

# What We Are Told and Not Told About the South China Sea

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*If war breaks out between China and the United States, there is a high probability that the precipitating factor will be the South China Sea. The United States is currently running another of its so-called "freedom of navigation" exercises in the region, employing no less than two aircraft carriers, together with their supporting armada of warships. The western media regularly report these naval exercises but rarely if ever is the historical situation put into any kind of context.*

There are in fact a number of important features of this confrontation between China and the United States that are seldom if ever discussed. A complaint by the Philippines to the Permanent Court of Arbitration received a judgement on 12 July 2016. The court ruled that there was no evidence of China having exercised exclusive control over the sea or its resources at any time. Therefore, the court ruled, there was no legal basis to the so-called "9 Dash Line" that China claimed to be within its exclusive jurisdiction.

China rejected the court's findings. This was hardly surprising from a purely historical point of view as China is able to demonstrate extensive control over the region going back hundreds of years, as Jianming Shen detailed in a lengthy scholarly analysis back in 2002.

But historical situations are often of dubious relevance in the world of modern geopolitics. They are certainly not relevant in helping to understand the attitude and behaviour of the contemporary government in Beijing. But that is only part of the story. Historical precedents are certainly of no interest to the United States and Australia in their pursuit of what they are pleased to call "freedom of navigation" exercises in waters thousands of kilometres distant from their respective borders.

This however, is simply empty verbiage. Neither country is able to point to a single incident of such free passage of civilian ships being in any way hindered. Given that at least 80% of China's seaborne exports traverse the South China Sea, China of all nations has the greatest interest in unimpeded freedom of passageway.

It would be both illogical and counter-productive for China to engage in any exercise that jeopardised the freedom of passage of civilian ships. Apart from its own vested interest, the South China Sea is the world's second busiest sea route, with ships from multiple nations taking advantage of its location in proximity to the world's most important economic region.

There is also the irony, never noted by the western media, of the United States purporting to uphold an important legal principle by an organisation, the International Court on the Rule of the Sea, (UNCLOS) that it itself does not belong to or accept the jurisdiction of over issues the United States regards as vital to its national interests. In short, the purported upholding

of the “International rules based legal order” is so much empty verbiage.

As noted, the Chinese have a vested interest in the free movement of civilian ships in the South China Sea. They are not alone in that. Also notably missing from western accounts of the disputes in the South China Sea is the fact that the Chinese claim to sovereignty over a large portion of the region predates the revolution that brought the Chinese Communist Party to power in 1949. The claims were in fact first lodged by the then Nationalist government of China. Equally importantly, and again totally missing from western political and media accounts of the dispute, is the fact that the government of modern-day Taiwan makes exactly the same claims as to its territorial rights over the South China Sea as does the government in Beijing.

An acknowledgement of this fact would of course undermine the “it’s all a Communist plot to bully its neighbours” that the western media is so fond of parroting. One of the islands that Taiwan claims, for example, is located more than 1000 km from the island of Taiwan. It is difficult to perceive a defence-based argument in such a claim.

Without in any way diminishing the historical or strategic interests that the PRC has in the South China Sea there is at least one other reason why the South China Sea is of such immense importance and that is its huge resources of oil and natural gas. It is impossible to believe that the United States is unaware of this resource as a few minutes of research readily reveals the basic facts. It is equally impossible to believe that the United States government does not covet those resources with a firm eye as to its own enrichment and/or that of US dominated companies.

The official estimate of oil reserves was declared in 2013 to be approximately 28 billion barrels of oil which would make it one of the world’s largest, and as yet largely untapped, reserves.

In addition to the oil however, there is also an estimated 266 trillion feet of natural gas also available. These are phenomenal quantities of resources that are very much in demand and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The interesting point is that the western media refers to tiresomely regurgitate “freedom of navigation” mantra and completely avoid any mention of these vast resources as a possible motive for western interest.

Yet another international treaty that the United States has declined to ratify is the International Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that provides an internationally recognised mechanism for dealing with any disputes over the utilisation and exploitation of sea-based resources. It is not too difficult to infer a reason for such United States non-participation: they intend to use their economic and military power to bully other nations into acceding to their wishes. One has to wonder, yet again, at the silence of the western media on the obvious self-interest of the United States in attempting to exert control over the South China Sea.

The message does not appear to have penetrated the United States mindset that their days of exerting territorial dominance and plundering the resources of others is over. A symptom of this continuing blindness to modern military reality is manifested in the aforementioned dispatch of two United States aircraft carriers and their associated fleet of support vehicles to the South China Sea. The Chinese are clearly not intimidated by this US show of force.

Again, the message seems not to have penetrated the American mindset. Aircraft carriers

are nowadays simply very large seaborne targets. The Chinese defence system, operating as it is from domestic territory, has at its disposal the Dong Feng 21D and Dong Feng 26 missile defence systems, to which United States aircraft carriers are simply a very large and very vulnerable target. They, together with other Chinese defence systems make the United States military presence in the South China Sea a suicide mission.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century world is a very different place from even two decades ago. China is the world's dominant economic power, and together with its Russian ally, effectively an unbeatable military power. It is not however, using that military and economic strength to impose its will. Together with its ASEAN colleagues it has been working to resolve disputes such as those arising from competing claims in the South China Sea. There is a very good prospect that disputes over the exploitation of the South China Sea's immense resources will be resolved sooner rather than later.

What the interested parties don't need is the unwelcome and self-interested meddling and trouble making of the United States and its "partners" such as Australia.

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