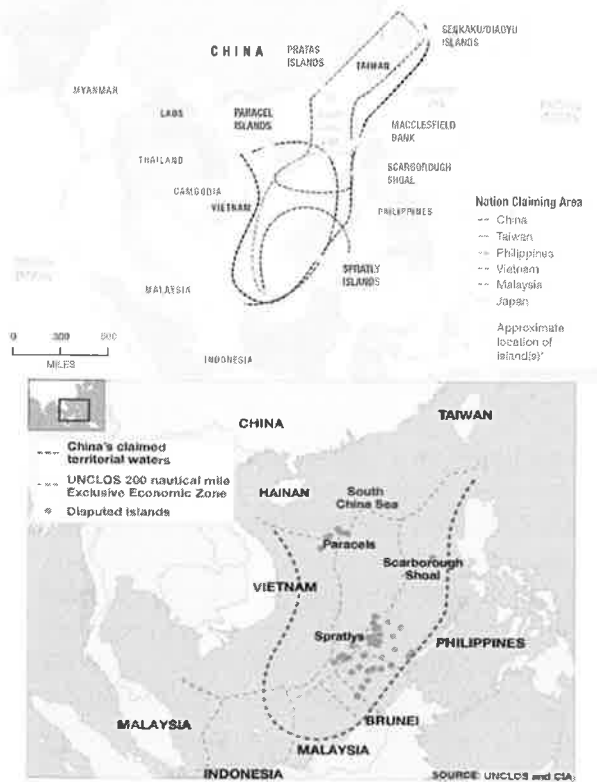


UNDERSTANDING CHINA’S COMMITMENT TO THE CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY AND NATIONALISM

Joshua Tupler

China is involved in a heated dispute with Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia over the sovereignty of several islands in the South China Sea. Other countries—including Indonesia and Brunei—do not claim ownership over any of the disputed islands, instead claiming that China has unduly asserted control over regions within the Southeast Asian nations’ exclusive economic zones. China rejects these claims and maintains its sovereignty over nearly all of the South China Sea (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Maps of the South China Sea¹



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China's recent "militarization" of the region has alarmed many Western media sources. This alleged militarization started in 2006, with China constructing artificial islands, building airfields, and deploying military infrastructure—including fighter aircraft and surface-to-air missile systems—in the disputed territories.² Most news articles have offered three main hypotheses regarding what is driving China's bold actions. The first and most pervasive narrative argues that a Chinese interest in acquiring large, potential reserves of oil and natural gas is the principal driver of Chinese fervor in the region.³ Other articles often cite Chinese economic interest in regulating trade and establishing control over fishing as a key motivator of Chinese behavior.⁴ Still others cite Chinese geostrategic interests related to establishing military bases in the region.⁵

Although there might be some truth to all these claims, there is a fourth less-discussed hypothesis that more adequately explains Chinese activity in the region: historical and national interest. In order to develop a more nuanced understanding of Chinese interest in the region, I will review the existing scientific and academic literature supporting the three widely held beliefs and find that the evidence for commonly-touted explanations is much weaker than the media portrays. I will then argue that historical and nationalist interest might be motivating Chinese attempts to gain greater control over the South China Seas, and that more attention ought to be paid to this explanation.

RESOURCE-BASED INTEREST

The "race for oil" in the South China Sea began in 1969–70 when an international report held out the prospect of finding vast hydrocarbon reserves. The oil and gas that has since been extracted has largely come from the littoral regions of Vietnam, Philippines and Malaysia. Because of these findings, there has been much speculation about the prospects of finding resources in the region surrounding the Spratly Islands, principally fueled by the Chinese government and news sources providing exaggerated figures that are generally viewed with skepticism by foreign oil companies and scientists alike.⁶

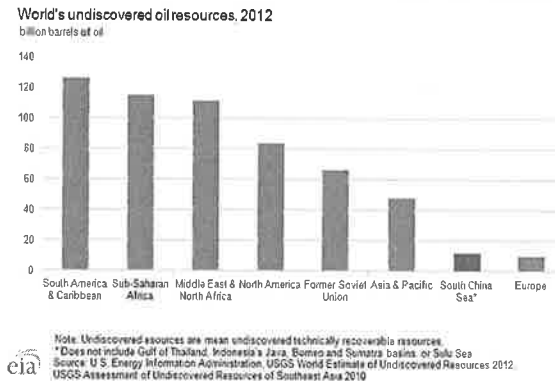
The first wave of scientific studies was carried out in the 1990s. A study conducted in 1997 by the Norwegian firm TGS Nopec (on the behest of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam) found huge structures that might contain hydrocarbon reserves but noted geological risk factors such as the uncertainty about the presence of proper source rocks, concluding that accurately assessing the potential for reserves required drilling.⁷ Nevertheless, no drilling has occurred due to the high political volatility in the region, which has made it difficult to assess resource potential in the region.

Following several studies over the Nasha Islands in the Spratly archipelago, in the 1970s to the early 1980s, the Chinese Ministry of Geology estimated that there may be 25 billion cubic meters of gas and 105 billion barrels of oil present.

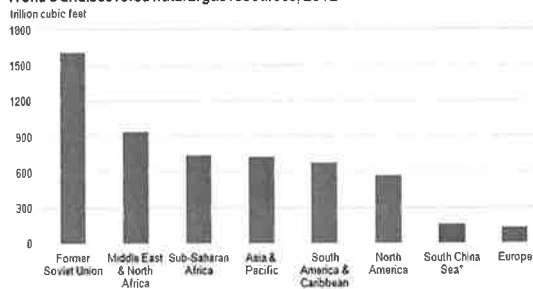
This estimate was revised to upwards of 225 billion barrels in 1994.⁸ Russian estimates during the same time were much lower and estimated that there were potentially 5.25 billion barrels of oil and 2.25 billion barrels of natural gas.⁹ The most recent Chinese estimates, conducted by the Chinese National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) in 2012, claim that the region contains 125 billion barrels of oil and 500 trillion cubic feet of natural gas—a finding that is drastically higher than their previous estimates from the 1990s and significantly higher than all other estimates confirmed by independent studies.¹⁰ These reports have led Chinese media outlets to call the Spratly region “the second Persian Gulf.”¹¹

The international oil industry and almost all non-Chinese sources have a much less optimistic perception of potential reserves. A 2012 study conducted by the U.S. Energy Information Agency estimates that the South China Sea contains approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in proved and probable reserves. This study is consistent with the work of the energy consultancy Wood Mackenzie estimating the sea to contain only 2.5 billion barrels of oil, and a separate 2010 U.S. Geological Survey study that estimates the region to contain between 5–22 billion barrels of oil and 70–290 trillion cubic feet of gas in undiscovered resources.¹² Comparing these estimates to other major oil producing regions worldwide reveal that this region contains a relatively small proportion of the world’s undiscovered reserves (Fig. 2). A common rule-of-thumb for estimating how much oil and natural gas can be extracted from such frontier areas is based upon assuming that ten percent of the “potential” or “undiscovered” resources can be economically recovered; so even if one uses the CNOOC 2012 estimates one would only expect China to be able to produce 12.5 billion barrels of oil and 50 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, still less than 2% and 3% of the oil produced in the Gulf.¹⁴ As such, one should be highly skeptical the South China Seas might be the “second Persian Gulf.”

Figure 2: World’s Undiscovered Oil and Natural Gas resources¹³



World's undiscovered natural gas resources, 2012



Note. Undiscovered resources are mean undiscovered technically recoverable resources.
 * Does not include Gulf of Thailand, Indonesia's Java, Borneo and Sumatra basins, or Sulu Sea.
 Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, USGS World Estimate of Undiscovered Resources 2012, USGS Assessment of Undiscovered Resources of Southeast Asia 2010



ECONOMIC AND GEOSTRATEGIC INTEREST

In addition to the hydrocarbon-related economic interest, pundits sometimes speculate about the importance of access to the South China Sea for fishing and the total volume of trade that passes through region as other potential motivators of China's expansion into the South China. China's fishing industry as a whole is large, in 2012 producing 13.9 million tons, which accounted for 17.4% of the world total fishing exports. Interestingly, China has been offering financial and political support to encourage fisherman to operate in contested waters to help establish Chinese claims to disputed region.¹⁵ It is unclear precisely how much the Chinese fishing industry gains from operating in the South China relative to other regions, and it seems highly unlikely that such fishing is key to the to China's economy; instead, fishing activities appear to be a means for staking a Chinese claim over disputed regions. The other major economic interest commonly discussed pertains to the volume of trade flowing through the region. Some articles cite the 5.3 trillion dollars of trade that passes through the South China Sea as a de facto rationale for China interest in policing the region, but these authors overlook the fact that China has benefited immensely from this and has little incentive to disrupt the flow of goods and services through the region.¹⁶

Another prominent theory explaining China's commitment to the region is based on geostrategic interest. These theories hold that the forward deployment of military forces in the region—such as deployment of fighter aircraft, early warning radars, and Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs)—is an important step in continuing Chinese attempts to develop A2/AD (Anti-Access Aerial Denial) to prevent Western powers from operating military forces in the Pacific region. Although these theories might be correct in the long term—in that an extremely well developed and integrated air defense network might increase the cost of projecting military force into the region—these geostrategic theories do not appear to hold much weight in the short term as we live in an age of precision strike where even weak militaries can destroy

almost any fixed target with ease.¹⁷ In the long term, such military developments will not prevent foreign powers from operating in the region but simply increase the cost of doing so. As such, the construction and deployment of military assets appears to be another means for staking a Chinese claim in the region rather than to an end in itself. Weaker versions of this geostrategic thesis maintain that China wants to flex its muscles and assert its military dominance (colloquially be the “big boy” on the beach). In the short term however, military infrastructure in the region will not have a serious effect on the balance of power in the region.

HISTORICAL AND NATIONALISTIC INTEREST

A strong theory explaining Chinese commitment to attain sovereignty over the Spratly Islands is based on China’s historical claim to the region. China first claimed the islands in 111 B.C. under Emperor Wu Di of the Han Dynasty who sent over 100,000 sailors to claim all the islands in the South China Sea.¹⁸ China has manuscripts from the Three Kingdoms Period in A.D. 220–265 containing maps and detailed descriptions of the geographic features of the islands.¹⁹ The Chinese have lived on parts of the Spratly Islands since the Tang and Song dynasties, between A.D. 618–907 and 960–1279 respectively, as confirmed by the discovery of artifacts and architectural remains such as living quarters, pottery, utensils, and knives from the time period. During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (13th through 18th centuries), China continued naval exploration of the region, employed astronomers to conduct observations from the region, and even established a governmental prefecture to administer the islands. In addition to a series of Chinese and European maps, British and French books have documented Chinese shrines and persons living on what are now referred to as the Spratly and Paracel Islands.²⁰

There have been a series of challenges to Chinese sovereignty in the last two centuries. France first challenged China’s claim to sovereignty over the Spratly and Parcel Islands in the 1930s, subsequently withdrawing their claim due to Chinese protest. The Japanese next occupied the islands including Taiwan during WWII but returned them to China in the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 and Sino-Japanese Peace Treaty of 1952. In the San Francisco Peace Conference of 1951 facilitated by the United States, of which China was not a participant, Vietnam claimed sovereignty over the Spratly and Parcel Islands and was rebuked by both China and Taiwan. From 1973 to 1988, armed conflicts occurred when Vietnam invaded the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and the Philippines and Malaysia occupied other island territories.²¹ China has consistently rejected all other countries’ claims to the islands and refused to participate in any intentional adjudication process.

Supplementing this historical account of China’s commitment to the Spratly Islands is a nationalist narrative. Many historians and political scientists refer to the years before and after the collapse of the Chinese dynasty system between 1839 and 1949 as the “century of humiliation” in which Western powers and Japan intervened in East Asia. China lost a series of wars and faced several

internal uprisings—including the First Opium War, the Taiping Rebellion, the Second Opium War, the Boxer Uprising, the Sino-French War, the First Sino-Japanese War, the British invasion of Tibet, the Second Sino-Japanese war—and subsequently had to grant major concessions to foreign powers in various treaties including important territorial concessions such as that of the Shandong province to Japan.²² Some political scientists and historians argue that domestic discontent and utter sense of embarrassment that plagued Chinese society during the century of humiliation allowed for the rise of nationalism and gave birth to the modern Chinese Communist Party (CCP); the May 4th movement in particular explicitly protested giving the Shandong territory to Japan. China's national identity and sense of pride can thus be seen as directly tied to maintaining control over, and preventing foreign powers from acquiring, any territory China views rightly as their own. In this light, China's commitment to maintaining sovereignty of the Spratly Islands can be understood as an unquantifiable symbol of Chinese pride and an essential step in China's plan to return to global dominance that they once exhibited in dynastic times.

CONCLUSION

Given China's recent actions and the increasing risk of an armed military conflict breaking out in the region, understanding Chinese motivations in the South China Sea is essential to prevent or de-escalate conflict. The Western media overlooks what is arguably the most important driver of Chinese interest: the role of history and nationalism. Given that scientific literature casts significant doubt on the oil and gas-yielding potential of the South China Sea, the Western media's focus on natural resources in explaining the conflict is likely misguided. Although discussions of economic and military interest are important, these factors do not appear key to understanding what is currently driving Chinese action in the South China Sea. Rather, the theory that best explains China's interest is one that addresses the country's strong historical claim to the region and the powerful symbolism that reacquiring the territories would play in its nationalist discourse.

It is important to note that no one theory can perfectly explain China's recent behavior in the South China Sea, and that the four categories of interest discussed are not intended to be mutually exclusive or exhaustive. I only maintain that any discussion of China's militarization of the region should start with an acknowledgment of history, and use Chinese nationalist interest as lens or filter to discuss other potential motivators.

NOTES

1 The sovereignty dispute map on the left is taken from: Domonoske, Camila. "U.S. Sails Near Disputed Island In South China Sea." NPR. January 30, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/30/464966081/u-s-sails-near-disputed-island-in-south-china-sea>. The

EEZ dispute map is taken from: “Q&A: South China Sea Dispute - BBC News.” BBC News. October 27, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>.

2 For more on the construction of the artificial island and airbase completed on the Fiery Cross Reef, see e.g., Hardy, James, and Sean O’Connor. “China Completes Runway on Fiery Cross Reef.” *China Completes Runway on Fiery Cross Reef*. September 24, 2015. <http://www.janes.com/article/54814/china-completes-runway-on-fiery-cross-reef>. For more on the deployment of Surface-to-Air Missile systems on the Paracel Islands, see e.g., Fisher, Richard D. “China Deploys HQ-9 Surface-to-air Missiles to Woody Island.” *Defence & Security Intelligence & Analysis*. February 17, 2016. <http://www.janes.com/article/58071/china-deploys-hq-9-surface-to-air-missiles-to-woody-island>.

3 For articles that cite resource-based interest as the core of the conflict, see e.g., Glaser, Bonnie S. “Armed Clash in the South China Sea.” Cfr Press, 2012; Perlez, J., *Dispute Flares Over Energy in South China Sea*, *New York Times*, 2012; Kate, D., *S. China Sea Oil Rush Risks Clashes as U.S. Bolsters Vietnam*, *Bloomberg.com*, 27 May 2011; Sant, S.V., *Contest Over South China Sea Spurred in Part by Resources*, *VOA*, 23 February 2016; Chapman, B., *China’s Nine-Dashed Map: Maritime Source of Geopolitical Tension*, *Mackinder Forum Commentary*. The Mackinder Forum, 2014; Chaudhury, D.R., *Vietnam Invites India to Explore Resources in Disputed South China Sea Region*, *Economic Times*, 24 February 2016.

4 See the section about “economic interest” in: Bonnie S. “Armed Clash in the South China Sea.” Cfr Press, 2012

5 Forsythe, Michael, and Jane Perlez. “South China Sea Buildup Brings Beijing Closer to Realizing Control.” *New York Times*. March 08, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/09/world/asia/south-china-sea-militarization.html?_r=0.

6 See e.g., Sarewitz D.R., Karig D.E. Processes of allochthonous terrane evolution, Mindoro Island, Philippines. *Tectonics*. 1986 Aug 1;5(4):525–52; Tonnesson, S., *The Economic Dimension: Natural Resources and Sea, War or Peace in the South China Sea*, 57 pp, Google Books, 2002.

7 See e.g., Tonnesson, S., *The Economic Dimension: Natural Resources and Sea, War or Peace in the South China Sea*, 57 pp, Google Books, 2002.

8 See e.g., Hutching, G., *China’s Hopes for Islands Oil Bonanza*, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 1994.

9 See e.g., Vysotsky, V.I., Rodnikova, R.D., Shlefer, V.M., & Larkova, Z. N., *The Spratly Islands region: petroleum potential (abs)*. Oil and Gas Asia Conference, Manila, Jan 1995.

10 See e.g., U.S. Energy Information Administration, *South China Sea*, *EIA.gov*, 7 February 2013.

11 See e.g., Scott, D., *China and the international system, 1840–1949: power, presence, and perceptions in a century of humiliation*. SUNY Press; 2008 Nov 7; Amry, S., *An Analysis of the South China Sea Dispute: Focusing on the Assessment of the Impact of Possible Solutions on the Economies of the Region*, CUNY Academic Works, 2015.

12 See e.g., U.S. Energy Information Administration, *South China Sea*, *EIA.gov*, 7 February 2013.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Hongzhou, Zhang. "China's Fishing Industry: Current Status, Government Policies, and Future Prospects." In Center for Naval Analyses. Proceedings of China as a "Maritime Power." CNA Conference, Arlington, Virginia, July 29, 2015. https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/China-Fishing-Industry.pdf.

16 See e.g., Goldstein, L., *The South China Sea Showdown: 5 Dangerous Myths*, The National Interest, 29 September 2015.

17 Ibid.

18 See e.g., Yeh S., Nansha Feng Yun Yo Kuo-Chi Kung-Fa (Nansha Situation and International Law), *19 Econ. & L.* 27, 1998.

19 See e.g., Chang T.K., China's Claim of Sovereignty over Spratly and Parcel Islands: A Historical and Legal perspective, *Case W. Res. J. Int'l L.* 1991, pp. 23:399.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 See e.g., Scott, D., *China and the international system, 1840–1949: power, presence, and perceptions in a century of humiliation*. SUNY Press; 2008 Nov 7; Pfaelzer, J., *Driven out: The forgotten war against Chinese Americans*. Univ of California Press; 2008.

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