

New era dawns as Beijing bucks US

Glenda Korporaal, CHINA CORRESPONDENT, 12:00AM October 4, 2018

This week's tension between naval ships from China and the US in the South China Sea has confirmed a growing concern in Beijing.

That is, that US President Donald Trump's angry trade war is not part of a specific goal that can be solved by official-to-official negotiation, or a specific trade concession, but part of a broader strategy to contain the rise of China on both economic and military fronts.

China's rising economic power has been accompanied by island-building in the South China Sea, including military installations, and expanding aid and investment in the Pacific.

Now China is finding new and harder lines are being drawn in the sand by the US on the trade front and Western powers on the naval front.

The US version of events is that the destroyer USS Decatur was conducting freedom-of- navigation exercises in the South China Sea near the disputed Spratly Islands, within 12 nautical miles of the Gaven and Johnson reefs, during a patrol, and was challenged in a deliberately unsafe manoeuvre by a Chinese destroyer.

China's version is that the US naval exercise was the latest in a series of provocative moves "under the pretext of navigation and overflight freedom" that threatened its sovereignty and security.

China said traditional tensions in the South China Sea had actually been getting better as China and ASEAN countries — those directly involved in the disputes — had been working together more co-operatively on a code of conduct to cover potential naval tensions in disputed waters.

It is now clear that the US, and its Western friends and allies, including Britain and Japan, have a strategy of more proactively conducting freedom-of-navigation exercises to challenge China's claims of sovereignty.

Tensions over the islands are not new, but the past weeks have seen warships from Britain, Japan and the US engage in freedom-of-navigation exercises that angered China, which this week said it would "take all necessary measures to safeguard national sovereignty and security." "The recent incident is -

emblematic of escalating tensions across the breadth of US-China relations,” said Euan Graham, a senior fellow at the Lowy Institute.

“China’s decision to use one of its warships in this manner demonstrates its willingness to take bolder, riskier actions in order to signal the strength of its opposition to US freedom-of-navigation operations around the artificial features it occupies in the South China Sea. “The relationship between China and the US is becoming more adversarial,” he said. “It’s difficult to identify positive areas of policy ‘ballast’ to the relationship, currently, certainly not in trade or investment.”

Unlike with the Trump-led trade war, as Graham points out, it is not just the US that’s pushing back against China’s overreach in the South China Sea. “This year we are also seeing a stepped-up naval presence from Japan, UK, France, Australia, Canada and, to a lesser extent, India,” he said.

On a broader front, China is starting to realise that the Trump trade threats and US-led tougher line on the South China Sea are all part of the same approach. “Xi and his team (have) made a fundamental shift in their views of the trade war from thinking it was a manageable dispute to now believing it is part of a broader American plan to keep China down,” US-based China watcher Bill Bishop wrote in the latest edition of his Sinocism newsletter.

He predicts China will begin working “increasingly hard to wean itself from as much dependence and reliance on the US as possible ... Welcome to the new era of US-China relations.”

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