

Ruling threatens Xi's tenuous hold

Written by Paul Lin 林保
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The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague has issued its ruling over a case brought by the Philippines regarding rights in the South China Sea. The ruling upheld all the complaints made by the Philippines.

China's actions ahead of the ruling — such as a large-scale live-fire drill in the South China Sea and attacks by academics and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) media outlets, as well as investing big sums to divide or buy off ASEAN and asking other countries to speak on its behalf — have shown that the ruling is not just the piece of “scrap paper” that Beijing claims.

It was probably first called that by Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) — an old Red Guard member with no respect for the rule of law — which is why it has been picked up by former Chinese state councilor Dai Bingguo (戴秉国) and editorial writers at the People's Daily.

Dogs who bite do not bark, and all Beijing's activity is evidence that it is all bark. The military exercise was over before the ruling was announced and, facing two US aircraft carrier battle groups, China was quick to hide the Liaoning for fear it might become a sacrifice.

The reason for this is that Beijing is to hold a leadership meeting at Beidaihe this month to discuss next year's 19th CCP congress. Given calls on Xi to step down, he had to make a show of force.

However, he is also afraid that a minor incident could set off a confrontation, since a few exchanges of fire could cost him his post as CCP general secretary. The military drill came to an abrupt end because if the tribunal's ruling were followed by “accidental” fire from a US warship at a Chinese warship, Xi would be forced out.

China is likely to avoid conflict now that the ruling has been announced. Beijing is likely to continue its verbal attacks, but any preparations for war would be mere posturing. The South China Sea conflict will continue. The image of China as a rogue state will be enforced and if there is military conflict, Beijing's position would be unjustifiable.

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The Philippines and Vietnam are the ASEAN members that are most directly at loggerheads with China in the South China Sea, and both nations have recently seen a change of government.

Prior to his election, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte offered China an olive branch because Beijing was willing to assist Manila in building three railway routes. However, China has signed an economic assistance agreement with the Philippines to the tune of US\$12 billion, and that has not been able to resolve the conflict.

A US-friendly government in Hanoi has stepped down. However, there is a saying in Vietnam that being friendly with the US will bring down the Communist Party of Vietnam, but being friendly with China will bring down the nation, so the question is which route Hanoi will choose.

The US, India and Russia are selling Vietnam military equipment. Hong Kong media cited a former Vietnamese People's Army deputy chief of the general staff as saying four years ago that "the Vietnamese army can battle its way all the way to Beijing," and recently in Ho Chi Minh City, a professor said that the nation should declare war on Beijing and destroy the Chinese dictatorship in order to "make a contribution to democratic history."

China is making a great effort to co-opt Indonesia and almost offered the country a high-speed railway for free, but Indonesia is far from Beijing and Jakarta never flinched. Indonesia's navy fired at Chinese fishing boats that crossed into its waters. Indonesian President Joko Widodo then visited the ship that fired the shot to reaffirm Jakarta's sovereignty over the area.

Any careless move by China could lead to armed conflict with these countries and the US, which would threaten Xi's leadership. The Chinese dream has turned into Xi's nightmare.

Taiwan should remain aloof from this conflict or risk being dragged down by China.

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