

The South China Sea is Not a Flashpoint

Two important anniversaries arrive in 2014 for protracted South China Sea disputes. January 19 marked 40 years since Chinese and Vietnamese forces clashed over the Paracel Islands, resulting in the deaths of more than 50 Vietnamese personnel and an undisclosed number on the Chinese side—at least the second-largest loss of life to have occurred in any single incident involving these disputed waters. Late 2014 will also mark 20 years since China controversially built structures on the aptly named Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands, prompting a further series of incidents at sea. Recent reports that China has moved large concrete blocks to Scarborough Shoal—yet another disputed reef that was the scene of an April 2012 standoff between Chinese and Philippines vessels—have sparked concerns in Manila that history is repeating.

More than at any time in the history of these disputes, the South China Sea has today become one of East Asia's most talked-about security flashpoints. Most famously, the strategic commentator Robert Kaplan has characterized this body of water as “the future of conflict.”¹ A recent study published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) describes the South China Sea as a “crucible for the unfolding geopolitics of Southeast Asia,” which has the potential to “influence the evolving balance of power in the region, and perhaps even the prospects for peace in the Asia–Pacific in the twenty-first century.”² Southeast Asia's top diplomat, Surin Pitsuwan, has dubbed the disputes “Asia's Palestine,”³ while former Australian Prime Minister and China savant Kevin Rudd refers to the South China Sea as a “tinderbox on water” and a “maritime Balkans of the 21st century.”⁴ In a controversial new book, Rudd's compatriot Hugh White goes even further, outlining a hypothetical scenario where a naval skirmish between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels draws in the

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United States and ultimately escalates into “the biggest war for many decades, and quite possibly the biggest since the Second World War.”⁵

The South China Sea is not an increasingly perilous Asian security flashpoint.

The term “flashpoint” is one of the most frequently used and yet underdefined terms in the security lexicon. Its origins lie in the physical sciences, where “flashpoint” refers to the temperature at which vapors emitted by a liquid will ignite when exposed to a flame. Applied to global affairs, flashpoints are geographic areas that have the ongoing potential to erupt into sudden and violent conflict. In one of the few attempts to formally define the term, U.S. Naval War College Professor Timothy Hoyt suggests that flashpoints

properly consist of three elements: First, they exhibit a *political* dimension, meaning that they “must be at the forefront of a significant and long-standing political dispute.” Second, *proximity* is key—flashpoints “tend to become greater concerns if they are proximate to both adversaries.” And third, flashpoints also “threaten to involve or engage more powerful actors in the international community, raising the possibility of escalation to a broader war.”⁶

This article challenges the popular assumption that the South China Sea is an increasingly perilous Asian security flashpoint. First, East Asia’s traditional flashpoints—Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and the East China Sea—stand a significantly higher prospect of combusting into broader, region-wide conflict. Second, China’s interests in the South China Sea are often overstated, and Beijing will continue to favor options short of military force to advance what

However, there are dangers in continuing to refer to the South China Sea as a flashpoint.

interests it does have in this region. Third, the balance of military power in the South China Sea is not shifting against the United States at the rate many pundits suggest, rendering overblown the prospects for Washington being drawn into war with China to defend the credibility of its Asian alliances. While the South China Sea is not a flashpoint, however, there are dangers in continuing to refer to it as one.

Pale by Comparison

History initially suggests that the South China Sea is not a flashpoint. The loss of life resulting from the use of force there pales in comparison to those in East Asia’s traditional flashpoints. For instance, in the unresolved Korean War (1950–53), which remains at the heart of continuing tensions on the Korean

Peninsula, an estimated two million military personnel were either killed or unaccounted for.⁷ A comparable number of casualties occurred in the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949), which left today's Taiwan flashpoint as a direct product.⁸ Further, at a time when some analysts are talking up the prospects of war between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, it is worth recalling that an estimated 15–35 million perished during the course of the second Sino–Japanese War (1937–45).⁹

While history is not destiny, more recent estimates suggest that the combustion of any one of these flashpoints today could prove equally devastating. Richard Bush and Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, for example, predict that a conflict over Taiwan could spark a nuclear war involving 1.5 billion people and produce a fundamental change in the international order.¹⁰ Similar estimates produced at the time of the 1993–94 North Korean nuclear crisis suggested that war on the Korean Peninsula could cost half a million lives and up to US\$1 trillion in its first ninety days.¹¹ Conflict between Asia's two most powerful navies in the East China Sea could prove equally devastating, particularly given that China and Japan are also the world's second- and third-largest economies, respectively. Total trade between these two historical great powers of East Asia currently stands at U.S. \$345 billion.¹²

**The East China Sea
is a different matter.**

It is hard to envisage a credible scenario where a skirmish in the South China Sea could erupt into a conflict of similar proportions. The nationalist foundations of these disputes are fundamentally different from those underpinning East Asia's traditional flashpoints. By way of example, recent polling suggests that 87 percent of the Chinese public view Japan negatively, whilst 50 percent anticipate a military dispute with Japan.¹³ Reflecting this sentiment, when Tokyo announced its decision to purchase contested Islands in the East China Sea from their private owner in September 2012, this sparked widespread anti-Japanese protests across China that spread to more than 100 cities.¹⁴ Such public displays of nationalist sentiment stand in marked contrast to June 2013 anti-China protests in Hanoi following Vietnamese allegations that a Chinese vessel had rammed and damaged a Vietnamese fishing boat. Subsequently, a mere 150 protesters gathered in the city center.¹⁵ Crowds of comparable size have attended anti-Chinese protests in the Philippines. For instance, a March 2012 protest outside the Chinese Embassy in Manila that organizers expected to draw 1,000 protesters attracted barely half that number.¹⁶

The strategic geography of the South China Sea also militates against it being a genuine flashpoint. Throughout history, large bodies of water have tended to inhibit the willingness and ability of adversaries to wage war. In *The*

Tragedy of Great Power Politics, for instance, John Mearsheimer refers to “the stopping power of water,” writing of the limits that large bodies of water place on the capacity of states to project military power—relative, at least, to when they share common land borders.¹⁷ Even when clashes at sea do occur, history suggests that these generally afford statesmen greater time and space to find diplomatic solutions. As Robert Ross observes, in such cases “neither side has to fear that the other’s provocative diplomacy or movement of troops is a prelude to attack and immediately escalate to heightened military readiness. Tension can be slower to develop, allowing the protagonists time to manage and avoid unnecessary escalation.”¹⁸

Ross’ observation, in turn, dovetails elegantly with the issue of proximity, which Hoyt regards as a defining feature of a flashpoint. The antagonists in the South China Sea disputes are less proximate than in the case of the Korean Peninsula—where the two Koreas share a land border that remains the most militarized on earth. The same can be said of the Taiwan flashpoint. Indeed, the proximity of Taiwan to the mainland affords Beijing credible strategic options—and arguably even incentives—involving the use of force that are not available to it in the South China Sea.¹⁹

Finally, and related to the third of Hoyt’s criteria, the South China Sea cannot be said to engage the vital interests of Asia’s great powers. To be sure, much has been made of India’s growing interests in this part of the world—particularly following reports of a July 2011 face-off between a Chinese ship and an Indian naval vessel that was leaving Vietnamese waters.²⁰ However, New Delhi’s interests in the South China Sea remain overwhelmingly economic, not strategic, driven as they are by the search for oil. Moreover, even if New Delhi had anything more than secondary strategic interests at stake in the geographically distant South China Sea, it is widely accepted that India’s armed forces will for some time lack the capacity to credibly defend these.²¹ Similarly, while much has been made of Tokyo’s willingness to assist Manila with improving its maritime surveillance capabilities,²² for reasons of history and geography, Tokyo’s interests in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, the Korean Peninsula, and even the Taiwan flashpoint dwarf those which it has at stake in the more distant South China Sea. The extent to which this body of water genuinely engages the vital interests of China and the United States continues to be overstated.

Chinese Core Interest?

Nevertheless, an April 2010 *New York Times* article fuelled speculation to the contrary, claiming that Chinese officials had referred to the South China Sea as a “core interest” during a meeting with two senior U.S. counterparts.²³ In a

November 2010 interview with veteran Australian journalist Greg Sheridan, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton alleged that Chinese officials had again applied this terminology to the South China Sea during the May 2010 gathering of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue.²⁴

Beijing's use of the term "core interest" in relation to any issue is significant given that Chinese officials have traditionally maintained that military force will be used in defending these. Since the term "core interest" first appeared in the Chinese foreign policy lexicon during the early 2000s, it has generally only been applied—officially at least—in relation to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. For this reason, use of the term with reference to the South China Sea would strengthen the justification for referring to this issue as a genuine flashpoint.

But doubts remain over whether Beijing truly regards the South China Sea as a "core interest." Michael Swaine reports that his investigation of Chinese official sources "failed to unearth a single example of a PRC official or an official PRC document or media source that publicly and explicitly identifies the South China Sea as a PRC 'core interest.'"²⁵ By contrast, Chinese officials have not exhibited such reticence when referring publicly to Taiwan or Tibet in such terms. Nor has Beijing shown any reluctance to threaten or to actually use military force in relation to these. During the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Beijing twice fired ballistic missiles into waters off Taiwan in an effort to intimidate voters in advance of the island's first democratic presidential election.²⁶ China went further in March 2005 when the National People's Congress passed an "anti-secession law" requiring the use of "non-peaceful means" against Taiwan in the event its leaders sought to establish formal independence from the mainland.²⁷

Explicit threats and promises of this nature are absent in official Chinese statements on the South China Sea even when, as in May 2012, the normally smooth-talking Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying ambiguously warned the Philippines "not to misjudge the situation" and not to "escalate tensions without considering consequences" at the height of the Scarborough Shoal standoff.²⁸ Indeed, although Beijing appears eager to demonstrate its growing naval capabilities by conducting military exercises in the South China Sea—as in March 2013 when it controversially conducted exercises within 50 miles of the Malaysian coastline—it is striking that Chinese efforts to actually exercise jurisdiction in this region continue to be confined, by and large, to the use of civil maritime law enforcement vessels.²⁹

This stands in contrast to the East China Sea, where exchanges between Beijing and Tokyo have quickly escalated to involve the use of military ships and aircraft. In early 2013, for instance, Tokyo accused Chinese warships of locking weapons-guiding radar onto a Japanese helicopter and a destroyer in two separate incidents.³⁰ In November 2013, Beijing went on to announce a

controversial new “Air Defense Identification Zone” (ADIZ) over the East China Sea and initially threatened to take defensive action against aircraft that did not disclose their flight plans prior to entering the zone and identifying themselves when operating within it.³¹

Unlike its recent behavior in the East China Sea, Beijing’s approach toward the South China Sea disputes has traditionally been one of conflict de-escalation. Beijing’s clear preference has been to manage such tensions bilaterally. Following a period where an increase in Chinese maritime patrols led to a rise in the number of clashes with Vietnamese (and Philippine) vessels, for instance, Beijing and Hanoi reached agreement in October 2011 on principles for settling maritime disputes. Likewise in June 2013, China and Vietnam agreed to establish new hotlines to assist with managing incidents at sea and dealing with fishing disputes.³²

Beijing has also shown some willingness to take the multilateral route. Most famously, China signed a non-binding “Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” with ASEAN in November 2002. While protracted progress continues, the official position of both China and ASEAN remains to establish a legally binding code of conduct in the South China Sea intended to incorporate mechanisms for avoiding incidents at sea, crisis management, confidence building measures, and joint development.³³ Beijing has certainly not shown similar flexibility in relation to any of its other publicly-declared “core interests.” At China’s insistence, for example, discussion of Taiwan is strictly off limits in Asia’s multilateral forums.

Some commentators contend that rising China’s deepening energy security imperative will eventually render the South China Sea a true “core interest” to Beijing. Chinese demand for oil is projected to increase by 40 percent—to in excess of 1.1 million barrels per day—within only a few years.³⁴ With unproven oil reserves of an estimated 11 billion barrels, the South China Sea offers Beijing a potential solution to this conundrum.³⁵ In the immediate term, however, many analysts also suggest that the South China Sea presents a different, yet no less significant “Malacca Dilemma” for China’s leaders. According to this line of argument, approximately 80 percent of China’s oil imports (sourced from Africa and the Middle East) are vulnerable to interdiction, particularly in narrow chokepoints that connect the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea, such as the Malacca Strait.³⁶ The same argument applies to Chinese imports of gas and other raw materials that also pass through these waters. Of greatest concern seems to be the prospect that the United States would seek to strangle China of such supplies in a future conflict over Taiwan.

While it is true that the U.S. Navy remains second-to-none in its capacity to enforce a blockade of Chinese shipping coming through the Malacca Strait, history suggests that it would only exercise this capability under the most dire

circumstances—and even then, it would be to the potentially irreparable damage of the United States’ international standing and reputation as a provider of global public goods. As Dennis Blair and Kenneth Lieberthal have argued, “The United States has a very long tradition of promoting and protecting the free flow of trade over the world’s seas. When Washington has used its naval dominance to blockade shipping, it has done so judiciously...Nothing in the United States’ foreign policy tradition indicates that the country would abuse its maritime power for its own narrow interests.”³⁷

In the unlikely event the United States were ever to take this path—conceivably only in the context of all-out war with China—it is important to remember that Beijing would still retain the option of diverting its ships through alternative routes, such as the Lombok or Sunda Straits, or potentially even south of Australia. U.S.-based China-watchers Andrew Erickson and Gabriel Collins estimate that such alternative routes could add as little as US\$1-2 per barrel—a relatively small price to pay during warfare.³⁸ Added to this, the October 2013 opening of a new oil and gas pipeline through Myanmar has further alleviated Beijing’s so-called “Malacca Dilemma.”³⁹ Taken together, such considerations cast doubt over speculation that the South China Sea will inevitably emerge as a Chinese “core interest” on energy security grounds.

U.S. Vital Interest?

Some commentators suggest that the South China Sea constitutes a vital U.S. interest because it is a litmus test for China’s challenge to U.S. primacy in the Western Pacific. Patrick Cronin and Robert Kaplan observe that “the South China Sea will be the strategic bellwether for determining the future of U.S. leadership in the Asia-Pacific region.” In their view, it is in this body of water “where a militarily rising China is increasingly challenging U.S. naval preeminence—a trend that, if left on its present trajectory, could upset the balance of power that has existed since the end of World War II.”⁴⁰

To be sure, the balance of military power between China and the countries of Southeast Asia is clearly shifting in Beijing’s favor. Although Vietnam and the Philippines have recently embarked upon their own military modernization programs—and while Southeast Asian claimant states have geographical advantages over China given their proximity to the disputed waters of the South China Sea—Beijing’s military modernization commenced during the mid-1990s, giving China a substantial head start over its southern neighbors. Moreover, Beijing has not had to deal with the fiscal constraints which periods of economic downturn and political unrest have created for a number of Southeast Asian governments over the past two decades.⁴¹

That said, it is equally important not to exaggerate the pace and scope of China's military modernization, conflating trends in the Southeast Asian distribution of power with a potential Chinese challenge to U.S. primacy in the broader Western Pacific. China currently does not possess the capability to project substantial power into the South China Sea, and will likely remain unable to do so for at least another two decades, its ongoing experimentation with aircraft carriers notwithstanding. As Dan Blumenthal has observed, "the PLA lacks a sustained power projection capability associated with asserting full control over the area, including sufficient at-sea replenishment and aerial refueling capabilities, modern destroyers with advanced air defense capabilities, and nuclear submarines, as well as regional bases to support logistical requirements."⁴² Added to this, questions have risen regarding the as yet largely unproven ability of PLA Navy crews to undertake prolonged operations at sea, particularly under conditions of high-intensity conflict.⁴³

Other commentators have argued that the South China Sea is a vital U.S. interest because it symbolizes the United States' commitment to its Asia-Pacific alliance partners. According to this line of reasoning, any wavering or unwillingness on the part of Washington to come to the defense of one of its Southeast Asian allies in the face of Chinese coercion would lead other regional partners to question the reliability of their own strategic relationship with the United States.

Yet, despite the fact that Washington ultimately refused to side with the Philippines during the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, there is little evidence to suggest any such crisis of confidence amongst America's closest Asia-Pacific allies. In its May 2013 Defense White Paper, for example, Canberra characterizes Australia's alliance with the United States as being "our most important defence relationship" and "a pillar of Australia's strategic and security arrangements."⁴⁴ The United States was certainly swift to demonstrate the credibility of its alliance commitment to Seoul following the March 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan*, undertaking a series of high-profile military exercises with South Korea in waters proximate to China and in the face of strong opposition from Beijing.⁴⁵ Likewise in November 2013, Washington sent a strong signal of support for Tokyo by flying two B-52 bombers through China's newly announced "Air Defense Identification Zone" without informing Beijing in advance.⁴⁶ U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel backed up this show of defiance with unequivocal confirmation that Article V of the U.S.–Japan Mutual Defense Treaty extends to the Senkaku Islands.⁴⁷

These examples call into question the connection that some commentators draw between U.S. strategy toward the South China Sea and the continued viability of the United States' Asian alliances. What they instead appear to demonstrate is that U.S. alliance relationships with Australia, Japan, and South

Korea are simply in a different category than those it has with the Philippines and Thailand.

Finally, the capacity of Beijing and Washington to navigate crises in their bilateral relationship further suggests that the South China Sea is not a flashpoint. Over the past two or more decades, the United States and China have gone to great lengths to manage bilateral tensions and prevent them from spiraling out of control. A recent example occurred in May 2012, when the two arrived at a mutually acceptable solution after the blind Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng sought refuge at the U.S. embassy in Beijing.⁴⁸

In the South China Sea, two major, modern Sino–U.S. crises have been successfully managed. The first occurred in April 2001, when a U.S. EP-3 conducting routine surveillance in airspace above the South China Sea collided with a Chinese J-8 jet fighter and was forced to make an emergency landing on Hainan Island. To be sure, efforts to address this crisis did not initially proceed particularly smoothly, as Chinese officials refused to answer incoming calls from the U.S. Embassy. Ultimately, however, those most intimately involved in the crisis—such as then-Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Dennis Blair—have written subsequently how top U.S. officials “made every effort to exercise prudence and restraint while they collected more information about the nature of the incident.” They have also acknowledged that their Chinese counterparts “made a series of grudging concessions that ultimately resulted in success...after they decided that it was important to overall Sino–U.S. relations to solve the incident.”⁴⁹

Again in March 2009, while diplomatic tensions between Beijing and Washington heightened in the immediate aftermath of an incident involving the harassment of the USNS *Impeccable* by five Chinese vessels, good sense also prevailed as senior U.S. and Chinese officials issued statements maintaining that such incidents would not become the norm and pledging deeper cooperation to ensure so.⁵⁰ Added to these examples of effective crisis management, it is also worth noting that Washington reportedly facilitated a compromise to the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff.⁵¹

While protracted and complex, the South China Sea disputes appear eminently manageable.

Time for Cool Heads

Thucydides famously wrote that war is motivated by honor, fear, and interest.⁵² This article contends that none of these factors are at play in the South China Sea. This region doesn’t engage the *interests* of Asia’s great powers to the extent

so often portrayed. Beijing's purported energy security *fears* in the South China Sea are typically exaggerated, as are anxieties that the U.S.-led Asian alliance network would unravel if Washington fails to confront Chinese assertiveness in this body of water. And questions of *honor* are substantially less pertinent to the South China Sea than to East Asia's traditional flashpoints such as the status of Taiwan or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. When assessing Washington's willingness and ability to honor alliance commitments, the United States' closest strategic partners will continue to pay most attention to U.S. actions on the Korean Peninsula and in the East China Sea.

To argue that the South China Sea is not a flashpoint is not a call for complacency. As studies of international conflict dating back to Thucydides have demonstrated, "a quarrel in a far-away country" that bears little obvious or immediate relevance to the central dramas of the international politics of the day can still provide the spark which ignites a war of epochal proportions.⁵³ That said, it is equally dangerous to unduly and indiscriminately overstate the importance of each and every point of tension in international politics. To do so about the South China Sea unnecessarily raises the temperature around a set of disputes that, while protracted and complex, appear eminently manageable with sufficient time and patience for creative diplomatic solutions.

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