

The South China Sea: Toward a Region of Peace, Cooperation, and Progress

July 5, 2011

Geopolitical Analysis of the South China Sea Disputes

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Introduction

Geostrategist Nicholas Spykman once described the South China Sea as the “Asiatic Mediterranean” to underscore its importance in Asian geopolitics; recent geostrategists like to call it the “Chinese Caribbean.” Just as Rome sought control over the Mediterranean and the United States over the Caribbean in pursuit of regional dominance, China seeks dominance over the South China Sea.

China’s claims and assertiveness have increased tension in the South China Sea. Most attention focuses on Beijing’s appetite for fishery and energy resources. But from a submariner’s perspective, the semi-closed sea can be referred to as the “Chinese Okhotsk” given its position in China’s nuclear strategy. Without understanding the nuclear dimension of South China Sea disputes, China’s maritime expansion makes no sense.

This paper is a geopolitical analysis of the South China Sea disputes. To understand the importance of the South China Sea in Asian geopolitics, this paper first reviews Imperial Japan’s attempt to dominate the waters. This paper then analyzes current disputes from the viewpoint of nuclear deterrence.

Lessons from the Pacific War

“All hands on deck, prepare to abandon ship. May God be with you!”—shouted Captain William Tennant, skipper of the HMS *Repulse*, on December 10, 1941, at 12:31. Then, a CBS correspondent, swimming in the thick oil flowing out from the *Repulse*, witnessed the HMS *Prince of Wales* lie “like a tired horse” half a mile away.¹

The battleship and the battle cruiser had been sent to Singapore in the hope that their

¹Cecil Brown, Columbia Broadcasting System (11th December, 1941), available at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WWprinceofwales.htm>, accessed on October 31, 2008.

presence would have an additional deterrent effect on Japan's southern advance. However, those two British capital ships were sunk in the South China Sea off the Malay Peninsula by nine Japanese planes based on Indochina—the first ships in history to be sunk by aircraft.

Japan, eyeing the resources in Dutch East Indies, had begun its southern expansion in 1939, filling the power vacuum in Southeast Asia resulted from the war in Europe. In response to Japan's advance into South French Indochina, from which Singapore was within Japanese aviation's reach, in the summer of 1941, the United States, coupled with Great Britain and Holland, imposed a trade embargo on Japan, thus shutting off the supply of oil from the United States, the Persian Gulf, and the East Indies.

Japan's strategy for the Pacific War was to establish a defense perimeter around its home islands and the Southern Resources Area, from Rangoon, through the East Indies, Rabaul, and the Gilberts and Marshalls to Wake, while inducing the United States to agree to negotiations. After a carrier attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Japan seized Guam, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, Singapore, and Wake, and created the defense perimeter in 90 days. Japan thus established complete control over the South China Sea, or the gates to the Indian Ocean.

Japanese carrier force also raided the naval bases on Ceylon to discourage British forces in the eastern Indian Ocean. Due to Japanese control of the gates along the Indonesian archipelago, the British Pacific Fleet, formed in November 1944, needed to pass south of Australia to reach the Pacific theater—a route 7,500 miles longer than an approach through the Malacca Straits.

However, there existed a wide gap in Japan's defense perimeter between the Kurils and Wake. In the Battle of Midway, Japan lost four carriers, 322 aircraft and many irreplaceable first-line aviators. With the weakening of Japanese naval power, Japanese offensive ended; the Allied counteroffensive began. The dual Allied advance through the Southern and Central Pacific gradually eroded the Japanese defense perimeter along the offshore island chain off east Eurasia. Only stray Japanese ships and submarines operated in the Indian Ocean for the rest of the war because the power center was in the Pacific. After the seizure of the Marianas, U.S. bombers began fire raids on Japanese cities, while the Allied submarines and aircraft destructed the sea lines of

communication between Japan and the South Resources Area and China. Finally, the atomic bombing, coupled with the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, induced Japan to surrender.

What lessons should be learned from the Pacific War? First, the security of Singapore, an island on the tip of the Malay Peninsula, was a vital interest of the United States. The United States was not ready for a war with Japan over Japanese aggression in China. But freedom of navigation in the maritime highway linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans was much more vital for the United States, when there was a risk that Japan might link up with Germany in the Indian Ocean. It is not an exaggeration to say that the United States prepared itself for the war with Japan over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The Pacific War also revealed that the Pacific Ocean is open-ended and provides highways for the direct confrontation of hostile powers. Although Japan continued to control the gates to the Indian Ocean, it had little effect on the defense in the Pacific theater.

In short, the South China Sea is important because it is an international waterway. Any attempt to dominate the waters invite hostilities from seafaring powers.

The Chinese Okhotsk: The Nuclear Dimension of the South China Sea Disputes

Possessing a credible sea-based nuclear deterrent is a priority for China's military strategy. China's single Type 092, or Xia-class, nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), equipped with short-range (1,770 km) JL-1 SLBMs (submarine-launched ballistic missiles), has never conducted a deterrent patrol from the Bohai Sea since its introduction in the 1980s. However, China is on the verge of acquiring credible second-strike capabilities with the anticipated introduction of JL-2 SLBMs (estimated range of 8,000 km), coupled with DF-31 and DF-31A road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). China plans to introduce up to five Type 094, or Jin-class, SSBNs outfitted with the JL-2 missiles, while constructing an underwater submarine base on Hainan Island in the South China Sea. China is thus making every effort to keep the South China Sea off limits just as the Soviet Union did in the Sea of Okhotsk during the Cold War.

The Soviet Union turned to SSBNs as insurance against US capabilities to destroy land-based ICBMs. The need to secure its insurance force from attacks and the

requirement for effective command and control meant that Soviet SSBNs had to be deployed close to home with longer-range missiles to strike the continental United States from home waters. In addition to the Barents Sea, Moscow gave priority to making the Sea of Okhotsk a safe haven for SSBNs by improving the physical defenses of the Kuril Islands and reinforcing the Pacific Fleet based at Vladivostok. The Soviet Pacific Fleet deployed 100 submarines, coupled with 140 surface warships, including a *Kiev*-class light aircraft carrier, to defend its insurance force in the Sea of Okhotsk.

Likewise, China needs to secure its forces in the South China Sea and modify its maritime strategy and doctrine accordingly. Currently, the primary wartime missions of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) are: 1) securing sea approaches to Taiwan; 2) conducting operations in the western Pacific to deny enemy forces freedom of action; 3) protecting Chinese sea lines of communication; and 4) interdicting enemy lines of communication. With the introduction of the Type 094, protecting Chinese SSBNs will become another primary mission, and this mission will require China to kill enemy strategic antisubmarine forces and end the resistance of other claimants in the South China Sea. Chinese anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, especially quieter nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), can be used to counter enemy forward antisubmarine warfare (ASW) operations. China's aircraft carriers, when operational, will be deployed in the South China Sea to silence the neighboring claimants.

China started to encircle the South China Sea, filling the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of US forces from the Philippines in 1991. China then reasserted the former Republican government's "historical" claims over all the islets, including the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, in the South China Sea and 80 percent of the 3.5 million-km² body of water along the nine-dotted U-shaped line despite having no international legal ground to do so. Those islets can be used as air and sea bases for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities and as base points for claiming deeper part of the South China Sea for PLAN SSBNs and other submarines. China also interprets the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in an arbitrary manner and does not accept military activities by foreign vessels and overflight in its waters to deny enemy ASW operations.

No wonder then that China called the semi-closed sea a "core interest" in 2010 and started to take assertive actions against other claimants with threats and even the use of force. China's efforts to dominate the South China Sea face fundamental challenges,

however. Chinese assertiveness has not only inflamed hostilities from other claimants but also raised concerns from seafaring nations such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. After all, the South China Sea is a recognized international waterway unlike the Sea of Okhotsk. Plus, since the JL-2 missiles cannot reach Los Angeles from the South China Sea, Type 094 SSBNs need to go into the Philippine Sea, where the US Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) conduct intense ASW operations.

To calm neighboring claimants, China has conducted dialogue and consultation with them since the 1990s. One result was the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (2002 DOC), which calls for peaceful solutions through dialogue. But China has been reluctant about implementation of a binding code of conduct. In response to China's recent assertiveness, Vietnam and the Philippines have conducted live-fire exercises in disputed waters, and strengthened ties with the United States since a US presence is the most visible deterrent.

The United States has made clear its opposition to China's assertiveness at various regional forums by emphasizing its interest in freedom of navigation. The United States recently announced the deployment of littoral combat ships in Singapore in the hope that their presence would have additional deterrent effect on China's assertiveness--just as Great Britain deployed HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* at the "Gibraltar of the East" to deter Imperial Japan. On the other hand, since China's excessive claims have led to the 2001 EP-3 incident and the 2009 *Impeccable* incident, the United States is seeking an incidents at sea agreement with China. But China is not interested since such an agreement will justify a continued US presence in the South China Sea.

India is another important player in the South China Sea. Delhi is expected to introduce its first SSBN INS *Arihant* with the short-range K-15 (700 km) SLBMs shortly and plans to build two more SSBNs with the development of longer-range K-4 SLBMs (3,500 km) and six SSNs to protect those SSBNs. Until India successfully develops longer-range SLBMs, Indian SSBNs will need to operate in the South China Sea to target Beijing. India is also concerned about Chinese SSBNs based in the South China Sea. In the near future, US, Chinese, and Indian submarines will play a game of underwater tag. As a result, India is strengthening ties with South China Sea nations, especially Indonesia, to justify its increased presence there.

Australia is also concerned about the high tension in the South China Sea. Stability in Southeast Asia on Australia's "Northern approaches" is particularly important since a hostile power can project power to Australia or threaten its seaborne trade and energy supply routes. It is expected that Australia will increase its military posture in the state's north while allowing greater access to its bases by U.S. military.

Japan has strategic interests in the South China Sea. It is a critical Japanese sea lane through which 90 percent of imported oil passes. The power balance in the South China Sea also has enormous impact on security in Japan's surrounding waters, namely the East China Sea and Philippine Sea. In addition, if China successfully obtains a sea-based second-strike capability by dominating the South China Sea, that would undermine the credibility of the US extended deterrent. Japan announced the new National Defense Program Guidelines in December 2010, which calls for enhanced ISR operations along the Ryukyu island chain and reinforcement of the submarine fleet. In the recent US-Japan 2+2 meeting, Tokyo and Washington included maintenance of maritime security and strengthened ties with ASEAN, Australia, and India in common strategic objectives. Despite domestic turmoil in Tokyo, China's assertiveness in the maritime common led to this strategic shift.

Conclusion

China faces a dilemma in the "Chinese Okhotsk." The more it seeks dominance over the international waterway, the more it invites hostilities. To avoid further deterioration, China should modify its nine-dotted claims in accordance with UNCLOS (US should accede to UNCLOS immediately). As long as China continues its assertiveness, China's maritime neighbors will strengthen strategic cooperation with the United States, India, Australia, and Japan to establish a regional ASW network. Yet, the region should seek cooperation with China. Where possible, joint development in disputed waters should be pursued. As the South China Sea is becoming a piracy hot spot, counter-piracy is an important agenda as well. Meanwhile, regional countries should continue dialogue with China on maritime security at various forums, including ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the East Asia Summit, and then seek a code of conduct to avoid armed conflict.