

The Dispute in the South China Sea and Taiwan's Approach

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Abstract

The South China Sea has long been considered as one of the “hotspots” where might erupt a military conflict in the Asian Pacific region. Since 2010, the tension of the South China Sea has further fuelled followed by the escalation of Sino-Vietnam sovereignty dispute and the U.S. engagement of this issue as a symbolic indicator of her “return to Asia”. Though Taiwanese holds the Itu Aba, the largest and most tactically significant island, in the South China Sea, considering its irrelevance to defending Taiwan, the troops stationed there were withdrawn and a de-militarized approach was adopted in the late 1990s. Taiwan's government hopes to solve the South China Sea issues by multilateral diplomatic efforts. However, such an approach did not achieve Taiwan's expected results. Due to its isolation from international arena, Taiwan is absent from any possible forums among the countries concerned and become the most likely one to be ignored from the South China Sea dispute.

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Strategic Significances of the South China Sea

The South China Sea (thereafter SCS) is a vast body of water, spreads over hundreds tiny banks, reefs, atolls, which are grouped as northeastern Pratas (or Dongsha) Islands, central Macclesfield Bank (or Zhongsha Islands), western Parcel (or Xisha) Islands, and southern, most disputed, Spratley (or Nansha) Islands. Basically, both the Pratas and the Macclesfield are no more than collections of underwater coral atolls. Taiwan dominates the Pratas and occupies the only surfaced atoll, the Pratas Island (1.74 km², with a 1,500 meters long runway). The dispute in the undeveloped, non-inhabitant Macclesfield is mainly between Taiwan, China and Philippine. The latter two have several maritime incidents off the only surfaced tip, the Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Dao, only few square meters above the sea). China now firmly controls the Parcel and fortifies the Woody (Yongxing) Island (2.1 km², the largest island in the SCS) as her forward base in the SCS.

The SCS dispute is mainly the Spratley dispute. It has long been considered as one of the “hotspots” where might erupt a military conflict in the Asian Pacific region. Such an assertion is not pure speculation. In the past, there were at least one confirmed naval skirmish and numerous maritime incidents that involving official vessels in the Spratley. Furthermore, the Spratley dispute is by nature complicated and difficult to moderate since parties concerned are multiple and some of their claims are mutual exclusive. Among eight parties who assert overall or partial sovereign and (or) economic claims in the Spratley, five (China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippine, and Malaysia) have occupied considerable footings. For some contenders, the stake is high. Besides prestigious or symbolic incentives, the Spratley is the area of strategic importance. For most inhabitant islands in the SCS locate in the Spratley. Physically, it is the center of gravity in the SCS. Not only does the SCS position as the connecting hub of sea lines of communication between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, its seabed is also claimed to deposit rich oil and gas reserve (estimated 100 billion barrels and 25 billion cubic meters respectively). One can not command the SCS and secure the access and resource without first controlling the Spratley.

Recently, the Spratley dispute is further compounded by two factors: China's strategic focus shifts to the SCS and the U.S. subsequent countermove. For China, though the SCS had been regarded as Chinese historical home water, her strategic focus in the SCS emerged slowly in the 1970s and 1980s. China took the control of the Parcel from Vietnam after 1974 and advanced into the Spratley only after her naval victory off the Johnson South Reef (Chigua Jiao) in 1988. Later in 1995, Chinese

expelled Filipinos and occupied the Mischief Reef (Meiji Jiao), now China's farthest outpost in the eastern Spratley.

China accelerated her strategic focus in the SCS at the turn of the century for the following three interdependent motivations: First, it was driven by economic purposes. The SCS, the passageway for China's oil supply, is crucial for sustaining her current economic bloom. Similarly, China needs to protect her fishing boats operating in the area and prevent other contenders such as Vietnam and Philippine (cooperating with Western oil companies) from exploiting oil and gas in the SCS. Second, China's grand strategy is to transform herself from a continental power to a maritime power. Compared with the U.S. long and solid alliances with Japan and South Korea in the East China Sea, the SCS is seen as the America's "soft underbelly." The U.S. dominance in the SCS was weakened after the Vietnam War. The American lacked reliable allies and her military presence was limited in the region. For China, the SCS is the most accessible key to open the gate of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. A so-called "String of Pearls Strategy" which refers to China's expansion of her political influence or military presence via a series choke points ranging from Hong Kong, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, to Oman, is widely circulated. Third, as a vital element of such an ongoing strategic transformation to a maritime power, China's rapid military modernization will enable her air and naval projection to support desired political strategy and military operations in the SCS in the near future. Moreover, the control of the SCS and denial of the U.S. fleet approaching toward the Taiwan Strait from the south would be required in the contingency of military actions against Taiwan.

For these reasons, maritime patrols are sent to the Spratley regularly. China established administrative office for Paracel, Macclesfield, and Spratley Islands at the new-founded Sansha City, a county-level city, on the Woody Island (in the Paracel) in 2007. The Woody Island, with a 2,400 meters long runway on it, is China's forward base in the area linking between the main outpost in the Spratley, the Fiery Cross Reef (Yungsu Jiao, see below), and the major rear base, Hainan Island. The latter attracts particular attentions. Not only China's military presence off the Hainan is dramatically increased, large bases for her advanced fighters and submarine flotilla were built on the island. It is said that China's first carrier, once being commissioned, would be based on the Hainan. In order to soften other contenders' suspicions about China rapid military buildup in the SCS, China actively took part of several dialogues with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and achieved some results. The ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea in 1992 and Declaration

on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 are two examples. China believes that the U.S. involvements in the SCS dispute could only complicate the issues, and, at worst, support other contenders against China's claims. Beijing strongly opposes any U.S.-led initiatives in this regard. In 2010, Dai Bingguo, the Director of Office of National Security Leadership Group in the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party, in the annual Sino-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue straightforwardly warned his American counterpart that the SCS is regarded by China as her "core interests" as the response to the U.S. increasing engagement in the area. In this June, China's Defense Minister, Liang Guanglie, publically quarreled with then U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, at Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. "Regional countries," Liang warned again, "do not gang with the antagonistic pact against someone."

The U.S. with undisputable global naval supremacy did just as her antecedent, the United Kingdom, had done and stressed on freedom of navigation and open access to any maritime commons. After the rapidly pullback of her overstretched military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration strengthens the relations with ASEAN countries and actively engages in the SCS dispute as indicator to signal her "return to Asia". In the ASEAN Regional Forum, July, 2010, Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, defined the SCS dispute is of regional as well as international interests that the U.S. shares "these interests not only with ASEAN members or ASEAN Regional Forum participants, but with other maritime nations and the broader international community." Secretary Clinton made the American intentions clear enough that "the US is prepared to facilitate initiatives and confidence building measures consistent with the Declaration." In her address, Clinton implicitly rejected China's SCS claim based upon historical assertion by saying "we call on all parties to clarify their claims in the South China Sea in terms consistent with customary international law; claims to maritime space in the South China Sea should be derived solely from legitimate claims to land features." More to China's outrage, only a month after Clinton's statement, the U.S. conducted a joint military exercise with Vietnam, the first one since the end of the Vietnam War. It was also an embarrassing shock to China's military because the participation of U.S. carrier *George Washington* in this exercise off the Gulf of Tonkin implied that the Hainan, China's major rear base in the SCS, was within the American strike range. The U.S. countermove against China's SCS expansion produced a new conflicting front save Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait in Sino-American security interaction.

Taiwan's Position and Options in the South China Sea

In military terms, each of five occupying countries in the Spratley has different advantages. Generally, the tactical feature of these tiny and flat islands is difficult to defend against any determined attacks unless air and naval reinforcements from the mainland can be brought into the spot timely. Thus, reinforcement and distance (from the mainland) are two key elements to military operations in the Spratley.

Malaysian concentrates in the southern Spratley and has built a 1,100 meters long runway and some tourism facilities on the Swallow Reef (Danwan Jiao, 0.1 km²), the Malaysian main footing in the Spratley.

The Filipinos footings in the Spratley locate around the northern and northeastern area. The Thitu (Zhongye) Island (0.33 km²) is the main base where a 1,500 meters long runway (the longest one in the Spratley) was built.

Though Malaysian and Filipinos forces in the Spratley are very small, their footings are relatively closer to the mainland. And the runways on the Swallow Reef and Thitu Island are capable for bringing in large reinforcing troops if situations required.

Vietnam has largest troops and occupies most islands spreading from central to southeastern Spratley. Some 500 Vietnamese troops station on the Spratley (Nanwei) Island (0.15 km²) where a 600 meters long runway and a helicopter platform were built. Compared with the Malaysian and Filipinos, the Vietnamese footings are relatively farther from the mainland. For this reason, Vietnam currently seeks to improve the tactical disadvantage by acquiring advanced fighters (Su-27s and Su-30s) and submarines (KILOs) from Russia. These latest procurements might be unable to defend her footings successfully but would be sufficient to inflict considerable damage on a China's more sophisticated force.

China's footings spreads in the northern and central Spratley Though China has the strongest military capabilities in the SCS, her troops deployment in the Spratley is much confined. China is the only occupying country without any runway in the Spratley. China's main outpost, the Fiery Cross Reef, is virtually a small artificial terrace (only 8,080 m²) swarming with 200 strong troops with observation post, radar facility and helicopter platform.

Taiwan occupies the Itu Aba (Taiping) Island (0.49 km²), the largest island in the

Spratley. Although Taiwanese has the best logistical facilities including a field hospital on the Itu Aba, Taiwan's tactical situation in the Spratley is the worst one. The distance between the Itu Aba and Taiwan (1,600 km or 1,150 km away from Taiwan-controlled Pratas Island) is so great that no timely air or naval reinforcement can be expected. The remoteness of the Itu Aba makes Taiwan's defense planners believe that this island is irrelevant to defending Taiwan. For this reason, Taiwan decided to demilitarize the Ita Aba. In 2000, Taiwan's Marine Corps was withdrawn from the island and replaced by the Coastal Guards whose role is more policing-oriented. In 2007, Taiwan built a 1,500 meters long runway (the second longest one in the Spratley) on the Itu Aba. But Taiwan's tactical disadvantage was only marginally improved.

Taiwan faces a dilemma in the Spratley dispute. Taiwan's overall security concerns limit her freedom of action in the Spratley. On the one hand, the major source of military threats against Taiwan's very survival comes from China. It is of Taiwan's security interests to have as many ASEAN "friends" as possible both for balancing China at the strategic level or, at the operational level, for protecting Taiwan's southern waters from China's military approaching. Particularly, a good relationship with the U.S. is uttermost crucial to Taiwan's security. By this line of argument, Taiwan should stand on the same side of the ASEAN countries and the U.S. However, on the other, Taiwan's sovereignty claim is identical to China's: both arguments are based upon historical assertions and both claim overall rights over the entire SCS. No administration in Taiwan would survive if compromising these assertions and claims, let alone "losing" the Spratley. For this account, Taiwan should choose to cooperate with China; after all, both sides of the Taiwan Strait are all Chinese and should unite together at this nationalistic issue against any foreigners. Some even go further and argue that a strategic partnership with China, constructed by some kinds of explicit confidence building measures or implicit bilateral supportive consensus between Chinese-held Woody Island and Taiwanese-controlled Itu Aba Island, in the Spratley could lead to a moderation of hostility in the Taiwan Strait.

In 2008, Taiwan government announced "the South China Sea Initiative" and declared that Taiwan's goodwill to accept the ASEAN 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. "Taiwan insists a peaceful approach to solve the South China Sea Dispute," the Initiative stated and urged all contenders to cooperate on the issues of environmental protection. For avoiding sovereignty dispute to obstruct such cooperation, Taiwan suggested a second-track multinational

platform for future dialogue. This Initiative, partly because of Taiwan diplomatic isolation and partly because it announced immediately after Taiwan's newly-built runway on Itu Aba being operational, has received little sympathy from the SCS contenders including China.

After the U.S. engagement in the SCS dispute, Taiwan's dilemma, as mentioned, became more evidently. It seems to the author that the current Taiwan administration turns to have a low level cooperation with China while avoid any conflicts with the ASEAN contenders and the U.S. in particular. Recently, several second-track dialogues between scholars and ex-military from the both sides of the Taiwan Strait are intensively conducted. Some initiatives on the cooperation of oil exploitation and maritime policing are also attempted. Some urge to re-militarize the Itu Aba such bring back Marine Corps or significantly strengthen the defense of the island (including deployment of battle tanks, surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles, or missile boats). This radical proposal is currently under discussion, but unlikely to be adopted due to the U.S. likely opposition.

Conclusion

For Taiwan, the SCS, and the Spratley in particular, is the sea of troubles. Taiwan's political and military positions are inherent weaker and her options are also limited. Any clear-cut moves will certainly damage the relations with either the U.S. or China. None is regarded affordable. More than any regional contenders do, Taiwan wishes the current SCS tension to be stabilized again. Any showdowns in the SCS will definitely involve the U.S. and China and lead to the bankruptcy of Taiwan current playing-safe and buying-time approach.#