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RICH REGION, STRONG STATES: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SECURITY IN ASIA

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Accessing Future Flashpoints in the South China Sea

Brad KAPLAN

SUMMARY

Confrontations between China and other rival claimants in the South China Sea have gained increasing prominence in regional and international media, most recently during a 2012 standoff between Manila and Beijing over sovereignty of the Scarborough Shoals. The potential for miscalculation and escalation during these confrontations is of concern to policymakers in Washington in that the waterway is of vital strategic interest to the United States, and several of the rival claimants facing China are defense partners. A serious confrontation between China and one of these defense partners could well result in a broader crisis between China and the United States. This paper examines data relating to “significant” military confrontations in the South China Sea from 1974 to the present in an attempt to identify trends in the confrontations, the most likely future flashpoints, and the most likely antagonists. The brief concludes with policy recommendations related to deterring aggressive assertions in the South China Sea.

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BACKGROUND

The South China Sea (SCS) is a major sea lane of communication for commercial ships, connecting oil from the Middle East with ports along the Pacific Rim and Americas. Maritime resources in the area include fisheries and hydrocarbon deposits. While the extent of these hydrocarbon deposits is debated, the U.S. Geological Survey mission estimates the SCS holds more than 725 billion cubic meters of recoverable gas and 28 billion barrels of oil.¹ Characterized by predominantly shallow waters with numerous reefs, rocks, and shoals, the sea stretches roughly from the Strait of Malacca in the Southwest to the Taiwan Strait in the Northeast.

Sovereignty within the SCS has been disputed by China and Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. All of these nations, with the exception of Brunei, have military outposts in the disputed waters, mostly in the Spratly Islands. Historically, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines have been the primary coastal states involved in significant confrontations.² In the past, escalation of such confrontations was limited by lack of military power among the claimants. As China's military power has grown substantially, that dynamic is beginning to change, particularly as other claimants expand maritime security zones and increase economic exploitation in the disputed areas. Given the importance of the region, such confrontations have potential to precipitate rapidly spiraling instability that could potentially result in a confrontation between the United States and China.³ A map of the SCS including overlapping claimed territorial areas is shown in Figure 1.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

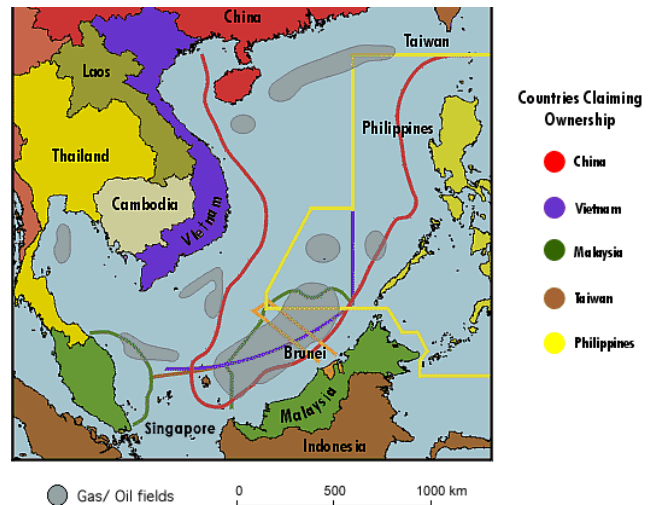
Data for this study were derived from the Center for a New American Security's web-based research tool "Flashpoints: Security in the East and South China Sea" (<http://www.cnas.org/flashpoints>). For the purpose of this study, "significant" confrontations were defined as one of the following:

- Naval forces exchanging gunfire between (surface engagement)
- Collisions between naval forces and fishing boats (surface collision)

1 U.S. Energy Information Administration, "South China Sea," <http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=SCS>, retrieved October 8, 2012.

2 B. Glaser, "Armed Clash in the South China Sea," East Asia Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 14, April 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/east-asia/armed-clash-south-china-sea/p27883>.

3 Ibid.



Source: <http://www.southchinasea.org/files/2011/08/Overlapping-EEZ-Claims-and-Oil-Fields.png>. Used with permission of www.southchinasea.org.

Figure 1. SCS and Occupied Areas

- Collisions between military aircraft (air collisions)
- Naval forces seizing or firing on fishing vessels (fisheries incident)
- Naval forces harassing military or other vessels (surface incident)
- Military ground forces or aircraft harassing or firing on aircraft (air incident)

Application of this selection criteria resulted in identification of 30 significant confrontations from 1974 to the present. These confrontations and their associated data are summarized in the appendix. Statistical analysis was conducted to examine: 1) the frequency that each country was involved in confrontations (Who); 2) the nature of the confrontation (What); 3) the date of the confrontation (When); and 4) the location of the confrontation (Where). The resulting tabular data and corresponding percentages are summarized in Table 1.

KEY FINDINGS

Several interesting findings emerged from the data analysis. First, China was involved in 83 percent of the confrontations, followed by the Philippines (43 percent), and Vietnam (40 percent). Encounters between other SCS claimants were relatively infrequent. While the United States was not involved in an SCS incident until 2001, the number of confrontations between the United States and China has increased since 2009.

Second, the application of deadly force—that is, firing shots to destroy or disable—accounted for a

Who ¹	China	Vietnam	Philippines	Taiwan	United States	Indonesia	Malaysia	Brunei	
	25 (.83)	12 (.40)	13 (.43)	1 (.03)	3 (.10)	2 (.07)	1 (.03)	0 (.00)	
What ²	Surface engagement	Surface incident	Surface collision	Fisheries incident	Air collision	Air incident			
	3 (.10)	11 (.37)	2 (.07)	10 (.33)	1 (.03)	3 (.10)			
When ³	1974–1979	1980–1984	1985–1989	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–present	
	1 (.03)	0(.00)	1 (.03)	2 (.07)	11 (.37)	4 (.13)	2 (.07)	9 (.30)	
Where ⁴	Paracels	Spratlys	MY EEZ	RPEEZ	Scarborough Shoal	Reed Bank	VN EEZ	ID EEZ	Hainan Island
	3 (.10)	11 (.37)	1(.03)	2 (.07)	4 (.13)	1 (.03)	3(.10)	2 (.07)	3 (.10)

¹Percentage equals number of times country was involved in a confrontation over total number of confrontations

²Percentage equals number of occurrences by confrontation type over total number of confrontations

³Percentage equals number of confrontations grouped in five year intervals over total number of confrontations

⁴Percentage equals number of confrontations by area over total number of confrontations

Table 1. Summary of Confrontation Statistics

relatively small number of the total encounters (10 percent). Conversely, harassment of surface vessels (including collisions) and incidents involving fishing boats accounted for 77 percent of the confrontations. Incidents involving aircraft have been relatively infrequent (13 percent). China, the Philippines, and Vietnam were participants in 85 percent of the incidents in which shots were fired.

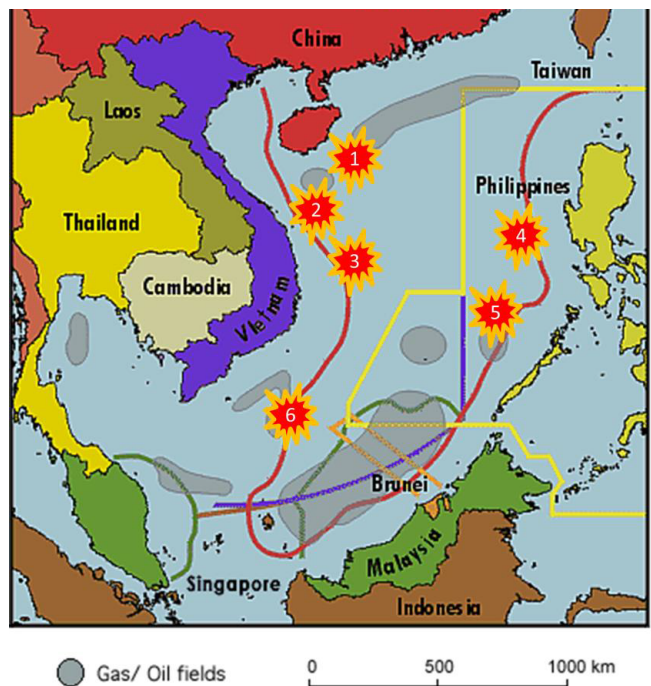
Third, there were two periods in which relatively few confrontations occurred: from 1974 to 1994 (4) and from 2000 to 2009 (6). The high-water mark for incidents was 11 in 1995–1999, and this number has been approached in the first three years of the period 2010–2014 (9).

Fourth, 47 percent of the encounters occurred in the vicinity of the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands, with an additional 23 percent occurring in the vicinity of the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Only 10 percent of the encounters occurred in Vietnam’s EEZ, with two of the three incidents associated with China’s interference in Vietnam’s oil exploration. The number of incidents in and around Hainan Island—all involving the United States and China—has increased since 2001. Figure 2 overlays the locations of the most frequent encounters on the map shown in Figure 1.

ASSESSMENT OF FLASHPOINTS

Above and beyond sovereignty for its own sake, the pattern of confrontations between China, the Philippines, and Vietnam is likely to reflect the importance that leaders from the respective countries place on fishery and, more importantly, hydrocarbon resources in

Figure 2. Locations of the Most Frequent SCS Encounters



Flashpoints key:

1. Vicinity Hainan Island (10 percent)
2. Vicinity Paracel Islands (10 percent)
3. Vicinity of Vietnam EEZ (10 percent)
4. Vicinity Scarborough Shoals (13 percent)
5. Vicinity Philippine EEZ (.07 percent)
6. Vicinity Spratlys (.37 percent)

Source: <http://www.southchinasea.org/files/2011/08/Overlapping-EEZ-Claims-and-Oil-Fields.png>. Bae map used with permission of www.southchinasea.org. Flashpoint locations added by author.

the region. China's growing military power provides Beijing with the capability to more frequently patrol the disputed region, surging maritime forces when necessary to aggressively assert sovereign claims. At this point, there is little that either the Philippines or Vietnam can do in response to such a show of force.⁴ Additionally, Washington finds itself increasingly involved in SCS encounters as Beijing's patience with long-standing air surveillance missions and military maritime research along China's littoral erodes.⁵

While the use of deadly force in the SCS has decreased since 1974, the overall frequency of confrontations has been increasing steadily, and straight-line projections for the period 2010–2014 suggest that such incidents will reach a record high. Of note, the first major confrontation between China and Vietnam in 1974 occurred after the U.S. withdrawal of forces from Vietnam and its surrounding maritime area. The period 1974 to 1994 is of interest in that only three encounters occurred over a 20-year period. This period of relative stability was followed by five years in which nine confrontations occurred. One possible explanation for this dynamic is that the U.S. military left its bases in the Philippines in 1992, and without this deterrent presence Beijing has been able to more aggressively assert its sovereign claims in the region, particularly those involving the Philippines.⁶

As alluded to previously, it is quite likely that confrontations in the South China Sea will increase in frequency as well as scope and intensity. Indeed, trends suggest that an all-time high number of confrontations will occur in the period 2010–2014. Among a number of factors that may contribute to this dynamic are Beijing's increasing confidence in its regional influence relative to the United States, the PLA Navy's rapid modernization, and the PLA's increasing focus on "new historic missions" that include safeguarding sovereignty in the maritime domain.⁷ Given the primacy of resource exploitation, the most likely flashpoint

areas for these confrontations are in disputed oil exploration zones along Vietnam's littoral, in the vicinity of the Philippines EEZ, and in fisheries zones proximate to the Spratlys, Paracels, and the Scarborough Shoal. Secondly, there is an increasing likelihood that U.S. military surveillance aircraft and research vessels will be involved in a significant number of confrontations similar to the EP-3 incident in 2001.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The official U.S. position has been to not take sides in SCS sovereignty disputes and to urge the countries concerned to resolve their issues in a peaceful manner.⁸ This policy notwithstanding, the United States clearly cannot afford to adopt a passive SCS strategy. The potential for miscalculation and escalation in future SCS confrontations should be of immediate concern to policymakers given the U.S. defense relationship with a number of the rival claimants facing China, including a bilateral defense treaty with the Philippines. Should a standoff rapidly spiral out of control, it is altogether possible that the United States would be dragged into a confrontation between China and one of these rival claimants, perhaps precipitating a broader crisis between China and the United States. Even if such a development were not the case, the consequences of a significant encounter between China and a rival claimant could well have a significant impact on U.S. regional security concerns.

It is unlikely that the United States can continue to unilaterally maintain stability in the South China Sea through military presence. Washington should seek to deter future aggressive assertions by all parties by working through and with regional partners and allies, including China. This goal should be pursued through a six-tiered approach, to include:

- Multilateral fora in which peaceful resolution of SCS disputes is pursued, including the development of a binding code of conduct for the countries concerned. Active U.S. leadership in this process is critical.
- Bilateral consultations with allies and defense partners in which the U.S. priority on maintaining SCS stability is stressed.
- Bilateral consultations with China which stress both U.S. neutrality relative to SCS claims and its resolve to maintain stability in the area.

4 Ian Storey, "Asia's Changing Balance of Military Power: Implications for the South China Sea Dispute," in *Maritime Energy Resources in Asia: Energy and Geopolitics*, National Bureau of Asian Research, December 2011, <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=564>.

5 S. V. Lawrence, and D. MacDonald, "U.S.-China Relations: Policy Issues," Congressional Research Service, August 2, 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41108.pdf>.

6 D. E. Sanger, "Philippines Orders U.S. to Leave Strategic Navy Base at Subic Bay," *New York Times*, December 28, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/28/world/philippines-orders-us-to-leave-strategic-navy-base-at-subic-bay.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>. Accessed October 8, 2012.

7 C. A. Cooper, "The PLA Navy's New Historic Missions" (RAND, 2009), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT332.html>.

8 K. Campbell, "Maritime Territorial Disputes and Sovereignty Issues in Asia," testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2012/09/197982.htm>.

Appendix: Summary of Selected Confrontations

Date	Countries Involved	Type of Confrontation	Location	Notes
Jan 1974	CH-VN	Surface engagement	Paracels	Battle of the Paracel Islands, CH takes control of the Crescent Group. Thirty-six troops from both sides.
Jan 1988	CH-VN	Surface engagement	Spratlys	Johnson Reef Skirmish. 74 VN sailors killed.
Mar 1992	CH-VN	Surface engagement	Spratlys	Inconclusive skirmish vic. da Lac Reef.
Jul 1994	CH-VN	Surface incident	VN EEZ	CH military vessels turn away VN commercial vessels vic. of an oil rig.
Mar 1995	CH-RP	Surface incident	Spratlys	RP evicts CH from Mischief Reef.
Mar 1995	CN-MY	Fisheries incident	MY EEZ	MY navy fires on CH trawler.
Mar 1995	TW-VN	Surface incident	Spratlys	TW artillery fires on VN freighter.
Jan 1996	CH-RP	Surface engagement	RP EEZ	Inclusive skirmish vic. Capones island.
Jan 1998	CH-RP	Fisheries incident	Scarborough Shoal	RP arrests 22 CH fishermen vic. Scarborough Shoal.
Jan 1998	VN-RP	Fisheries incident	Spratlys	VN fires on RP fishing boat vic. Spratlys.
May 1999	CH-RP	Surface incident	Spratlys	CH harass grounded RP naval vessel vic. Spratlys.
May 1999	CH-RP	Surface collision	Scarborough Shoal	CH fishing boat sunk by RP naval vessel.
Jun 1999	CH-RP	Surface collision	Scarborough Shoal	CH fishing boat sunk by RP naval vessel.
Oct 1999	MY-RP	Air incident	Spratlys	Confrontation between 2 MY fighters and 2 RP surveillance planes.
Oct 1999	VN-RP	Air incident	Spratlys	VN engages RP reconnaissance aircraft vic. Spratlys.
Jan 2000	CH-RP	Fisheries incident	RP EEZ	RP shoots CH fishing boat vic Palawan Island, killing 1.
Mar 2001	CH-RP	Fisheries incident	Spratlys	RP boards 14 Chinese-flagged ships, confiscates their catches and ejects vessels.
Apr 2001	CH-US	Air collision	Hainan Island	CH fighter collides with US EP3 vic. Hainan, killing 1 CH. 23 U.S. crewmembers detained.
Aug 2002	VN-RP	Air incident	Spratlys	VN fires warning shots at RP reconnaissance planes.
Mar 2009	CH-US	Surface incident	Hainan Island	5 CH ships surround and harass the USNS <i>Impeccable</i> .
Jun 2009	CH-US	Surface incident	Hainan Island	CH sub damages USS <i>McCain</i> 's towed array.
Jun 2010	CH-ID	Fisheries incident	ID EEZ	ID patrol boats confront CH fishing vessels that are escorted by armed fisheries management vessels.
Jul 2010	CH-ID	Fisheries incident	ID EEZ	CH and ID naval ships seize control of fishing vessels suspected of illegal fishing.
Feb 2011	CH-RP	Fisheries incident	Spratlys	CH frigate fires warning shots at an RP vessel after warning it to leave the area near Jackson Atoll.
May 2011	CH-VN	Surface incident	VN EEZ	CH marine surveillance ship severs cables of VN seismic vessel chartered by the Vietnam Oil and Gas Corporation.
Jun 2011	CH-VN	Surface incident	VN EEZ	CH fishing vessel snared on the lines of a VN survey ship.
Jul 2011	CH-VN	Fisheries incident	Paracels	CH soldiers assault a VN fisherman and threaten crew members before expelling them from waters.
Oct 2011	CH-RP	Surface collision	Reed Bank	RP naval vessel rams a CH fishing boat.
Mar 2012	CH-VN	Fisheries incident	Paracels	CH detains 21 fishermen near the Paracel Islands.
Apr 2012	CH-VN	Surface incident	Scarborough Shoal	Naval standoff between CH and RP vic. of Scarborough Shoal.

Abbreviations

CH: China; TW: Taiwan; VN: Vietnam; RP: Philippines; MY: Malaysia; ID: Indonesia

- Periodic U.S. military posturing in the SCS to demonstrate commitment, including routine patrols and freedom of navigation assertions. When possible, such operations should be conducted with other regional actors, including China.
- Increased access to Philippine bases and routine military operations conducted from these locations. Surveillance aircraft flying out of the Philippines is of critical importance to maintaining U.S. situational awareness.
- A comprehensive strategic communication campaign that fully integrates U.S. diplomatic and information initiatives related to the SCS with demonstrations of military capability and resolve.

The United States has significant security interests in the South China Sea, and the stakes are extremely

high as coastal states aggressively assert their respective sovereignty claims in the region. Without proactive U.S. engagement, confrontations between China and the Philippines or Vietnam are inevitable. Such confrontations could well escalate to the extent that the United States becomes involved in a protracted crisis with China. Policymakers can decrease the possibility of such a crisis by making the U.S. commitment to maintaining regional stability clear and by working with all parties to peacefully resolve disputed claims. Diplomacy—backed by tangible demonstrations of military capacity and commitment—will be integral to the achievement of these goals.

Brad KAPLAN served for 30 years in the United States Navy as a surface warfare officer. He now works for a major defense contractor as a senior military analyst.