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Geopolitical Insecurities and Territorial Grievances in East Asia

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JOHN HICKMAN, DEC 31 2012

East Asia is awash with territorial disputes that journalists for news sources outside the region clearly find difficult to fathom. Nationalisms, history, fishing and hydrocarbons all figure prominently in their explanations for individual disputes. What is missing is an explanation for the larger phenomenon.

Writing for the *New York Times*, Choe Sang-Hun explained the Dokdo/Takeshima Island dispute between South Korea and Japan as the product of nationalist agitation exploiting bitter memories of Japanese colonial rule and territorial decisions made by the United States at the end of the Second World War.[1] Also in the *New York Times*, Jane Perlez emphasized competition for hydrocarbons in the dispute over the South China Sea between Vietnam, the Philippines and China.[2] Writing for the *Guardian*, Tania Branigan attributed that conflict to competition for “energy resources” and “growing pressure from nationalists.”[3] Writing for the *Washington Post*, Chico Harlan attributed the disputes between China, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines over various “tiny islands” to competition for hydrocarbons and nationalism that is “intensified by social media.”[4] Writing for the *Australian*, Greg Sheridan simplified matters by blaming Chinese nationalism for the dispute over the South China Sea and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute in the East China Sea between China and Japan.[5]

Professional analysts offer much the same. An International Crisis Group report characterized the South China Sea dispute as being driven by competition for hydrocarbons and fish stocks, new military capability and nationalism.[6] A *Foreign Affairs* article by Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Thomas J. Christiansen described Beijing’s acerbic foreign policy turn on the South China Sea and other issues as motivated by Chinese pundits and bloggers who feel freer to engage in nationalist agitation than criticism of domestic policy.[7] An *Asia Pacific Bulletin* article by Marquis Clayton described the same South China Sea dispute as being the result of “historical animosities and increasingly emotional resource nationalism.”[8]

Missing from these explanations is a reason why they would bubble up together in East Asia. Although technological advances are undoubtedly part of the answer – hydrocarbons may be extracted more easily and populations are more connected by social media – this is also true in other regions with outstanding disputes over islands. Just as importantly, the interest of the state is more than the sum of corporate profits and popular passions mobilized via social media.

The modern state wants territory, even in the form of Exclusive Economic Zones, because it enhances national security. Historically, states possessing more territory have tended to survive and emerge victorious in their armed conflicts with states possessing less territory. Territory encompasses multiple and sometimes unrecognized power resources.[9]

The unspoken grievance is that China and South Korea gained little new territory as Exclusive Economic Zones in the scramble to carve up the oceans during the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Despite their large economies and populations, China and South Korea were entitled to claim only fractions of the areas claimed by the ten states that received the largest shares: the five Anglo-Saxon powers + France, Russia, Indonesia, Japan and Portugal. The United States and France each acquired more than 11.3 million square

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kilometers of the oceans. By comparison, China may claim a mere 879,000 square kilometers – less than the 923,322 square kilometers that the Maldives received. Given that China has the largest population on the planet, the second largest national economy and the fourth largest pre-UNCLOS land area, awarding 31 other states more area is another humiliation for a people whose modern national narrative consists largely of humiliation by other powers.

If the discrepancy between economic and military power on the one hand and new territory under UNCLOS on the other is not as extreme in the case of South Korea, it must still rankle. South Korea can claim only 300,851 square kilometers, less than the 308,480 square kilometers for Nauru.

New territory matters most to states that are geopolitically insecure. Today China confronts a degree of geopolitical vulnerability comparable to Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Chinese political and military elites looking at a world map are likely to experience much the same sort of geopolitical claustrophobia that German political and military elites experienced a century ago. Like Germany just before the First World War, China is a continental power that has grown wealthy through industrial exports but is heavily dependent on imported raw materials and whose access to the sea is more limited than the other powers, with the exception of Russia. To complete the historical analogy, early 20th century German elites also felt shortchanged in the Scramble for Africa. Here is how German General Friedrich von Bernhardi captured that feeling at the time in his book *Germany and the Next War*.

In the most recent partition of the earth, that of Africa, victorious Germany came off badly. France, her defeated opponent, was able to found the second largest colonial Empire in the world; England appropriated the most important portions; even small and neutral Belgium claimed a comparatively large and valuable share; Germany was forced to be content with some modest strips of territory.[10]

Although the general devotes much of the text in that book to expressing the German nationalist and militarist narrative in all its pointy helmeted glory, it is nonetheless clear in that passage and others that geopolitical insecurity dictated aggression.

Decision-making in Beijing is opaque but almost no imagination is needed to conceive of contemporary Chinese elites perceiving a comparable geopolitical insecurity and nursing a comparable grievance about our “most recent partition of the earth.” Beijing has more at stake than the profits from exploitable hydrocarbons and the content of blog posts. By implication, appeasing or deterring China will be pricey. However, either option is likely to be much cheaper than fighting them.

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[1] Choe Sang-Hun. “Fight Over Rocky Islets Opens Old Wounds Between South Korea and Japan.” *New York Times*. October 5, 2012. A8.

[2] Jane Perlez. “Alarm as China Issues Rules for Disputed Area.” *New York Times*. December 1, 2012.

[3] Tania Branigan. “Chinese Frigate Runs Aground in Disputed Part of the South China Sea.” *Guardian*. July 13, 2012.

[4] Chico Harlan. “Sea of Trouble Surrounds Tiny Islands Amid Asian Land Disputes.” *Washington Post*. August 12, 2012. A13.

[5] Greg Sheridan. “Beijing Worrying Many Neighbors.” *Australian*. September 27, 2012.

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[6] International Crisis Group. "Stirring Up the South China Sea (II): Regional Responses." July 24, 2012: 1.

[7] Thomas J. Christensen. "The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 90, No. 2. March/April 2011.

[8] Marquis Clayton. "Uncomfortable Truths: Breaking the Impasse in the South China Sea." *Asia Pacific Bulletin*. 178. August 24, 2012.

[9] John Hickman. "The New Territorial Imperative." *Comparative Strategy*. Vol. 29, No. 5, November 2010.

[10] Friedrich von Bernhardi. 1914. *Germany and the Next War*. New York: Longmans. Pp. 66-67.

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