

Why China is not to Blame for the Militarisation of the South China Sea

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ASIM RIZVANOVIC, AUG 5 2013

Even though a significant clash in the South China Sea has not occurred since the Johnson South Reef Skirmish in 1988 (Bordonaro, 2010), analysts, the media, and others have formed a growing consensus that the South China Sea will become, as Fravel (2012: 33) describes, “the central theatre of conflict in the new world.” Although Kaplan (2011: 1) opposes Fravel and argues that “war is far from inevitable even if competition is a given,” the sensationalist standpoint espoused by Fravel (2012) is the one that many media outlets and Think Tanks, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, subscribe to: “The risk of conflict in the South China Sea is significant” (Glaser, 2012: 1). As a result, concerns continue to grow in relation to the expansion of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), an arm of the Chinese military, which has only in the last decade, began to take on a significant role. As Bedford (2009: 34) argues, the Chinese “security calculus was focused inwards,” and it is this former paradigm of the Chinese strategic mentality that renders the drastic expansion of the PLAN rather less dramatic than generally perceived.

Before jumping to sensationalist conclusions, it is imperative to keep in mind that the PLAN has been evolving from a primitive coastal defence force to a navy that has only recently been able to project power abroad (IISS, 2010). Thus far, the PLAN has predominantly projected this power through its “historic and significant” cooperation with the international anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden (Erickson and Mikolay, 2009), though some such as Lin-Greenberg (2010: 226) are quick to dilute the importance of such events, citing the “logistical and technical shortcomings” of the PLAN. However, Lin-Greenberg’s (2010) assessment must be considered with care, as others such as Ji (2012: 482) argue that the technological gap between the West and China is a thing of the past—a point in concurrence with Payne (2009: 29) who states that “[Chinese] technological advances over the past decade have been impressive.”

As the PLAN has evolved, so too has the strategic landscape of the South China Sea. The navies of Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and others have accelerated expansion and modernisation (Dosch 2011). This regional development, what one might even call an “arms-race,” is blamed generally on China (Dosch 2011), but naturally, China is unequivocal in its accusations and blames the US (The Guardian, 2013). Even though Chellaney (2011) and others are happy to indict the Chinese on account of militarization of the area, this essay argues that the case is far from overwhelming, and hence, it seeks to moderate the debate and show that in reality, the blame cannot be solely ascribed unto Beijing.

I begin by evaluating the PLAN build-up and show that whilst the transformation appears striking, in reality, when considering its starting point, it is not so impressive. I then move on to discuss events that have transpired and show that the hype over the South China Sea has been, thus far, overblown, and that in the few cases of concern, China may not be to blame at all. Naturally, it is unavoidable to comment on the US and its role in the South China Sea, and I argue that in a bid to force out China, the ASEAN states have attempted to draw the US into the issues. I conclude by showing that the build-up of the PLAN has been a natural progression, befitting a state of its size, and I highlight that the majority of “events,” which the media regularly call attention to, are misdiagnosed as “military clashes.”

Answering the questions involves primarily utilizing secondary sources, but I also make use of primary sources such as Chinese official outputs. However, because of the nature of the topic, as a distinct set-back it is virtually

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impossible to negate the side-effects of some inaccuracies, such as “official” military spending announcements. Naturally, due to the possibility of disparagingly interpreting issues of sovereignty and maritime law, there will always be a need to speculate to some degree. Hence, aiming to avoid pitfalls of “orientalism” and “eurocentrism,” I intend to speculate from a neutral point of view. Moreover, I seek to steer clear of engaging in the debate with regards to Taiwan’s status as a de facto independent state; therefore, I treat it in the same way as the UN does—as a part of mainland China (Winkler, 2012).

The Transformation of the PLAN

The worries caused by the expansion of the PLAN can be seen throughout the Asia-Pacific (Katigbak, 2013; Singh, 2013). Prior to firmly band-wagging with such thought, it must be considered that the evolution of the PLAN has been somewhat sluggish to other famed sea-faring states. A comparison can be drawn with the Soviet Union, which was able to transform its navy in just fifteen years (Da Cunha, 1990). With the PLAN’s transformation already having taken more than fifteen years, in the case of China, the rate of change has, therefore, been slower. This relatively slow evolution has been a side effect of the Chinese approach to military matters; it has concentrated more on core economic issues such as internal “tranquillity” (Krepon and Katz-Hyman, 2005: 330). In fact, the very essence of the Chinese Naval “revolution” has been a tendency to establish asymmetric capabilities such as anti-satellite missiles (ASAT) and shorter range missiles that are tasked with targeting nearby US allies and bases (Krepon and Katz-Hyman, 2005: 329).

Despite the focus on asymmetric solutions, there does seem to be a clear indication that the PLAN and the wider Chinese military has surpassed many limitations that authors such as Lin-Greenberg (2010) seem to believe are harnessing China. A case in point is a Chinese project to launch a 35-satellite constellation (Beidou), which will have both military and civilian applications (Moltz, 2011: 172). Furthermore, the Navy has fully embraced the information-technology revolution in military affairs, and concepts such as maritime domain awareness and interconnectivity are second nature (Ji, 2012: 482). The technological adeptness is indicative of the PLAN’S new readiness to tackle Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats such as piracy and terrorism (Ji, 2012: 477).

The importance of this vis-à-vis my question is to highlight the following point, that as states evolve, they “cultivate new needs . . . [and] apprehensions that force them to expand in new ways” (Kaplan, 2010: 2). Therefore, it is too naïve to simply expect the PLAN to remain static or to reign itself in, but it is legitimate that it might grow. This growth by default does not mean that China is a belligerent state; au contraire, the Chinese rise has been rather peaceful. Moreover, this does not inherently mean that I subscribe to any theories of Chinese “exceptionalism” (Wang, 2012), but the current trends do indicate the “über-realist” nature of the current Chinese system (Kaplan, 2010: 2).

Nonetheless, realism is a hallmark of the Chinese approach, as it firmly espouses war avoidance (Bajoria and Xu, 2013); indeed, China has not fought a war for 25 years (Ji, 2012: 478). Of course, it would be far too speculative to assume that this will continue ad infinitum, especially considering plans for a second and larger indigenous aircraft carrier (AFP, 2013a), as well as construction of a new submarine base with direct access to the South China Sea (Jane’s, 2008). Regardless, it is easily accepted that Brazil and India operate aircraft carriers, yet when China does the same, it is regarded as subversive and aggressive (Goldstein, 2011: 338).

In sum, this short section’s aim has been to simply show that the expansion of the PLAN has not resulted in a direct military conflict. Whilst the expansion may have incentivise greater military expenditures on the part of regional actors such as Vietnam, the case of the PLAN, as being a belligerent actor, is yet to be shown.

Competition or War?

It is then not logical to assume that by itself, China is to be blamed for all events that have transpired in the South China Sea. Like China, Vietnam has been modernizing its naval forces, principally by purchasing Russian equipment (Pham, 2009) such as the significant purchase of six Kilo-class submarines (Kazianis, 2013). In addition, between 2005 and 2009, Vietnam has increased its military spending as a portion of its GDP by 0.6% to 2.5% (SIPRI, 2013), compared to the Chinese figure at 2.0% for the year 2011 (The World Bank, 2013), best described as having “limited

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transparency” (Erickson and Liff, 2013: 1). Moreover, the disparity of size between the economies further renders the real terms on spending as highly incongruent (IMF, 2013). Nonetheless, such proceedings highlight the changing power dynamics, nationalism, and untapped natural resources of the region that all sides seek to appropriate (Goldstein, 2011: 321).

Still, as Studeman (1998) argues, the geopolitical complexities of the South China Sea are reduced to being “the responsibility of China.” Studeman (1998) goes on to say that prior to the Opium Wars, “the Chinese saw these uninhabited cays and shoals [the Spratly] . . . [as] zones beyond civilizations.” The historic, almost orientalist viewpoint that Studeman (1998) utilizes, is grossly misguided, particularly as he later admits that the current era is one of “resource scarcity.” Considering the abundance of hydrocarbons in the area (USEIA, 2013), and the fact that it is home to some of the world’s busiest shipping lanes (Calonozco, 2013), states are expected to compete for such resources.

In fact, in 1956, the first claim for the Spratly Islands came from China, albeit via Taiwan (Baker and Wiencek, 2002: 19), when it occupied the largest island in the Spratlys, a bid that under customary law would entitle it to ownership (Studeman, 1998). Studeman (1998), who places the entirety of the blame on China, states. “. . . desperate to find domestic sources of petroleum, both Vietnam and the Philippines began to occupy [the Spratlys].” However, it was not only China but this emergence of a necessity to fuel one’s own economy, coupled with the discovery that oil and other resources that were abundant in the South China Sea, that pushed all sides to exploration and bids of sovereignty. In fact, Vietnam has since claimed sovereignty on grounds of “historical contact,” though evidence does not exist that such contact was ever made (Buszynski, 2010: 86).

Due to the varying claims, on occasion regional navies have quite logically stepped-in to enforce the respective claims of the various parties (Goldstein, 2011: 329). Though this is the case, the vast majority of incidences actually involved coast-guard type organizations as opposed to actual navies (IISS, 2011: 1). For example, in July 2011, on disputed Flat Island (*Feixin* and *Patag*, in Chinese and Tagalog respectively), the Philippines completed construction of a shell-like structure to serve as a forward operating base (Laude, 2011), to which Beijing expressed its firm repugnance of (IISS, 2011: 1). In the State of the Union Address, the President of the Philippines said that the state had to “. . . let the world know we are ready to protect what is ours” (Till, 2013: 325). Although Chellaney (2011: 74) accuses China of “strategic subterfuge” in the South China Sea, this Philippines example is explicit in highlighting that other actors have acted unilaterally and have negatively impacted the status quo.

Moreover, since this event, by taking its case to a tribunal under the jurisdiction of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Philippines has sought international ratification. In fact, the country’s move plays into the hands of Beijing, as the other ASEAN states are averse to engaging in such legal endeavours (IISS, 2013); the division of ASEAN unity is a key goal for the Chinese regime (Kapila, 2013). By breaking off from a multilateral approach, Manila is further segregating the disputes and portraying its own distinct self-interest.

As a final example, the Vietnamese state-run petrochemical firm, Vietnam Oil and Gas Group, accused China of cutting cables used for hydrocarbon exploration in 2012 (Page, 2012). Like the previous Philippines case, Vietnam enacted a unilateral policy on a multi-layered issue. The Chinese response to cut the cables was neither militaristic nor massively disproportionate; as opposed to by the PLAN, it was merely a petty, disruptive act carried out by civilian fishing vessels (ICG, 2012: 4). In sum, such disruptive cases have been hallmarks of the South China Sea disputes, and in fact, the disputes have not been limited to the maritime domain, with reports of like-for-like cyber-attacks, public protests, and an “escalating war of words” (IISS, 2011: 1)

Despite Vietnam’s vehement insistence of “undisputed sovereignty” (CNN, 2012), and China’s use of claims based on history (CCTV, 2012), both parties, along with the Philippines, have previously entered into mutual covenants in attempts to ease tensions. One example is of a trilateral survey undertaken by the three aforementioned states (IISS, 2011: 1). Despite a modicum of progress, due to nationalist sentiments in the Philippines, where the project was seen as being contra Philippine sovereignty, it rapidly came to a halt (IISS, 2011: 1). Interestingly to note, these nationalistic urges were cunningly coaxed by the self-interested President of the Philippine National Oil Company,

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who stated that rather than pursue cooperation, the Philippines would exert sovereignty rights over the area (To and Shaofeng, 2009: 168). Despite remarks of optimism and an expression of hope for continued trilateral cooperation by Chinese Premier Wen Jibao (To and Shaofeng, 2009: 168), the three years of progress were wasted and replaced by a return to high levels of tension.

In short, To and Shaofeng (2009: 167) argue that China has been ready to temporarily put aside issues of sovereignty so as to engage in extracting resources in partnership with relevant ASEAN states. The above example is surely testament to this approach and further highlights Beijing's realist *modus operandi* in foreign affairs. Whilst the two case studies examined are but a pair amongst a vast array of potential avenues of investigation, they are noteworthy in that they highlight that Beijing is not always the first to break away from dialogue and cooperation.

The US' Role?

It would be a gross oversight to not consider the US' role, or lack thereof, in the South China Sea "conflicts." As the PLAN has expanded, the US has gradually scaled down operations in the Middle East and began "expanding and intensifying its already significant role in the Asia-Pacific" (Manyin and Daggett et al, 2012: 2); what is essentially a strategic repositioning, the mainstream press refers to it as a "pivot" back to the Asia-Pacific (The Economist, 2011; AFP, 2013b). Moreover, Yongnian (2012) states that the supposed aim of the US, to "maintain the existing order in Asia," cannot succeed and only results in the opposite.

The case seems to be clear as it becomes apparent that ASEAN states, so as to further legitimise their own claims, have attempted to drive a wedge between the US and China. Whilst such endeavours are likely to damage the Sino-US relationship, the US has managed, thus far, to abstain from directly involving itself in issues of territoriality, which is something of a foreign policy tradition for Washington (Fravel, 2012: 34). The sovereignty disputes may not be the chief concern for the US anyway, as the significant foci, as explained by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, are freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce (Al-Jazeera, 2012). Though it would be speculative to outright argue that the repositioning is to counter the PLAN and its growing potential to dominate Taiwan (O' Rourke, 2012: 3), naturally the "pivot" will allow the US a firmer and more rapid response to any attempts by the mainland to invade the island.

Conclusion

Considering the evidence produced hitherto, it does not clearly appear that, at the very least, the case against China is closed or is overwhelming. Though the PLAN has been undergoing a dramatic transformation, when the starting point is considered, that transformation is not the one that appears so significant. The very essence of this enlargement may well be argued to be bellicose in nature, but the empirical evidence proving this—beyond all reasonable doubt—is yet to be produced. As I have shown, the majority of incursions have seen involvement of coast-guard or paramilitary type organisations, not the PLAN.

Considering the two well-known cases, it does at the very least appear that not all transgressions have been the making of Beijing; at times, Vietnam and the Philippines have both disregarded protocol and have made efforts to solidify their own positions on the Spratly Islands. The attitude portrayed by Manila is, particularly concerning, as it has not only endeavoured to construct forward-operating bases, but it also has destroyed the precious-few, but hopeful, opportunities of cooperation with Beijing and the other ASEAN states.

Thus far, the US role has been somewhat benign. To avoid stoking a conflict, the US must abstain from issues of territoriality in the region. If not, its involvement may very-well give the likes of the Philippines the final motivation and reassurance that it needs to expand its campaign on the islands—a move that will surely see diplomatic, economic, and military reprisals from Beijing, and even possibly, other ASEAN states.

Whilst a plethora of examples could highlight an argument aiming to prosecute China, at the very least, it must be accepted that the South China Sea (or the West Philippine Sea as Manila has taken to calling it), is a deeply complex environment. The only thing that is clear-cut, then, is that all sides are keen to propel their own interests, even if it

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means subverting potential cooperative projects.

This essay's aim has been to show that blindly accepting that everything is the fault of the PLAN and China, prematurely forgoes any neutral discussion. As the strategic balance, when altered, may well result in a drastic miscalculation by any of the parties, the US and other non-directly involved actors have to utilize a similar balanced appraisal of the situation. In the interest of Beijing and Washington, both must police the global commons and maintain ease and freedom of navigation. These converging viewpoints have to recognize that cooperation and the status quo is the only way to ensure a positive-sum outcome in the disputes.

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