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US struggles for strategy to contain China's island-building

Charles Clover in Beijing and Geoff Dyer in Washington



China's efforts to dredge new land on remote coral atolls in the South China Sea have left the US struggling to come up with a response.

For Washington, Chinese land-creation has helped make allies of former adversaries now fearful of military domination by an assertive China. The latest example was the trip to Vietnam last week by Ashton Carter, US defence secretary, who pledged US patrol craft to the Vietnamese navy.

But there is a limit to how far countries in the region are willing to present a united front to China, which has reclaimed 2,000 acres of land in the past 18 months, far outstripping all other claimants combined, according to Mr Carter. The Obama administration is also unsure about how strongly it should push back against what US officials see as a long-term Chinese plan to control the region's waters.

China claims 90 per cent of the waters of the South China Sea, a position contested by neighbours including Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. But the Obama administration is increasingly finding itself in the uncomfortable position of taking the lead in efforts to confront

Beijing, while stumbling in diplomatic action to establish consensus in Southeast Asia on what to do.

“The obvious frustration for the US is that all the Southeast Asian countries, with the possible exception of the Philippines, do not want to make a choice between China, their main trading partner, and the US, the main provider of security in the region,” says Euan Graham of the Lowy Institute in Sydney.

The second problem is that each of these countries has occupied its own islands, and some are doing their own land reclamation. At the Shangri-La security summit last month Mr Carter called on all parties to stop land reclamation. Last year a similar appeal by the US went unheeded by all but the Philippines, and subsequently collapsed.

Other diplomatic efforts include a common “code of conduct” among the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – four of which have claims in the South China Sea – which would put a commitment not to reclaim land in legally binding language and place additional diplomatic pressure on China.

Asean is split between those countries that do not have claims, which are more China-friendly, and those that do. Meanwhile, China is seeking to deal separately with each claimant.

“In crude terms some might say they are doing divide and rule,” says Ong Keng Yong, former Asean secretary-general and now deputy chairman of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.



Meanwhile, as China builds up its islands, others such as Vietnam and the Philippines continue their own island-building efforts. "They are all busy creating facts on the ground, so to speak," says Mr Yong. "They are all creating a position for future bargaining."

The Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei each claim some of the Spratlys, while China, Taiwan and Vietnam claim the whole chain. Vietnam occupies many more islands than China does.

However, China's dredging efforts, which appear to be aimed at creating military facilities including a 3km runway capable of handling fighter jets, dwarfs the others. US analysts fear the next step is for China to claim airspace over the South China Sea by declaring an air defence identification zone once the runway is finished.

"The fear is that China will turn the Sea into a Chinese lake," says Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy of the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore.

Faced with such a prospect and indecision among its friends, US officials admit they need to do more to challenge Chinese muscle-flexing, but there is no consensus yet within the Obama administration about how to respond.

Washington recently raised the temperature in the South China Sea by inviting a CNN crew on board a surveillance flight over islands claimed by China, and broadcasting radio challenges by Chinese military on the ground.

Beyond that, the administration is considering conducting what are known as "freedom of navigation" exercises where it would send warships into the waters around the reclaimed Chinese land features. The objective would be not to contest the specific territorial claims, about which the US says it remains neutral. Instead, the US would be showing that it does not recognise the sandbanks as islands with their own territorial waters. Under international law, nations control 12 nautical miles around islands and coasts.

However, the concern within the administration is that an overly aggressive US response could escalate tensions, alienate allies and partners in the region or even lead to an altercation with Chinese naval vessels.

Bonnie Glaser of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington says that while freedom of navigation patrols do not hinge on "buy in" from regional powers, broader diplomatic efforts do.

"It's important for the US to have support for its actions in the South China Sea, if not from all Asean members then from a key core group," she says. "In the absence of adequate consultations, diplomatic initiatives fail."

But such co-operation remains a distant goal, says Mr Graham. "Southeast Asia for the US is something of a fickle audience because no one wants to get too far out in front - everyone has a different idea of the sweet spot they'd like to occupy between the US and China."

Additional reporting by Michael Peel

Asean navies no match for Chinese dominance

In contrast to Japan in the East China Sea, the Southeast Asian nations have much weaker navies incapable of taking on Beijing, **write Charles Clover, Michael Peel and Robin Harding.**

The Philippines has taken the most confrontational line, but its most modern naval ship is a refurbished US coastguard cutter that dates from the 1960s.

On a visit to Japan last week Benigno Aquino, Philippine president, said talks would begin on allowing the Japanese navy to use Philippine bases – a big step for both countries. At present the Philippines only has such agreements with the US and Australia, while the deployment of Japanese vessels in the South China Sea would be controversial both in Beijing and domestically.

Tokyo and Manila will also start talks on military exports, which could include radar and anti-submarine patrol aircraft, on top of the coastguard vessels Japan is already providing

The Philippines has an election next year that analysts say may have implications for its pro-US stance vis-à-vis China.

Vietnam, the other main player in the South China Sea, is comparatively hesitant about openly siding with the US. Politically, Vietnam is split between those who want to make an accommodation with China and those who want to actively balance – says Euan Graham of the Lowy Institute in Sydney.

Promotions and demotions at the five-yearly Vietnam Communist party conference next year may act as a bellwether for which faction is holding sway.

Vietnam's efforts to be militarily self-reliant led it to buy six Russian-built attack submarines, of which the fourth was delivered this month. Last year a Vietnamese fishing vessel sunk after a collision with a Chinese boat in a confrontation over an oil rig that Beijing had placed in waters claimed by Hanoi.