

A Competitive Turn: How Increased Chinese Maritime Actions Complicate U.S. Partnerships

By James R. Holmes

Chinese maritime actions in the East and South China Seas became increasingly competitive during 2012, further complicating U.S. efforts to fashion maritime-security coalitions and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific. This has entangled the U.S. desire to maintain freedom of the seas with its hesitance to become involved in contentious territorial disputes.¹ By resisting the temptation to overreact, taking a stand on excessive maritime claims, reconciling its interest in freedom of navigation with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and continuing its rebalancing to Asia, the United States can stem the repercussions from China's assertive maritime behavior.

China's two-month standoff with the Philippine Navy at Scarborough Shoal and its incursions into territorial waters claimed by Japan represented the low points in an eventful year, which was scattered with incidents.² The velocity at which events hurtled along during the late spring and summer, however, did come as a surprise. China's leadership may have decided the time had arrived to pursue an endgame for the territorial disputes in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, and elsewhere within the waters bounded by the "nine-dashed line" that Beijing has inscribed on its map of the region. China claims "indisputable sovereignty"³ within the nine-dashed line, which, as of November 2012, also appears on new Chinese passports, irritating many of China's neighbors.⁴

Why now? Beijing may feel strong enough to settle matters on its terms. It may see the United States as too weak and distracted to

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counteract its maritime offensive. Or it may see this as a fleeting opportunity, with “now-or-never” logic compelling the leadership to lock in whatever gains it can. Chinese leaders may believe that the balance of political and military power could shift away from China, as the domestic economy has apparently slowed while the Obama administration proceeds with its rebalancing to Asia. In either case, China is taking actions that create new facts on the ground. For

instance, Beijing established a regional prefecture based at Sansha, on Yongxing Island, to administer the Spratlys, Paracels and the adjacent Macclesfield Bank.⁵ By exercising jurisdiction over disputed places on the map, the Chinese government evidently hopes its claims to sovereignty will take on an aura of legitimacy – even inevitability.

China is shaping events in the South China Sea through an imaginative combination of military and non-military instruments, in ways that are consistent with its historical and expanding understanding of sea power. Indeed, the Chinese fishing fleet acted as an unofficial auxiliary to Beijing’s policy at Scarborough Shoal, an atoll within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Where fishing craft go, government ships follow as protectors. In April,

a Philippine Navy frigate apprehended Chinese boats for poaching at Scarborough Shoal, prompting nearby ships from China’s “dragons” – the China Marine Surveillance Force and kindred coast-guard-like agencies – to respond. Weeks of standoff ensued with Manila ultimately withdrawing its assets from the atoll, leaving China holding the contested real estate.⁶

In this incident, China chose to confront the Philippines through unarmed and lightly armed surveillance, fisheries and law-enforcement ships. This fits China’s preferred narrative: navies fight for disputed objects, while non-military vessels exercise jurisdiction. Rather than admit that the South China Sea’s islands and waters are contested – thus granting fellow claimants a modicum of legitimacy – China behaves as though its sovereignty is fact. Accordingly, the leadership typically holds military might in reserve as a “recessed” deterrent or coercive option. Southeast Asian states know that vastly superior power waits over the horizon and will be deployed if they

defy China's wishes. Beijing may believe it has found a winning formula in this "small-stick diplomacy."⁷ It has applied similar methods in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan, and has thus far refrained from using the "big stick" of its naval force.

Beijing, then, has expertly created problems for its Asian neighbors and the United States. Modifying the rules of the U.S.-led order in Asia – particularly those allocating jurisdiction over geographic features – appears to be China's goal. Proscribing activities such as surveillance flights, underwater surveys and aircraft-carrier flight operations could well be on Beijing's long-term agenda. U.S. policymakers therefore need to determine how to shore up that order, which serves U.S. interests and the region well.

Yet measures designed to safeguard the freedom of navigation, Washington's chief stated interest in the South China Sea, intersect with competitive endeavors. In naval historian Geoffrey Till's parlance, it is increasingly difficult to disentangle struggles for dominion over islands and the waters that lap against them from routine "good order at sea" functions, such as safeguarding transportation through the sea lanes or tapping undersea natural resources.⁸ In theory, good order at sea should operate by what strategist Edward Luttwak calls "linear logic," the standard assessment of costs and benefits that occurs during peacetime.⁹ All states have an interest in public goods like maritime security, so they should rally around multinational efforts to protect shipping and manage resources.

Vying for dominion and sovereignty, however, engages an action-reaction dynamic that Luttwak calls the "paradoxical logic" of strategy.¹⁰ Continual interaction between competitors disrupts cooperation against pirates, weapons traffickers and other scourges to free navigation. Sovereignty engages deep passions. Phrases like "indisputable sovereignty," China's standard description for its claims in the South China Sea, drive up the value that both leaders and citizens attach to their political goals – and thus the amount of resources Beijing is prepared to expend on behalf of those goals, and for how long. The same holds true for rival claimants like Vietnam or the Philippines. Paradoxical logic, writes Luttwak, can give rise to "ironic reversals" of fortune as each side adapts to and tries to one-up its rival's strategic moves. Such interactions are inherently non-linear and unpredictable.¹¹

Carl von Clausewitz describes competitive dynamics with phrases such as the "continuous interaction of opposites" or "collision of two living forces."¹² Clausewitz likens that interaction to two wrestlers grappling constantly for strategic advantage. That seems an apt metaphor for the South China Sea today – except that that there

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are more than two potential competitors, and the competitors do not have equal political, economic and military power. The weaker

wrestlers inhabiting the arena can try to tag a powerful outsider, the United States, who waits just outside the ring. China frets that U.S. maritime-security initiatives provide cover for just such a countervailing coalition, and thus for a latter-day U.S. containment strategy.

Given the turbulent strategic setting, what can the second Obama administration do to advance U.S. interests and buttress the current order? There are no easy answers. Separating endeavors governed by linear logic from those governed by paradoxical logic represents the ideal solution, if such a thing is possible. Regional stakeholders could work together to supply public goods while setting power politics aside. But doing so requires a conscious political choice on the part of all stakeholders – something that appears doubtful following this year’s events.

Therefore, the Obama administration should adhere to the following guidelines to promote U.S. interests in the East and South China Seas:

- **Don’t panic.** Chinese leaders have seemingly gone out of their way to make a wicked problem even more wicked. But having done so, they now confront strategic dilemmas of their own making – taking on a series of commitments all along the East Asian seaboard while simultaneously casting their eyes toward the Indian Ocean. They have categorized many of these commitments as core interests or questions of sovereignty – inflating popular and elite expectations in the process. They must now deliver, using naval and military forces that are not yet able to defend all of Beijing’s stated interests simultaneously. Dispersing effort throughout the East and South China Seas would make the Chinese military weak everywhere, whereas concentrating effort at some particular hotspot would leave China vulnerable elsewhere. Potentially self-defeating behavior on Beijing’s part represents an opportunity for Washington to achieve its goal of promoting stability in the region, because such actions make it easier for U.S. officials to develop and maintain coalitions that advance U.S. strategic goals.
- **Take a stand against excessive claims.** The administration should reinvigorate the State Department’s Freedom of

Navigation Program – which challenges “excessive coastal state claims over the world’s oceans and airspace” – to make clear that the United States rejects excessive Chinese maritime claims.¹³ Well-publicized U.S. Navy cruises that defy China’s claims would make a diplomatic statement, further reassuring allies and setting a marker for China.

- **Beware of bad precedents.** U.S. officials should consider whether it is possible to uphold freedom of navigation while remaining agnostic toward other elements of UNCLOS. A permanent Chinese occupation of Scarborough Shoal would effectively detach part of the Philippine EEZ, as would China’s effort to auction off sectors of the Vietnamese EEZ to foreign firms for oil and gas exploration. If China can amend or repeal one part of the law of the sea by fiat, why not others? Obama administration officials should declare that the United States considers the law of the sea indivisible – and renew the push for UNCLOS ratification.¹⁴
- **Match purpose with power.** The logic of the Obama administration’s rebalancing to Asia is eminently sound, as are long-standing efforts to enhance the capacity of Southeast Asian states to police their own territory, territorial seas and EEZs. These efforts must continue. Maintaining the current order in the Asia-Pacific requires the ability not just to provide public goods but also to prevail in international competition. Furthermore, refraining from these efforts for fear of antagonizing China would send the wrong signal by effectively enabling the Chinese leadership to veto U.S. action.

The best way for the United States to achieve its regional goals involves continuing cooperation with Asian governments, maintaining preponderant forces in the region and remaining on cordial terms with Beijing (insofar as possible). Washington should remain confident about the course it has set in maritime Asia.

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ENDNOTES

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14. For more on the importance of UNCLOS, see Will Rogers, "Security at Sea: The Case for Ratifying the Law of the Sea Convention" (Center for a New American Security, April 2012).

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