

A recipe for trouble in China's backyard

By David Pilling

Published: September 29 2010 19:58 | Last updated: September 29 2010 19:58

Take a handful of uninhabited islets roughly equidistant between Okinawa and Taiwan. Add a Chinese trawler captain, determined to fish in what he regards as Chinese waters. Then mix in a Japanese patrol boat defending Tokyo's control of the islands. Finally, leave the Chinese fisherman to stew (preferably in a non-stick Japanese jail) for two weeks. Voilà. You have just created [a diplomatic row](#) to traumatise much of Asia and rattle even Washington.

The immediate cause of alarm is Beijing's rough-house tactics following the captain's arrest in waters near the disputed Senkaku islands, known as Diaoyu islands in Chinese. Not only did Beijing insist on the captain's immediate release, a demand to which Tokyo [eventually capitulated](#). It also escalated the dispute. It arrested four Japanese nationals; [blocked exports of rare earths](#) used by Japanese electronics companies; cancelled diplomatic exchanges; and allowed anti-Japanese demonstrators to pour on to Chinese streets. (It even canned the tour of SMAP, a Japanese boy-band.) Even the release of the captain did not mollify Beijing, which demanded an apology and compensation.

The underlying concerns go deeper still. Diplomats detect a pattern of more assertive – some say aggressive – Chinese behaviour. If Japan, with its still-powerful economy and sophisticated defence force, cannot stand up to Beijing, what hope for the many smaller countries that have territorial disputes with China? Most of these have lain dormant for decades. Beijing has hitherto been happy to put them on the back-burner, favouring a charm offensive aimed at convincing neighbours that its rise poses no threat.

Those days may be over. Beijing has begun to pursue its regional interests more forcefully. Its navy has conducted boisterous [war games](#). Its government has warned off western companies, including Exxon Mobil, from doing business with Vietnam in waters that China also claims. Retired generals have started referring to the South China Sea – a body of water The Economist calls a “great lolling tongue of Chinese sovereignty” – as a core interest.

Although not yet official terminology, this raises the prospect of Beijing putting the South China Sea, with its shipping lanes stretching to the Malacca Straits, on a par with Tibet and Taiwan. That would make the sovereignty issue non-negotiable, a problem for the several nations, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, that have overlapping claims. It would be akin to a Chinese Monroe Doctrine, which asserted the rights of a then-rising US to its Latin American backyard.

These signs of Chinese swagger have provoked panic in some quarters. Shintaro Ishihara, the admittedly mouth-frothing Tokyo governor, compared China to a crime outfit expanding its turf. Chris Nelson, editor of a Washington newsletter, coined the

ungainly (but useful) term “Putinizing”. Like Russia under Vladimir Putin, he said, China was playing to domestic nationalism by hardening previously friendly attitudes to its neighbours. Denny Roy, senior fellow at Hawaii university’s East-West Center, said China’s view of the Asia-Pacific ultimately “doesn’t have room for the degree of American influence we see today”. That could put the two sides on a “collision course”.

Part of the explanation for China’s harder tone may be a recent speech by Hillary Clinton, US secretary of state, in which she [declared the South China Sea part of the US national interest](#) and offered to mediate in territorial disputes. As well as pushing back against Washington, Beijing may believe it has outgrown Deng Xiaoping’s exhortation to “hide our capabilities and bide our time”. It may feel, in Mr Roy’s words, that now is the time to “push the system into a shape more to China’s liking”.

As China’s economic bandwagon rolls on, it is only natural – if not self-evidently desirable – for it to seek more regional influence. Since the US emerged as a great power last century, it has hardly been shy about pursuing its interests abroad. It built and controlled a canal in Panama, funded coups from Iran to Chile, and went to war in Indochina and the Middle East. To this day, its navy treats the Pacific as an American lake. By these standards, China’s ambitions for regional influence look decidedly modest.

The US has the advantage of being an attractive democracy with a dream to sell. That has been enough to win acceptance, if not always joyful embrace, of its extra-territorial activities. “There have been many question marks against US power, but it is the power we’re used to,” says Simon Tay, a Singaporean who has written about the loss of US influence in Asia. “The US is the foundation of the existing system.”

It is precisely the sense that Asia may be in transition towards a new power-sharing arrangement that is causing angst. China – a still-impooverished, authoritarian state – remains less trusted than the US in much of the region. No one really knows how Beijing would behave if it gained anything like the power Washington has so long enjoyed. That is why Asia looks so closely at incidents such as China’s diplomatic brawl with Japan – for clues as to what the future might hold.

david.pilling@ft.com