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Protecting Our Seas

China's Efforts to Protect the Seas

By Lina Gong

Synopsis

The convening of the first Ocean Conference by the United Nations earlier this month illustrates the pressing need to curb and reverse marine environmental degradation. This issue is critical for China given its growing challenges from marine environmental degradation. China needs to develop its marine economy sustainably and enhance law enforcement and international cooperation.

Commentary

THE INCLUSION of the marine environmental agenda in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 'Goal 14' -- on the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources -- is significant. It reflects the recognition that the oceans are crucial for the world's sustainable development amidst the growing severity of marine environmental concerns.

The degradation of the marine environment has critical implications for China that relies on the seas for a diversity of purposes, from food security to economic development. While China has strengthened its efforts to protect the seas, emphasis on sustainable development of the marine economy, enhanced cooperation and coordination are needed for more effective governance of the marine environment.

Marine Environment and China's Security

The seas play an important role in China's economic security, food security and environmental security. Marine economy accounted for 9.5 per cent of China's national GDP in 2016 and created 35.5 million jobs. According to a paper presented

at the “China as a Maritime Power” Conference in 2015, China’s fishery output accounted for one third of the world’s total in 2013, leading to a trade surplus in fishery of US\$11.6 billion.

In addition, sea lanes are bloodlines for the economy of the world’s largest trading country, as shipping accounts for 90 per cent of the transport of global trade according to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

With the world’s largest population living in shrinking areas of arable land, China’s food security is under stress. As the seas are major sources of protein and necessary nutrients for human health, there have been calls by scholars for better exploitation of marine food resources to improve China’s food self-sufficiency.

Environmental security is another concern as the seas are an integral part of China’s overall environment. The oceans regulate the global environment by absorbing 30 per cent of the world’s carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, but the volume of absorption declines as the marine system changes. This contributes to climate change and consequently impacts China as a member of the global community.

State of China’s Marine Environment

According to the UN, human activities like pollution, depleted fisheries, and loss of coastal habitats are major causes of marine pollution, affecting 40 per cent of the world’s oceans. As domestic consumption of seafood increases, China’s fishermen tend to overfish. The excessive expansion of fishing has been depleting China’s own fish resources.

It is estimated that fish stocks in China has dropped by 60 per cent compared with the 1980s. The growing consumption and depleting stocks at home have driven Chinese fishing fleets to explore the open oceans, which is criticised by some as threatening global fishery.

Sea water quality is another issue facing China’s marine environment. The percentage of heavily polluted areas in the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea increased 1.8 per cent and 1 percent respectively in 2015, according to China’s State of Environment Report 2015.

Water pollution, climate change and other human activities like poaching, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) pose great risks to the marine biodiversity as coral reef, turtle and other sea creatures are facing an existential threat. The Yellow Sea saw the record-scale algal bloom in July 2013, which can dramatically change the marine ecology of the affected coastal areas.

China in Action

In recognition of the importance of the seas and the threat of marine environment degradation to its security, the Chinese government has committed itself to curbing marine pollution. Beijing has promulgated and amended over 20 sea-related laws and regulations in the past decades, laying the legal basis for stricter law enforcement.

Marine environmental protection is specifically included in China's 13th Five-Year Development Plan released in March 2016, which highlights issues like coastal areas protection and restoration, pollution control, and regulation of fishery. In practice, China has notably increased the number of monitoring stations and protected areas across its maritime territory, with 8000 monitoring stations and 40 protected areas established.

Despite the legal and policy instruments in place, there remains much space for improvement in implementation and enforcement. Breaches of fishing moratorium and illegal discharges of pollutants into the seas are not isolated incidents, and this indicates that stricter enforcement of law is needed. Economic interests are primarily behind the breaches of laws and regulations as the market's thirst for seafood fuels China's fishing fleets.

While ecological balance has been incorporated in China's national strategy, the transformation into a more sustainable model is still in progress. The increased attention to the seas from the central leadership has been a relatively recent trend; it thus takes more policy guidance and awareness campaigns for China to develop its marine economy sustainably.

Closer Cooperation and Coordination Needed

Strengthened cooperation and coordination with other countries is essential when it comes to protecting the marine environment. The flow of ocean currents makes it difficult to monitor and control marine pollution within one's own territory. There have been incidences of Chinese fishermen being arrested by law enforcement forces of other countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Senegal.

China has been engaging in bilateral and multilateral marine environmental cooperation since the 1990s, such as the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) in 1993 and the non-binding Northwest Pacific Action Plan (NOWPAP). It signed a bilateral agreement with Vietnam in 2014 on research cooperation in marine environmental management in the Beibu/Tonki Gulf.

Nevertheless, the multilateral and bilateral mechanisms China has joined are loose arrangements with low-level institutionalisation. Territorial disputes constitute a major barrier to deeper cooperation in marine environmental protection. But it is in the interest of China as well as other related countries to explore ways to initiate and enhance cooperation.

China and the Philippines held the first dialogue on South China Sea last month, which marked the establishment of the bilateral mechanism for consultation on the maritime dispute. Cooperation in marine protection can be a potential item on the agenda of future consultations.

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