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Full steam ahead for China-s territorial ambitions

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In a famous maxim, China's late leader Deng Xiaoping urged his countrymen to "hide your brightness, bide your time". That was more than 20 years ago. It now seems China's leaders have finished biding their time.

In an assertive redefinition of its place in the world, China has put the South China Sea into its "core national interest" category of non-negotiable territorial claims - in the same league as Taiwan and Tibet. China has drawn a red line down the map of Asia and defies anyone to cross it.

It brings China into direct conflict with the claims of five neighbours, and challenges the US Navy's dominance of the waters. One-third of all commercial shipping in the world passes through the waters now claimed exclusively by China, the sea bounded by Taiwan in the north, Vietnam in the west, the Philippines in the east and Malaysia and Brunei in the south.

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It contains oil and gas fields; some Chinese analysts have dubbed it "Asia's Persian Gulf" for its potential oil wealth and its fractiousness. It is particularly inflammatory because China's government is repudiating its non-binding 2002 agreement with its South-East Asian neighbours to solve territorial disputes through peaceful negotiation.

It's a crisis, but a quiet one. That's mainly because the affronted countries are reacting with wary restraint towards their burgeoning neighbour. Vietnam has pointedly demanded China observe the agreement, but the others have been almost inaudible.

And the US?

The US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Kurt Campbell, told the Herald: "I think the US and China have a flourishing state-to-state dialogue on a host of issues. In that larger context there will invariably be issues on which the US and China will have differences and we understand that those differences will extend not just to issues of rights of Taiwan or issues such as Tibet, but will also extend to issues like the South China Sea.

"We have sought to work closely to establish a dialogue, not just with China but with our friends in South-East Asia, to ensure that we fully support the 2002 process between China and South-East Asian states to deal with any outstanding issues through diplomacy."

In other words, the US also wants China to revert to the status quo ante, to negotiate rather than to stake a unilateral claim. As usual, the Association of South-East Asian Nations is useless in the face of trouble. It once again falls to the US to seek a solution.

The ASEAN Regional Forum, which adds China, the US, Australia and a range of others, is due to meet in Hanoi on July 23. This is bound to be a hot topic.

Why is China doing this? Because it needs to, according to one of its top naval officials. Rear-Admiral Zhang Huachen, deputy commander of the East Sea Fleet, told The Straits Times: "With the expansion of the country's economic interests, the navy wants to better protect the country's transportation routes and the safety of our major sea lanes."

Walter Russell Mead, of the Council on Foreign Relations, is unconvinced: "It's sterile in terms of China's trade

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ambitions; what commerce does it protect? China needs the flow of energy and raw materials from all over the world."

China is doing it because it can, according to a retired general, Xu Guangyu. "China's long absence from its exclusive economic waters over the past decades was an abnormal historical accident and now it is just advancing to normal operations," he told the South China Morning Post. "We kept silent about territory disputes with our neighbours in the past because our navy was incapable of defending our economic zones, but now the navy is able to carry out its task."

China now thinks it can get away with it, according to Wang Hanling, an expert in maritime affairs at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: "Actually, such disputes have existed since oil and other oceanic resources were discovered under the Diaoyu Islands [which Japan claims under the Japanese name Senkaku Islands] and the Spratlys and Paracels in the South and East China seas in the 1970s."

There was a suggestion the South-East Asian states could form a common front against China, a prospect "which once concerned Beijing", said Wang, but which it has now dismissed after three decades of inaction. "We found our neighbours had territorial-water disputes to wrangle over and national interests to defend, which makes it very difficult for them to build a unified front against China. Even if they succeed in joining together, they are still not strong enough to defeat China."

It is one of several moves this year by Beijing to expand its naval dominion: First, it has declared a newly expansive naval doctrine. Until now, its zone of operations was limited to the so-called First Island Chain, stretching from Japan to the Philippines. But Beijing now proclaims "far-sea defence" reaching to the Second Island Chain, a zone stretching all the way to Guam, Indonesia and Australia.

Second, it has waged more aggressive patrols and naval exercises to give operational meaning to the new doctrine. In April, for instance, a 10-ship fleet sailed beyond the First Island Chain, an exercise of unprecedented scale for China. Third, it continues apace to build capability, including an underground submarine base on Hainan Island, and an aircraft carrier battle group, due to be deployed in the next few years.

The head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Robert Willard, said in April: "Of particular concern is that elements of China's military modernisation appear designed to challenge our freedom of action in the region."

With its economy thriving and its capabilities growing, Beijing is no longer biding its time but acting to assert itself.

Peter Hartcher is international editor.