



South China Sea in China's Grand Chessboard

by Thanh Hai Do

Thanh Hai Do is a PhD Candidate at Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at Australian National University. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the views of any institutions. The author would like to thank Leszek Buszynski and Thuy Do for their valuable comments and suggestions.

To some people, China's behavior in the South China Sea is a source of confusion. Observing the gaps between China's rhetoric and actions, Ryan Santicola regarded China's approach as "[consistently inconsistent](#)." Brad Glosserman found it hard to explain why China is [infuriating many of its neighbors](#) all at one time. Examining China's moves in the light of Chinese strategic culture may provide an answer.

Chinese people often see international politics as a chessboard, in which every move is part of a grand strategy to win the game. Three things are important. First, secrecy and stratagem are vital to besting even a superior adversary. Second, China is thinking long term, aiming for gradual progression rather than revolution and "[capitalization of opportunities](#)." The Chinese are not as impatient as Westerners. They can wait for the right moments to make their moves. Third, Chinese strategists do not see fighting as a top priority. As Thomas G. Mahnken pointed out, they believe that strategy is primarily to create "a [disposition of forces](#) so favorable that fighting is unnecessary." These insights shed much light on what China is doing in the South China Sea.

China's grand strategy

As a rising power, Beijing needs a sphere of influence around its border. In other words, China will strive to eventually push the United States out of Southeast and Northeast Asia. As China [cannot match the United States militarily](#), its grand strategy is not to take on the US directly, but to use its weight to pacify neighboring countries, forcing them out of the latter's embrace.

In this grand strategy, the South China Sea appears to be the main theatre for three reasons. First, the South China Sea is a semi-closed sea that straddles key shipping lanes to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Second, the small- and medium-size countries of the South China Sea region have less resistance to China's supremacy. Finally, the US presence in the South China Sea region is clearly weaker than in the East China Sea. From China's strategic perspective, the South China Sea is perhaps the weakest point, if not the "Achilles' heel," of the US security system in the Asia-Pacific.

The evidence of China's design in the South China Sea is its nine-dash line claim, which has no legal basis and runs counter to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the

Sea (UNCLOS). China published [this claim](#) in May 2009 in a response to the joint submission by Vietnam and Malaysia to the UN Commission on Limits of Continental Shelf. In defiance of widespread criticism and calls for clarification, China remains silent about the limits and the nature of the claim. Ambiguity gives China greater flexibility to interpret its rights and jurisdiction over the vast swathe of the so-called 'historic waters,' which account for 80 percent of the South China Sea.

China's game in South China Sea

As events unfolded, China revealed a subtle strategy to subdue other claimants in the South China Sea. This strategy has four instruments. First, China has developed a strong navy which is capable of not only fending off the US from the first island chain, but also overriding any of its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Second, China is utilizing a force of civilian and paramilitary vessels as the primary means to challenge the status quo. So far, China has managed [to take control of the Scarborough Shoal](#) and also staged a blockade against the Philippines, with fishing boats and law enforcement vessels, in the Second Thomas Shoal.

Third, China is using a mobile giant oil rig to assert control over maritime space. Since May 1, 2014, China deployed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig and a [flotilla](#) of over 100 fishing boats, law enforcement and paramilitary vessels, and naval warships to an area Vietnam claims as its legitimate continental shelf. Haiyang Shiyou 981 is not only an oil rig but also a [territorial marker](#).

The oil rig incident is alarming in its level of violence. China's navy-backed civilian forces, including fishing boats and law enforcement vessels, have not hesitated to use [low-intensity violence](#), such as ramming, fog-horning, and high-pressure water cannons, to physically damage and intimidate adversaries' assets. Chinese aircraft also flew low to intimidate Vietnamese sailors. The collisions and water cannon attacks have already injured Vietnamese sailors and damaged a dozen Vietnamese vessels.

To protect the rig, China imposed restrictions on navigation throughout the area. At first, China declared a circle, one nautical mile in radius, around the rig that was inaccessible to foreign ships. The radius was increased to 3 nm. At sea, the Chinese vessels tried to enforce an exclusion zone [20-25 nm](#) from the rig. One Vietnamese fishing boat was [sunk due to direct ramming by Chinese boats](#) 17 nm from the rig.

Fourth, Beijing has used diplomacy as a diversionary tactic. Chinese leaders repeatedly pledge to pursue "peaceful development." Though advocating the settlement of disputes through bilateralism, China has rejected any compromise on

sovereignty issues. China has delayed any progress toward a Code of Conduct (COC), though it is a commitment in the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea signed in 2002. Usually, at international conferences, Chinese officials and scholars avoid elaborating on the legality of the nine-dash line claim and blame other claimants and the US for their assertiveness. Lt. Gen. Wang Guanzhong's remarks at the 13th Shangri-La Dialogue are typical.

China is forcing rivals to play its game, which plays to its strength. The unarmed encounters at sea are sufficient to break the will of opponents while avoiding forceful intervention by the US.

Regional responses

Other South China Sea claimants do not have many cards to play against China. Legal adjudication sounds promising for the Philippines, but not for Vietnam. Vietnam's economy is heavily [dependent](#) on China: in 2013, 28.1 percent of Vietnam's imports, most of which were materials to produce export goods, were from China. Costly economic retaliation and the unknown effects of legal moves would make legal options for Vietnam undesirable. Meanwhile, inside Vietnam, [anti-Chinese protests that turned into riots](#) have raised concern among foreign investors. Nationalism is a [fire](#) which is not easy to control.

Hanoi and Manila have tried to appeal to ASEAN. However, they face [difficulties in forging unity](#) within ASEAN to name and shame China's actions. Amid the oil rig crisis, ASEAN issued a separate statement on the South China Sea on May 10, 2014, but it fell short of criticizing China's unilateral action.

Concerned about escalation to an armed conflict, both Vietnam and the Philippines have avoided sending warships to the standoffs. In the oil rig incident, though Vietnam declared its willingness to use "all necessary measures" to defend its legitimate interests, leaders in Hanoi made it clear that the Vietnamese will not fire the first shot. They know that international law is against them if they fire first, and that the United States will not save them. If armed conflict breaks out, Vietnam would be outgunned by China's naval and air firepower. Understandably, without any significant strategic backing on the horizon, Hanoi has no choice but to play it safe. At the recent Shangri-La Dialogue, Vietnam's Minister of Defense Phung Quang Thanh kept [his tone](#) moderate, downplaying the oil rig crisis while appealing to the overall good relationship between Vietnam and China.

The need for stronger US intervention

Washington has asserted its leadership in the Asia-Pacific through a "rebalancing" policy that includes a range of military, economic, and diplomatic measures. It is also the most vocal in criticizing China's unilateral actions. However, the US falls short of an enduring and comprehensive strategy to rein in China in the South China Sea. If the US allows current trends to continue, it may find its position in the South China Sea undermined.

To prevent the loss of a key strategic area, the US should take four steps. First, Washington should condemn and react forcefully against attempts to change the status quo. Second,

the US should take concrete measures to assure freedom of navigation and foster strict application of UNCLOS 1982. It should formulate a clearer and stronger disapproval of China's nine-dash line claim. Third, it should provide sufficient civilian and technical support to enable other claimants to resist China's law enforcement power at sea. Fourth, it should encourage more serious discussions among claimants on a binding code of conduct and final settlement of disputes. The US should not do all these alone. It should partner with claimants and user states to establish a transparent and reliable rules-based order in the South China Sea.

China has thrown a ball in to the US court and it is up to the US to respond firmly.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed. We especially welcome Chinese colleagues to provide their reaction to this assessment or to offer alternative explanations of China's "grand strategy" in the South China Sea.