

Frenemies in the South China Sea?

Hamzah Omar Yaacob

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EVEN as China muscled its way into the South China Sea, a war is unlikely to break out. Ever so often, the US and China engage in hard talk, with Asean member states minding their own business.

That was the essence of what Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan said yesterday (March 30) at the third installment of a lecture series by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Even though some pundits say China is adamant about controlling the South China Sea because of resources, Mr Kausikan disagreed. The heart of the dispute, he argued, is jingoism, rooted in China's desire to lay claim to lost territories. China claims it once controlled the Spratly and Paracels islands – islands in the South China Sea – in ancient times. Other areas China once controlled such as Siberia and Mongolia are “beyond recoverable”. Ultimately, he said: “Beijing wants to reclaim something of its historical centrality in East Asia.”

But the US is not going to be pushed out. It, too, wants to remain an East Asian power.

China has ratcheted up tensions in recent years by reclaiming land, building airfields and requiring those who pass through to identify with Chinese authorities. The US has responded by sailing its ships and flying its aircraft close to Chinese military installations.

But being a purveyor of noble ideas like Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea, the antithesis of China, plays into US interests in the region, he said. Mr Kausikan pointed out the irony in the US not being a party to the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Seas (UNCLOS), that amongst many things basically tells countries how they can control the seas around them.

He said: “There may be less differences between the Chinese and American positions on Freedom of Navigation than immediately meets the eye.”

Hold on, does that mean the US and China could one day see eye-to-eye?

It could be possible, he said, but cautioned that such a situation may not be good for Asean: “Dealing with US-China competition is difficult but at least leaves open the possibility of manoeuvre.”

But he felt that Asean was not navigating the waters of the complex US-China relationship well, by tiptoeing around the South China Sea dispute and doing nothing substantive in a bid to avoid irritating China.

He pointed out the recent example of Malaysia's muddled response in March this year to fishing vessels spotted off the coast of Sarawak, escorted by Chinese coast guard ships. Originally,

Malaysia said the vessels were in its waters before it was contradicted by another statement a week later saying that they were not.

Mr Kausikan said this did not have to be the case, but acknowledged that some Asean countries have been caught in a bind between cozying up to China for economic reasons and engaging the US as a security buffer. After all, China is an important economic partner. Trade between China and Asean was worth US\$480 billion (S\$648 billion) in 2014 according to the Asean-China Centre.

That said, pandering to the US or China should not be treated as a “dilemma” because doing so would mean succumbing to Chinese diplomacy in Asean that “seeks to impose on the region and foreclose options”, he added.

The diplomat said “the most important of these mind-games relate to US presence in the South China Sea”. Asean is just not in control of these games. Despite all the engagement between the Asean and the US and China, “the person in the driver’s seat (Asean) is sometimes only the chauffeur,” he added.

Countries in Southeast Asia will ultimately have to deal with China because of geography, but when it comes to the US, “American porridge is always going to be too hot or too cold”.

“Unfortunately, China understands Asean better than the US and knows far better how to work with Asean, which is a polite way of saying (they know how to) manipulate our weaknesses,” he added.