The South China Sea and China-US Relations: Beijing’s Perspective

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Maritime issues have emerged as one of the most important security issues in the Indo-Pacific, driving major powers to strategically adjust their policies towards the region. During the past decade, maritime disputes have escalated to the point where the regional order is being affected and the risk of subsequent armed conflict cannot be entirely ruled out.

The South China Sea (SCS) is at the centre of maritime disputes in the Indo-Pacific region. Many states have significant maritime security interests in the SCS including, inter alia, freedom of navigation and overflight, peace and security in the region, and respect for international laws and norms. While governmental talks have not yet brought about significant progress to solve the disputes, Track II dialogues such as this have the potential to provide open and frank analysis and discussions leading to recommendations that can more effectively manage the situation.

With these considerations in mind, UNSW Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV), and the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA) hosted a conference and two associated workshops, termed ‘The South China Sea in the broader maritime security of the Indo-Pacific’, from 28 to 30 September 2016 in Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy. This special December 2017 edition of NASSP Issue Briefs are a result of the conference, workshops, and institutional partnership.

**The Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV)**

The Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam is an educational and research institution affiliated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam. It was established in 1959 and focuses on conducting strategic research in international affairs and foreign policies; teaching students and post-graduates in the areas of international relations, law, economics, journalism and foreign languages; and training mid-career professionals from central and local government agencies on international affairs and diplomatic skills.

**The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA)**

The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), founded in 1959, is a private, nonpartisan policy think-tank focused on foreign affairs and security issues. In addition to a wide range of research projects, the institute promotes dialogues and joint studies with other institutions and experts at home and abroad, examines Japanese foreign policy and makes proposals to the government, and disseminates information on international relations to the public. The institute, together with a large network of affiliated scholars, aims to serve as an indispensable resource on international affairs in a complex world.

**National Asian Security Studies Program (NASSP)**

UNSW Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy

The new National Asian Security Studies Program builds on the Executive Education Program developed in 2014. Aside from conferences, workshops and publications to enhance the policy community’s understanding of the Indo-Pacific, the Program is specifically designed to develop leading scholar-practitioners. Through the Program, graduates will be better networked with regional and global partners who will have strengthened their capacity to formulate best practice policy responses to contemporary security challenges.
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The South China Sea and China-US Relations: Beijing’s Perspective

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Over the last few years the South China Sea (SCS) dispute has become a chief point of friction between Beijing and Washington, causing widespread apprehensions of an emerging Sino–US rivalry that could unsettle the long peace and stability that the region has enjoyed since the 1970s. While there have long been differences between the two countries in their positions in the SCS – and unlike issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and even trade disputes until recently – the SCS dispute has never assumed such a central place in the bilateral relationship as it is today. Indeed, considering that there have been sceptical views within both countries about the importance of the disputed features in the SCS to their respective national interests, recent hostilities between Beijing and Washington have been somewhat puzzling. As Michael Swaine, a respected observer on Sino–US relations, puts it ‘To allow a dispute over a few rocks and islands in a corner of the Asia-Pacific region to derail a vital relationship critical to both regional and global peace and prosperity is the height of folly’. ¹

Many observers thus tend to view recent developments in the SCS through the lens of an intensified zero-sum Sino–US competition for strategic primacy in a region of critical importance to the future of global politics. For example, Hugh White, a prominent Australian scholar of strategic affairs argues that

The key to understanding what is happening now in the South China Sea... is to recognise that it has almost nothing to do with the disputed reefs and rocks themselves.... It has everything to do with the deadly serious rivalry between the world's two strongest powers, determining who sets the rules in Asia and who enforces them. ²

In a similar vein, Peter Jennings, the executive director of Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), notes that a new cold war-type rivalry is emerging between the US and China chiefly because of their incompatible strategic interests in the SCS.³ There is growing concern that the increasingly hostile and sometimes bellicose actions displayed by the militaries on both sides in the SCS may cause unintended armed clashes which could escalate to a fatal major war between China and US.⁴ In this context, a respected

long-time China Watcher in the US, David Lampton, warns that the Sino-US relationship is reaching a ‘tipping point’ to a dangerous strategic competition unseen since prior to 1972.\(^5\)

For many observers outside China, recent tensions between China and the US in the SCS have been essentially caused by Beijing’s ambition to challenge Washington’s longstanding leadership in the region, seeking to assert its own dominance in an area perceived as China’s natural sphere of influence. For some commentators, China’s assertive and even coercive behaviour in promoting its interests and agenda in the SCS represents a grave challenge to the rules-based international order and well-accepted international norms and laws.\(^6\) Others, however, are more sympathetic. While agreeing that China’s recent behaviour is decidedly destabilising, they tend to regard China as merely doing what a typical rising power in the history would and should do: maximising its power and security through regional dominance.\(^7\) Thus instead of a struggle for international rules, norms and laws, US-China competition is essentially a replay of time-honoured classical great power politics. There are still others who believe that China’s growing assertiveness has been driven by Beijing’s flawed assumption that the US is a rapidly declining power. As two respected observers claim,

\[\text{After the 2008-2009 US financial crisis, China analysts mistakenly concluded that the United States was in terminal decline, and that China’s moment had come to undo a century of humiliation by asserting its influences rather than biding its time as it developed its economy.}\(^8\)\]

To what extent have China’s recent assertive and increasingly uncompromising actions in the SCS been driven by an intention to challenge US strategic primacy in the Asia-Pacific region? How does China see the growing involvement of the US in the SCS disputes and recent tensions in Sino-US relations? How important is the SCS dispute in China’s foreign policy in general and in its relationship with the United States in particular?

This paper seeks to address these questions briefly through an examination of Chinese perspectives. It finds that there is a significant and indeed widening gap between Chinese views and external perceptions with regards to the nature and causes of China’s actions in the SCS and the role of the US in the region. Such a perception gap has not only contributed to the recent tensions in Sino-US relations in the SCS, but also posed obstacles to management of the already complicated dispute. If left unaddressed, it could lead to dangerous escalation of a bitter rivalry that both Beijing and Washington seek to avoid.


China’s views of the US–China rivalry & South China Sea disputes

Like many policy-makers and observers outside China, Chinese leaders and foreign policy analysts are well aware and indeed increasingly worried about emerging Sino–US rivalry. Ever since Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power, avoiding ‘a Thucydides trap’ in Sino–US relations has been a repeated theme in his meeting with his American counterpart, President Obama. During his first visit in October 2013 to the United States after assuming the role of president, Xi stated that both sides ‘need to work together to avoid the Thucydides Trap – destructive tensions between an emerging power and an established power’. Two years later during his state visit to the US, in a speech on Sino–US relations, he expressed more concerns about the state of Sino–US relations, declaring ‘There is no such thing as the so-called Thucydides trap in the world. But should major countries time and again make the mistakes of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves’.9

Recent developments in the SCS have had some Chinese scholars convinced that Sino–US rivalry is not just a possibility, but actually happening. For example, in the aftermath of the recent ruling delivered by an Arbitral Tribunal on the Philippines v China case, Wu Shicun, president of China’s National Institute for the South China Sea Studies, observed that ‘China and the US is now on the edge of great power rivalry and strategic competitions in the South China Sea’, warning that ‘if China and US continue to move to the direction of direct confrontations, it will have disastrous consequences for regional peace and stability’.10

Unlike many external observers, however, Chinese foreign policy elites generally believe that the recent tensions in the South China Sea have been largely caused by the US's increasing involvement in the dispute due to its intention to constrain China’s growing power and influences in the region. From Beijing’s point of view, the year 2010 is a watershed in US policy towards the SCS, when the then US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, made a statement in the ARF meeting of that year in Hanoi, declaring that the US has ‘a national interest’ in the SCS. It is argued that since then US policy in the South China Sea has not only shifted from a previously neutral position to implicitly and explicitly siding with some claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam in their disputes with China, but has also been directly involved in the dispute through increased military activities in the region.11 Such activities include intelligence collection and surveillance in waters close to China’s coast, and an increasing frequency of joint military exercises in the SCS.

It is thus not surprising that Beijing sees the US as being the chief instigator behind the arbitral case filed by the Philippines against China under the UNCLOS. Immediately after the award made by the arbitration tribunal in July, Wu Shicun argues that not only had the case has been ‘carefully planned’ by the US, but its outcomes were also deeply influenced if not imposed by the US.12 The sweeping legal victory for the Philippines in

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11 Ibid.
the award further reinforced the Chinese view that the ruling was manufactured by the US. Even those Chinese scholars who held a more neutral position than Beijing's official South China Sea policy in the past have begun to question both the legality of the award and the intentions of the US.\(^{13}\)

For Beijing, the perceived shifts in US policy towards the SCS have been fundamentally driven by Washington's broader objective to maintain its hegemonic position in the region. More specifically, it is perceived that the growing involvement of the US in the SCS aims to ensure the so-called 'freedom of navigation' of its military, thereby maintaining and reinforcing the solidarity of the US-led alliance system in the region by demonstrating its will and commitments to assist its allies and to ensure its position as the rules-maker in regional security affairs.\(^{14}\)

Chinese analysts also see the US's changing SCS policy as a crucial part of its broader 'Rebalance to Asia' strategy, which aims at counterbalance China's growing power and influence. A leading Chinese scholar argues that under the Obama administration US policy towards China has undergone a major shift. Whereas the previous policies under the Clinton and Bush administrations focused on shaping China's behaviours largely through inducement, policy under the Obama administration has become one of explicit balancing defined by deterrence.\(^{15}\) In this context, a widely held view in China is that the SCS has become an important and convenient stepping stone for the US to implement its rebalance to Asia strategy by driving a wedge between China and ASEAN and encouraging other claimants to take international legal action against China in the South China Sea. Such a view has been further reinforced by the Obama Administration's reported opposition to its allies joining China's initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the exclusion of China from the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement.

It is thus not surprising that Chinese analysts generally regard China's actions in the South China Sea in recent years as being largely defensive, driven by the need to protect China's legitimate national interests. Indeed, while many Chinese analysts do acknowledge that China's behaviour in the SCS has been more assertive and uncompromising than before, they believe that such a stance is justified in serving to protect China's territorial and maritime interests against the encroachments of other countries, and thus more appropriate than Beijing's previously more conciliatory policy of the early 2000s. As a consequence, instead of perceiving China's tough actions as causing tension, some Chinese scholars argue that these policies have been more effective in shaping a stable situation in the SCS by effectively deterring other claimants from taking legal action that would harm China's national interests.\(^{16}\) It is also argued that Beijing's tough actions have led to a reduction of nationalist sentiment among the Chinese public, as Chinese citizens would have become more confident about the government's will and capability to defend its national interests.\(^{17}\)


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
Chinese analysts have increasingly begun to argue that China should take tougher action in the South China Sea, generally perceiving such action as necessary if not overdue in defending China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, rather than as intended efforts to challenge US strategic primacy.\(^{18}\) Whether one agrees or not, it should be noted that the idea that all the island groups in the SCS have always been China’s sacred territory has been deeply immersed in the mind of the Chinese public before and after 1949. Thus, as China’s ambassador to the US, Cu Tiankai, stated, instead of aiming at challenging US primacy as misperceived by many external observers, ‘China believes it is doing nothing more than maintaining and defending legitimate territorial claims and maritime rights.’\(^{19}\)

Despite its growing assertiveness, Beijing does not want to allow the South China Sea issue to dominate and derail its broad relationship with the US. Beijing knows only too well that a stable and cooperative relationship with the US is fundamental to China’s peaceful rise. As mentioned earlier, Chinese leaders and analysts have nonetheless become increasingly concerned about the emerging Sino–US rivalry. The concept of a ‘new type of great power relationship’ was thus initiated by China with the aim of setting the relationship on a manageable path. In his meeting with US President Obama at Sunnylands, California in June 2013, Xi proposed the new concept as the basis for future conduct of the bilateral relationship. The ‘new type of great power relationship’ will be defined by three essential features: non-conflict and non-confrontation; mutual respect of each other’s different political systems and core interests; and win–win cooperation.

Similarly, China also does not intend to let the SCS issue disrupt its overall foreign policy objective of maintaining a peaceful and stable external environment conducive to China’s economic development. However, Beijing faces the challenges of maintaining a balance between keeping stable relationships with countries in the region and protecting China’s core national interests. On the one hand, as mentioned above, Beijing feels it is imperative to be more assertive in protecting China’s national interests in the SCS, due to the sensitivities of national sovereignty, intensified competition over maritime rights, and rising domestic public expectations sparked by China’s expanding national strength. On the other hand, it is acutely aware of the negative impacts of its tougher diplomatic stance on its relationship with other claimants and on China’s broader strategic interests and position in the region. Thus balancing the dual tasks of more strenuously defending China’s sovereignty and maritime rights (weiquan) whilst maintaining regional stability (weiwen) that serves China’s broader strategic interests, constitutes a significant foreign policy challenge the Chinese leadership.

**Conclusions**

Chinese and external perceptions differ sharply on the nature and causes of recent tensions in the SCS and on the motives behind China’s increasing toughness in handling the matter. Given the wide perception gap, Beijing and Washington face the real danger of being trapped in a vicious security dilemma defined by mutual suspicion. While leaders on both sides vow to pursue a constructive and non-confrontational relationship, strong mistrust that is deeply rooted in divergent perceptions make it difficult for the two countries to resolve their differences. Instead of focusing on their respective narrow

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\(^{18}\) “Five Think Tanks Speak Out Collectively: after the Ruling, That’s What We Should Do”, July 12, 2016, Huajunet. Xue Li, “A Letter to Obama”,

national interests, both sides should make greater efforts to recognise and accommodate each other's security concerns.