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China's Subtle Strategy in the South China Sea

Summary

- Disputes over territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea are gaining new momentum as tensions, rhetoric and conflicts increase over disputed land features in the region. China, the leading regional claimant, appears intent on securing vast swaths of ocean for its own use and control.
- China's subtle and imaginative tactics are successfully compelling countries in the South China Sea to back away from disputing their aggressive actions.
- U.S. Mutual Defense Treaties (MDT) in the Asia-Pacific offer no assurances that the U.S. will become involved in limited disputes over territory to which it stakes no claim. Events on the Korean Peninsula in 2010, such as the CHEONAN incident, provide a practical example of how post-World War II conceived defense treaties function in the 21st century.
- Extra-regional affairs have the potential to exacerbate territorial disputes in the SCS and drive the region toward conflict.

Introduction

Although surprising to many and frustrating to most, the United States military—the most powerful in the world—remains relatively powerless to stop the advance of unwarranted Chinese territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea. From tensions with the Philippines over territorial claims in Scarborough Shoal to Chinese declarations of the Senkaku Islands being an integral part of China, these thorny issues portend possible conflict with serious potential to both escalate and migrate to other disputed regions. The U.S. State Department acknowledges that the U.S. has no territorial claims in the region and calls for peaceful negotiations while all parties adhere to previously established international norms. The U.S. Navy currently lacks the legal basis for involvement in the issue and is likely to continue to show restraint given the high potential for regional entanglement and escalation. Countries in the region are loath to challenge China for fear of reaping damaging punitive measures with long-term consequences. Taken together, it is difficult to rationalize a credible counter to excessive Chinese claims in the region.

Problems of Ownership

Although the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei are vehemently opposed to territorial acquiescence, their strong language has yet to stop the inevitable creep of Chinese territorial assertions for future possession and development. The Chinese government's designation of

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the prefectural city of Sansha as the municipal administrator for the land features of the South China Sea (SCS) not only creates the appearance of Chinese jurisdiction, but attempts to establish exactly what the Western world relies on so dearly for legitimacy: the rule of law. The Chinese government-controlled media coverage of events on Sansha Island highlighted an aspect of China's strategy laden with potentially risky unintended consequences, one which sells the idea of the SCS as a Chinese possession, while generating nationalist sentiments which are difficult to control. A picture of the so-called "nine-dotted line" map in Chinese passports continues a charade that China somehow owns all of the land features in the SCS due to unilaterally determined and ill-defined maps produced after World War II. A troubling question is whether China is making empty claims for nationalist reasons—or if China has a specific goal. Indeed, it seems likely that China is using its economic, military and political strength to test the limits—and methods—of international opposition to its territorial expansion in the SCS.

Methods of Staking a Claim

China's aggressive maritime tactics of using surveillance, enforcement, and fishing vessels are impressive, particularly since none of these methods actually cross the 'redline' of using PLA (People's Liberation Army) Navy assets to expand its influence.

It is through this sort of subtle methodic process that the Chinese appear to be gaining the initiative in the region, while others are scrambling to maintain the status quo and wondering how far China will go in pressing its will. Observers should not forget that China Marine Surveillance (CMS) is basically a paramilitary maritime law enforcement agency authorized to take offensive action when necessary. As such, the risk of armed engagement with Chinese vessels still exists and would not necessarily avoid triggering a reaction under a U.S. mutual defense treaty simply because the vessel is not part of the formal Chinese armed forces.

China is clearly intent on developing the largest military and maritime law enforcement force in the Asia-Pacific region. Its ability to bring a preponderance of strength to any territorial or maritime dispute in the region will be its greatest asset for securing its interests. Ramming or blocking vessels of other nations and overwhelming their counter-efforts with sheer numbers are very effective tactics in preventing others from responding with more traditional uses of violent force. In any case, as soon as violent force is used to stop so-called "peaceful" Chinese advancements, the other nation—not China— would most likely receive the blame for escalating the dispute.

As an exercise in forethought, it is useful to consider what would happen if China decided it had enough economic, political and military leverage to simply engage in a campaign of physically claiming land features in the SCS one-by-one. If China decided to peacefully overwhelm Philippine ships and fisherman in the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal and establish a human outpost, how would the international community react? China has already demonstrated its finesse in using "mass presence" or "mass intimidation" as a substitute for kinetic use of force. Should the Philippines be daring enough, a Philippine assault on a Chinese outpost would almost certainly trigger a violent and overwhelming response from China. If so, would the U.S. feel compelled to come to the aid of the Philippines vis-à-vis its MDT (Mutual Defense Treaty)? And if Chinese reactions to the Senkaku Island dispute (see below) with Japan are any indication, if China found the Philippine reaction distasteful, it would exact a severe and punitive economic toll.

The CHEONAN Incident as a Game-Changer

Recent history may also be a useful indicator for deciphering the role 20th century U.S. MDTs will play in the region. For example, despite the existence of a MDT, U.S. reactions to North Korea's

sinking of the South Korean Corvette, CHEONAN, in March of 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyong Island in November of the same year were quite muted. Every country in the region was watching to see how not only the Republic of Korea would respond, but how the world's most powerful military would react to an attack on one of its largest regional allies. South Korea's limited and imprecise artillery response to the shelling of Yeonpyong Island had no discernible impact on any North Korean military sites. Fortunately, the confluence of some important factors helped prevent greater escalation.

First, the cause of the CHEONAN incident was not fully verified until both sections of its hull were salvaged and inspected over the next month. This delay allowed emotions on the peninsula to cool and diplomatic efforts to redirect energy previously focused on military retaliation to shift toward a more peaceful end-state. Second, when the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyong Island subsequently occurred, the resulting deaths and injuries marked one of the worst escalations in North-South Korean relations since the 1953 armistice. Yet despite this brazen attack on South Korea, U.S. military action was not forthcoming and its lack of retaliatory response with more advanced precision weapon systems lost on neither friend nor foe. Although the U.S. brings to bear leading-edge technology, the most professionally trained military force in the world, and an integrated battle force that far outstrips any competitors, the key enabler the United States seems to lack in the region is a clearly defined strategic threshold at which it will use any of these competitive advantages. This ambiguity has both the capacity to engender riskier behavior or, vice versa, deter other aggressors from pushing the limits of what they can achieve. The merits of both can be endlessly debated.

A current and relevant instance of a U.S. MDT being tested is the ongoing China-Japan spat over the Senkaku Islands. On January 19th, 2012, a Chinese frigate developed a radar lock—commonly considered an aggressive act—on a Japanese ship-based helicopter. Eleven days later a Chinese warship locked its fire-control radar on a Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer in the East China Sea. These sorts of incidents highlight a growing trend within the PLA-Navy, and the broader Chinese maritime fleet, of a China willing to use intimidation and the threat of deadly force to secure its claims. This irresponsible bravado demonstrates a lack of maturity and understanding as to how major navies responsibly wield weapons of war in the maritime domain. Without confidence-building measures such as the Incidents-at-Sea (INCSEA) Agreement which the U.S. created with the former Soviet Union in 1972, the Chinese are saber-rattling in treacherous waters more familiar to their rivals. To be certain, should China ever choose extreme measures to try and limit the flow of commerce through the region or take military action in defiance of international maritime norms, the U.S. Navy would fast arrive to engage forces threatening commerce feeding prosperity to almost the entire globe. Crossing this redline would signal to the rest of the world that China intended on single-handedly reestablishing international norms. Thus far, China has remained prudent enough not to sail across this wake in the water.

Extra-Regional Influences

Outside of the region, U.S. policymakers and defense experts should also worry about the prospect of the US being drawn into a major conflict – namely, back to the Middle East. For example, should Israel unilaterally or with the blessing of a U.S. administration conduct a strike on Iran's nuclear development infrastructure, regional escalation would be certain, the negative economic effects of which would cascade into the Asia-Pacific and heighten tensions amongst the countries already engaged in regional territorial/maritime disputes. Oil prices would spike, resources would become more constrained, and the flow of commerce threatened. The attendant increase in the significance of SCS and East China Sea resources would add additional pressure on resolving disputed

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is based on Aaron Austin's experiences and observations while deployed throughout Asia for the U.S. Navy and as an Asia Pacific foreign area officer. Lieutenant Commander Austin is currently an Interagency Professional in Residence at the U.S. Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace or the U.S. Navy.

territories, with no guarantees that they would be solved peacefully. The decline in supply would likely increase the chances of violent confrontation as resource valuations increase and nationalist sentiments flare over securing projected sources of rare resources.

Conclusion

The tense and intransigent nature of territorial disputes in the SCS and ECS imparts on the region a peculiar sense of instability bubbling under the surface. Unable to physically rebuff Chinese claims to land features of the SCS, regional countries must watch their own perceived possessions slowly slip away if China does not change course. Although actions speak louder than words, Chinese nationalist rhetoric is helping set the stage for what appears to be future concrete actions in the SCS. Even with a coherent and unified political response from the international community in opposition to future Chinese territorial gains, without leverage or the will to physically block China, China seems poised to overcome its "century of humiliation" from the First Opium War (1839-1842) through the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945 with a focus on regional dominance.



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