Chinese fishing vessels seized in the Pacific

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Two Chinese fishing vessels were seized by authorities in Vanuatu in late January for allegedly fishing illegally in the south west Pacific island nation's territorial waters.

Authorities claimed the Dong Gang Xing 13 and Dong Gang Xing 16 were fishing in Vanuatu's northern waters near the remote Torres islands. Vanuatu's department of fisheries, the police maritime wing, and a French naval reconnaissance plane from New Caledonia had monitored the ships before they were detained by a Vanuatu patrol boat. The crew is facing investigation after undergoing quarantine in Port Vila.

New Zealand journalist Michael Field described the incident as "murky," chiefly because of the nature and origin of the vessels. There are currently 200-300 Chinese longliners and purse seine tuna fishers legitimately operating in Vanuatu's 663,251 square kilometre exclusive economic zone, from their base in Fiji.

The arrested boats, owned by Zhuhai Dong Gang Xing Long Distance Fishing, were operating closer in-shore for grouper and sea cucumber. Beijing had given the company permission to fish in Mauritania, Africa, and Vanuatu under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Vanuatu currently maintains diplomatic relations with China and, along with Tonga, signed up to the BRI in 2018.

According to Field, the company says it has permission under the BRI to build a base in Vanuatu, a claim that has not been acknowledged by Vanuatu. Field speculated the boats may have believed they were operating under a deal between Port Vila and Beijing and asked: "Is Vanuatu heading for a diplomatic row with China?"

Pacific island nations have in recent years sought to clamp down on illegal and unregulated fishing. In 2015 Palau burned four Vietnamese fishing boats caught off its coast and arrested the captains. During coordinated maritime sweeps in 2017, several Vietnamese boats were detained in the territorial waters of the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia.

However, driven by the US diplomatic, economic and strategic offensive against Beijing, Pacific states are now being drawn into fierce geo-strategic rivalries. Washington has seized on claims of illegal fishing to boost its military presence across the region. Armed US Coast Guard cutters are currently being deployed to American Samoa and Guam to counter "Chinese activity."

The incident in Vanuatu came just a month after Palau, a former US Pacific territory, detained a Chinese-flagged vessel and its 28 crew, also for allegedly harvesting sea cucumber in its waters. In December, Palau's president-elect Surangel Whipps Jr announced he would oppose Chinese "bullying," declaring the small archipelago nation would stand by its "true friends," the US and Taiwan. Palau is one of only four of Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies in the region after the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 2019.

The Chinese fishing vessel and six auxiliary boats were intercepted at Helen Reef, in Palau's northern waters, and escorted to the main island of Koror by a naval patrol boat donated by Australia, as part of its own anti-China Defence Cooperation Program. The ships and crew were ultimately released after being detained for several weeks, accompanied by official complaints from Palau to the Chinese government over its "intransigence" on illegal fishing by "their people."

Beijing has not commented on either of the recent incidents. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying had earlier declared China was "a responsible fishing country," with "zero tolerance for violations of relevant laws and regulations committed by distant fishing vessels."

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Palau's actions were hailed by US Ambassador John Hennessey-Niland, who said Washington "steadfastly support Palau's efforts to protect its territorial sovereignty and prevent People's Republic of China (PRC)-flagged vessels from engaging in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing."

Last October, US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien accused China of encouraging fishing violations, building illegal military outposts, dumping garbage and harassing commercial vessels. O'Brien told Radio NZ that China was "threatening the rules-based order that's kept the peace since World War II." Coast Guard vessels would "enforce US laws," while partnering with other Pacific nations, O'Brien declared.

Last year, Palau's outgoing President Tommy Remengesau Jr wrote to US Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite saying Washington should look at setting up military facilities in Palau as a bulwark against "destabilizing actors." Palau's demands included port facilities, secondary airfields, law enforcement training grounds and maritime enforcement and surveillance facilities.

China has the world's largest distant-water fishing fleet, with nearly 17,000 vessels. Its expansion into the Pacific is raising the ire not only of the US, but also its close ally and regional imperialist power Australia. A Papua New Guinean (PNG) regional governor, Toboi Awi Yoto, last month sharply criticised Australia's hostile response to a plan to establish a $200 million Chinese fisheries park on Daru Island in PNG.

Canberra raised concerns late last year about "national security" and "potential overfishing" and dispatched officials to Daru for "discussions." Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne told the Australian parliament that the government had contacted the PNG government to ensure Australian interests are "fully safeguarded." She warned the Australian Border Force would patrol the Torres Strait to ensure that "traditional-only" fishing rules were enforced. "Commercial-scale fisheries would not be considered a traditional activity under the Torres Strait Treaty and would not be permitted," Payne declared.

Yoto hit back on Facebook at the overt bullying, saying Australia had no counter-offer to the Chinese plan and he was "not satisfied with their intentions for my people to remain the same," i.e. living in poverty. "It's regrettable that all they want is for us to be subsistence farmers and fishermen and maintain our current status quo," he added.

Regional geo-strategic and political tensions have further escalated due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has decimated the Pacific's tourism industry. Many Pacific island nations have reached out to Chinese-led agencies to prop up their budgets after exhausting financing options from traditional sources.

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