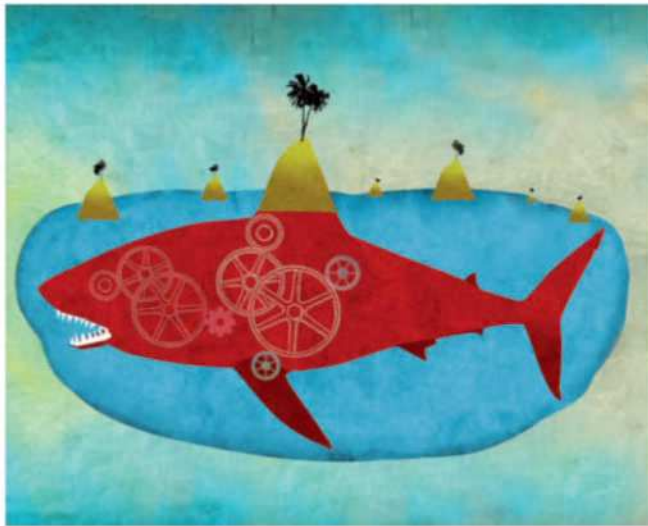


# Banyan | A Chinese lake

China has broken its promise, militarised the South China Sea and got away with it



**L**ESS than three years ago, Xi Jinping stood with Barack Obama in the Rose Garden at the White House and lied through his teeth. In response to mounting concern over China's massive terraforming efforts in the South China Sea—satellite images showed seven artificial islands sprouting in different spots—the country's president was all honey and balm. China absolutely did not, Mr Xi purred, “intend to pursue militarisation” on its islands. Its construction activities in the sea were not meant to “target or impact” any country.

As Steven Stashwick points out in the *Diplomat*, a journal on Asian affairs, these denials were always suspect, given the growing evidence of radar installations and bomber-sized bunkers made of reinforced concrete. Last month came the revelation that China had installed anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles on three islands in the Spratly archipelago west of the Philippines—far, far from its own shores. (Some or all of the Spratlys are claimed by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.) That follows China's biggest ever naval review, in the South China Sea in April. Later in May China declared that several bombers had landed in the Paracel Islands, which it disputes with Vietnam. It seems only a matter of time, says Bill Hayton of Chatham House, a think-tank, before the final step in China's militarisation of the sea: the deployment of attack aircraft in the Spratlys.

While other claimants continue to dredge, expand and reinforce the islets they occupy, the scale of China's reclamation—which has slowed at last but which covers about 3,200 acres (1,300 hectares) in the Spratlys alone—dwarfs all the others' efforts put together. China had claimed to be serving the common good: making navigation safer by building lighthouses, for instance. That never rang true. For one thing, the reclamation is an ecological catastrophe. Reefs are crucial spawning grounds for the sea's fast-diminishing fisheries, which account for 12% of the global catch. China's recent actions further undermine its professions of altruism and redraw the strategic map. Admiral Philip Davidson, the new head of America's Indo-Pacific Command, says that “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States.”

The question is what others will do about it. To date, Chinese expansionary tactics have for the most part involved incremental

steps: moves not so provocative as to incite a response. One trick is not always to deploy the navy, but the coastguard and “maritime militias”, when intimidating neighbours. That, as Andrew Erickson of America's Naval War College argues, has allowed China to get its way with less fuss. Presumably China thinks it can now get away with it again.

It may be right. Two years ago, a UN tribunal at The Hague ruled against China's grandiose territorial claims in the sea in a case brought by the Philippines. But Rodrigo Duterte, who had just become president, made it clear that he would put the case to one side. He has since sucked up to Mr Xi while often slamming America, his country's historical ally. The Philippines needs Chinese investment. Mr Duterte will even consider joint exploitation of gas reserves with China in disputed waters. The Philippines' existing gasfields may run out in the mid-2020s.

Compared with the Philippines, Vietnam has much more powerful armed forces. And as a communist state, like China, with a history of people's wars, it can counter China's militias with its own, made up of fishermen and other sailors. When China hauled an oil-exploration rig into Vietnamese waters, Vietnam eventually managed to get the rig to withdraw. In public, Vietnam takes a more robust stand against Chinese assertiveness.

That, however, hides behind-the-scenes discussions, which also include joint development. China is the giant. Neighbours have little choice but to rub along with it. Yet there are political risks. Bloody protests broke out in Vietnam during the stand-off in 2014, with anger directed not only at China but also at Vietnam's own rulers. There were more anti-Chinese protests earlier this month. And on June 12th, Philippine independence day, Mr Duterte was thrown off guard by protests over Chinese seizures of fish from Filipino vessels near Scarborough Shoal. In 2012 China reneged on a promise to withdraw from this reef, which is on the Philippine continental shelf, almost four times further from China than it is from the Philippines. Mr Duterte thought he had struck a deal to allow Filipino fishermen back. The Chinese claim the seizures were a mistake. But if Mr Duterte cannot show more fruit from his pro-China policy, says Jay Batongbacal of the University of the Philippines, the political cost will rise.

## Untruth and non-consequences

As for America, President Donald Trump's administration appears to have a strategy of pressing China on several fronts, including trade and more robust support for Taiwan. It has rescinded China's invitation to annual naval drills off Hawaii, while inviting Vietnam instead. It has increased “freedom of navigation operations” in the South China Sea (sending vessels close to China's new islands) and persuaded France and Britain to conduct them too. Presumably the red line set by Mr Obama—no Chinese construction on Scarborough Shoal—still holds.

America's defence secretary, James Mattis, promised “larger consequences” if China does not change track. Yet for now Mr Xi, while blaming America's own “militarisation” as the source of tension, must feel he has accomplished much. He has a chokehold on one of the world's busiest shipping routes and is in a position to make good on China's claims to the sea's oil, gas and fish. He has gained strategic depth in any conflict over Taiwan. And, through the sheer fact of possession, he has underpinned China's fatuous historical claims to the South China Sea. To his people, Mr Xi can paint it all as a return to the rightful order. Right now, it is not clear what the larger consequences of that might be. ■