

Growing Militarization of the South China Sea, US-China Confrontation

Two Case Studies

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The South China Sea Dispute or Crisis as it has come to be known, is a rather complicated dispute involving many different parties, both directly and indirectly, and that concerns a number of key issues. These concerns include national sovereignty, control of oil and natural gas, fishing rights, and the freedom of navigation on the high seas. It is a matter of argument whether the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has helped resolve some aspects of the dispute or has done more to confuse and exacerbate the situation.

The dispute has reached a point of crisis over the past year, as China has upped the ante in its claims to most of the South China Sea. In 2009, China officially submitted its claims in the region to the UN, what came to be known as the “Nine Dash Line” claim. The Nine Dash Line claim basically asserts that the majority of the entire South China Sea is the historical, sovereign territory of China. In order to reinforce such a claim, China embarked on a rapid and ambitious plan to develop a number of reefs and islands in both the Paracel and Spratly Island chains in 2011. The island development involves a great deal of land reclamation that has created man made islands that China intends to occupy, administer and militarily reinforce.

The island construction efforts have worried the United States, which is wary of growing Chinese influence and ambition in the region. The Obama administration has increased military aid and cooperation with rival claimants in the region and has embarked on a course of military brinkmanship with China. Stressing the desire to maintain freedom of navigation through the South China Sea, a legitimate concern, the U.S. Navy has conducted a series of operations starting in late 2015, where warships have sailed within 12 nautical miles of these island construction operations, as well as fly-overs by surveillance aircraft and B-52 bombers. The USS John C. Stennis aircraft carrier strike group was dispatched to the South China Sea in March of 2016, as the United States continues to increase its military presence in the region.

As the United States Navy is repeatedly sent to probe the reaction and resolve of China in staking its claim to sovereignty in the South China Sea over the coming year, it would seem prudent that diplomats and naval strategists study the historical precedent of two naval engagements fought by China in the region in past decades. China and Vietnam fought the Battle of the Paracel Islands in 1974 and the Johnson South Reef Skirmish in 1988. These two naval engagements between rival claimants to the islands had a significant influence on the course of the South China Sea Dispute over the intervening years and has led to the

increasing militarization that we are witnessing today. A study of these two events are essential if an understanding of the current state of affairs in the region are to be understood.

I The Battle of the Paracel Islands, 1974

History

Although still mostly uninhabited, the Paracel Islands have changed sovereignty a number of times since the late 1800s. France claimed the islands as part of their colony of Indochina; however, they relented to China's objections and recognized Chinese sovereignty over the islands at the conclusion of the short Sino-French War of 1884. The Islands were claimed by Japan after their invasion of China in 1931, attaching the Paracels and Spratly Islands to administration of the prefecture of Taiwan, having invaded and claimed that Island as well. France took advantage of this opportunity to once again lay claim to the Paracels as a part of Indochina. By 1941, Japan had defeated the French military and absorbed Indochina into the Japanese Empire. Upon the Japanese surrender in 1945, Nationalist China regained sovereignty over the islands, although the French protested once again over the rightful sovereignty of the Paracels. Upon defeat at the hands of the Chinese PLA, the Nationalist forces of China abandoned mainland China and consolidated in Taiwan. France would later be forced to relinquish its hold on Indochina, and Vietnam would have to fight the United States in a long and costly war before gaining its independence. Split into two countries by the time of the Battle of the Paracel Islands in 1974, it was the Navy of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) that would clash with China, at that time an ally of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). When one considers the historical context, it becomes clear why China, Vietnam, and Taiwan all still claim sovereignty over the Paracels.



Paracel Islands

The Naval Engagement

In 1974, when Vietnam was fighting a civil war between the U.S. backed regime in the south and the communist regime in the north, China saw an opportunity to occupy the Paracels, while Vietnam was distracted by more pressing matters. While the naval engagement was fought on January 19th, the situation first developed on January 16th and extended until January 20th. On the 16th, South Vietnamese Navy officers and an American advisor on the frigate Lý Thường Kiệt (HQ-16), discovered a small PLA force occupying both Drummond and Duncan Island while conducting a patrol of the region. The PLA troops were supported by converted (armed and armored) fishing vessels at the time of their discovery; however, it was known that other PLAN warships were in the vicinity. The commander of the Lý Thường Kiệt reported the situation to the South Vietnamese naval command who dispatched additional warships to the area.

The following day, January 17th, a small force of South Vietnamese commandos took up position on Robert Island and discovered that a Chinese flag had been planted on the island, which they promptly removed. The frigate Trần Khánh Dư (HQ-4) arrived to reinforce the Lý Thường Kiệt, while the Chinese Kronstadt Class submarine chasers #274 and #271 arrived on the scene as well. By the 18th, two additional Vietnamese vessels arrived, the Trần Bình Trọng (HQ-5) and the corvette Nhật Tảo (HQ-10). The Nhật Tảo arrived on the scene with

only one functioning main engine for the battle that would follow.



Kronstadt Class submarine chaser. These vessels were only of approximately 300 tons displacement

By the morning of the 19th of January, Vietnamese troops from the *Trần Bình Trọng* landed on Duncan Island and were repulsed by the PLA troops dug-in there, suffering casualties including 3 KIAs before retreating from the island. At this point, two additional Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels had arrived on scene, the *T34 Class* minesweepers #386 and #389. At approximately 1030 hours the Vietnamese vessels opened fire on the Chinese warships in a naval engagement that would last only 40 minutes, but would see all vessels engaged damaged by enemy fire. The Chinese commanders were able to maneuver their smaller craft skillfully, and engaged and defeated an equal number of larger and more heavily armed adversaries. The corvette *Nhật Tảo* HQ-10 was immobilized and sunk. The fateful decision to send the vessel to a potential conflict in the first place, with only one working main engine, was an act of criminal negligence on the part of South Vietnam's naval high command. While the crew was ordered to abandon ship, its captain, Lt. Commander Nguyễn Văn Thà decided to go down with his ship.



The ill-fated *Nhật Tảo* HQ-10 commanded by Lt. Commander Nguyễn Văn Thà.

The battle ended when the commander of the South Vietnamese fleet, Col. Hà Văn Ngạc who was in acting command of the frigate *Trần Bình Trọng* (HQ-5), ordered all vessels to withdraw westward as two additional PLAN *Hainan Class* submarine chasers, the #281 and #282, were discovered to be closing on the area of the battle at top speed. Additional Chinese warships and aircraft were also inbound from Hainan Island. In effect, the small South Vietnamese garrison on the islands was abandoned and forced to surrender on the 20th after being subjected to bombardment from Chinese aircraft. A PLA force of marines made an amphibious landing on Pattle Island and took over 40 men prisoner, including the American military advisor, all of whom were later released to the International Red Cross in Hong Kong on January 31st.

Lasting Ramifications

The Chinese Navy fought a brave and savage engagement against a force of warships that was far superior in displacement, armor and armament. The Chinese naval forces showed resolve and tenacity in staking their claim to the islands and refused to back down when fired upon by a superior force. The Republic of Vietnam forces were soundly beaten, and when it was obvious that additional forces had been dispatched to the battle by China, they requested assistance from the U.S. Seventh Fleet, which was active in the area. The United States had no intention of becoming more embroiled in a regional conflict that it had recently extricated itself from on an official level, and had no intention of engaging in hostilities with China, a nation that the Nixon administration hoped to improve diplomatic relations with.

The Paracel Islands were effectively occupied by China and sovereignty was enforced by the PLAN. China established a military outpost and surveillance base on Woody Island which has expanded significantly over the intervening decades. China has built a military airbase complete with a 2,700 meter (8,900ft) long runway, hangars for fighters, and armored

munitions bunkers in recent years. Two batteries of HQ-9 surface-to-air missile systems were deployed on the island in February of this year, which sent shockwaves throughout the South China Sea. China had made it known that J-11B fighters were deployed to the islands a few months prior to deployment of the SAMs. It is important to note that China has also increased civilian development on the island, including encouraging tourism to the islands amongst its citizens on the mainland. Civilian aircraft and small cruise vessels bring tourists to the tiny islands increasingly. It appears that China is exerting sovereignty over the islands in a number of respects.

II The Johnson South Reef Skirmish, 1988

History

The many claims of national sovereignty over the Spratly Islands are even more muddled and complicated than that of the Paracels. As is the case with the Paracels, the conquests of Imperial Japan during the years of 1931 - 1945 and the civil war within China, have both played a significant role in some nations' established claims to at least some of the islands. China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines all claim some of, if not all of the islands as their sovereign territory. These claims of sovereignty are both historical and legal, in a modern sense, as they pertain to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982).

The Imperial Japanese expansion that occurred between 1931 and 1945 claimed many sovereign territories of nations in the region as well as a number of colonial holdings of a number of European powers. When Imperial Japan was defeated by the colonial powers that had previously held sway in the region, such as the United States, France and Britain, as well as regional resistance movements such as could be found in Vietnam the Philippines, old and new claims were brought forward. In a similar fashion as in the Paracels, an island chain of small islands, atolls and reefs was claimed, conquered, imperially administered in an arbitrary fashion, and then surrendered over a period of fifty years. This led to a host of conflicting claims at the end of the Second World War that continue today.

Fast forward to 1988, after the regional powers of China, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia had all ratified the UNCLOS. The UNCLOS established the 12 mile territorial water boundary as well as the 200 mile Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ) that all signatories must recognize. Quite obviously, many EEZs overlap one another and this reality was understood when UNCLOS was drafted. Mechanisms for conflict resolution and arbitration were also established by the UN to resolve disputes. Matters of national pride and sovereignty aside, oil and gas exploration over the past twenty years have found ample evidence that vast amounts of these resources exist below the seabed in the entire South China Sea region. The desire to claim and control these resources, as well as the marine life resources (fishing rights) in the area have only added pressure on claimants to secure as much of the region as possible. The vast wealth estimated to lie under the seabed of this formerly insignificant chain of uninhabited island and reefs is perhaps the greatest factor that currently fuels the dispute.

In 1987, China was asked by the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) to survey the Spratly Islands archipelago as part of a global oceanographic survey initiative. As part of this effort, it was agreed that China should construct a survey station in the region. In April of that same year, China began construction of a survey station and observation post on Fiery Cross Reef. As construction commenced, Vietnamese forces

landed on at least four islands in the vicinity of the Union Bank to monitor the Chinese activities and to reinforce their claim of sovereignty. By the first two months of the following year of 1988, a significant presence of both Chinese and Vietnamese troops and warships in the Union Bank set the stage for a confrontation.



Union Bank in the Spratly Islands and the location of the Johnson South Reef Skirmish of 1988.

The Naval Engagement

Vietnam had established an armed presence on at least four islands and reefs in the Union Bank by the beginning of March, 1988. They have claimed that they were worried that the Chinese forces in the area were moving to do exactly the same, and an effort to maintain Vietnamese sovereignty over the region was necessary. Three small vessels were dispatched to the area by Vietnam, two armed transport vessels the HQ-604 and HQ-605, as well as the landing craft HQ-505. On the 14th of March these vessels began landing troops on Johnson South Reef. They were confronted by no less than three PLAN frigates, the *Nanchong* #502 (Jiangnan Class FF), *Xiangtan* #556 (Jianghu II Class FF), and the *Yingtian* #531 (Jiangdong Class FF).

At approximately 0730 hours, the *Nanchong* interdicted the HQ-604 landing troops on Johnson South Reef. Which force fired first is still in question, but the opposing forces of troops on the reef exchanged fire at some point. The *Nanchong* opened fire on the Vietnamese troops on the reef as well as transport HQ-604. The transport was set ablaze and sunk as a result of enemy fire. At approximately 0900, the PLAN frigate *Xiangtan* confronted a force of Vietnamese soldiers and the HQ-605 at Lansdowne Reef, where an exchange of fire resulted in the Vietnamese transport being set ablaze and sunk. The Vietnamese landing ship HQ-505 ran aground on Collins Reef at some point during the skirmish and the troops onboard the vessel attempted to hold it against any attempts by the Chinese to occupy the reef.

With all of their vessels out of action, the Vietnamese soldiers gathered around the national flag that they had raised on Johnson South Reef. They refused to surrender and had no means of retreat. The frigate *Nanchong* opened fire on the Vietnamese troops, who stood exposed on the reef, with 37mm anti-aircraft cannons. The brutal act was recorded on a video camera by the crew of the PLAN frigate. The short battle resulted in casualties on both sides, the Chinese suffering 18 wounded and 6 dead, while the Vietnamese losses were at least 70 dead.



Still image from video shot from the Chinese frigate *Nanchong* showing Vietnamese troops being gunned down while standing on Johnson South Reef

Lasting Ramifications

The immediate and lasting ramifications of the Johnson South Reef skirmish are still being felt today. The brutal fashion in which Chinese forces dealt with the conflict was seen by a global audience when the video camera footage shot from the frigate *Nanchong* was released. Both China and Vietnam occupied additional islands and reefs in the Spratlys within 48 hours of the incident. Taiwan immediately moved to reinforce its military outpost

on Taiping Island (Itu Aba) and dispatched two guided missile destroyers to conduct “exercises” in the area. The Philippines issued an official statement to warn any possible adversaries that they would not tolerate any encroachments on the islands occupied by its forces and promptly reinforced its garrisons in the area with added troops and weapons systems. This did not stop China from occupying Mischief Reef in 1994. This elicited a diplomatic protest by the Philippines within the framework of the United Nations, but no military response from the Philippines. The Spratly Islands sovereignty dispute was injected with a new dose of tension after the deadly skirmish at Johnson South Reef. The militarization of the region which resulted has steadily increased in scope over the intervening years; however, its scale and pace have increased exponentially in the past five years.

The Situation at Present

China has made the decision to solidify its claim of sovereignty over both the Paracel and Spratly Islands through an unprecedented development program that has seen tiny reefs and islands expanded in size through significant land reclamation efforts. Woody Island hosts a resident population of approximately 1,400 people today. Military installations on the island include the recently constructed hangars that can accommodate at least sixteen J-11 fighters, a number of reinforced munitions storage facilities protected by explosive mitigating berms, and an airstrip some 2,700 meters long. On February 17th, 2016, satellite imagery confirmed the presence of two batteries of HQ-9 surface-to-air missile launchers complete with engagement radar and Type 305B AESA acquisition radar.

The only nation to challenge China militarily in the Paracel Islands since that fateful day in 1974 has been the United States. In late January of this year, the *USS Curtis Wilbur* DDG 51 sailed within 12 nautical miles of Triton Island in a “freedom of navigation” operation. In the closing months of 2015, the U.S. Navy and Air Force have been conducting freedom of navigation sailings and overflights of Chinese claimed islands in the South China Sea. As part of the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia”, the United States has been increasingly challenging China’s territorial claims in the region and calling for the recognition of the principle of freedom of navigation in international waters. Interestingly, the United States has no territorial claims in the South China Sea, nor is it a signatory of UNCLOS, unlike all other claimants in the dispute. Not only does the United States not recognize any national claims in the South China Sea, it further more does not recognize the legal legitimacy of UNCLOS.



Woody Island in a recent photo

China has developed the Johnson South Reef into a small island since the time of the bloody skirmish that took place in 1988. Land reclamation and construction have turned a below-sea-level reef into a small island, complete with radar installations, a helicopter landing pad, and vessel docking facilities. It is unknown whether China has deployed any advanced weapons systems to the island. Even more notable than the surveillance base established at Johnson South Reef are the major land reclamation efforts at Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef. Two of these territories were occupied by China immediately after the naval skirmish of 1988, while Mischief Reef was occupied in 1994. Both reefs have been developed into sizable islands complete with airstrips and docking facilities. China has decided to develop the reefs into significant military installations by which they can exert

sovereignty in very real terms over the entire South China Sea.

The pace and scope of China's island construction operations over the past two years have led to an increased sense of urgency in the capitols of Manilla, Taipei and Ho Chi Min City. The United States has stepped in to assure these rival claimants that China will be confronted both diplomatically and militarily by a rival axis centered on the military might of the United States. The United States seems adamant that no one regional power should control the shipping lanes, oil and natural gas resource, and fishing rights in the South China Sea.



Johnson South Reef today



Chinese land reclamation efforts at Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands August 2014 - January 2015



China's development of Subi Reef in recent years



Detail of land reclamation and airstrip construction on Mischief Reef

Seeing the writing on the wall, Vietnam has also taken measures to solidify its position in the Spratly Islands archipelago. Vietnam has been fortifying its position on Sand Cay, due east of Taiwan-occupied Taiping Island. Vietnam lacks the economic means and technical capabilities of China, but they are following suit in developing their occupied holdings none the less.



Sand Cay land reclamation and construction from 2011 to 2015

Conclusion

In putting the current state of the South China Sea Dispute into historical context, one must acknowledge the influence of past military engagements fought over sovereignty in the region. The Battle of the Paracel Islands and the Johnson South Reef Skirmish exhibited the willingness of both China and Vietnam to engage in direct military confrontation to ensure their control of territory that they see as inseparable parts of their respective nations. Both nations learned different lessons from these altercations, and these lessons have shaped the wider dispute in the region in the intervening years.

China learned the lesson that it must forcefully and resolutely exert its territorial claims in the region, even if it comes down to a direct military exchange of hostilities. The ruthless murder of Vietnamese soldiers on the Johnson South Reef personifies the Chinese acceptance of just such a course. China has accepted that "might makes right" and "possession is nine tenths of the law" as it continues to solidify its position in the region and aims to reinforce its "Nine Dash Line" claim in the South China Sea. As it continues to

develop its holdings in the region and builds a modern and capable naval warfare capability, which far exceeds that of its neighbors, China realizes that time is on its side in resolving the dispute in its favor.

The other claimants in the region all learned a valuable lesson from the Johnson South Reef Skirmish as well. The majority of claimants such as Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia have all moved to reinforce their occupied territories in the region. Malaysia and Brunei have decided to be more diplomatic in their handling of the dispute. Malaysia has too much to lose economically from any territorial dispute with China, and Brunei is far too weak to win any military confrontation, no matter how limited in scope.

The influence of the United States, whether positive or negative in nature, cannot be overstated. The United States Navy in the Pacific, under the aggressive and uncompromising direction of Admiral Harry Harris (CDRUSPACOM), ironically the highest ranking Japanese American ever in the U.S. Navy, has conducted a number of freedom of navigation sailings in the region that have increased in tempo over the past 6 months. The *USS John C. Stennis* CSG is currently sailing through the South China Sea, following in the wake of the *USS Lassen* that sailed within 12 miles of Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands, and the *USS Curtis Wilbur*, which sailed within 12 nautical miles of Triton Island in the Paracel Islands. Although the age old concept of freedom of navigation on the high seas must be championed, a purely military solution to this centuries old dispute is doomed to failure. The United States should be marshalling broad international support through diplomatic means, in concert with a resolute military posture, to ensure that freedom of navigation in the region is acknowledged and respected by all nations in the region.

Increasing U.S. brinkmanship may end up colliding with Chinese nationalist resolve in the region, and result in a conflict that will benefit no one. Perhaps the most frightening prospect in the current hyper-militarized atmosphere, is an accident or an independent action by the commander of a warship on either side that could escalate into a military conflict of much larger proportions. As the military forces that are brought to bear increase in number and capability, and the political statements become more bellicose, we must all hope that pragmatism and statesmanship will eventually win the day.

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