

Contesting American Power: Beijing's Challenge in South China Sea Disputes

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Image by Jonathan Kos-Read

Why did claimant states in the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, especially China, recently increase its militarization activities, in ways that were relatively absent in the previous decades? Why is Beijing, under the Xi Jinping-led government, building artificial islands in a highly disputed maritime area that several Asian states have contentiously claimed for past decades? Notably, Chinese economic development depends on its control of major maritime routes, most especially the South China Sea region, where more than half of the world's trade passes through. Remarkably, the Chinese government has implemented wide-scale dredging operations and land reclamation activities in some parts of the SCS, and more recently, has constructed several military installations. In the words of the U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander Harry Harris : “China was using dredges and bulldozers to create a “great wall of sand” in the South China Sea.”

I analyze the motivations behind China's policy of building artificial islands in the SCS. In doing so, I eschew mono-paradigmatic approaches to analyzing the rise of China as a world power in the context of SCS disputes. My core argument states that

China's aggressive militarization and committed building of artificial islands are facilitated by two key factors. At the domestic level, amidst growing domestic socio-political challenges, Xi Jinping and his allies are trying to consolidate their authority by rallying nationalist pride as a justification for recent activities in the SCS region. At the transnational level, with the inability of the Trump administration to credibly make strong commitments in defending its allies' interests and maritime public international law, SCS claimant states' willingness to rely on US security umbrella is likely to become weary over time. Therefore, understanding the motivations that underpin Beijing's strategy in SCS disputes requires careful consideration of recent changes in domestic political conditions in Chinese politics vis-à-vis the perceptions and responses of various stakeholder states in the Asia-Pacific region.

Chinese Domestic Politics

Essentially, there are several factors that facilitate Chinese foreign policy strategy in the SCS region to a more assertive and militaristic stance. The first key factor refers to the broader domestic political change in China, whereby the politicians of the Communist Party have been experiencing **fundamental challenges to their domestic legitimacy**. Within Chinese domestic politics, growing domestic problems – pollution, corruption, infighting within the Communist Party, and increasing material inequality, among others – have pushed the Chinese government to stir nationalistic fervor and rally the domestic population towards a constructed external threat. Such moves also seeks to **divert the public's attention from the regime's recent failures** in sustaining a high level of equitable economic growth and in deflecting criticisms from failing to effectively address domestic problems such as poor environmental standards, rising material inequalities, and human rights abuses.

Decrying the allegedly broken international trade system, the Trump administration has accused China of unfair trading as well **as theft of intellectual property of US companies** and implemented, since the start of 2018, a series of tariffs on various goods produced from China. Consequently, this trade war has bolstered **anti-American sentiments** in China as part of the broader effort to consolidate the authority of the Communist Party-led Chinese state.

Amidst domestic problems and the perceived threat posed by the political uncertainty in United States' foreign policy under Trump, Xi Jinping is now set to rule over China indefinitely, with lawmakers recently passing legislation that **effectively abolishes presidential term limits**. Such a strategic political move, together with efforts to rally public support for the Chinese militarization of the SCS region, aims to reinforce the authority of Xi Jinping and his allies.

Notably, the increase in the number of military and civilian activities in the SCS coincides with recent changes in the core principles of Chinese foreign policy. For example, the Communist Party in 2012 **'reclassified the South China Sea as a "core national interest" – which 'means China is prepared to fight to defend it' – placing it alongside sensitive issues such as Taiwan and Tibet**. In view of Beijing's **One-China policy to the status of Taiwan**, it is likely that Beijing could soon demand that other states fully recognize Chinese sovereignty over the SCS region as a key condition for establishing and maintaining formal diplomatic relations.

China has consistently shown disinterest in resolving SCS disputes within the framework of multilateral institutions. For example, Beijing maintained a position of 'non-acceptance and non-participation' in recent SCS arbitration proceedings in The Hague. Also, Beijing has consistently shown disinterest in working with the ASEAN on SCS disputes, which could facilitate their resolution among member states and with external actors. By choosing to engage with individual SCS claimant states rather than the ASEAN as a collective body, the Chinese government holds stronger leverage by weakening the bargaining position of smaller claimant states.

American Power Under Siege

Transnationally, Chinese militarization of the SCS region reflects Beijing's new found resolve and confidence in undermining American power, a key pillar of post-World War 2 international order in the Pacific region. In addition to current Chinese air fields and ports that could potentially support massive military aircraft and vessel presence, there are credible reports that Beijing is likely to build several nuclear power plants in the SCS – a scenario that could further increase the precariousness of the Asia-Pacific region's security environment.

What do Chinese military activities in the SCS region mean for American power? By establishing aerial and naval facilities in disputed SCS region, Beijing substantially raises the material and political costs for Washington in bolstering the anti-Chinese rhetoric and policies of other SCS claimant states that have enduring ties with the United States. At least in the short-term, China does not necessarily aim to win a war against the United States, but the mere presence of Chinese military facilities in the SCS region is expected to demotivate Washington from haphazardly using military force against Beijing.

Considering that prospect, the US-dominated regional order now faces serious challenges. China has unexpectedly emerged as a credible challenger to U.S. dominance in world politics and has recently surpassed Japan as the world's second largest economy. By the end of the next decade, China is likely to overtake the US as the world's biggest economy – a prospect that could transform the balance of power in world politics. Amidst the perceived decline in American power, China's persistent strengthening of bilateral ties with smaller Asian countries, which traditionally have been American allies, poses a serious challenge to American dominance in the Asia-Pacific region.

Given the growth of Chinese economic and military power, the United States and its allies have implemented several notable counter responses. First, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (including US, Japan, India, and Australia) aims to mobilize a coordinated response against threats to law-based global order. Second, the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance (Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) and its intensified cooperation with Japan and Germany facilitates the sharing of classified intelligence on Chinese foreign activities. Third, as the strongest US ally in East Asia, Japan has also intensified its military cooperation with other SCS claimant states, including Vietnam and Philippines, meanwhile the United States has dramatically increased the frequency of military drills in the SCS region. Thus, in response to Chinese land reclamation projects and aggressive militarization of the

SCS, smaller claimant states are starting to bolster their military defence capabilities and have welcomed U.S. military assistance.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding, America's need to strategically engage with China on a wide range of global governance issues limits Washington's long-term security guarantees to its Southeast Asian partners. This form of limited engagement stems from the need to protect broader American interests in global governance or those interests that are perceived to be necessary in maintaining America's dominance.

With the inability of the Trump administration to credibly issue stern commitments in defending its allies' interests and maritime public international law, SCS claimant states' tense reliance on the US security umbrella is likely to wear over time. That scenario offers two options for smaller SCS claimant states. The first option refers to the ASEAN as a potential conflict resolution mechanism, while the second option calls for individual claimant states to negate, bargain, or even accede to the demands of Beijing on a bilateral basis. It is quite unlikely that ASEAN could soon emerge as an effective resolution mechanism to this dispute considering its **past record of neutrality and indecisiveness**. Ultimately, the continuation of the political crisis in the US is likely to weaken the resolve of smaller claimant states to audaciously defend their territorial claims on a unilateral basis. These conditions, taken together, could perhaps overturn more than a half-century of US dominance in the Asia-Pacific region.

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