

Asia Rising Podcast – China Seas

Professor Nick Bisley

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we examine the news, events and general happenings of Asia's States and Societies. I'm your host Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia and in this podcast we're going to examine China's controversial activities in the East and South China Seas. Today I'm joined by long time China scholar and analyst, Linda Jakobson. Linda is a visiting Professor of the United States Study Centre at Sydney University, a non-resident Fellow of the Lowy Institute, Founding Director of China Matters a new, not for profit public policy initiative and most importantly a member of the La Trobe Asia Advisory Board. Linda thanks for joining us.

Professor Linda Jakobson

Thank you for having me.

Nick Bisley

So the past twelve to eighteen months, there's been a number of really quite high profile things that have occurred in the East and South China Sea. The declaration of the Air Defence Identification Zone, the CNOOC Oil rig that was drilling in, what most people would think are Vietnam's exclusive economic zone, and then earlier this year, the widespread publication of photo's showing quite significant land reclamation in an island chain in the Spratly Island Chain in South China Sea. But these are only the most high profile of what's been a considerable range of activities. Perhaps start with the broad question which is why is China becoming so much more active in what it's doing in these two seas?

Linda Jakobson

I think Nick, there are a number of reasons. Firstly, Xi Jinping after he came to power at the end of 2012 made it clear that he would favour a determined response from China on issues that deal with sovereignty. He was of the opinion that, for years China had been slightly too soft, because China had emphasised the need for stability, stability meaning peace, and others had encroached on China's sovereign rights because China had been either, what they say is 'passive' or what they would say is 'conciliatory'. So Xi Jinping comes to power and he says, "We need to staunchly safeguard our Southern Rights, while at the same time maintaining stability." So we'll probably get back to that phrase in a little while, so that's one reason.

Second reason is, after twenty-five years of; even thirty years, of rapid modernisation China now has the capacity, with its law enforcement agency vessels to patrol, to safeguard to "Assert sovereignty in a way that it never could before." If one sees the photographs of China's new Coastguard Vessels alongside a Vietnamese or a Filipino Vessel it's nearly like watching an elephant beside an ant. It's huge the difference now, in both the size and the scope when we look at the coastguard fleets, so China now has the capacity to do now what I think it's wanted always to do, but hasn't because it has not had that capacity, but also because it felt it had to kowtow, it had to take into account others demands when it was weak and needed others to continue to modernise.

Nick Bisley

Is there also a sense that the sea has become more important to what China is? That is to say its economic growth in the past had been kind of internally focused moving people from the countryside to the city. Is there a sense that the sea is more important to its overarching goals?

Linda Jakobson

Absolutely, I'm really glad you brought that up because I should have mentioned as the third reason why we're seeing a new behaviour from China in it's so-called near seas and that is precisely what you said. The maritime domain has for about five to ten years now, been emphasised, it's not only maritime security, I think it's important to remember that China is paying a huge amount of attention to maritime economy, maritime scientific endeavours, maritime environment protection and so on and so forth. The maritime has, as you said, become such an important domain, after all, so much of China's energy and raw materials come via the sea to China and they are paramount to that economic growth continuing.

Nick Bisley

So what does China want from its activities, and to put it bluntly, is there a kind of large plan, is there a big strategy at play? Some people argue there's this grand master plan out there and submarine bases in the South China Sea or what have you, or are things a bit ad hoc in terms of what they are trying to achieve?

Linda Jakobson

Well that was a very big question that you asked. A really big question, does China have a grand strategy? China doesn't have a grand strategy if you define that as written documents approved by all senior leaders in the Chinese Communist Party of, these are the steps which will take us to our goal, and our goal is to probably..... I think the Chinese goal, but in vague terms articulated so far is to dominate their near seas.

They want to make sure a) they will never be attacked from the sea, because they're very aware of the humility and weakness of China approximately 100 years ago when Western powers and Japanese powers came from the sea to put China on its knees.

And secondly they want to ensure that they will control enough of the near seas to make sure that no one will deprive them of the energy and raw material shipments coming into China. Now that doesn't mean that they don't believe in free sea lines of communication, which I think is important.

But back to your question, is there a grand strategy which has been articulated, approved of, I don't think so. Furthermore, I do think that this ambiguous way of Xi Jinping articulating that we need to more forcefully defend our sovereignty, but we need to absolutely maintain stability, is being used by many maritime security activists promote their own interests.

So on the large level I think the answer to my question is no, that there is a desire to dominate but how it is actually going to happen hasn't been spelt out in any formal way and on top of that, the new leader; who actually isn't so new anymore he's after all been two and a half years in power, has made it possible for many different actors within the system to advance their own interests, their personal interests or their institutional interests by taking advantage of this ambiguity.

Nick Bisley

So there's this sort of large sense of, 'we want security, we want to ensure we are not threatened, we are not vulnerable, we want to ensure our economic interests are maximised,' but beyond that you don't buy into this argument that there's a grand plan to secure the South China Sea or anything along those lines?

Linda Jakobson

I think an aspirational goal is definitely there, I do think that if China could choose Nick, China

would say we want the near seas to be our seas. South China Sea would become a China Sea. So I do agree with those people who say that that's China's goal, but it's an aspirational goal. China is pragmatic, China knows that it needs the United States in many, many ways, China knows that the United States is not going to go away any time soon, so China is finding ways to increase its own influence in the near seas under the circumstances which it acknowledges are reality.

Nick Bisley

In a major report that you wrote and was published last year by the Lowy Institute which looks at these issues and particularly looks at the different players that you're referring to, that are involved in China's maritime strategy, I guess you could call it. An interesting phrase in that which caught my eye was this idea of Chinese maritime policies marked by a kind of 'fractured authority' and I wonder if you could just explain what you meant by that, and then what are the implications of the fact that authorities are fractured in this way, how China's maritime ambitions play out?

Linda Jakobson

That report, China's unpredictable maritime security actors I based on the research which I had done explained that China's Foreign Policy decision making has become fractured because there are so many groups vying to influence the top leaders' decisions, because China has so many new expanded, growing, global interests and with them have come these interest groups who all have an opinion how China's Foreign Policy should be made. Now put this in the context of maritime security, I think, because of the growing importance of the maritime domain in both security environmental sense, economic sense, scientific sense and 'what have you' sense, again we see a proliferation of actors who were so called, "Not very important actors generally speaking" some time ago. Now, maritime is important, senior leaders are paying attention, there is money to be had from the Central Government coffers to promote x, y and z. We've seen this with Sansha this new, so called city in the middle of the ocean which is being promoted to the status of a city and is receiving huge amounts of investment from both local and central governments and is a very controversial project.

Nick Bisley

It has about 1,500 people who live there?

Linda Jakobson

Exactly and so called, has a "Jurisdiction of hundreds and thousands of square miles," basically the whole South China Sea if you'd ask the Chinese. So these actors who before were not important, feel that they have a chance now to be important and they are pushing the boundaries of the permissible, so back to that directive, as long as they don't do something that causes war, and I would say there's a lot of things that come very close to pushing China into a very tense situation which could cause military conflict, but you can just stop short of that. There's a wide scope of actions that these actors can take and still fulfil the decree that they are promoting or defending sovereignty and that's what they use. They say, "In the name of China's sovereignty we are going to establish the city of Sansha, we are going to build runways and ports and so forth on these small little islands or reefs or shoals even where land reclamation is taking place." There's a maritime consciousness at the moment sweeping through coastal areas of China, but there's also this rights defence consciousness as they say in Chinese, and you can sort of justify any action by saying that we are defending sovereignty and that's what I meant when it's fractured.

There's so many different groups, also official groups, these aren't just marginal groups, they're people like the Coastguard, local governments, tourism agencies but also the officials who are in charge of promoting tourism Guangdong Province, so there are a lot of government actors too who have become maritime security actors pushing because they stand to benefit from it.

Nick Bisley

Has that tended to increase a sort of sense of unco-ordinated quality of what's going on and a kind of sense of the command and control from Beijing is not what they might like?

Linda Jakobson

There was a period, 2009, 2010, 2011, when it was very unclear, there was inattention by senior leaders leading to an increase in unco-ordination or bad coordination one should say. Since Xi Jinping came to power, there's very clear indications that he wants better co-ordination and I think he is already seeing that happen and there's been a consolidation of many of the maritime law enforcement agencies into a consolidated coastguard and so on, so there is an effort to do more.

But because of the way the Chinese system works there is still room for manoeuvre. Xi Jinping can't possibly be on top of every decision made and these local actors, it doesn't mean because they're not co-ordinating well that they wouldn't be also pushing the envelope. I think one can have co-ordination and good co-ordination but still have local government actors and government in the broadest of senses pushing the envelope.

And then we haven't spoken about the PLA, because the PLA is a maritime security actor for obvious reasons, the PLA Navy and the PLA generally is tasked with defending sovereignty. Certainly in the maritime sphere we are seeing indications that the PLA would like to be more active. According to my research findings, they took upon themselves more of a co-ordinative role during that very contentious oil rig episode when the Chinese towed the oil rig to, what most people would definitely see as Vietnamese waters, so I think again, you can have good co-ordination in fact, maybe there's better co-ordination today than several years ago between the PLA and the coastguard, but they are perhaps pushing the boundaries of the permissible, we don't know.

Nick Bisley

It seemed to me that the low presence of the PLA, looked a bit like an effort to try to keep the tensions that are going to come from this down, in the sense that when there have been clashes with Vietnamese fishermen or with Indonesian fishing vessels or the Philippines, you can say this is not military, this is not the PLA it's coastguard, state law enforcement entities or what have you. Do you think was that considered?

Linda Jakobson

It's important to bear in mind, even though I share the concerns of what China's doing with its land reclamation projects out on the shoals and so on, that China is not using guns or cannons to defend its sovereignty. It is using civilian law enforcement agency vessels, in the background has often loomed the PLA, but I think the political leadership, I have to say when we talk about China, does want the PLA to stay in the background. And I think that would be a very worrying sign if the PLA was tasked with defending sovereignty on issues of contested waters and maritime right. So I think it's very intentional that Communist Party Leadership wants the PLA to remain in the background, but I think the PLA perhaps themselves, would like to have a bit more of a role, at least a coordinating role.

Nick Bisley

So China's increased activity; some have said assertiveness, in its maritime activity of course involves competing claims with other countries it's an inherently international problem or policy environment, they're in dispute with at least six or seven different countries and entities about who owns what and the claims that follow from that. How dangerous is this situation do you

think? There is a bit of a debate out there about the extent to which we've got new flashpoints, the potential trigger for major conflict. You talked earlier about people walking up to the point of conflict and not quite getting there. What's your sense of how risky things are?

Linda Jakobson

I think one always has to be concerned about an incident, whether it's an accident or intentional incident by a local actor, spinning out of control and causing a terrible situation between the governments of two countries, that perhaps worries me the most. But generally speaking I think China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and all the countries involved including the United States all want peace, no one is seeking war. And so I feel less concerned that any of them would change their policies and be willing to take the risk of hostilities in a military conflict to further their interests. I do think we're going to see this tense situation continuing, but I don't see a war breaking out.

Nick Bisley

So where do you think it's going to end. Is there an end game around this, does China get largely what it wants? Will American say recognise this space, sphere, influence, call it what you will, because there has been a tendency policy in the past and in many cases where, 'we know we've got differences of opinion, we'll set them aside and get on with the day to day', but of course at some point there has to be a reckoning, at some point the different about who owns the submerged shoals, the islands, the reefs, the rocks, needs to be finalised. Do you have any sense of how that may play out, just in your crystal ball?

Linda Jakobson

I would emphasise a few points. China thinks long term. I think that there's something to believe in those who say that Xi Jinping wants to position China, in a way that when he leaves power in 2022 if everything goes according to plan, he'll leave China in a better situation to negotiate than when he came to power in 2012. They are thinking long term, I think China themselves think that with investment opportunities and preferential treatment both in trade and in investment, it will woo it's South East Asian neighbours in a manner which will soften the resolve of countries like the Philippines and Vietnam. I don't think that will happen, but I think that's the Chinese thought behind it.

As for Japan and we haven't spoken specifically about the East China Sea, I think there is, hopefully and I say hopefully, that there is a possibility that we will return to a status quo which means that we will put this issue aside, we will compartmentalise that issue and get on with developing the relationship which is after all I very much based on interdependence. Perhaps push the resolution of the Senkaku – Diaoyu Islands forward, so I don't think the day of reckoning is going to come any time soon.

Nick Bisley

The can, can be kicked down the road for some time to come. Thanks for joining us Linda.

Linda Jakobson

Thank you Nick.

Nick Bisley

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