

High Stakes in the South China Sea

Resources, nationalism, and domestic audiences are pushing Vietnam and the Philippines towards confrontation with China.

By Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt
July 30, 2012

Coverage of the South China Sea territorial dispute has tended to paint the story as that of a giant China flexing its muscle over a handful of smaller Southeast Asian states. But while China's **increasingly assertive behavior** shows its willingness to exploit the weaknesses of other claimants, the picture is not as simple as it is often portrayed. Vietnam and the Philippines are pushing back against China, and many countries are stoking tensions in the sea. Together, their actions leave plenty of room for open conflict to break out.

Vietnam and the Philippines are no strangers to confronting China over the South China Sea. Vietnam and China fought two wars in the 1970s and 1980s over the Paracels, while China occupied a Philippine-claimed reef in the mid-1990s in the Spratlys. Tensions have run high again in recent years, driven by resource and strategic interests.

Beijing is more determined than ever to ensure that its Southeast Asia rivals do not come between it and its territorial claims. In the face of **Beijing's growing confidence**, Hanoi and Manila are actively enlisting the aid of ASEAN and the United States.

Vietnam had some early success. Hanoi deftly outmaneuvered China, much to Beijing's embarrassment, by championing the sovereignty issue on ASEAN's agenda during its chairmanship of the organization in 2010. Its efforts culminated in U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's **landmark speech** that declared that the South China Sea was a U.S. "national interest." The phrase was a rude awakening for China and, according to a Vietnamese diplomat, was a major reason that Beijing started taking Hanoi more seriously.

However, Hanoi and Manila's efforts **are now failing** to convince China to tread more lightly. Beijing has simply upped the ante in response. The Philippines has also



Image Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Dylan McCord

responded to China's claims by leaning on its military alliance with Washington, even going so far **as to advocate** interpreting the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty in a way that includes the South China Sea—a position the United States has yet to endorse.

Nor do bold steps always produce a persuasive show of force. Manila's deployment of a warship to intercept Chinese vessels poaching in the disputed Scarborough Shoal in April began a standoff that was only broken by a typhoon. Hanoi's passage of a maritime law in June, requiring foreign naval ships entering the disputed areas to notify Vietnamese authorities, was countered by Beijing's creation of a centrally administered outpost in the South China Sea, Sansha City, **complete with its** own military garrison.

In this game of tit-for-tat, **Vietnam and the Philippines** are clearly vulnerable. ASEAN has been too divided as of late to be of much help. The diverging interests of individual ASEAN states have stalled negotiations over a code of conduct agreement with China. The end result was a **diplomatic deadlock** at this month's foreign ministers' meeting in Phnom Penh, the first time in the organization's 45-year history that ASEAN members failed to issue a joint statement.

With no mechanisms to manage tensions and the prospects of a resolution diminishing, directly pushing back against Beijing seems to be an ever escalating gamble for Hanoi and Manila. But **domestic demand** in Vietnam and the Philippines for hydrocarbon and fish stock is eroding the longstanding restraints on conflict. Furthermore, rising nationalism and a reluctance to appear weak before their respective domestic audiences are nudging them towards greater confrontation with China as the latter enlarges its maritime footprint. High stakes coupled with an increase of tensions means that a misstep by either China or Southeast Asian claimants can all too easily escalate the dispute to irreversible levels.

***Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt** is the Beijing-based China and Northeast Asia project director for the International Crisis Group. The International Crisis Group recently released the second in a series of reports in the South China Sea. You can read the [report here](#).*

HA

August 6, 2012 at 17:11

Phillipines remember how badly you wanted the US out?

We had to go no matter what.

Guess you need us now?

Responses only accepted in english.

[Reply](#)

Cyrus

August 3, 2012 at 09:25

Ofcourse the Chinese would not sing our Frigates. That would mean you are really stupid if you do.

Why? Because if there is an attack on Philippine Ship, a Naval Vessel at that would constitute the activation of the Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States that has been made clear with clarifications between the State Department and our Foreign Affairs.

[Reply](#)

Cyrus

August 3, 2012 at 02:08

If you follow Philippine and United States clarification on the MDT it covers Philippine Vessels and Philippine Territory and bases. So an attack on lets say the Gregorio del Pilar or the Pag-asa Island would directly activate the MDT.

[Reply](#)

Cyrus

August 3, 2012 at 02:05

You won't sink it because that would prove how stupid you are. An attack, especially a sinking of a Philippine Military Vessel by an agressor would certainly cover the MDT. Which I believe the Chinese doesn't want to happen.

That is a reality and why we are sending them AGAIN.

[Reply](#)

Duke

August 2, 2012 at 23:53

Vic,

You're talking just like a small town childish thug (You're not the God Father, just a ' cheap street thug', no more no less!). Based on **the Qing's official territorial map of 1904, Hainan was China's southernmost part & the Paracels & Spratleys islands never included in it.** So, any Chinese sovereignty claims farther than that limit are totally faked & illegal. Every country in the world are bound to respect & abide by the international law & norms, & Communist China is certainly no exception. SCS & ECS are the international bodies of water open to all nations in the world for navigation & transit passages (Freedom of navigation). When you greedily & stupidly claim these global commons as your own property, you've already put the noose around your neck & painted yourself into a corner without any tiny hope for

vic

August 2, 2012 at 00:25

@Errol T

We should all be realists. Philippines could only auction off sea blocs and hope to have income. This is called "economic rent". In the real world: no work, no income. If you want to collect "rent", then make sure you can protect the guys paying you rent. America will not help Philippines collect rent, why should it?

[Reply](#)

vic

August 2, 2012 at 00:13

@Cyrus

You are freeloading. America will help Filipino land territory – that is the Mutual Defense Pact. However, nobody is going to invade the Philippines. What for? But if Filipinos want to get rich by simply auctioning blocs of the sea, then it is up to them alone to face the risks of business. Simple. You want Americans to fight for you to get rich? Be realistic.

In economics, we all call this collecting "rent". But in the real world: no work, no income

[Reply](#)

vic

August 2, 2012 at 00:03

@Cyrus

Big deal. Be a realist, the cutters are given under "diplomatic public relations ". They are obsolete, and are not real fighting ships. Nowadays, one missile fired from a ship far away will sink this cutter; there is no match whatsoever. Well, at least you give the islanders some sense of security and pride. But please know the limits for your own safety.

Don' worry, the Chinese won't sink these cutters. It is bad publicity.

[Reply](#)

vic

August 1, 2012 at 23:55

@Louis,

Use a bit of common sense. A bully picks on the small and defenseless. A bully does not pick on a big fellow. In the Philippines, they will call the small guy, Mr. Butiki (lizard). Well, Mr. Butiki must survive and not fight with the bully head on. But if Mr Butiki is dumb, he will be really whacked. Use your brains. Submit and wait for your opening, if it ever

vic

August 1, 2012 at 23:45

If conflicts are not resolved through negotiations, then it will be settled through force of arms. That is what history shows.

[Reply](#)

vic

August 1, 2012 at 23:40

@duke

China is now enforcing what it said more than 60 years ago. So what else is new? Well, there are supposed to be a lot of gas and oil in the seabeds of SCS. So, everyone is claiming now, this was not the case 60 years ago. So who are the latest claimants? No wonder, China said it is undisputed Chinese territory and the others are saying 'bully'. So, worse comes to worse, fight it out. Otherwise, sit down and negotiate. China reacts to the Vietnamese and Filipino show of force. Philippines set up a school, so China updates a city administrative region. Vietnam passed a law and started auctioning, so China updated its laws and also started auctioning the same blocs. Tit for tat. Nothing unusual for nations muscling on each other's claim. Well, the strongest and/or the smartest will win. Simple.

[Reply](#)

Duke

August 1, 2012 at 17:00

Vic,

There are a lot of oil , natural gas & ores etc. in Russian Far East & Siberria. Go claim them back, China. They're your territories lost to the Russians in the Qing dynasty . So far, the Russian bear dares not claim the whole Artic like you said. They're surely not greedy & stupid like the red dragon. Behave!

" Qing dynasty map shows no China claim in spratlys

HANOI – Vietnam's National Museum of History displayed on Wednesday a map donated by a local historian that he said proved China had no claim to disputed islands in the South China Sea

The map was donated by Dr. Mai Ngoc Hong who said it was a **1904 Qing dynasty map of Chinese territories that did not include the disputed Spratley and Paracel Islands.**

"I have one wish that this map is known not only to the Vietnamese but also to Chinese people and scientists. The legality of this map clearly shows Vietnam's sovereignty over the two islands. There is no arguing about that," he said adding he spent a month's salary to pay for the map. Beijing, which lays claim to the whole South China Sea, recently upset Hanoi after the government-backed China National Offshore Oil

sun da pao

August 1, 2012 at 01:28

Testing. Hmm, my earlier comment did not appear...

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