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Joining the dashes

The South China Sea's littoral states will fight in the museums, in the archives and on the maps

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THE countries around the South China Sea have long engaged in competitive cartography. It is now becoming a spectator sport. In June, at an exhibition in Haiphong, Vietnam showed off some of its maps. In September exhibitions opened in both Manila and Taipei of material that the governments of the Philippines and Taiwan hope will bolster their respective

claims in the sea. On paper, Taiwan's claim is identical to that of China, whose assertion of sovereignty over most of the sea, within a vast mysterious U-shaped line around its edges, has alarmed its neighbours. So Taiwan's archives have attracted keen interest. What is more, Taiwan's elucidation of its claim is a setback for China.

The Taipei exhibition for the first time put on display a small portion of the archives that accompanied Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang (KMT), or Nationalist party, when they fled Mao Zedong's victorious Communists to the island in 1949. At the exhibition's opening, Taiwan's president, Ma Ying-jeou, clarified what the KMT government was claiming in 1947 when it asserted sovereignty over islands held during the second world war by the Japanese. Unlike China, which has never spelled out whether it is claiming everything inside its U-shaped line—*islands, rocks, shoals, reefs, fish, oil, gas and water—or just the islands*, Mr Ma was clear that the claim was limited to islands and 3 to 12 nautical miles of their adjacent waters. There were, he said, “no other so-called claims to sea regions”.

This matters, because in theory it means the line could be interpreted as compatible with current international law. Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), “the land dominates the sea”. Land features are entitled to 12 miles of territorial waters; habitable



islands have an additional 200 miles of “exclusive economic zone” (EEZ). So even if all the islands were China’s—and besides Taiwan and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei also have claims—its EEZ would be subject to painstaking demarcation and might not cover the whole sea.

Mr Ma’s intervention will have pleased America. Bonnie Glaser, of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think-tank, says the Americans have been secretly urging Mr Ma to clarify what the KMT meant when it drew up the map. The hope was that this would put pressure on China to spell out and even modify its own stance. It is part of America’s efforts to avert conflict in the sea, a vital maritime thoroughfare for a big proportion of world trade. America does not explicitly take sides in the territorial disputes but blames China for raising tensions.

Ms Glaser says the American request put Mr Ma and his aides in an extremely uncomfortable position. China insists that Taiwan is part of its territory, to be retaken by force if, for example, it declares formal independence from China. And one of the last vestiges of the fiction that there is but “one China” is Taiwan’s adherence to China’s sweeping territorial claim.

Mr



Ma has ruled out co-operating with China on the shared claim, but cannot redraw Taiwan's boundaries without being seen in China as guilty of separatism. His six-year presidency has been marked by vastly improved relations with China. He would not want the South China Sea to ruin this. Under him, Taiwan is quietly building a new port big enough to host warships on Itu Aba, or Taiping, the largest island in the Spratly chain. But otherwise Mr Ma has been silent. He must hope now that China will regard his clarification as legalistic and trivial.

Many of the archives are still secret, and the Chinese have long pleaded in vain for a glimpse. Some senior Chinese officials were in the audience at the exhibition opening. But Michael Gau, a maritime-law expert at National Taiwan Ocean University, says they were barely interested in the exhibits, which were all declassified, and included a grainy black-and-white

photograph of a sovereignty tablet on Itu Aba from 1946. Instead, they wanted to hear “whether Taiwan has embraced the U-shaped line or has been scared by the Americans.”

The answer, it seems, is a bit of both. Mr Ma did not mention the line and is not challenging its validity. It has become an article of patriotic faith in China—appearing, for example, on maps in Chinese passports—as if it were some ancient, well-documented historic proof. In fact, as a new book (“The South China Sea”, by Bill Hayton) makes clear, its origins are unhistorical, unscientific and haphazard. Many older Chinese maps show the country’s southern borders as the Paracel islands, also claimed by Vietnam, but at the north end of the South China Sea. In 1933 Chinese mapmakers, angered by the French assertion of sovereignty further to the south in the Spratly islands, extended the claim right down to the James shoal, which they apparently thought was above water but is in fact a submerged feature near Borneo.

In 1936, the U-shaped line appeared. This, drawn with 11 dashes, was the basis of the line the KMT claimed. In 1953, to be nice to Communist brethren in Vietnam, China’s new Communist rulers erased two dashes, in the Gulf of Tonkin. So when, in 2009, China for the first time submitted the map officially to the United Nations, it was as a “nine-dashed line”. Last year, a tenth dash was added, to make clear that Taiwan falls within the U.

My map is better than yours

If China were to accept Mr Ma’s interpretation it would at least add clarity to the complex interlocking disputes. But though many Chinese scholars tend to agree with him, China seems in no hurry officially to commit itself. Even if it did, a resolution to the disputes would be no closer. UNCLOS can adjudicate on the waters attached to pieces of land, but not on sovereignty over the land itself. And China’s are not the only maps, nor necessarily the most credible. Among those on display in Manila is one showing as Philippine territory the Scarborough shoal, a rocky outcrop in effect annexed by China in 2012. The map dates from 1636, predating the nine-dashed line by a good three centuries.

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