

Indonesia, America and China's Nine-Dash Line

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By Stanley A. Weiss

JAKARTA -- When the history of the early part of the 21st century is written, one of the great heroes of the People's Republic of China might turn out to be an anonymous map-maker from the late 1940s whose work is helping to drive increasingly dangerous confrontations today between China and its neighbors across the South China Sea.

The question at issue is: who owns what across this 1.3 million square-mile stretch of water, through which passes more than half of the world's nautical trade? Numerous studies reveal that maps of the region, including some carved in stone that date back to the 10th Century, show China consistently laying claim to just one island in the Sea: Hainan Island, just off the mainland, which defined China's southern border for centuries. But as journalist Andrew Browne recently illuminated, in 1947, somewhere deep in the cartography division of the Kuomintang regime, a map-maker added 11 heavy dashes to the familiar atlas encircling 90 percent of the South China Sea and connecting it back to China. No explanation accompanied this change. No Chinese territorial conquest drove it. No treaty enabled it. No other nation acknowledged it. No global body even knew about it.

And yet, as Brown argues, after forcing Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang to flee to Taiwan in 1949, Chinese communists turned the 11-dash map into a nine-dash line in 1953 and claimed ownership. It sat passively until 2010, when Beijing revived the map, assigned historical weight to the concocted line and used it to declare "indisputable sovereignty" over the same 90 percent area of the Sea. It did so in spite of the fact that huge swaths of the territory are claimed by--and recognized by the United Nations as owned by -- five other nations.

While headlines often tiptoe around the map's murky origins, there is little question that the nine-dash line is, in the words of one Filipino judge, a "gigantic historical fraud."

Even so, China has used the nine-dash line as justification to make mayhem across the South China Sea. In 2014 alone, it tried to build a new oil platform in waters claimed by Vietnam. It blocked ships supplying the Philippine navy. It announced plans to build lighthouses on land claimed by the Philippines, began construction on islands claimed

by Vietnam and the Philippines, and issued new rules for access to fishing off its shore that the U.S. has described as "provocative and potentially dangerous." In fact, China claims almost the entire South China Sea, rejecting rival claims not only from Vietnam and the Philippines, but also from Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei.

And this is not to mention China's continuing claim in the East China Sea to five islands known as Senkaku in Japanese and Diaoyu in Chinese. While the dispute over the uninhabited islands goes back more than a century, tensions flared in 2010 after Japan arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing boat for ramming Japanese patrol boats in the waters off the islands. They flared again after Japan purchased three of the islands from a private Japanese owner, and got ratcheted up again last month when Japan quietly gave names to the five islands and published them on a maritime website. With Chinese and Japanese ships and planes regularly playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse, credible foreign policy analysts have asked if these five tiny islands could spark war.

But sitting here in the Defense Ministry of Indonesia, the region's biggest potential counter-weight to China's aggressive actions, it's difficult to see any easy solutions. Like Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine, this is about power politics, pure and simple. China -- thirsting for oil and unquestionably driven by the vast store of oil and natural gas that reportedly lie beneath these ocean waters--waited until it was strong enough economically and militarily to reassert the nine-dash line. It is all but daring the rest of the world to stop it. And Indonesia hasn't been excluded--this past spring, China lay claim to parts of the Indonesia-held Natuna Islands, including a segment of Indonesia's Riau Islands. Far from a full-throated response, Indonesian officials went out of their way to publicly deny that Indonesia had any maritime dispute with China (while quietly and quickly working to strengthen its forces on Natuna)

For a nation like Indonesia -- which counts China as one of its largest trading partners, its largest purchaser of Indonesian products, and a strong partner of its military -- it is a difficult balancing act.

"I've been the chief of bilateral defense relations with China since 2007," the Deputy Minister of Defense, Sjafrie

Samsudin, tells me in his office. “I visit China every year and they visit us to enhance the bilateral relationship ... We want the Chinese to implement a stable dialogue and increased efforts (in the South China Sea). The Chinese tell us that they agree with us, but feel they are surrounded by countries such as the U.S.”

This point comes as something of a surprise. What I hear repeatedly in conversations across this island nation is that China might be the only Asian country that believes the U.S. will use its influence to deter the ambitions of Beijing here. Despite high-profile joint exercises between the U.S. and local militaries and a marked increase in U.S. military hardware postmarked for Southeast Asia, many leaders here believe that there is more sizzle than steak when it comes to the U.S.’s highly touted “pivot” to Asia.

“Privately, at the highest levels of the government here, they are concerned about China and see the train coming at Indonesia in four years,” says a high-ranking western diplomat. “China is trying to pick off each country one by one and they know the U.S. threshold. Indonesia realizes this and thinks that the U.S. is not going to stand up against the Chinese and doubt the U.S. has resolve in Asia.”

With China’s leadership taking a with-us-or-against-us mentality across the region, the burden placed on China’s neighbors is excruciating -- particularly when it comes to the U.S. “No one wants to be told by the Americans what to do,” a long-time diplomat from the Asian subcontinent tells me, explaining that to be seen as compliant with Washington invites scorn. “There’s a negative perception of America over the past few years. We are looking forward to increased interaction with the U.S. after Obama.”

For many years, America was able to circumvent such concerns because its relationship with the Indonesian military was so strong -- essentially training two generations of Indonesian leaders. But in the wake of reported human rights abuses here 15 years ago, the U.S. -- under the leadership of Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy -- cut off relations with the military. While some training and support has since been restored, U.S. training for Indonesia’s elite Special Forces has yet to resume.

In fact, Sjafrie, the Deputy Minister himself, a decorated Special Forces officer, cannot get a VISA to visit America. While he leads Indonesia’s military delegations to Russia, China and other nations, he’s not allowed to meet with his U.S. counterparts -- and when U.S. elected officials visit Jakarta, they rarely meet with the military. It prompts Sjafrie to ask, “How can you have a fair understanding (of

each other) if you don’t meet and talk to us.”

“Our office is now very close to China as a result of America’s bad behavior,” says a high-placed aide to the Ministry, adding, “Many good opportunities have gone to China instead.” That’s not a good formula for convincing local governments to side with America against their 800-pound neighbor to the north.

“The next Indonesian president needs to strengthen relations with both the U.S. and China,” says Sjafrie, pointing out that U.S. Ambassador Robert Blake is working hard to establish full military-to-military support and relations, a priority he deems “vital.”

“The macro relations are being enhanced and have been developing for a long time. But on the micro side, we need more work and development. We have suffered for 15 years under sanctions and we want to move on.”

In October, Sjafrie will move on as deputy defense minister. But unlike some previous occupants of his office, he won’t be going to America to train with military leaders at Fort Bragg or the Army War College. Instead, he says, “I’ll be going to Beijing to enhance my knowledge in defense studies. I’ll study (revered Chinese military general) Sun Tzu again because it can be used in all aspects of life.”

It was Sun Tzu who said, “Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.” Time will tell if the same may be said about the South China Sea.