

Avoiding the Dragon's Breath and the Bear's Claws

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In the 21st century, the sea remains the pre-eminent medium of access and exchange. The two Eurasian, continental powers, Russia and China, have recognised that the sea, as the engine of globalisation, is vital to their ability to assert their status as great powers. They also are aware that the connections between the sources of raw materials, production centres and markets confer an ability both to exercise control of commerce and to offer the means by which further means of influence and coercion can be incorporated into their diplomacy.

A recent speech by President Xi Jinping expresses these themes,

‘We should realize that the 21st century is the century of the sea as people have entered into a period of nautical exploration.

Explorations of the sea have paved the way for China's future development and it is part of China's strategic development that cannot be neglected.

During the process of China developing into a maritime power, the world should join forces to safeguard maritime peace. If there is any maritime hegemonism, terrorism and piracy, the stability of the world's waters cannot be maintained.’

He concluded with the telling sentence, ‘The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned.

As the strategic level, both Russia and China are challenging the current rules-based international system, with frequent statements about the need to ‘de-Americanise’ the world and its institutions. At sea, there have been regular attempts to test the limits of toleration in either eroding or overriding international or national entitlements, especially in relation to the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea. These contraventions are consistent with their stated desire to recover sovereign rights across several areas of strategic interest that they claim to have lost when agreements were negotiated when they were in a position of inferiority or weakness. This approach is also expressed as an aversion to the status quo and any cooperative agreement, when it does not suit their interests.

As evidence of their re-discovered interest in the sea, Russia and China are both expanding and modernising their maritime forces to enable them to challenge the status quo at sea, notably

with the introduction of anti-access and area denial platforms and systems. These are benchmarked against the capabilities of the naval forces of the free world and represent not only a considerable force-on-force threat, but also inflict a disadvantageous cost ratio on western country and their allies in seeking to defend against them.

However, it is Russia and China's apparent intention and increasing capability to use the sea to dominate and control their immediate neighbourhoods, in place of land-based interventions and immediate coercive pressure that needs to be noticed in the context of the early 21st century.

Russia is busily extending its reach and capability to dominate the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Arctic, with the deployment of increasingly capable denial weapons and systems. Its occupation of Crimea has seen a significant re-fortification of the peninsula, characterised by increasingly capable anti-surface and anti-air weapons, backed up by powerful aviation, surveillance and offshore zone patrol forces. A similar process is under way in the Baltic, with substantial enhancements to the Western Military District and the exclave of Kaliningrad, most notably the use of sophisticated anti-ship missiles and the S-400 anti-air system. The Arctic has also been significantly reinforced.

Meanwhile, it is evident that China has adopted a territorial approach to the South and East China Seas, with the overriding of the claims of its neighbours to economic zones, in gradually extending its grip out to its so-called 10-dash line. The systematic construction of infrastructure and military facilities, as well as the basing of combat aircraft and surveillance systems on the reefs of the Spratly and Paracel groups is evidence of a determined drive to assert sovereign right, enforced by might.

These measures by China and Russia are not related simply to attempts to strengthen their relative advantage in times of tension and war, but in peacetime as well, with the implicit threat of coercion being conveyed to their neighbours. Russia and China appear to be applying anti-access and denial doctrine to routine peacetime activity, as well as their wartime planning. Strategically, if Russia and China can routinely exclude the US and its allies from areas of sea (and the associated airspace) that represent their 'near abroad' they will increase their ability to dominate their regions both commercially and strategically, while weakening the assurances and links between the US and its major allies and treaty partners. This process would have an extremely damaging effect on US assurances to Europe and NATO, on the one hand, and Japan and South Korea, as well as other Asia-Pacific partners that fear China's domination, on the other.

As such the issues at stake in the South and East China Seas represent a significant test case. If these disputes are not resolved peacefully, future naval conflicts in other parts of the world are likely to revolve around and result in a series of 'land grabs' at sea, just as land campaigns in the past were fought to acquire land and assets. However, as long as China and Russia have more to lose than to gain from a breakdown of the international system of law and trade, the current

grudging acceptance of the status quo seems set to continue, punctuated by a sequence of minor spats and disputes in the margins of UNCLOS.

Consequently, the first half of the 21st century in the region is likely to witness a series of tests of will and resolve as both the US and its allies and China and Russia probe and assess each other's responses to incidents on the ragged edge between 'territorial' claims and insistence on the freedom of the seas. Incidents are likely to take the form of 'encounter actions' between single vessels or small forces rather than substantial task groups. They are likely to involve the use of unmanned assets to probe the limits of tolerance.

In the areas under threat, countries will probably have to decide on a case-by-case basis whether it is worth risking confrontation and conflict in order to preserve their offshore integrity and the freedom of the seas. Those that have a primary commercial partnership with either Russia or China and a primary strategic relationship with the US will have a particularly difficult dilemma. Those that possess decisive military capability are likely to be able to threaten or use force to insist on their claimed rights or the maintenance of the status quo. Those that cannot deploy forces or call allies in aid will be forced to back down in the face of encroachment or exploitation. Unless the US stands behind them, by speaking softly (or loudly) and carrying a big stick, the 'Melian Dialogue' from the Peloponnesian War will probably apply: 'the strong do as they can and the weak suffer what they must'.

The fundamental issue at stake is whether the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea will remain, by cooperation or enforcement, the basis for the international order at sea. At present, only the US is prepared to challenge the blatant 'land grab' at sea by China and the various attempts at coercion by Russia. Unless the world community is prepared to accept a post-Grotian world in which the freedom of the seas gives way to controlled and exclusive sea-space, other countries will need to be prepared to assist the US in its task of ensuring that the seas of the world remain open to all those who wish to proceed 'on their lawful occasions'.