

## **Is China being a bully?**

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**By Xavier Kong**

Tiger heard that there were some fingers being pointed at China during the Shangri-La Dialogue – the Asian defence summit. It wonders now whether China is being a bully and how the situation should be resolved.

Tiger is stumped. By what, Tiger is not sure. Is it how China behaved like a petulant child when coming under fire from the United States and Japan? Or is it the point that Malaysia did not say anything against Chinese incursions in the region when the rest of the Asean group was speaking out? How about that the Asean coalition itself, which is supposed to be a united faction of countries that aid one another in defence and economy, acted like a splintered faction?

This all happened over the weekend at the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Shangri-La Dialogue, a defence summit attended by the defence ministers, military chiefs and permanent heads of ministries of 28 Asia-Pacific countries. The summit is held annually at the Shangri-La hotel in Singapore, where it has been held since 2002.

China has been stepping on quite a few toes recently, superpower or not, with the latest being the intrusion into Vietnamese waters to set up an oil rig. However, when the United States defence secretary Chuck Hagel and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe started to point out China's indiscretions, Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong, deputy chief of the general staff leading the the Chinese delegation, came back with an entire fusillade that distills down to the words "You started it".

Then again, with Hagel saying that "China has undertaken destabilizing, unilateral actions asserting its claims in the South China Sea," and how "the United States will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged," it can be understood why Wang was incensed. Of course, it did not help matters that Abe had thrown in with insinuations that someone – without pointing any direct fingers – is using "the threat of weapons of mass destruction and attempts to change the status quo through force or coercion. Clearly there exist elements that spawn instability," which further incensed Wang.

This led to Wang feeling that “the speeches of Mr. Abe and Mr. Hagel have been pre-coordinated,” with Hagel focusing his remarks on China and that “the whole audience could feel it,” while “Mr. Abe, overtly or covertly, explicitly or implicitly and directly or indirectly condemned China,”. This preceded the returning shots by Wang, who ended with “assertiveness has come from the joint actions of the United States and Japan, not China”. A rather elaborate way of saying “you started it first,” is it not?

And while our own defence minister Hishammuddin Hussein “made a pointed call” to the superpowers, there was still no direct denouncement of the antagonistic approaches China had taken. Recall that the Chinese Navy had again made claims in the disputed James Shoal a reef off the coast of Sarawak earlier this year, and they brought along an aircraft carrier and three destroyers to that party.

Note that, in the event China really does succeed in claiming James Shoal, it would reduce the economic exclusion zone of Sarawak from 200 nautical miles, or about 370 kilometres, to almost nothing at 80 kilometres, and that is just the distance from James Shoal to the coast of Sarawak, without taking into account territorial waters that are bound to be added to that limit. Note that James Shoal is 1,800 kilometres from the closest China coastline.

At the same time, Hishammuddin, through his words, appears to straddle the middle line between the United States, China, and its obligations to the rest of the Asean nations. The Trans-Pacific Partnership, with its ties to the United States as well as Malaysia’s Asean neighbours would indeed serve well towards Malaysia’s economy. However, with no cohesive stand by the Asean nations, how can the Asean voice be heard?

As Tiger had mentioned before, “Unity is strength”, and Tiger looks at how the delegates of the Asean nations, countries which have pledged to aid one another, announced their disenchantment of China’s pressure on their nations by each declaring their own stand. Why was there no cohesion among the outcries? At least, if there was a united stand, the Chinese delegates may have listened.

Then again, Tiger understands that over the same weekend that the Shangri-La Dialogue was held in Singapore, prime minister Najb Razak and his entourage were in China, strengthening ties between the two countries. Here, China had also reaffirmed that it wished to resolve each territorial dispute with the individual

nations disputing them. Why the over-complication of matters? Why not just gather all involved, hold a meeting, and trash it out then?

This matter is not entirely new, either, considering the Asean nations and China had already signed a declaration to hash out a code of conduct in the South China Sea at a later date – back in 2002. Among the clauses included a pledge from China to “exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes,” which Tiger believes the country has very conveniently forgotten.

Where does China find these claims? In a map with eleven dots on it, published in 1947 by the Kuomintang government of the Republic of China to justify its claims in the South China Sea. After the Communist Party took over, then-premier Zhou Enlai revised the claim to nine dots. This nine-dotted line has, according to the Asia Times Online, been used by China to show the maximum extent of its claim, without indicating how the dots would be joined if it was continuous. Very sneaky indeed.

Amid multiple repetitions by parties involved that this be resolved, why has it not happened? It might be worth noting here that China has many established trade routes and agreements with the countries it is in dispute with, of which those same countries depend on for continued growth.

Unfortunately, suffering has already begun from China’s aggressive actions. Anti-China sentiment grew to a boiling point in Vietnam just recently, due to the Chinese setting up an oil rig, guarded by a flotilla which patrolled its three mile exclusion zone, within waters that Vietnam had claimed as its own. This led to riots, causing the loss of both stability and material, as the riots led to the torching of factories in an industrial zone in southern Vietnam, to the point that some factories had to take to spray-painting the message “We are not Chinese” on their gates to avoid the persecution of the rioting crowd.

Sadly, global politics remain a murky pool in the eyes of this Tiger, who is further saddened because it all seems like a very petty contest. In Tiger’s eyes, it all just seems to be China being a bully, through either political, economic, or military means, all because the country feels threatened by the United States. An assertion of dominance? A big game of “whoever blinks loses”? Or is it just that?

It is well-known that the waters in these parts contain oil and gas and other resources. That would be another good reason for China to assert its dominion and

dominance over these. And it will be good enough reason too for others to take steps to protect their own interests. Wish Malaysia will do more.

Tiger feels that is enough thinking for today, and Tiger shall now proceed to cheer himself up with a tasty treat, as well as a well-deserved bask in the sun as a reward for all this thinking.

GRRRRR!

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