



Beijing lines up diplomatic battle groups over South China Sea

Ben Dooley



Map showing disputed claims in the South China Sea [More](#)

The disputed rocks and reefs of the South China Sea are more than an ocean away from the landlocked African nation of Niger.

But that has not stopped the strife-ridden, largely desert country of 17 million people adding its voice to a growing diplomatic chorus that Beijing says supports its rejection of an international tribunal hearing on the waters.

Others apparently singing from the same hymn sheet include Togo, Afghanistan and Burundi. They are among the latest foot soldiers in "a public relations war" by China aimed at questioning international maritime rules, said Ashley Townshend, a research fellow at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.

The tribunal case, brought to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague by the Philippines, is highly technical and hinges on such issues as how international law defines "islands".

Niger joined the ranks of "over 40 countries that have officially endorsed China's position" that the issues should be settled through direct negotiations, not international courts, said Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying.

That, she added, was just the start: "There will be more and more countries and organisations supporting China."

Similar announcements have become an almost daily ritual at China's foreign ministry media briefings, as it steels itself for what is widely expected to be an unfavourable ruling by the tribunal that could come within weeks.

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the whole of the South China Sea, on the basis of a segmented line that first appeared on Chinese maps in the 1940s, pitting it against several neighbours.

But it is also a party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Manila accuses Beijing of flouting the convention and has called for the tribunal, set up in 1899, to rule on the row.

Beijing insists that the court does not have jurisdiction, arguing that any claims to the contrary are politically motivated, and has boycotted the proceedings.

"By cobbling together a group of nations that share its views, Beijing's aim is to show that there is a genuine debate over the legality of the Philippines' legal challenge," Townshend said.

"It is trying to build a counter-narrative to push back against the mainstream international consensus on maritime law."

Not very successful

Despite requests by AFP the foreign ministry in Beijing did not provide a full list of China's backers on the issue.

But other than its main diplomatic partner Russia, few heavy hitters have come out in support, with Beijing's neighbours – many of them unnerved by its increasingly assertive behaviour – notably absent.

Many of those disclosed so far are poor African countries, and Bonnie Glaser, a senior Asia advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, described the names as "mostly composed of smaller, inconsequential nations".

In some cases the claimed support has been short-lived. The South Pacific island nation of Fiji and EU member Slovenia both quickly denied Chinese foreign ministry statements that they were backing Beijing, with Ljubljana saying: "We do not take sides on the issue."

Zhu Feng, an international relations expert at Peking University, told AFP: "I don't really feel that China's recent public diplomacy activities have been very successful."

Beijing, he said, "needs to develop its diplomatic activities and fight for more supporting voices".

But China's options are limited.

"While China has built odd coalition partners stretching from Russia to Mauritania and Venezuela to Gambia, the Philippines counts on support from the US, Japan, Australia, Britain and others, including respected global bodies like the EU and G7," Townshend said.

The ruling will be determined by the judges, he pointed out: "Neither side's supporters have any bearing on the outcome."

Even so Beijing is still turning to countries like uranium-rich Niger, for whom the benefits of taking China's side probably outweigh the costs.

China's state-owned oil giant CNPC has poured billions of dollars into Niger's oil industry, which is almost entirely dependent on Chinese enterprises.

It is one of many relationships Beijing has cultivated for such situations, said Deborah Brautigam, of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

"The Chinese provide official development assistance mainly for diplomatic reasons," she said, adding "when they need diplomatic support for something... the foreign ministry requests it".

"Something like this has little cost to an African country."

