



Fishing wars and free trade

One in 10 of all militarised interstate disputes, which are conflicts just short of war, have been over the rights to fish in the world's oceans.

Right now, the United Kingdom (UK) and France are battling for post-Brexit fishing rights, an acrimonious dispute which is escalating daily.

Within the Brexit agreement, the common fisheries policy that had been in place since the 1970s was replaced with a new EU-UK fisheries agreement that offers French fishers a continuation of that previous agreement until 2026. This is for the waters of Jersey and Guernsey, and in the inshore waters between six and 12 miles from the UK's shores, but only if they can prove that they had previously been fishing those waters.

Fishers in New Zealand who benefited, or lost, with the introduction of the Quota Management System in 1986 will understand the minefield.

Both France and the UK have been accused of making permits very difficult to acquire.

The need for fishers of both countries to have permits to fish as they have previously is proving fraught. The French Government detained a UK trawler this week claiming it did not have a license.

The UK has also put a Royal Navy ship on standby in case the further French threat to cut power supply to the Channel Islands is carried out.

However, none of this is new.

Fishing and maritime sovereignty have been a point of contention globally since the 17th century. The battles between the Dutch and the UK in the 1600s started when the UK accused the Dutch fishing fleet – at the time the largest in Europe – of pillaging the North Sea.

Three wars were fought between the Dutch and the UK, and, more recently the Cod Wars of the 1950s and the 1970s saw Iceland exclude the UK from its fishing waters.

With the welcome news that New Zealand had secured an in-principle Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the UK, we are eager to see the details of just what this means for our seafood exports.

Currently, New Zealand seafood faces tariffs of up to 22 percent. With the implementation of the FTA, tariffs will be eliminated on hoki, removing a six percent tariff. Tariffs on mussels, which ranged between eight and 20 per cent, will be progressively removed over three years. Prior to Covid-19, hoki exports were worth \$2.2 million and mussels \$6.4 million.

However, with territorial tensions rising over fish in the UK/EU waters, how welcome New Zealand seafood will be, tariff-free, to UK consumers is at least something to flag in what is very likely to be an increasingly protectionist market.

Free Trade Agreements keep New Zealand primary industries fuelling the domestic economy and the implementation of the UK/NZ FTA and the progress on an EU/NZ FTA are to be celebrated.

Interestingly, whilst territorial seas of any country are now defined as 12 nautical miles from the coast of a country, it was once three miles – the range of a cannon.

The Washington Post recently reported that in order to keep its people fed and employed, the Chinese government provides hundreds of millions of dollars a year in subsidies to its distant-water fishing fleet. “And in the South China Sea, it is common for its ships to receive Chinese Coast Guard escorts when illegally entering other countries' fishing waters. As such, the Chinese government is directly enabling and militarizing the worldwide robbing of ocean resources.”

New Zealand has a 200-kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and does not allow foreign vessels to fish within it – which means they must be flagged to New Zealand, fishing New Zealand quota, and abiding by all employment and health and safety requirements of New Zealand law.

That doesn't isolate us from the same threats facing other jurisdictions as the demand for seafood grows exponentially with the world's population and the further depletion of waters less well-managed than New Zealand's.

The long history of fishing wars is not likely to be over soon.

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