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COMMENTARY

China's global fishing dominance



By Ian Urbina

September 4, 2020

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First of 2 parts

MORE than a hundred miles from shore, near the coast of West Africa, I accompanied marine police officers from Gambia as they arrested 15 foreign ships

for labor violations and illegal fishing over the course of a week in 2019. All but one of the vessels arrested were from China.

At the beginning of that same year, during a month-long voyage on a toothfish longliner headed into Antarctic waters from Punta Arenas, Chile, the only other ships we passed were a dozen rusty Chinese purse seiners that looked barely seaworthy.

Aboard a South Korean squid boat in May 2019, I watched nearly two dozen ships flying Chinese flags make their way single file into North Korean waters, in flagrant violation of United Nations sanctions. They were part of the world's largest fleet of illegal ships: 800 Chinese trawlers fishing in the Sea of Japan, revealed in a recent investigation for NBC.

And this month, more than 340 Chinese fishing vessels appeared just outside the biodiverse and ecologically sensitive Galápagos Marine Reserve. Many of the ships were tied to companies associated with illegal fishing, according to C4ADS, a conflict research firm.

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Three years prior, a similarly sized Chinese flotilla arrived in these same waters, and one ship was apprehended with about 300 tons of illegally caught fish, including endangered species, such as scalloped hammerhead sharks.

Unmatched

With anywhere from 200,000 to 800,000 boats, some as far afield as Argentina, China is unmatched in the size and reach of its fishing armada. Fueled primarily by government subsidies, its growth and activities have largely gone unchecked, in part because China itself had historically had few rules governing fishing operations. The dominance and global ubiquity of this fleet raise broader questions about how, why, and at what cost China has put so many boats on the water.

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The why has long been clear: geopolitical power and food security for China's 1.4 billion people. As the US Navy has pulled back from the waters of West Africa

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and the Middle East, China has bolstered its fishing and naval presence. And in places such as the South China Sea and the Arctic's Northern Sea Route, China has laid claim to prized shipping lanes as well as subsea oil and gas deposits.

“The scale and aggressiveness of its fleet puts China in control,” says Greg Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, adding that few foreign countries have been willing to push back when China's fishing boats make incursions into their national waters.

As for food security, many of the marine stocks closest to China's shores have dwindled from overfishing and industrialization, so ships are forced to venture farther to fill their nets. The Chinese government says it has roughly 2,600 distant-water fishing vessels, which, according to a recent report by the Stimson Center, a security research group, makes it three times larger than the fleets of the next top four countries — Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Spain — combined.

‘Harmful’ subsidies

“Without its massive subsidy schemes, China's distant water fishing fleet would be a fraction of its current size, and most of its South China Sea fleet wouldn't exist at all,” Poling says.

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Over the past two decades, China has spent billions of dollars supporting its fishing industry, says Tabitha Grace Mallory, a professor at the University of Washington, who specializes in China's fishing policies, in email. In 2018, total global fisheries subsidies were estimated to be \$35.4 billion, with China accounting for \$7.2 billion of it. The vast majority of that amount went toward what Mallory calls "harmful" subsidies because they expand rather than contract the size of fishing fleets. This includes those for fuel and for new boats that increase the size of the fleet. Alternatively, a small portion of state subsidies pay for the decommissioning of boats, according to Mallory.

The government also helps cover the cost of new engines, of more durable steel hulls for trawlers, and for armed security and medical ships to be stationed at fishing grounds, enabling fishing captains to stay at sea for longer. Chinese fishermen further benefit from government-led fishing intelligence that helps them find the richest waters.

Daniel Pauly, principal investigator of the Sea Around Us Project at the University of British Columbia's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, explained in email that subsidies have not only increased geopolitical tensions by allowing ships to venture into contested regions.

Pauly said: "They also play a major role in depleting

fish stocks as they keep vessels operating that would otherwise be decommissioned.”

As long as fleets are provided financial assistance to overfish, experts say that sustainable fishing is impossible. Already 90 percent of commercial fish stocks tracked by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have been overfished or fully fished — meaning they are past their capacity to sustainably replenish themselves — including the world's 10 most important commercial species.

Govt-funded overfishing

China is by no means singular when it comes to subsidizing its fishing fleet. More than half of the global fishing industry would be unprofitable at its current scale without government subsidies, according to a 2018 study in *Science Advances* led by National Geographic Society explorer-in-residence Enric Sala.

Japan spends more in subsidies for fishing on the high seas — the parts of the ocean not under control by any government — than any other country, accounting for about 20 percent of global high seas fishing subsidies — \$841 million, Sala's study shows. Spain accounts for 14 percent of global fishing subsidies, followed by China at 10 percent, then South Korea and the US.

But when it comes to scale, China is by far the biggest.

With more than 800 ships on the high seas, Chinese vessels were responsible for more than 35 percent of the reported global catch on the high seas in 2014 — more than any other country. (Taiwan, with the next highest number of vessels at 593, accounts for about 12 percent of that catch, and Japan, with 478 ships accounts for less than 5 percent.)

But subsidies are not just a major reason that the oceans are rapidly running out of fish. In putting too many vessels on the water globally, subsidies can lead to fishing over-capacity, unhealthy competition, territorial disputes, and illegal fishing as captains become desperate to find new, less-crowded fishing grounds.

“To put it bluntly, this is akin to paying burglars to rob your neighbor’s house,” says Peter Thomson, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for the Ocean, about the role that subsidies play in encouraging illegal fishing.

To be continued tomorrow

Ian Urbina, a former investigative reporter for the New York Times, is the director of The Outlaw Ocean Project, a nonprofit journalism organization based in Washington, D.C., that focuses on reporting about environmental and human rights crimes at sea.

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