

Testing the Waters in the South China Sea

Written by Zhiqun Zhu

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ZHIQUN ZHU, NOV 26 2015

On October 27, 2015, the US navy conducted a high-profile freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea. USS Lassen sailed into 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef controlled by China. China, as expected, protested strongly, including summoning US ambassador in Beijing Max Baucus. US Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the US military would continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows. Indeed, two weeks later two US B-52 strategic bombers flew near artificial Chinese-built islands in the South China Sea.

What do recent events in the South China Sea reveal about US-China relations? What is likely to happen in the near future?

First of all, the South China Sea tension is a case of conflict between an existing power and a rising power. Though China cannot and will not replace the United States as the dominant nation in the international system anytime soon, the power gap between the two countries is being narrowed very quickly. From a power transition perspective, China's rise challenges US supremacy, and the United States will do everything possible to stunt China's rapid growth.

Distrust and misunderstanding run deep in the US-China relationship and sometimes lead to confrontational approaches. Not a claimant to the disputed islands, the United States has conveniently used 'freedom of navigation' (FON) to get involved in the South China Sea to halt China's assertive activities there. The United States is deeply concerned about growing Chinese power and influence while China feels uncomfortable about US FONOPs and close-range surveillance along China's coast. The United States is also anxious about the Beijing-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the ambitious 'One Belt, One Road' program; while China is suspicious of real intentions of US rebalance to Asia and the TPP trade negotiations that have excluded China. In the case of TPP, the Chinese wonder: are countries like Vietnam more ready for such a high-level trade deal than China?

Secondly, USS Lassen's sail is highly symbolic and not intended to be provocative; China's reaction has been measured, indicating neither side is willing to escalate the tension. The United States demonstrated its will to sail and fly freely in the South China Sea and reassured its Asian allies amid growing fear about forceful Chinese behavior.

The United States is likely to continue FONOPs in the South China Sea routinely but in a more low-key manner. China will protest whenever a US warship or surveillance aircraft enters the area claimed by China, but neither side will deliberately trigger a confrontation. The United States is unlikely to take further actions to stop China's land reclamation in disputed waters. As in trade and cybersecurity, instead of heading towards a collision course, the two countries seem to have established a working protocol for issues they disagree on.

Thirdly, the two countries seem to be adjusting, sometimes clumsily, to the changing global power structure with the aim of avoiding the so-called 'Thucydides trap' associated with power transitions. Through initiatives such as China's 'new type of great power relations' and America's 'rebalance to Asia', the two countries are developing new strategies to engage each other, though the true objectives of such strategies are murky.

Freedom of navigation has never been a real problem in the region. The Subi Reef is a low tide elevation and does

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not enjoy 12 nautical mile territorial waters, and China has yet to announce 12 nautical mile territorial waters for those man-made islands. So this whole episode seems quite theatrical, which prompted US Senate Armed Services committee chairman John McCain to ask: is USS Lassen's operation an 'innocent passage' or a more provocative act to contest China's sovereignty?

With China's growing power comes its expanding global reach. On September 2, 2015, five Chinese navy ships operated in the Bering Sea off the coast of Alaska for the first time in history. The United States publicly stated that Chinese warships' innocent passage was consistent with international law, but privately the United States has become more vigilant of China's ambitions.

Finally, it is not easy to manage this most complex bilateral relationship, but the relationship has become more mature now. In the past, regular exchanges, especially military ones, often became victim to diplomatic disruptions in the relationship. But this time, military exchanges have continued. Following USS Lassen's sail in October, Chinese navy ships visited Florida and California in early November, and USS Stethem visited Shanghai in mid-November as scheduled. The two navies also conducted a combined search and rescue exercise near Shanghai. Posturing in the South China Sea notwithstanding, the two countries are conducting business as usual.

The US-China relationship is global in nature as their cooperation and competition shift from one region to another. Moves by third parties such as Japan, Taiwan, Russia or North Korea can pose challenges for the US-China relationship. For example, US encouragement of Japan's patrol in the South China Sea is ill-conceived and will only create new tensions between China and Japan. And if a future leader of Taiwan pushes for de jure independence for Taiwan, the United States and China will face a real trouble.

Understanding the inherent risks associated with the unfolding power transition, the United States and China are learning to work with each other. With diplomacy, visionary leadership, and expanded exchanges at all levels, the United States and China will be able to maximize their cooperation, manage their differences, and coexist peacefully in the 21st century.

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