

Trouble Brewing to the South of Stanley

One of my favourite pastimes when living in Perth in Western Australia was taking my children to the beach. The beaches in Perth are famous for their clean white sand and for the surf that comes rolling in from the Indian Ocean. I would spend many an enjoyable afternoon watching my children play in the water and looking at the surfers riding the waves. Unlike Hong Kong the air was clear and you could see right to the horizon. I would often look for a plume of smoke that would indicate that a ship was about to come into view. Gazing out across the ocean makes you think about what is beyond the horizon and the people that live in those distant lands. In the case of the Perth beach where I would sit the nearest place over that horizon was South Africa a very long 8,000km away with nothing but the Indian Ocean in between.

One of the joys of living in Hong Kong is the beautiful scenery away from the concrete urban areas. Stanley is a favourite location for many people who too might sit on the beach watching the swimmers and the boats and dreaming about what lies beyond the horizon far away. Due south of Stanley and Hong Kong is the far west of the Pacific Ocean which in this part of the world is generally referred to as the South China Sea or more simply the South Sea. This area of water stretches from the southern coastline of China all the way to Indonesia a distance of 2,500km. Although not as great a distance as Perth to South Africa it still embraces a vast area of water. But unlike the Indian Ocean the South China Sea has hundreds of scattered low lying islands. These islands are little more than the tips of subterranean mountains that rise from the depths of the ocean floor thousand of metres below the water's surface.

The islands are mostly small and uninhabited save for the occasional fishing village. Obviously they are not large enough or have the economies to exist as independent countries. Rather they are claimed by one of the larger countries that boarder the South China Sea: China, Taiwan to Japan to the north; the Philippines to the east; Vietnam and Thailand to the west; and Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei to the south. However, it is not accurate for me to say that they are claimed by only one of those countries as most are claimed by two or more nations. And this is where the problem starts for it is this part of the world that many experts believe the next major international conflict will take place.

So why could a war erupt over what is little more than a series of rocky islands? The answer has nothing to do with the scenic beauty of the islands or their potential as tourist destinations. It does have something to do with fishing given that almost 10% of the fish in the world's oceans are to be found in the South China Sea. The fundamental reason why so many countries claim ownership comes down to what is to be found below the ocean floor. Geologists believe that vast deposits of oil and natural gas exist beneath the South China Sea and preliminary drilling by the world's leading oil companies confirm their views.

The case of who owns remote islands in oceans or large seas has long been a source of bitter dispute between nations. In the case of the South China Sea, the various players claim ownership based on historical events from long ago. Ancient maps and historical books and documents underpin many of the claims.

The People's Republic of China and Taiwan lays claim to the entire sea area stretching south to Indonesia. Obviously this has led to considerable tension not only between Beijing and Taipei but also with all the countries along the way. The first major cluster of islands south of Hong Kong, the Paracel Islands or Xisha Islands to the Chinese, are disputed by Beijing, Taipei and Vietnam. These authorities also dispute the Spratly Islands located in the centre of the South China Sea.

On occasions the disputes over ownership of the islands have led to armed conflict and deaths. In 1974 soldiers from the PRC and Vietnam who were based on the Paracel Islands were engaged in a skirmish that led to the deaths of 18 soldiers. The Paracel Islands have since been controlled exclusively by China. A more serious incident occurred in 1988 when 70 Vietnamese sailors were killed in an engagement with Chinese navy vessels. Such skirmishes have occurred on a regular basis over the past twenty years although the number of cases has risen sharply in recent times. What is of concern is that one of those skirmishes could turn into a serious conflict and the possibility of war.

The countries involved in the South China Sea issue have expressed their willingness to discuss the issues with each other. In the case of the People's Republic of China the wish is for the negotiations to be bi-lateral, that is, between the two countries claiming the same area of land. The other nations, however,

believe that the discussions need to be multi-lateral, that is, involving all the nations because of their fear of China's superior military power.

To complicate matters, the United States has called on China to resolve the territorial dispute with its neighbours and in a show of support for the other countries has been holding joint naval exercises in the South China Sea, particularly with Vietnam and the Philippines. The involvement of the USA has upset China who believe this to be none of America's business and that the presence of US warships in the region is only raising tensions further. The response by the People's Republic of China has been to increase its own navy's presence in the region.

Yet why are all these nations so intent on claiming sole ownership of these scattered islands and the surrounding waters? Rather than taking a course that might well lead to armed conflict or even war, why can't there be another solution? If the geologists and oil companies are correct, the oil and natural gas under the seabed would be worth billions of dollars and last for generations. Surely, there is a strong argument for an agreement to be drawn up between all countries that would see the income generated from exploration divided between each of the nations?

A major conflict in the South China Sea would be disastrous not only for the counties involved but also for the world economy. One third of the world's shipping uses these waters and trade between Asia and the rest of the world would be seriously disrupted. One would hope that common sense prevails and that an agreement can be struck between all parties.

The reason I am telling you about events in the South China Sea is that this region will be an important news item in the months and years ahead. As SPC students it is important that you keep up to date not only with current world events but also start thinking for yourselves about that might happen in the future. This is all part of your development as a global citizen who is able to form your own views on world issues. I encourage you to pay close attention as events unfold in that large body of water to the south of Stanley.

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