

Seas of troubles

Taiwan and China share the same maritime claims, but have very different interests



In the convoluted dramas in the seas around China, Taiwan is often cast as a bit player, the optional extra to the lengthy lists of contending parties to the many territorial disputes. But the fatal shooting on May 9th of a 65-year-old Taiwanese fisherman by the Philippine coastguard has shifted Taiwan to centre stage. The killing provoked a crisis in its relations with an important economic partner that happens also to be a treaty ally of America—the ultimate guarantor of Taiwan's own defence. In the bigger picture, its involvement in such disputes inevitably draws attention to the island's unsettled international status, and to the future of its relations with China.

Because China bars Taiwan from international treaties, Taiwan cannot ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). But it follows the convention's principles. The shooting took place 164 nautical miles (about 300km) south-east of Taiwan, where the "exclusive economic zone" it would be entitled to under UNCLOS overlaps with that of the Philippines.

Taiwan's fishing fleet has a reputation as voracious, and in this incident the Philippines said its coastguard was acting against illegal fishing; it opened fire to disable the engine of a Taiwanese vessel after it tried to ram a Philippine cutter. Taiwanese officials said the dead man was unarmed, and his boat was riddled with bullet holes. The public, whipped up by a tub-thumping press, was outraged. The government demanded an apology, an inquiry and compensation and imposed tough sanctions, including a freeze on the hiring of Filipino workers and the recall of ambassadors. It has conducted a naval drill in the contested waters. Meanwhile, hackers from both countries mounted cyber attacks on the other's official websites. The Philippines' first apologies were rejected as "insincere", though one came from an envoy appointed by President Benigno Aquino and seemed abject.

China helped fan Taiwan's fury. Its foreign ministry was quick to condemn the "barbaric act". The reliably bellicose *Global Times*, a Communist Party paper, dutifully recalled that Taiwan is in China's eyes a province-in-waiting, deserving of its protection. The paper quoted Zhuang Guotu of Xiamen University, just over the strait from Taiwan: "China has reiterated over time that Taiwan is an integral part of China. Now is a good opportunity to show that China will not tolerate the shooting of our fishermen, whether they are from the mainland or Taiwan, and that our government is determined to protect the life of its people."

Taiwan's president, Ma Ying-jeou, has presided over a big improvement in relations with China, through increased trade and tourism. But that has not brought much sympathy in Taiwan for any kind of Chinese security umbrella, let alone unification. And in another dispute—over the five, Japanese-controlled islands in the East China Sea known as the Senkaku islands in Japanese and the Diaoyu in Chinese—Taiwan has incurred China's wrath.

In China's view, the uninhabited islands are a historical part of what was the Taiwan prefecture of Fujian province (and, from 1887-95, the province of Taiwan). Taiwan and the islands it controlled were snatched from the declining Qing empire in 1895 as war booty by an ascendant Japan. China argues the islands should have been returned to it on Japan's defeat in 1945. Japan, however, regards the Senkakus as part of the Okinawa (formerly the Ryukyu) chain, and says they were unclaimed by any power until it "discovered" them in 1884. (China's People's Daily has raised doubts as to whether even this interpretation of history would give Japan sovereignty, questioning its claim to all the Ryukyus, the modern-day Okinawa prefecture).

So Taiwan was among the fiercest opponents of the Japanese government's "nationalisation" last year of three of the islands by buying them from their private owner. Last September the Taiwanese coastguard fought a rather silly water-cannon battle with Japan's near the islands. But last month, to China's fury, Taiwan cut a deal with Japan, allowing both countries' fleets to fish in the waters round the islands. It was a reminder that, for all its ardent nationalism, Taiwan has close ties to Japan—which occupied it for 50 years—and also that it pursues its own interests, not those of the Chinese "motherland".

My country, which is thee?

Worryingly for China, the emotions now on display are driven by patriotism for Taiwan, not China. The biggest reason the first apologies from the Philippines were dismissed was that they did not formally come from the government, because of its "one China" policy of recognising only the government in Beijing. Resentment at this in Taiwan unites both Mr Ma's relatively pro-China ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT), and the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which favours formal independence for Taiwan. The DPP also supports the government's claims to territory that historically had nothing to do with Taiwan, except as the seat of the KMT government after it lost the civil war to the Communists in 1949. Taiwan adheres to the same vague "nine-dashed line" claim as China, asserting sovereignty over almost all the South China Sea. It has a garrison on the largest island in the Spratly chain in that sea. Last year, the DPP accused Mr Ma of a wimpish reaction when China declared that it had set up an administrative structure for the sea.

Just as it has long tolerated Taiwan's control of tiny islands just off the mainland, so China probably welcomes Taiwan's bizarre claim to the South China Sea. Taiwan's government has long discarded most of the fictions that used to sustain its claim to legitimacy over all of China: parliamentary seats for mainland constituencies, government bodies planning for the reconquest, and so on. That Taiwan and China make the same territorial claims is a last vestige of a shared "one China" outlook. Yet its handling of the row with the Philippines shows how even a "pro-China" government in Taiwan in fact believes in "one China, one Taiwan".

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 407, n. 8836, p. 50, 18 a 24 May 2013.