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Reviving the China Threat

Gregory Clark

Reviving the China Threat

By Gregory Clark

"I recognize that it (China) is becoming a considerable threat."
--Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso

For some of us in the China-watching business (I have been there for more than 40 years), there has always been a China "threat." It began with the 1950-53 Korean civil war, which initially had nothing to do with China.

Indeed, if any outside power was involved in North Korea's attack on its rival government in the South, it was the Soviet Union, not China. The Communist regime in Beijing had just come to power after a protracted civil war with the rival Kuomintang (KMT) regime. Its troops were being moved to the south of the country, far from Korea, in preparation for the final attack on the KMT enemy which had fled to Taiwan.

Even so, Beijing was blamed. As punishment, Washington withdrew its earlier pledge not to get involved in China's civil war and called for a KMT counter-attack against the Mainland.

It would also threaten Beijing more directly, by sending troops close to China's border with Korea in late 1950. When China then moved its own troops into Korea, the China-threat people moved into high gear. Images of hordes of Chinese troops relentlessly pushing US forces southwards down the Korean peninsula followed by two years of military stalemate were to lay the groundwork for two decades of US and other Western policies calling for the containment and non-recognition of Beijing.

The next China threat was supposed to operate via the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Coping with that 'threat' meant the West had to prop up a range of incompetent, corrupt rulers in the area, and intervene cruelly to suppress revolts by local Chinese against discrimination in Malaya and then in Sarawak.

It also meant that the U.S., Britain and Australia would work very hard to prevent the 1959 election of an intelligent Chinese, Lee Kwan Yew, to the Singapore premiership. Lee was seen, amazingly, as a front for Beijing and Chinese communism. The three Western powers threw their support and secret funds behind Lee's pro-Western rival, Lim Yew Hock, whom Lee easily defeated. (Lee subsequently sent Lim as ambasssador to Canberra where he served for some months before abandoning his embassy and disappearing into a Sydney redlight area, leading to his recall.)

The China-threat lobby moved into overdrive over Vietnam in the early 1960s. There a civil war in the South supported

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by North Vietnam was denounced by Washington and Canberra as the first step in Beijing's planned "aggression" into Southeast Asia - despite the fact that as in Korea, Moscow's support for the pro-communist side in that civil war was much greater than China's. However, Beijing's rhetoric supporting the war was seen as proof of China's guilt.

One result was that, in 1964, I had the task of accompanying an Australian foreign minister, Paul Hasluck, in a foolish, U.S.-instigated bid to persuade the Soviet Union to side with the West against those aggressive Chinese. The US, and Canberra, had decided that the Sino-Soviet polemics at the time proved that Moscow was on the side of moderation and detente with the West while Beijing was committed to aggressive support for pro- communist revolts world wide.

Hasluck labored on about how China was threatening not just Asia but also Soviet territories in Central Asia and the Far East. He gave up only after being told bluntly by the Soviet prime minister, Alexei Kosygin, that Moscow was doing all it could to help North Vietnam in its just struggle against US imperialism, would continue to do so, and that it would like to see Beijing doing a lot more.

In 1962, as China desk officer in Canberra, I had to witness an extraordinary attempt to label as unprovoked aggression a very limited and justified Chinese counterattack against an Indian military thrust across the Indian-claimed border line in the North East Frontier Area.

Threat scenarios then had China seeking ocean access via the Bay of Bengal. The London Economist even had Beijing seeking to move south via Afghanistan.

Then came the allegations that China was seeking footholds in Laos, northern Thailand and Myanmar -- all false. U.S., British and Australian encouragement for the 1965 massacre of up to half a million leftwing supporters in Indonesia was also justified as needed to prevent China from gaining a foothold there.

So too was the U.S. and Australia's 1975 approval for Indonesia's brutal Invasion and takeover of East Timor. Both saw Fretilin, then the main political party opposed to the Portuguese colonial regime and seeking independence, as a dangerous leftwing grouping that might turn to China for support.

Beijing's moves to prevent Taiwan independence have also been condemned as aggressive, despite the fact that every Western nation, including the U.S., has formally recognized or accepted that Taiwan is part of a nation called China in which Beijing is the sole legitimate government.

China's efforts to assert control over Tibet were also branded as Aggression, even though Tibet has never been recognized as an independent entity. True, many have the right to be upset over the crude way in which Beijing asserted control over Tibet. But many also forget that some of that crudity was the result of an abortive CIA/New Delhi attempt to stir up a revolt in the area.

The cruelty and damage caused by China's Great Leap Forward in the late

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sixties, the Cultural Revolution in the late seventies, and the Tiananmen massacre of 19889 also provoked alarm among some China watchers. But these were internal, not external, events.

And so it continues to the present day. With the alleged Soviet threat to Japan having evaporated, we now have an army of Japanese and U.S. hawks -- Foreign Minister Aso included -- ramping up China as an alleged threat to Japan and the Far East.

Much is made of Beijing's recent increases in military spending. But those increases began from a very low base; until recently its military were more concerned with running companies and growing their own vegetables. Today Beijing faces a U.S.-Japan military buildup in East Asia for which the spending far exceeds China's. Tokyo and Washington have a strategic military alliance that specifically targets China over Taiwan, and possibly other parts of East Asia. For Beijing to ignore these facts would be surprising, to say the least.

The US and Japan justify that buildup partly as needed to contain the potential threat from China. And if the Chinese military were placing bases and sending spy planes and ships close to the U.S. coast, were encouraging Hawaiian independence , and were bombing U.S. embassies, the U.S. role in that buildup might be justified. But so far that has not happened.

The China 'threat' to Japan is supposed to involve maritime borders in the East China Sea. Tokyo has unilaterally decreed that its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in that area extends to the median line between the Chinese coast-line and the Ryukyu islands. It claims sole right to develop potential oil and gas reserves in this claimed EEZ area and its strategists urge punitive action against any Chinese challenge to that right. Even Chinese developments on the Chinese side of that median line are threatened on the basis that they may take gas from underground reserves on the Japanese side of the claimed line.



The Senkaku Islands

Beijing disputes Tokyo's EEZ claim. It says the continental shelf extending all the way to the Okinawa Trough, or well within the EEZ area claimed by Japan, should be the basis for deciding the EEZ boundary. But it makes no move to assert control over the disputed area. Instead it calls for agreement on joint undersea development in the area between the two rival claim lines, at least until the rival claims have been settled.

Who is right? The 1982 UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) which created the EEZ concept simply says that international law should be the

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basis for deciding conflicting claims. But international law is vague. In the past it endorsed the continental shelf approach as the main basis for delimiting maritime boundaries. But recently it has begun to favor the median or equidistance line approach. However it also goes on to say that any equidistance approach should also be equitable, to both sides.

One example of equity in the equidistance approach was the recent Libya/Malta judgement where Libya was favored because of its greater land mass. In this as in several other similar cases, the International Court of Justice has ruled that "the equidistance line is not mandatory or binding." It says that the "proportionality of coastlines" is also a factor.

In theory at least this proportionality ruling would seem to favor China.

The pending Australia-East Timor agreement also raises doubts about Japan's blunt rejection of Beijing's proposals. The continental shelf was the basis for the original Australian-Indonesian maritime boundary agreement reached back in 1972. It favored Australia greatly since the Timor trough which defines the shelf runs close to the Indonesian and Timor coastlines.



Timor from space

Then as extensive oil and gas reserves were found on the shelf between Australia and East Timor (which was incorporated forcefully into Indonesia in 1975), there were demands for the equidistance line to be used. When East Timor gained independence from Indonesia in 2002 the demands grew even louder.

But Canberra still insists on the continental shelf line agreed earlier with Indonesia. However, and as a concession, it has agreed to revenue sharing from developing some oil and gas reserves between the equidistance line and the original continental shelf line, a position somewhat similar to what China proposes today in the East China Sea.

An even stronger precedent was created by Tokyo itself. Japan and South Korea used to have rival equidistance and continental shelf claims against each other. Then in 1974 they agreed to disagree, and to decide the matter some time in the future (the year 2028 was mentioned). In the meantime they agreed to joint development in the area

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between the two claimed lines. That 1974 agreement was confirmed as late as August 2002, by an accord for a specific oil co-exploration project on the continental shelf between the two nations. Like Beijing, Seoul's continental shelf claim extends to the Okinawa Trough, Jon M. Van Dyke of the William S. Richardson School of Law, University of Hawaii at Manoa, and the foremost expert on Japan-China and Japan-Korea sea boundaries, agrees that the equidistance principle is now dominant. But he adds that in cases of disagreement "it may be appropriate to resolve some of them with shared or joint-use zones of some sort."

The 1982 UNCLOS says specifically that in cases of disagreement "the States concerned shall make every effort to enter into provisional arrangements of a practical nature." Beijing's joint development proposal in the disputed area would seem to match that principle. Tokyo's hard-line approach which says everything is already decided would seem to contradict it.

Ironically, as late as 1994 Tokyo agreed to joint fisheries exploitation with China and South Korea in the East China Sea pending what it then agreed was the need for final EEZ delimitations. But today it insists that the Japan-China EEZ has indeed been finally delimited—not by negotiation but by unilateral fiat.

Tokyo takes an equally hard line in its Senkaku Islands dispute with Beijing—a dispute in which the Chinese/Taiwan claims are not without historical validity, and would have even more validity under Beijing's continental shelf approach.

Tokyo moves from the hard line to the absurd in its claim to 200 nautical mile EEZ rights in every direction from a miniscule and remote Pacific Ocean rock far to the east of Japan and which it calls Okinotori Island. Its claim flies in the face of Article 121 (3) of UNCLOS, which states clearly that small rocks and even uninhabited islands cannot have an EEZ. What we see in all this is the ease with which Japan's positions on territorial questions harden once subjected to the glare of publicity. In backroom deals Tokyo can show reasonable flexibility.

For example, in both 1955 and 1956 Tokyo was on the point of reaching a closed-door compromise settlement of its nagging territorial dispute with Moscow. Tokyo would receive two of the four disputed island territories (Shikotan and the Habomais) i.e. it would accept continued Soviet conrol of the larger islands of Etorufu and Kunashiri over which Japan had specifically renounced all right and title under the 1951 San Francisco peace agreement (but to which in 1953 it revived a claim).

Both times Japan's hardliners were able to drag the compromise agreements into the light of media and rightwing scrutiny. Overnight the compromises were condemned as sell-outs of the Japanese national interest. . A similar backroom compromise proposal organized by the LDP politician Suzuki Muneo in 1999 during former prime minister Mori Yoshiro's administration met the same fate. The Foreign Ministry officials involved

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have all been forced into exile.

For a while there were signs that Foreign Ministry moderates were also willing to go along with Beijing's 1970s suggestion that the Senkaku Islands ownership dispute be shelved for the next generation to solve. But Japan's rightwing quickly put an end to that commonsense suggestion. Led by Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro, they have also done much to force Tokyo into its absurdly defiant position over the Okinotori rock. Public opinion in Japan seems unable to comprehend that there can be two sides to a dispute, especially when territory is involved. Even at the height of Canberra's dispute with East Timor, responsible Australian media were always careful to refer to the 'claimed' Australian EEZ line. The Timorese case was presented objectively. Meanwhile in Japan the media and the commentators take it for granted that Japan's median line EEZ claim in the East China sea is totally correct. Even the supposedly impartial NHK forgets to use the word 'claimed.'

It is not impossible that an economically powerful China still filled with a sense of grievance over past wrongs might in the future want to begin to threaten its neighbors. But apart from a brief border war with Vietnam in 1989, that has not been the case in the past. Nor is it now. For a Japan, which inflicted many of those past wrongs on China and whose Yasukuni Shrine obsession shows that it remains unrepentant about those Wrongs, to condemn China as a threat is chutzpah - Oriental chutzpah.

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