

# The Potential for Sino-US Conflict in the South China Sea

Written by John Hemmings

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JOHN HEMMINGS, MAR 21 2011

Arguably, the most significant fact in international relations at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the gradual emergence of China as a regional and global power, and the *relative* decline of what can be loosely termed the 'status quo powers' and their most powerful member, the United States. There is a strong debate[1] on whether China is itself a status quo power, or a revisionist power, and this debate becomes more divisive when viewed from an Asian Pacific context since the growth of China's military spending[2] is beginning to translate into hard power on a regional level. The projection of these new capabilities are viewed with concern by the US, its Asian Pacific allies, and other regional powers which has driven the 'China threat' discourse, characterising defence and security debates in Washington DC, Tokyo, Manila, Seoul, and occasionally Canberra over the last decade. While it is not apparent that China's interests will directly challenge those of the status quo powers on a global level, there are structural and ideological reasons for the US and its regional allies states to view China's emergence as an Asian military power with apprehension. There is after all a pattern of rising authoritarian or single-party powers coming into conflict with liberal democracies and for their part, liberal democracies tend to view those states that dismiss or disregard the application of their own values and principles with hostility. Rising authoritarian powers, for their part, carry with them some of the seeds for potential conflict. As closed states, their foreign policy-making tends to be opaque, secretive and difficult to predict[3]. Furthermore, the governing elites in these types of states tend to utilize nationalism to maintain legitimacy and right 'historical injustices', projecting military power as an outward expression of their new status. Many of these factors can be seen at work in modern China, the use of nationalism to legitimize continued Communist Party rule[4], the growing influence of the military on policy-making[5], and the use of the 'century of humiliation' discourse in Chinese school textbooks. Following a number of mini-crises in the South China Sea this year, apprehension about China's rise is rapidly turning into outright concern. Policy-makers Washington DC, must now seek to answer two questions: one, are there any regions where US and Chinese strategic interests conflict, and two, if so, what is the likeliness of that conflict harming greater US hegemony?

While it is uncertain that Chinese policy-makers have substantially moved away from the strategic principles espoused by Deng Xiaoping[6] in the 1970s, it is possible that today's Chinese policymakers and military planners are reacting to what could be called 'rolling ambition', that's to say, they are willing to seize opportunities for extending effective Chinese control over waters and trade routes that are of immense strategic importance to continued economic growth and are increasingly willing to do this using military force. Over the last decade, there have been an increasing number of maritime and air incidents on China's doorstep in the South China Sea, based around China's UNCLOS claims, which indicate that this 'rolling ambition' has already in fact begun, and that we are perhaps seeing the first signs of a more confident Chinese grand strategy, one which seeks preponderance over China's periphery. In April and then in August, China responded to rising tensions over rival maritime UNCLOS claims with Vietnam and other claimants by dispatching large naval flotillas from northern bases to the region[7] for live-firing exercises. A war of words with the United States was started after Hillary Clinton called *freedom of the seas* in the region a US 'national interest', a response to a senior Chinese official Dai Bingguo's labeling of the region, a 'core interest', a phrase with sovereignty connotations, reserved usually for Taiwan and Tibet. What factors, then, might drive Chinese ambitions in the region? China's long history as Asia's hegemonic power serves as a model for Chinese planners, perhaps not in actual territorial control, but in terms of a sphere of influence. Chinese academics and thinkers tend to view the US presence and its alliance system in Asia as relics of another era, and the

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US as recent 19<sup>th</sup> century interlopers into what has been a traditionally Chinese-influenced region. Furthermore, Chinese thinkers tend to see the US as a declining power, with itself in the ascendancy. Finally, China's growing need for resources, and the fact that economic disruption could lead to public dissatisfaction, and even internal political violence internally, mean that the control of supply routes and energy resources are of great strategic concern for Beijing.

The South China Sea is a crucial energy lifeline for China, and contains large gas reserves and rich fishing waters. There is a strategic impulse for military planners on both sides to secure the waterway or at least to deny access to it to the other during any contingency. Chinese planners will have noted that, unlike the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Straits or East China Sea, the region is far from both US bases and lines of supply, as well as being off-radar for both the US public and Congress. A Sino-Vietnamese naval conflict, for example, would have much less impact in the United States than say, a Sino-Taiwanese or Sino-Japanese conflict, and Pentagon officials would have difficulty defining or justifying a US military response. Finally, unlike the Taiwan Straits or Senkaku Islands, Chinese planners can take a creeping approach to the region, incrementally establishing de facto control, without the risk of confronting US forces openly. The crucial factor for the United States is the place that the waterway plays in greater US strategy. If China is able to secure the South China Sea in its entirety, three US allies will immediately have their most important trade and energy supplies at risk. While China might not seek to cut Tokyo, Seoul or Taipei off without cause, control over the region would in itself be a subtle form of pressure not to risk Beijing's ire. China's willingness to constrict resources as a form of foreign policy pressure has already been revealed, as when for the first time in September 2010, it severed the supply of rare earth metals to Japan after the fishing boat incident. Given that the US alliance system is built on the guarantee that it will safeguard its allies' energy supplies, China could conceivably undermine the US Pacific system without firing a single shot.

The Asia Pacific today is characterized by a US-lead security order, established in 1945, maritime in nature, and dominated by PACOM, one of the largest naval commands in the world. Prior to 1940, US forces were fixed around Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines; today, the US forward deploys its forces in partnership with allies like Japan and South Korea. Throughout the Cold War, the US Navy's self-appointed mission has been to guarantee safe waters for trade and to safeguard energy supplies from the Middle East to these allies. The conceptual framework used by the US to underpin these strategic policies is that of protecting and 'the global commons', that's to say, to safeguard with a military presence waters that are of common interest to the wider community. Seen through this lens, the South China Sea's is one of the most strategically vital 'commons' in the world. China's claims to the South China Sea are legally dubious at best, and deserve careful attention but, their greater significance is as a backdrop to the shifting power play between China and the United States in Asia, and the long-term trends that are pushing this competition. The very fact that China is rising sets the tone of the relationship, and affects China's relations with its most immediate neighbours, which must balance security concerns with economic interdependence with Beijing. As it rises, China has begun to look at ways of protecting and controlling its periphery, its SLOC and its energy supplies. This would seem to be a natural instinct for a rising power, but the problem is that it has a direct impact on the order that already exists in the region; indeed, China has thus far been a major beneficiary of this arrangement[8]. The key to maintaining peace between the US and China will be how Washington and Beijing handle this sensitive and potentially explosive strategic situation.

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[1]Alaistair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, Vol 27 No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 5-56

[2] Sean Chen, John Feffer, *China's Military Spending: Soft Rise or Hard Threat?*, Foreign Policy in Focus, May 2010

[3] David Shambaugh, 'Coping with a Conflicted China', *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2011

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[4] Christopher R. Hughes, 'After 1989: Nationalism and the New Global Elite' in A Kipnis, *Contemporary Chinese Society and Politics*, (London, Routledge, 2009), pp. 361-394

[5] Linda Jacobson, Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, SIPRI Policy Paper 26 September 2010

[6] Deng's strategy could be summarized as avoid conflict, develop national power, and advance incrementally.

[7] <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-16-2010/october/chinas-three-point-naval-strategy/>

[8] [http://www.gmfus.org/galleries/pdf/GMFPower20Shift20Asia20Paper\\_for\\_web200128.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/galleries/pdf/GMFPower20Shift20Asia20Paper_for_web200128.pdf)