

# The South China Sea: A Challenging Test of the International Order

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## **The Enduring and Evolving Nature of Power in the Asia-Pacific**

Of course, those age-old dynamics of strength and weakness require an international system to check them because they are so alluring. Our post-World War II order of rules, norms, protocols, and courts create an interlocking lattice of vigilance against coercive power dynamics. Yet power and the exercise of coercion have become far more nuanced since Thucydides diagnosed the central dilemma of international relations. While Athenian triremes are easy to tell apart from the Athenian Coast Guard, it is a distinction that is becoming increasingly blurry for the contemporary maritime realm. Indeed, though economics has always been a crucial part of international relations, the sheer breadth of interconnectedness of the modern global marketplace further complicates the exercise of diplomacy, muddying otherwise purely political or security priorities while also making the exercise of coercive power easier to disguise or dissemble. Modern dilemmas around security and economics – as well as demographics and other variables – are transforming the practice of statecraft. Foreign policy analysis and the continued health of our international system require more than ever a nuanced appreciation of modern power and its development.

The Asia-Pacific is a paradigmatic example of how the foundations of power can change relatively rapidly and carry with them profound geopolitical effects. At the start of World War II, Japan was the economic and military centre of gravity in Asia. Powered by its regionally early industrialisation, the Japanese state made a strong bid to exert its power over much of the continent and Pacific region. Its economy and military were without peer, even though it faced competition in population by regional demographic heavyweights China and Indonesia. By sheer force of numbers China was able to mount significant resistance against Japanese occupation, but it was not until the United States' entry into the Pacific theatre that Japanese forces were rolled back to their home isles. It took years, millions of lives, and a broad international alliance to repel the aggression of a small island nation with a strong military and economic advantage.

Today military and economic strength persists as the conventional source of power, although demography and globalisation have driven significant reformulation of that power for our modern age. It is true that China's military modernisation program, pursued now for multiple decades

with considerable resources and speed, has improved its ability to leverage force as a source of influence. More importantly, however, China has marshalled a source of power arguably more potent to our contemporary world: its economic demography. It is true that China is still a developing country, with economic challenges and many millions of the world's poor. But Beijing's economic liberalisation has resulted in a marketplace so massive that it is very nearly regionally monopolistic. By moving the largest number of people out of poverty in a single generation, China, through economic policy, has established its comprehensive national power. Though few would argue that China could prevail over the United States in a direct conflict in the present day, Beijing is beginning to prevail against Washington in today's non-military arenas of competition. Particularly in Southeast Asia, China's comprehensive national might towers disproportionately over its neighbours.

Coercion of Different Stripes in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea, consequently, is an extreme example of how these power imbalances are weakening the international order designed to remedy them. The South China Sea is a vitally important waterway and, as a result, the definition of a global public good. One-third of all the world's commercial shipping flows through its waters, worth five trillion US dollars. It is resource-rich, holding proven reserves of at least seven billion barrels of oil and 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. It is also thoroughly contested, with Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei holding competing claims to the area's various reefs, rocks, islands, and reclaimed land. Yet, though there are at least six different claimants jockeying for territory and resources in the South China Sea, the narrative of the area's tensions has largely been defined by each country's claim *in contrast to China*. This is for good reason, as China's conduct in the region has been to aggressively flout the aforementioned lattice of international norms and laws – most notably that of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

This aggressive and norms-damaging behaviour has taken many forms. Most visibly, perhaps, have been Chinese island building and maritime confrontations. Citing historic rights to vast swaths of the South China Sea within its so-called Nine-Dash Line, Beijing has acted in ways to make those legally absurd claims a fait accompli. Prior to an UNCLOS-chartered Permanent Court of Arbitration decision clarifying the definition of legal islands, China has engaged in extraordinary dredging operations to build islands in strategic locations throughout the South China Sea, especially inside the Paracel and Spratley islands. These artificial mid-ocean outposts ostensibly served two purposes. First, they could buttress Chinese claims inside the Nine-Dash Line by way of the maritime entitlements – such as a 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) Beijing could assert surrounds each of their artificial islands. Second, the various reef-made-islands could serve as strategic staging grounds, serving as host to weapons and sensors that would enhance conventional force projection in the region. The first use has been all but nullified in the eyes of the world by the arbitral court's ruling that China's islands, being artificial, are not entitled to exclusive economic zones. The second, more outwardly coercive use, however, remains intact precisely because it does not depend on the consent of other nations to be as such. Indeed, if anything the preparation of these islands for military use has only accelerated, most notably by the construction of bomber-grade airfields, hardened aircraft hangers, and sites suspected to be undergoing preparations for missile launcher installation.

But while these islands serve as conspicuous, stationary testaments to Chinese expansionism, Beijing's more mobile maritime confrontations have been similarly provocative and weakening to global rules and norms. Chinese Coast Guard vessels have routinely harassed and intimidated civilian vessels from various countries, particularly fishing boats operating in areas China considers its own. When Chinese oil rig HD-981 crossed into Vietnam-claimed waters in 2014 and conducted weeks of extraction operations, it was accompanied by eighty vessels, many belonging to the Chinese Coast Guard, to foil Vietnamese efforts to interdict those operations. Beijing has doubled down on the use of an aggressive Coast Guard – which already employs multiple retired PLA naval vessels that have been simply painted white, and engages in aggressive

ramming maneuvers. In late 2015 and early 2016 China began building massive new ships, collisions with which would be catastrophic, to add to its supposedly civilian Coast Guard fleet.

At the same time that China has been weaponising the raw tonnage of its Coast Guard, it has also begun to assert its economic weight. By virtue of its size, China's market access has become indispensable to economies across the region. Beijing's 2010 decision to suspend rare earth mineral shipments to Japan over disputes in the East China Sea has not gone unnoticed. In addition to the aforementioned resource extraction in disputed waters, China has deprived private fishing vessels of access to traditional fisheries, not only causing economic headaches for dependent communities, but also raising the spectre of food insecurity.

Indeed, China's hard power and its economic power have both provided sufficient coercion to deter a coordinated diplomatic response by competing claimants, but have also remained just below the threshold of provocation necessary to merit a more forceful international response.

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