can point to answers lying in plain sight. One is that China has long-standing claims, right or wrong, on the territories of its neighbours. The other is the dramatic shift in the regional power balance in favour of China. Unlike in the past, China now has the military power to make good its claims and alter the territorial status quo, if only in bits and pieces. This is what China is doing in the South China Sea. And the situation may not be any different in Ladakh.

As a north Indian peasant might sum up, "*jiski lathi, uski bhains*" (He with the big stick gets to own the buffalo). If you want a highfalutin way of saying the same thing, turn to the Greek sage, Thucydides: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

The real challenge for Delhi in managing its expansive territorial dispute with Beijing, then, is to redress the growing power imbalance with China. The rest is detail.

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