

Collision course in the South China Sea

US and China must act fast to reduce risks of accidental military clashes

James Stavridis

China is expanding an aggressive program of constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea. Since beginning the massive dredging operations in the Johnson South Reef of the Spratly Islands in late 2013, Beijing has built a total of seven such islands.

Think of it as an "ink blot" strategy -- each artificial island becomes a claimed "island," about which Beijing seeks to control a 12-mile territorial sea, a 24-mile contiguous zone, and a 200-mile exclusive economic zone. It has also claimed dozens of extant atolls in addition to the artificial islands. Over time, with enough such "ink blots" gradually connecting, it can significantly buttress its highly controversial claim to ownership of the entire vast South China Sea.

The "islands" are increasingly militarized, many with air strips, ports, logistic facilities, radars, permanently-stationed troops and barracks, artillery, and missiles. As the U.S. Navy conducts planning for potential combat operations as part of the network of "operational plans (OPLANS) and "contingency plans (CONPLANS), the planners are forced to consider each of the islands as essentially an unsinkable aircraft carrier. With seven islands constructed so far, and connected with China's formidable land-based air force, the U.S. Navy has an increasing challenge on its hands over control of the sea.

China sees the South China Sea as a foundational building block of its "One Belt, One Road" strategy, which strives to tie economic resources to the Middle Kingdom. The allure of the treasure trove of natural resources -- oil, natural gas, fish -- is obvious. So is control of the 20%-30% of the world's shipping that passes through these waters.

Beijing's claim to the South China Sea is based on its historical activity in the region, stretching back 500 years to the voyages of the legendary 15th century Admiral Zheng He. The claims have been adjudicated in international courts and rejected. Not to be deterred, China is aggressively building on the high seas and defending its actions not just in international forums, but on the water and in the skies with an aggressive program of sea and air deployments.

The U.S., which was slow to awaken to the threat, is now leading an effort of various allies and partners to challenge the Chinese claims in the only way that in the end with matter: in the air and sea.

Naval vessels of the U.S., the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Japan are planning or conducting patrols through the claimed "sea space" around the artificial islands. So far this year the U.S. alone has conducted at least a half-dozen such patrols, dubbed Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPS).

Whether this tactic is "too little too late" or may have an effect remains to be seen; but at this point it is the only reasonable policy and legal operational option. China, of course, vigorously objects and it seems only a matter of time before there is a figurative and literal collision at sea, probably between a U.S. warship and a Chinese counterpart.

A similar incident in the air in 2001 between a Chinese fighter and a lumbering American maritime patrol aircraft led to a crisis, with the American aircrew held essentially hostage for days and eventually released. Now nearly two decades on, with a much more muscular China military and an assertive leader in Xi Jinping, such an incident could easily spark a wider confrontation -- especially with tensions rising as the Trump Administration trade war escalates.

It is in the interest of neither the U.S. nor China to actually end up in a military confrontation in the South China Sea; but neither side seems remotely inclined to back down. **China clearly has a detailed long-range plan to eventually control the South China Sea;** whilst the U.S. strongly supports its allies in the region against what it views as Chinese aggression. It believes fervently in freedom of the high seas -- a principle for which it has gone to war in the past.

A small incident could easily flash into something far larger, perhaps dragging the equally contentious issues surrounding the future of Taiwan into the confrontation.

Both sides will need to be mindful of the significant potential for military engagement. Young pilots and destroyer officers operating at sea and in the air are far from the centers of power -- but jammed into a confined water and airspace, it is entirely possible that a miscalculation could rapidly escalate.

All of this is exacerbated in the current moment with significant disputes over trade, intellectual property, and activity in the cyber sphere.

Some of the palliative measures to be encouraged include: greater military-to-military consultations and confidence building measures (conferences, exchanges of notes, "hot lines" for instant contact); negotiation of specific tactical protocols to be followed when forces are in proximity (distances between ships and aircraft, radio calls); more diplomatic contact via international organizations, especially the United Nations; and working to compartmentalize the various disputes so that there is not a "bleed over" effect between trade and the South China Sea, for example.

None of that, of course, will fully resolve the underlying maritime territorial dispute between the two major great powers of the early 21st century. I hope time will soften the edges of the argument and enable both sides to find their way to a reasonable level of compromise. But in the meantime, the U.S. will continue to challenge territorial claims it sees as both preposterous under international law and strategically indigestible.

It will encourage its far stronger network of allies, partners and friends -- from the nations of the region to NATO -- to support its side in the dispute. China likewise will not back down, and indeed will also increase pressure on Taiwan as part of the broad outline of its ambitions -- occupying as it does the crucial gateway to the northern end of the South China Sea. None of this is encouraging, and it is perhaps the major "watch out" risk over the coming decade. Look for rough seas ahead in the waters of the South China Sea.

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