

Can China Defend a “Core Interest” in the South China Sea?

Dejà vu surrounds reports that Beijing has claimed a “core interest” in the South China Sea. High-ranking Chinese officials reportedly asserted such an interest during a private March 2010 meeting with two visiting U.S. dignitaries, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and the senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council, Jeffrey Bader.¹ Subsequently, in an interview with *The Australian*, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton disclosed that Chinese delegates reaffirmed Beijing’s claim at the Second U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, a gathering held in Beijing in May 2010.² Conflicting accounts have since emerged about the precise context and what was actually said at these meetings.³ Since then, furthermore, Chinese officials have refrained from describing the South China Sea in such formal, stark terms in a public setting.

The ambiguity and controversy recall a similar incident 15 years ago, as the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis reached its crescendo. On that occasion, a Chinese general reportedly told Ambassador Chas Freeman that U.S. leaders “care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan.” His statement was widely interpreted as a veiled nuclear threat.⁴ Subsequent Chinese disavowals and backpedaling obscured the exact nature of this unofficial conversation. Nevertheless, these incidents together show that Beijing commonly draws red lines around issues it considers paramount to its well-being. They also comprise a cautionary tale about taking Chinese statements at face value.

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Conflicting accounts have emerged about whether China actually declared a “core interest.”

Assume for the sake of discussion that Beijing is pursuing a core interest in the South China Sea as a matter of policy. Declaring such an interest would seemingly elevate the strategic importance of that body of water to a level reserved for Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang—territory that is integral to China’s vision of itself as a nation and that must be protected at all costs. This represents a political goal of astonishing scope. Defending it would

presumably warrant diplomatic and military efforts of the utmost magnitude. But can the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) follow through, and how?

Does Beijing possess the military means, strategy, and warfighting prowess to uphold an interest of such overriding importance? Assessing existing and nascent Chinese capabilities will help policymakers and analysts determine whether Beijing’s ends in the South China Sea lie within its military means. If not, it is important to examine the time and resources China must invest to mount a credible defense of its core interests. Such a benchmark will also suggest how key stakeholders in the region can respond to an increasingly ambitious Chinese policy without provoking an overreaction from Beijing.

A Range of Strategic Goals

First, what might Beijing mean by “core interest” and what strategic guidance derives from such an interest? If the Chinese Communist leadership indeed treats the South China Sea as it does Taiwan, several strategic implications come to light:

Territorial Sovereignty Is Indivisible. If Chinese leaders see maritime sovereignty as indivisible from sovereignty over land territory, it follows that territorial disputes cannot remain unresolved indefinitely.⁵ Although Beijing is prepared to shelve contested claims for the sake of joint extraction of natural resources, its position on territorial integrity is sacrosanct. It must get its way eventually.

China Needs Armed Strength to Seize Disputed Territories. Accordingly, if the South China Sea is a core interest to be upheld under any circumstances, then China must amass the wherewithal to defeat outsiders’ efforts to make today’s status quo a permanent political reality. Beijing ultimately needs sufficient capacity to seize all disputed territories, whole and intact, while warding off adversaries intent on reversing Chinese gains.

China Must Impose a New Regional Order. To consolidate national unity and defend all its core interests, China must establish a new regional order despite challenges from neighbors and outside powers. It can establish that regional order by consensus or coercive diplomacy, depending on the circumstances. To hedge against threats to a Chinese-led order, however, constructing a locally dominant navy is prudent.

These implications would prod Chinese policymakers toward a maximalist view of the nation’s core interests. If Beijing acts on them, the South China Sea will in effect become a Chinese lake in which the PLA forbids access to external navies.

A more modest interpretation—grounded in U.S. history—is possible as well. Some in China view the South China, East China, and Yellow seas, known to ordinary Chinese simply as “the three seas” or the “near seas,” in much the same way that 19th-century Americans regarded the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico, as expanses the United States must dominate to realize its political and commercial potential.⁶ With the limited exceptions of the islands wrested from Spain in 1898, Washington lodged no territorial claims in the Caribbean or Gulf, nor did it bar them to European warships. U.S. administrations mostly wanted to forestall European efforts to obtain naval bases athwart sea lanes leading to the Central American Isthmus, the future site of a transoceanic canal.

This was precisely the purpose for which President Theodore Roosevelt intended his 1904 “Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine. Roosevelt claimed a limited right to intervene in the affairs of weak Caribbean states that had defaulted on their loans to European banks. Common practice was for European governments to send warships to seize customhouses in these countries to repay their creditors. In so doing, they took possession of coastal territory in the Americas—territory they might transform into naval bases along Caribbean sea lanes.⁷ Such a prospect was anathema to U.S. maritime strategists.

Why was preempting European inroads so important? For sea-power thinker Alfred Thayer Mahan, the Isthmus constituted a “gateway to the Pacific for the United States.”⁸ Digging a canal across Nicaragua or Panama and safeguarding the approaches to that canal were Mahan’s uppermost concerns. He prophesied that “enterprising commercial countries” such as the Kaiser’s Germany would contend for dominion over such geostrategic features, as the Spanish and British empires had done for centuries.⁹ Mahan maintained that the United States now held the “predominant interest” on the Isthmus, owing both to its burgeoning commercial interests in the Far East and to its peculiar geography, which inhibited “rapid and secure communication between our two great seaboards.”¹⁰ For him, free movement for military and commercial shipping between the East

and West coasts, and between North America and Asia, added up to a core U.S. interest in the Gulf and Caribbean.

To uphold this core interest, Mahan prescribed a 20-battleship U.S. Navy able to “fight, with reasonable chances of success, the largest force likely to be brought against it” in southern waters.¹¹ A fleet “capable of taking and giving hard knocks” could wrest “command of the sea” from European contingents dispatched to the Americas.¹²

The South China Sea is China’s answer to the Caribbean and the Gulf. With its vital sea passage into the Indian Ocean, the Malacca Strait, it bears striking resemblance to America’s enclosed middle seas. The Malay Peninsula and the Sumatra archipelago merge in geospatial terms, forming a large isthmus that to Chinese eyes must evoke the Isthmus that obsessed Mahan. And the South China Sea, like Mahan’s Caribbean, is a maritime domain with only one great seafaring power—China—along its shorelines. The enclosed Baltic Sea and Black Sea, both of which wash against the coasts of a dominant continental power, Russia, likewise present noteworthy visual parallels. The Soviet Union built up naval forces to convert these seas into Soviet preserves. Similar geostrategic circumstances seemingly warrant similar strategy.

But *fin de siècle* America was situated far from major-power threats. It could afford to leave its Atlantic or Pacific shorelines more or less unguarded,

If it concentrates on the South China Sea, China could forfeit interests in the Yellow and East China seas.

concentrating its energies on one discrete expanse. China enjoys no such luxury. If it concentrates its navy solely on managing the South China Sea, it could forfeit vital interests in the Yellow and East China seas. North Korea continues making trouble at Beijing’s nautical door. Rival Japan boasts a world-class fleet and a strategic position astride Chinese sea lines of communication (SLOCs). The impasse across the Taiwan Strait lingers, commanding Chinese policy attention. At the same time, enlarged maritime interests

beckon Chinese attention to waters outside East Asia and to missions such as counterpiracy. Beijing cannot safely neglect such matters, which deplete resources for Southeast Asian contingencies.

Nor can Beijing count on some other strong fleet to distract the U.S. Navy, which rules the waves. Mahan’s United States was fortunate not only geographically but also diplomatically. Faced with a rising German High Seas Fleet, Britain’s Royal Navy beat a quiet retreat from the Western Hemisphere to guard the British Isles against this burgeoning threat. Britain no longer kept a fleet permanently on station in North America. By contrast, the 2007 U.S.

Maritime Strategy vows to station “credible combat power” in the Western Pacific indefinitely, largely to reinforce U.S. alliances and keep a watchful eye on China.¹³

On the other hand, the contemporary U.S. Navy, like the Royal Navy of Britain’s imperial heyday, bears global responsibilities which dilute the forces it can concentrate in any one theater. As China’s navy matures, therefore, Beijing can hope to amass local preponderance over the largest detachment Washington is likely able to deploy in Asian waters—much as the turn-of-the-century U.S. Navy did vis-à-vis European navies, despite its overall inferiority to them. In other words, the home-field advantage still matters.

All in all, the strategic problems besetting Beijing appear acute. Demands on finite resources in multiple seas will stretch Chinese maritime defenses thin along its lengthy seaboard. Whether the PLA can mass enough forces to protect the maximal version of its core interest in the South China Sea, while also covering interests in other important waters, appears doubtful for now. Something more modest, along the lines of the strategy pursued by Mahan’s and Roosevelt’s United States, appears thinkable. Excluding great-power bases from Southeast Asia while cowing China’s neighbors with its superior—to them—PLA Navy would let Beijing start fashioning a new regional order even while its fleet remains a work in progress.

A maximal “core interest” appears doubtful for now, but something more modest appears thinkable.

How Would China Defend a Core Interest?

The Chinese military, then, may already possess the wherewithal to begin enforcing a policy of primacy in the South China Sea, but to do so it would likely be forced to concentrate most of its seagoing forces along China’s southern coast—at unacceptable risk to interests elsewhere in the China seas. To back a core-interest policy with steel, the PLA Navy must develop the hardware, seamanship, and tactical acumen to perform several functions.

Its main job is to accumulate sufficient ships, aircraft, and armaments to impose local control of any sea area in Southeast Asia at times of Chinese leaders’ choosing. This might require projecting credible force to the most southern portions of the South China Sea, nearly 1,000 miles from Hainan Island. Winning local sea control is the enabler for other naval missions in contested waters.

Having accomplished this, the Chinese fleet can exploit control of the seas in a variety of ways. It can defend friendly shipping along the SLOCs or attack enemy shipping transiting the same sea lanes. It can project power ashore using sea-based aircraft, land-attack missiles, or marines embarked in amphibious assault vessels. Or it can discharge constabulary functions such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counterpiracy, and counterproliferation—legitimizing its primacy in the South China Sea, much as the United States did in the Caribbean and Gulf under the Roosevelt Corollary.¹⁴

China would also benefit from the versatility of naval power. As the multinational tsunami-relief effort in 2004 amply demonstrated, ships designed for sea control or power projection can readily switch over to constabulary missions. Built for combat operations, Chinese amphibious assault ships and hospital ships have recently deployed to the Indian Ocean on noncombat missions.

Nevertheless, this is an ambitious slate of missions for a navy long accustomed to sheltering in coastal waters. Can the PLA Navy execute them with existing forces? According to *Jane's Fighting Ships 2010–2011*, the Chinese navy is made up of 135 major combatants (submarines plus large surface combatants) and an assortment of lesser vessels arrayed into three fleets: the North, East, and South Sea fleets.¹⁵ This number is somewhat misleading, as are force totals for any navy. The U.S. Navy rule of thumb is that a navy needs three ships to keep one battle-ready. (At any given moment, one of these is cruising overseas under the navy's tactical training cycle; another is working up for deployment through a demanding regimen of exercises, inspections, and routine maintenance; the final third is being overhauled in shipyards and is entirely unavailable for sea service.) In other words, commanders have as few as one-third of the total number of warships at their disposal, although up to another third may be available at reduced readiness.

U.S. practices offer a crude measuring stick for Chinese naval preparedness, but it is clear that fleet numbers on paper exaggerate deployable combat power by a wide margin. Using the *Jane's* figures for Chinese major combatants, 45–90 warships supported by lesser vessels must cover Chinese commitments spanning three China seas, not to mention an expanding slate of missions in the Indian Ocean. Juxtapose this with the 32 major combatants that the Southeast Asian navies could hypothetically muster among them. External players could also intervene in South China Sea contingencies. The Taiwan Navy features 28 major combatants, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force 71, and the Australian Navy 18. (Of course, these fleets too must obey the 3:1 ratio for deployable units.)

This adds up to formidable opposition for China all along its periphery. The PLA Navy must manage contested theaters without the benefit of an impressive

logistics fleet—ships able to rearm, refuel, and reprovision men-of-war at sea, thus extending combatants’ cruising radius—and without key capabilities such as antisubmarine warfare and mine countermeasures. Indispensable for power projection and noncombat functions, moreover, the amphibious fleet remains anemic. It is concentrated opposite Taiwan, should Beijing see the need to launch a cross-strait invasion. To date, the PLA Navy has exhibited curious myopia toward such capabilities and systems. Constant strain on the fleet is probable until such shortfalls are corrected.

Nor do material measures tell the whole story. The most lethal weapon is no better than its user. Seamanship and tactical skill in the officer and enlisted corps—“the human variable, the greatest variable of all” in naval warfare according to novelist C.S. Forester¹⁶—remain largely unproven despite the navy’s competent performance in counterpiracy duty off Somalia. Counterpiracy duty has reportedly wearied PLA Navy crews unaccustomed to prolonged voyages or to the rigors of maintaining hardware exposed to saltwater, weather, and continuous operation.¹⁷ Although the PLA has recently incorporated more realistic wartime scenarios into training exercises, it remains uncertain how well Chinese commanders will handle their vessels amid the stress of hot war.

Alongside the fleet, Mahan listed forward bases athwart vital SLOCs as a second “pillar” of sea power. To provide constant presence, the PLA would benefit immensely from bases in the southern reaches of the South China Sea. Taiwan holds Itu Aba, or Peace Island, the largest island in the Spratly archipelago, along with the adjacent Center Cay and Sand Cay islets. But even these Taiwanese possessions would be of dubious strategic value to China in a major military contingency, particularly one involving the U.S. Navy. The islands are too small and boast too few resources to stage major sea-control or power-projection operations. At most, they could act as way stations resupplying and rearming smaller PLA Navy flotillas. The greatest value these islands offer may lie in their potential to deny access to nearby waters. China could deploy long-range antiship cruise missiles on these outposts, in effect creating no-go zones in the South China Sea. Such assets, then, may do little more than telegraph Chinese resolve.

Chinese commanders may be counting on a new capability—an antiship ballistic missile (ASBM), a maneuverable ballistic missile capable of striking at moving targets at sea hundreds of miles away—to help compensate for shortcomings in the naval inventory. According to Admiral Robert Willard, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, an ASBM prototype has reached “initial operating capability,” or the early stages of operational deployment.¹⁸ Estimates of its range vary from 1,500 up to 2,500 kilometers. The higher-end figure would let ASBMs stationed on Hainan Island or elsewhere in southern China reach the entire South China Sea, as well as the western approaches to

the Strait of Malacca. This represents an orders-of-magnitude increase in the range and hitting power of land-fired antiship missiles. Dramatically extending the range of shore fire support would ease the burdens on the Chinese fleet, applying constant pressure on challengers to Chinese interests in peacetime and wartime alike.

The distinction between peacetime and wartime scenarios is critical, simply because the United States probably would not add its own forces to the mix confronting China unless a shooting war had broken out. The provocation would be too slight. Should Washington abstain from involvement in peacetime controversies, this would relax the strain on Chinese naval forces immensely. The PLA would only have to face off against relatively weak Southeast Asian fleets. Backed by sufficient numbers of ASBMs capable of holding adversary fleets at risk, even a modest South Sea Fleet could seek to intimidate Southeast Asian states with sporadic or routine shows of force. Such peacetime uses of naval force might be intended to impose a new normal on Southeast Asian states that already implicitly acknowledge China's preeminent interests in the South China Sea. If this is part of a longer-term strategy aimed at undermining the political will of China's neighbors, Beijing can likely spare itself the bother of building an overwhelming fleet or diverting assets from other important theaters.

But if Beijing craves *de facto* ownership of the South China Sea—a plausible interpretation of “core interest”—and thus permanent control of events at sea, then it must dramatically accelerate its naval buildup, factoring in the likelihood of U.S. intervention. Only thus could the PLA meet the Mahanian standard of fielding enough naval power to meet the largest fleet likely to be arrayed against it. ASBMs might provide full-time virtual presence, but they are no substitute for credible and sustainable combat power at sea. In short, Beijing can hope to construct a new regional order using weaponry already at sea or under construction, but it must do so while remaining below the threshold for U.S. intervention. Should U.S. naval power remain in decline, China will enjoy increasing liberty of action, simply because U.S. presidents will find it harder and harder to justify the risk of ordering precious U.S. Navy task forces into harm's way.

It is worth speculating about the operating patterns which would characterize PLA naval operations in support of a core interest. For peacetime missions in the South China Sea, the PLA would likely invert the order in which it unleashes its layered defenses in combat. For instance, the ASBM would likely be the weapon of first resort for a Western Pacific contingency against the U.S. Navy. Long-range missile strikes would help PLA defenders damage or sink U.S. Pacific Fleet reinforcements bound westward from Guam, Hawaii, or ports along the U.S. West Coast. Cruise-missile-armed aircraft operating from mainland airfields would come next, followed by shorter-range systems such as diesel submarines,

stealthy fast patrol boats, and major surface combatants—all armed with antiship cruise missiles. The PLA’s goal would be to even or reverse the balance of forces before U.S. strike groups ever closed on Asian shores—much as the Imperial Japanese Navy envisioned using submarines and aircraft to prosecute “interceptive operations,” cutting a superior U.S. fleet down to size before the decisive clash.

In South China Sea peacetime crises, by contrast, the PLA would probably hold its ASBMs in reserve, using them as a recessed deterrent to protect surface warships. With missile cover, even lesser warships would be ideal for coercing weaker parties in the region. For example, a few small, stealthy, missile-armed Type 022 *Houbei* fast-attack craft operating in the Spratlys under ASBM cover could hold most Southeast Asian surface navies at bay. Whether China plans to build aircraft-carrier strike groups for coercive purposes remains to be seen, but periodic sorties even of lesser vessels would remind smaller neighbors of Chinese core interests, underscoring the value China attaches to the South China Sea.

In other words, a modest increase in Chinese combat power at sea could perceptibly tip the naval balance of power in Beijing’s favor in peacetime contingencies not involving the U.S. Navy. Over time, left unopposed by powerful outsiders such as the United States, Japan, or Australia, small-scale shows of Chinese supremacy over Southeast Asian fleets might start to win grudging acquiescence in a new Sinocentric order.

This could take place in as little as five years—much as Great Britain acquiesced in the Grover Cleveland administration’s hyper-muscular interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. During an 1895 crisis between Venezuela and Great Britain, Secretary of State Richard Olney demanded the right to mediate, informing British diplomats that the United States’ “fiat” was now “law” in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁹ While it rebuffed this claim, London nonetheless started withdrawing its North American squadron by the turn of the century, tacitly bowing to the new U.S.-centric order in the Americas.

The American precedent appears plausible in light of current strategic trends. Indeed, Bernard Cole of the National War College projects that the PLA Navy might be able to “exert hegemonic leverage in maritime East Asia” by 2016–2017 owing to its swift growth, American naval overstretch, and fiscal constraints on Japanese shipbuilding.²⁰ Such forecasts are worth pondering.

Without the U.S. Navy involved, China could tip the naval balance of power in its favor in five years.

Coping with Pushback

To be sure, China evidently still lacks adequate military means to make the South China Sea a Chinese lake, but it might make strides in that direction while still working on its naval project. Sea control that more or less permanently excludes rival navies from these waters remains beyond its reach, if indeed that is the goal. China can issue low-level military threats, bullying its southern neighbors with its existing fleet of ships, submarines, aircraft, and missiles. Such actions may yield some coercive dividends in the short term, but they do not—yet—portend the fundamental reordering of maritime politics that a Chinese core interest may require. Neither Southeast Asian states nor major extraregional powers appear inclined to accept a Sinocentric nautical order. Competing powers will push back.

Even as China modernizes its naval power, consequently, the regional balance of forces will act against attempts to impose Beijing's will. Southeast Asian states will not lightly buckle under intimidation tactics so long as U.S. military power and diplomatic assurances remain believable. Washington's very public pronouncements about its own stake in Asian waters indicate that the region has no reason to fear that the United States will abdicate the stabilizing role it has long played in Asian seas. Although China is undoubtedly a rising sea power, regional navies are not pushovers. Nor are they standing still.

Both claimants and third parties to territorial disputes are visibly responding to China's seaward march. Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and even Vietnam

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are procuring submarine forces to hedge against China. Extraregional powers such as Japan and Australia are matching China's buildup with their own. Tokyo plans to expand its undersea fleet for the first time in more than 30 years, while Canberra has embarked on the most expensive submarine program in Australian history.²¹ Both capitals clearly have Beijing in mind. And, as it peers eastward across the Bay of Bengal, India too worries that Chinese primacy in the South

China Sea would presage a more muscular Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean, an expanse New Delhi regards as an Indian preserve.

Looking ahead, then, China may face the possibility of horizontal escalation to smaller but capable naval rivals in other areas during a crisis or conflict in the South China Sea. Such escalation would exert restraint on Chinese statesmen and military commanders. In short, favorable trends in the naval balance for China may be more fleeting than meets the eye.

Whether the United States can sustain its primacy in maritime Asia is a final—and perhaps the crucial—determinant of China’s capacity to align means with ends. The 2007 U.S. Maritime Strategy identifies the Pacific and Indian oceans as the primary theaters of action for the U.S. sea services, pledging to stage strong combat forces there for the foreseeable future. This places the South China Sea—the juncture between the two theaters—squarely at the center of U.S. maritime interests. The Maritime Strategy, furthermore, proclaims that the U.S. Navy will preserve its capacity to “impose local sea control wherever necessary, ideally in concert with friends and allies, but by ourselves if we must.”²²

This represents an unambiguous statement of intent. Even so, policymakers have left considerable ambiguity in the nature of the U.S. commitment to the region. Hailed for declaring a “national interest” in free navigation through Southeast Asian SLOCs, for instance, Secretary of State Clinton also reaffirmed that Washington takes no position on who exercises sovereignty over South China Sea islands or adjoining waters.²³ This allows Beijing ample room to maneuver to test U.S. steadfastness while solidifying its own claims. Recurrent confrontation evidently lies in store.

China may cope with the prospect of resistance by dedicating additional resources to efforts to overcome quantitative and qualitative shortfalls bedeviling the PLA Navy. Mass is the main impediment to China’s maritime project. In short, Beijing needs many more ships comparable to the modern units comprising the frontline fleet. To man these ships, it needs to recruit growing numbers of skilled, seasoned personnel for the officer and enlisted corps, assuring that the navy can operate sophisticated equipment in high-intensity sea combat.

Some observers point out that China has constructed no new destroyers since 2005, implying that China’s naval buildup is coming to a halt. But there is ample evidence that naval construction is far from over.²⁴ Indeed, Beijing appears to be pushing ship construction along multiple axes simultaneously, shifting its investments from destroyer construction into a variety of platforms. For example, China continues to lay down hulls for *Jiangkai II*-class guided-missile frigates, the most advanced ships of their type in the PLA Navy inventory.

China has also been pouring resources into refurbishing the decommissioned Soviet aircraft carrier *Varyag*, most likely as a training platform for naval aviators. This leaves aside the new-construction flattops Beijing now admits it is pursuing.²⁵ Competing demands on finite resources begin to explain China’s on-and-off procurement process. And finally, the rumored building pause for

Whether the United States can sustain its primacy in maritime Asia is crucial.

The South China Sea is squarely at the center of U.S. maritime interests.

destroyers may have never happened. Judging from photos now making the rounds, a combatant exceeding 10,000 tons—the biggest vessel ever to slide down the ways in China—could be nearing completion at a Chinese shipyard. A new destroyer would scarcely be the first surprise that Chinese shipbuilders have sprung on outsiders in recent years. Surprises have been more the rule than the exception.

Consequently, it behooves statesmen not to write off Chinese naval modernization. This is no mere flirtation with the sea. Chinese sea power is here to stay. But there is time to organize a response. Even assuming it meets no countervailing responses in the region, China is at least a decade from amassing the type of preponderant naval power that can reliably deter U.S. intervention while cowing Asian navies. That Beijing can realize its dream of a new regional order is not a foregone conclusion.

The Other Taiwan Contingency

Taiwan constitutes an important, often overlooked intervening factor in Chinese strategy toward Southeast Asia. Despite the apparent thaw in cross-strait relations since 2008, China must still dedicate substantial attention and resources to preparing for a range of military contingencies in the Taiwan Strait. Simply put, Beijing will remain tied down as long as the Taiwan impasse remains unresolved. But should the island return to the mainland, either peacefully or at gunpoint, a fundamentally new calculus in Chinese strategy will take hold.

Not only would a satisfactory resolution free China of an all-consuming politico-military headache, it would also present Beijing a military redoubt overlooking the northern reaches of the South China Sea. A post-Taiwan world, then, would open up new military vistas for PLA commanders. For one thing, China could redeploy military assets arrayed against Taiwan to other forward positions supporting southern naval campaigns. For another, Beijing could use the island itself as a base, stationing missile batteries, fighter aircraft, and warships there to partly encircle the South China Sea.

Admittedly, Taiwan is no panacea, however valuable it may be as a geostrategic asset. Short-range ballistic missiles and shore-based tactical aircraft would be unable to reach major targets along the South China Sea rim. These targets are widely scattered around a U-shaped arc stretching southward from Vietnam to Indonesia and turning back northward to the

Philippines. Such a long, convoluted defense perimeter severely complicates targeting, even for a missile force as large and as sophisticated as the PLA's Second Artillery Corps. But the problem would be less complex, once forces were based on Taiwan.

Don't Be Baited

China is at least a decade from reliably deterring U.S. intervention while cowing Asian navies.

China appears to be following in the footsteps of past continental powers such as the United States, Imperial Germany, and the Soviet Union that asserted primacy over nearby seas. Chinese resolve toward South China Sea disputes, consequently, should come as little surprise. But there are many varieties of primacy. Asians could live with a China that, like Mahan's United States, is overbearing at times, yet largely restrains its ambitions. A China that claims outright ownership of regional waters is another matter entirely. Asian and U.S. leaders must monitor for Chinese claims and action that go beyond the historical model supplied by the U.S. experience a century ago.

No immediate danger seems to be in the offing. A chasm separates a maximal version of China's core interests from its capacity to fulfill these interests. Beijing confronts stressful security challenges in the near seas, not to mention out-of-area demands comparable in importance to those in Southeast Asia. But if China is content to settle for a limited core interest—for something less than complete dominance in the South China Sea—or if it proves willing to concentrate forces to the south to the detriment of its interests elsewhere, then it may soon make good on its claim to primacy in the South China Sea.

But international politics is a collision of living forces. No nation, however small, is an inanimate object. Chinese rhetoric and behavior have already triggered an action–reaction cycle in the region, prompting an arms race of modest scope. It is by no means fated that Beijing can dictate its terms to weaker neighbors under prevailing circumstances. The United States and fellow Southeast Asian protagonists, accordingly, must remain vigilant while taking care not to hype Chinese intentions or capabilities. In so doing, they improve the chances for peace.

Notes

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