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Commentary

Julie Michelle Klinger: Chinese fishermen face global entanglements

China's fishing boats have gotten into a lot of trouble in recent weeks.

A Chinese vessel within Argentina's exclusive maritime economic zone ignored radio communications, audio and visual signals, and warning shots. After it attempted to force a collision, the Argentine coast guard followed defense protocols and sank the vessel. In this March 16 incident, all 32 Chinese crew members were rescued. Beijing has offered little explanation for their conduct.

On March 19, the Chinese and Indonesian coast guard skirmished as the latter attempted to escort a Chinese fishing boat away from Natuna Island. The Chinese coast guard vessel rammed the seized ship to prevent the Indonesians from keeping it as evidence. In contrast to the subdued diplomatic response to the Argentine incident, China's foreign ministry angered regional leaders by stating that the waters surrounding Natuna Island, northwest of Borneo, were "traditional Chinese fishing grounds."

Taiwan's coast guard in turn announced on March 24 that it had taken 41 Chinese fishermen into custody after they were found poaching turtles and coral in waters near Dongsha Atoll National Park, 450km southwest of Taiwan.

These events are the latest incidents in longstanding disputes between Chinese fishermen and coastal countries across the globe. More significantly, they highlight diplomatic and security dimensions of what has long been thought to be little more than a marine conservation issue.

Heightened vigilance

In Indonesia and Taiwan, the seizures of Chinese fishing vessels have been accompanied by legal and military action. In Taiwan, the recently captured fishermen will be prosecuted for poaching while Indonesia has taken the bold step of blowing up dozens of captured vessels and vowing to apply the same treatment to any other foreign ship caught fishing within its exclusive waters. In these cases, it is clear that the fishing disputes serve as a proxy for broader territorial and regional geopolitical issues, specifically the assertion of Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea and of Taiwanese sovereignty.

The case of Argentina is different. There have been no public announcements concerning the potential prosecution of the fishermen seized, and the Chinese embassy has made no public statements besides requesting information about the incident. Relations between the two countries have expanded dramatically since the turn of the century, with dozens of trade, diplomatic, educational and scientific research cooperation agreements signed. Because the presence of a rogue Chinese fishing vessel in the South Atlantic does not constitute a territorial threat to Argentina, the incident allows us to take a closer look at three broader issues typically lost in international commentary on China's global integration.

First, it highlights criticisms that Argentina-China relations are asymmetrical rather than mutually beneficial, with Argentina mainly serving as a primary commodity exporter to the detriment of domestic economic diversification and sustainable development objectives. To some observers, the Chinese incursion into Argentina's waters reflects a sense of entitlement to South America's natural resource wealth. To others, it is simply an expected result from heightened commercial activity with a rising economic power which facilitates the movement of goods both licit and illicit.

Second, the incident has heightened vigilance across the continent to the increased presence of Chinese fishing boats in coastal waters, particularly those of Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Colombia. According to Daniel Garcia Marco of BBC Mundo, the crew of the vessel sunk by the Argentine coast guard jumped into the sea in hopes of being rescued by a sister ship from the same Chinese company that was waiting in international waters. This suggests that illegal fishing within exclusive zones is a coordinated strategy among Chinese fishing fleets. Such risky behavior in far-flung waters is driven by the need to meet demand from China, the largest consumer of fish products in the world.

To explain the global reach of China's fleets, most commentaries point to the high price that fins harvested from sharks captured off the coasts of Africa and South America fetch in the gilded culinary corridors along China's eastern seaboard. But such explanations obscure the character and the global reach of China's seafood trade.

200,000 vessels

In value terms, fish flour and meal used for domestic livestock feed bring in double the amount of money of almost any other category of seafood. Yet this is a relatively cheap commodity. In other words, while China may still be one of the best places to find an endangered sea creature on the menu, consumption by the elite is only part of the demand. Most of the fishing trade is focused on high-volume, low-value products.

Furthermore, most of the recent news coverage neglects to mention the central role of China's fishing industry in the global seafood economy. Not only is China the largest consumer, it is the world's largest seafood exporter. Approximately half of the seafood processed in China is exported to the U.S., Japan and Western Europe. Although it is Chinese fishing

boats that are getting into trouble, the world's seafood is being routed through China in the service of developed world diners.

Third, the geographical diversity of the recent clashes highlights the extent of China's international fishing activities as well as global criminal networks. Observers from the Korean Peninsula to West Africa to Antarctica report hundreds, sometimes thousands, of incursions annually by Chinese fishing vessels into exclusive or protected areas. This illustrates the difficulty of monitoring and enforcing maritime law.

The immense global reach of China's fishing vessels, the scattered nature of maritime boundary enforcement, and the fact that most seafood demand is dominated by relatively cheap fish meal creates a situation that encourages participation in lucrative global underground activities. From the Maldives to Mauritius to the California coast, China's long-range fishing vessels have been implicated in the trafficking of people, drugs and guns.

It must be said that fishing in exclusive areas or engaging in illegal trading to supplement the low returns of the high-risk fishing industry is hardly a Chinese innovation. For decades, European, American and Japanese fishing ships flouted international treaty conventions, recklessly fishing in sensitive ecosystems and trafficking in exotic and endangered species.

However, China's national fishing fleet is the largest in world history. With more than 200,000 fishing vessels and 3,000 long-distance ships, China's far-reaching fishing practices pose political, environmental and security challenges to nations around the world. Those living in China's main seafood export markets would do well to pay closer attention to the origins of what is on our plates, lest our seafood dinner subsidize ongoing tensions.

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