Why China cares about the South China Sea

China's territorial claims are driven by a sense of historical victimisation.


Salvatore Babones

The judges have spoken: China has no legal basis for its claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea. China's "nine-dash line" territorial claims, which cover most of the South China Sea, will not be recognised under international law.

Vietnam and the Philippines have historically administered most of the rocks and reefs in the South China Sea, but in recent years China has aggressively pursued territorial claims in the area.

Since 2012 China has engaged in large-scale land reclamation efforts on islands it controls.

The July 12 ruling from the Permanent Court of Arbitration resolves a case brought against China by the Philippines under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. There are no enforcement provisions in this convention, so there is nothing to prevent China from continuing to expand its presence in the South China Sea.

Aggressive actions

But China's aggressive actions have alienated all of its maritime neighbours. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei all dispute China's expansive interpretation of its maritime borders.

The South China Sea is thought to harbour large reserves of oil and gas, but these are mainly located in undisputed coastal areas, not far out at sea.

And while the South China Sea is strategically important to China, all countries in the region share China's interest in keeping it open.

Protesters throw eggs at a picture of the US president outside the US Consulate in Hong Kong to protest about the Hague ruling in Hong Kong [EPA]

China's true interest in the South China Sea has much more to do with history and politics than with oil and security. The South China Sea dispute is not about China's interpretation of international law. It's about China's interpretation of itself.

From the Ming to Xi Jinping

Chinese politicians and China scholars like to pretend that China is a timeless civilisation that dates back past the dawn of history.

But the real roots of modern China can be found in the Ming dynasty that unified the Chinese empire under Chinese rulers nearly eight centuries ago, in AD 1368.

It was then that China recognisably assumed more or less its modern borders. Perhaps more importantly, it was under the Ming dynasty that China first encountered the Western world, emerged from feudalism, and formed many of the basic social structures that persist to today.

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Ming China had no serious challengers among its neighbours. Unlike Europe, where many small states vied for territory - and survival - China reigned supreme over its region.

Ming China had no need for well-defined borders because all of East Asia was to some degree under Chinese control, contained within China's "tianxia" or system of rule.

When the first Portuguese adventurers reached the mouth of southern China's Pearl River Delta in 1513, this system began to break down.

At first the Portuguese were treated as just another minority group. Over time, the Western powers (and Japan) became more aggressive in asserting territorial claims.

Though they never conquered China itself, the Western colonial powers did carve up most of Southeast Asia.

They also carved up the oceans. Vietnam's maritime claims in the South China Sea are based on old French colonial claims, and the Philippines traces its claims back to the Spanish colonial period.

Contemporary borders

Though the countries of Southeast Asia have every right to their contemporary borders, it still irks many Chinese people that those borders were drawn by others, mostly without China's consent.

The maritime borders of the South China Sea were set in stone (as it were) by strong Western countries at a time when China was too weak to contest them.

Now the Western powers are gone and China is the strong one, once again surrounded by a panoply of relatively weak neighbours, just as it was 500 years ago.

This must be very frustrating for Xi Jinping and the rest of China's contemporary leaders. It is certainly frustrating for Chinese nationalists. But for good or for bad the borders are what they are.

Many Chinese people, perhaps the majority, feel that their country has been unfairly treated by history. They are probably right.

China is a great and ancient civilisation that experienced its weakest period just as the map of the world was solidifying into its current form.

Nonetheless, no one in Asia today wants to reopen the question of borders, not even China.

China has pushed its maritime claims over uninhabited rocks and reefs. It has gone so far as to install people on those rocks and reefs. But it has made no move to contest already-populated islands.

China may have been unfairly treated by history, but so were many other countries.

China may spend billions of dollars to populate artificial islands in the middle of the ocean. But it won't change China's history, and it won't do much for China today.

China refutes the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration and has vowed to ignore it. The world shouldn't pay much attention if it does. China will make no friends by changing itself from a historical victim into a contemporary bully.