

Tension on the high seas

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FULL TEXT

EXPLAINER

The South China Sea is one of the world's most tense regions. But the entry of four Chinese coast guard vessels and 63 fishing boats into Indonesian waters in December, and again in January, still managed to shock and infuriate Indonesia.

The Chinese vessels were fishing in the Natuna Sea in part of Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. In response, the Indonesian government sent its own coast guard, navy, private fishing boats and even four F-16 fighter jets to repel them.

The same pattern is playing out around the world, in waters from Africa to Antarctica. In some places, illegal fishing is happening on an industrial scale. In many cases, fishing is a proxy for deeper power plays.

How much does the world fish?

An estimated 59 million people worked in fishing or aquaculture industries in 2016; 85 per cent of those were in Asia, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation. Global fish production peaked at about 170 million tonnes in 2016, with about 90 million tonnes from caught fish (from oceans and inland fishing).

People all over the world are eating more fish. Between 1961 and 2015, in per capita terms, consumption grew from 9 kilograms a person to more than 20 kilograms. It now accounts for about 17 per cent of animal protein consumed globally. But there has been a decline in ocean and inland fish catches, with a boom in aquaculture accounting for the growth in production. Even as the percentage of the world's oceans being fished has risen from 60 to 90 per cent, the actual catch has declined dramatically from 25 tonnes per 1000 kilometres travelled in the 1950s to 7 tonnes now, according to a study by Sea Around Us.

That's not because fishing fleets or nations have become more ecologically conscious - it's because there are fewer fish to catch.

Why are nations arguing over fish?

In the South China Sea, the dispute over boundaries is a major contributor. In parts of Africa, although distant-water fishing fleets - those that operate outside territorial waters, sometimes thousands of kilometres away - may have permission to operate, some of them break the rules on their allotted catch.

Over-fishing and unregulated fishing, plus climate change, are the main threats to fish stocks, says Associate Professor Quentin Hanich at the University of Wollongong. "There has to be a stronger focus on co-operation. Fish don't care about maritime boundaries."

But the network of 17 Regional Fisheries Management Organisations around the world, which attempts to manage and conserve fish stocks such as tuna on the high seas, is struggling. Membership is voluntary, enforcement is difficult and targeting illegal or unregulated fishing is problematic.

How do fish wars play out in the South China Sea?

Who owns what in the South China Sea is disputed among several countries. The disagreements include boundaries on fishing rights, so fishing activity is inherently tied to their geopolitical interests.

Hanich says the dispute is undermining the sustainable management of fishing in the region. "What we are seeing in these areas is over-fishing as claimant states can't agree on where the lines should be," he says.

The South China Sea accounted for 12 per cent of the global fish catch in 2015, though catch rates have declined by up to 75 per cent in the past 20 years, according to a report by Greg Poling, the director of the Washington-based Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

Fisheries in the region, Poling wrote, "teeter on the brink of collapse", while the Chinese government-subsidised fleet in the region serves two purposes: "Most of these vessels serve, at least part-time, in China's maritime militia." Either the geopolitics follows the fish, or vice versa, says Evan Laksmana, from Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies. "From Jakarta and Beijing's point of view, the fisheries fight in the Natunas isn't about the fisheries, it's about broader issues. The fish follow the politics," Laksmana says. "For Beijing, it's about making a statement. It's a way of signalling to Indonesia and other countries that their rights are there, you can't rely on international law."

The dispute won't be solved through military posturing, sending fishing boats to the region or diplomatic protests, Laksmana says. Co-operative agreements about fishing rights in the South China Sea offer the best way forward. In such a vacuum of regulation, a fisheries management organisation could step in - but there isn't such an organisation in the South China Sea.

Where are the hot spots?

The South China Sea is by no means the only global hotspot. Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in distant waters takes place all over the world, driven by economics, politics and the need for more protein.

Washington think-tank the Stimson Centre says the top five countries targeted by IUU are Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Micronesia and Papua New Guinea. While distant-water fleets usually have deals with local governments, monitoring and enforcement is problematic for these tiny nations and it's likely that some IUU fishing also takes place.

On the west coast of Africa, Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, the Congo and Angola are also in the global top 20 nations targeted by distant-water fleets. Spain is by far the most active of the top five distant-water fishing nations on Africa's west coast, although China, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea also have a presence.

Those four Asian nations are otherwise more active on the east coast of Africa: Seychelles, Mozambique, Madagascar and Mauritius, which are also in the top 20. In Mozambique, some locals view China's infrastructure investment as a trade-off for permission to exploit the country's natural resources.

In Antarctica, the amount of IUU fishing has been on the rise for the past decade. Australia and France are among the countries trying to combat this, while Russia and China have opposed the creation of new marine-protected areas.

In Australia, the Department of Agriculture says some IUU fishing takes place in our northern waters, largely by traditional or small fishing boats from south-east Asia and in the remote sub-Antarctic waters near Heard and McDonald Islands, about 4000 kilometres south-west of Perth.

There are tensions between China and Brazil over fishing rights in the southern Atlantic ocean. In the Bay of Bengal, tensions between Sri Lanka and India are growing.

What does it mean for Australia, and the world?

Professor Jessica Meeuwig, a marine ecologist from the University of Western Australia's Oceans Institute, says the contest is "fundamentally about food security".

"A very large proportion of the world's population relies on seafood as a major part of their diet. So countries like China, with a very small exclusive economic zone, they look at increasing their access to fish populations," she says.

If countries don't work together to tackle over-fishing - and climate change - the planet faces a threat to one of its major sources of protein.

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