Chinese Dominance Spreads Across South China Sea

Meanwhile the littoral states keep saying 'after you…no, after you'

Written by **David Brown** and **Bronson Percival**

It boils down to this: China will dominate the South China Sea unless it is checked. The United States and China's East Asian neighbors can curb China's creeping imperialism, but only if and when they agree on how to share the costs and risks of convincing Beijing to alter course.

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China wants to expand its maritime frontier. This goal has tremendous popular support at home. Expansion is, however, bound to test US resolve to sustain the status quo on the western rim of the Pacific. It is also bound to challenge the independence of China's East Asian neighbors, even if China seeks only deference rather than dominance. For now, Beijing appears to have decided on small steps where it holds the tactical advantage: in the South China Sea that sweeps south from Hainan to Singapore.

The pattern of Chinese expansion has become obvious. Forget the notion of China's "peaceful rise" – the *lietmotif* of Chinese diplomacy well into the first decade of this century. Since Beijing reasserted a claim to 80 percent or more of the world's largest enclosed sea in 2009, China has nibbled its way steadily south. Chinese coast guard and fisheries management vessels are out in front, but the paramilitary glove covers the iron fist of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy.

Analysts once debated whether Beijing was orchestrating its quest for hegemony in the South China Sea or trying to manage various Chinese actors. No longer. In recent years Chinese tactics have been impressively coordinated – a mixture of intimidation, naval patrols, localized blockades, oil rig deployments, ramming of fishing vessels and construction of facilities on small islands and sub-surface shoals. Beijing has established an administrative structure, "Sansha City," for its south sea dominion. Since 2012, the dashed line enclosing those dominions has been included on a watermark map in Chinese passports.

China's drive for dominance over the South China Sea stirs the hearts of Chinese patriots, who have swallowed a mythical version of China's historic role in Asia's waters. To this myth, add Beijing's determination to undo the humiliations once visited by European powers – the so-called "century of shame" – by visiting similar humiliations on its near neighbors. The result is a great power blinded by historic myth and its own self- righteousness. China appears to have convinced itself that it seeks nothing more than to recover its maritime territories. Consequently, in Beijing, other Asian states' growing angst is often ascribed to American machinations to contain China.

US strategists have yet to reach consensus on how to react to China's quest for an expanded maritime dominion. US policies have helped to keep Sino-US relations on a relatively even keel overall, but have failed to moderate China's posture on maritime territorial issues.
Some US experts have for several decades imagined that Washington might build a constructive, even intimate relationship with Asia's emerging superpower, a sort of duopoly with China cast as the junior partner. In that vision, the US remains guarantor of the security of Japan, South Korea and in a very real sense, of the rival Chinese government in Taiwan, as well as of Southeast Asia. Beijing is not buying that, and may eventually aim to corral its one-time Northeast Asian tributaries as well. For now, that is too tough a nut for China to crack. Southeast Asia is a much softer, more attractive, target.

Strategists in Southeast Asian capitals briefly speculated that as Xi Jinping consolidated power, China would pursue a more confident and concomitantly less abrasive foreign policy. That hasn't been the case. Though Asean doggedly urges China to agree to a Code of Conduct that might deter or at least manage incidents in the South China Sea, Xi's China shows no serious interest in Asean's scheme, let alone in discussing territorial claims multilaterally.

Chinese analysts seem to have concluded some years back that the littoral countries to the south were eating China's lunch while only pretending to negotiate sovereign claims. Since 2009, Beijing has lost interest in cutting "joint development" deals with various partners except on terms that require acknowledgement of China's claims. Its tactics have served an increasingly single-minded and thus far successful pursuit of dominion over neighboring waters. In parallel in Chinese military circles, it is often argued that Chinese security depends on control of waters within a "first island chain" and eventually on the ability to project power into the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

These notions drive Beijing's strategy and have put China on a collision course with the US. Since World War II, American diplomacy has aimed in the broadest sense for a rules-based world order that is respectful of international law and protective of the rights of all states, large or small. Though ironically still not ratified by the US Senate, the UN Law of the Sea Convention is very much the product of that American vision. Its provisions on freedom of navigation support a web of seaborne trade that is vital to global prosperity and provide a framework that lowers the risk of naval clashes on the high seas.

American strategists have tended to focus on the alleged "big picture," China's rise as a multidimensional power. However, this focus on China casts the rest of Asia into something of a shadow and sees China's hell-bent pursuit of its maritime ambitions primarily within the context of Sino-US relations. An articulate group of China experts argues that disputes in the South China Sea just aren't important enough to risk America's overall relationship with China.
Others think that raising the costs to China will persuade Beijing that prospective gains in the South China Sea just aren't worth screwing up its relations with Washington. Both camps of US pundits might be right about China, but only if Beijing also sees the world through a Sino-US lens.

Many Asian leaders seem to believe that Sino-US rivalry trumps their individual disputes with China, and that Washington will eventually fall for the line that only tangible, muscular US engagement will prevent China's domination, not just of the South China Sea but also of the Southeast Asian states it washes onto.

Rather than see the other states of East and Southeast Asia drawn inexorably into a China-centered political and economic framework, it has been argued here and there in the region that Washington will eventually shoulder the burden of curbing Chinese ambitions, leaving China's Pacific neighbors free to pursue their own interests at minimal cost.

Thus there was hopeful excitement in many Asian capitals a few years ago when US spokesmen announced that US attention would be "pivoted" back toward East Asia. And yes, the State Department *has* stepped up the rhetoric, quite properly labelling Chinese moves "provocative" and dismissing Beijing's nine-dash line as "without basis under international law."

However, US forces remain tied to missions in the Middle East, despite withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan. No one knows if and when the interminable Trans-Pacific Partnership trade negotiations, a key component of the pivot, will finally be concluded, or whether the US Congress will eventually approve US participation.

Those who assume that the US cannot resist confrontation with China have misread America's politics and the American public mood. Still haunted by America's Vietnam trauma of half a century ago and weary of conflict in the Middle East, American public opinion will not support the costs, both financial and in terms of US forces, to protect Asian countries that are unwilling to sacrifice to protect their own independence. Further, the iron rice bowls of those who have poured US forces and resources down rat holes in the Middle East for over a decade will continue to divert the US from Asia.

With the qualified exception of Japan and the Philippines, China's Pacific neighbors show scant inclination to make the commitments that will help them and their neighbors stand up to China. For example, with no Asian-US core around which to rally, powerful voices in Hanoi still insist that accommodation to Beijing is the only viable strategy. They are perhaps more concerned to maintain Communist Party rule than Vietnamese autonomy, but no matter.
Further south, Malaysia and Indonesia can be expected to cling, as long as possible, to vain hope that China will confine its ambitions to whipping the Philippines and Vietnam into line.
Until Asean's leading members and US allies in Asia are ready to share the costs and risks of curbing Chinese ambition, President Obama and his National Security Council staff will remain very cautious. The US will share intelligence, particularly with regard to maritime domain awareness, and provide limited security assistance, but it will not sacrifice its overall relationship with China by interposing the 7th Fleet or deploying significant US paramilitary assets in the South China Sea.

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