

Will the South China Sea Lead to War?

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Russia's South China Sea Exploration complicates matters even more

Speculation that the South China Sea disputes will lead to conflict are not beyond the realm of possibility, given the numerous military clashes between several countries in the region over the past 40 years. The primary belligerents are familiar: China, the Philippines, and Vietnam have at one point exchanged punches against the other; although as of late the latter two have united by mutual agreement in their opposition against China.

A dispute between China and the Philippines has dragged on this week, beginning when Manila's biggest warship attempted to arrest Chinese fishermen accused of illegal entry to Scarborough Shoal off the Northwestern Philippine coast. Three Chinese warships responded, ordering the Filipino vessel to leave and claiming Chinese sovereignty. Chinese and Filipino diplomats have been attempting to resolve the dispute peacefully.

As these disputes grow beyond territorial possessions to include the vast, untapped natural resources of the sea, so too do the parties involved. Last year India ventured into the South China Sea to explore resources alongside Vietnam, much to the chagrin of China. Now Russia has joined the fray, adding to Beijing's growing headache despite China's best efforts to limit the number of nations involved in the region. OAO Gazprom, the world's biggest natural-gas producer, plans to develop two blocks with PetroVietnam, which takes 49 percent of a joint venture project while PetroVietnam holds the majority share, according to Bloomberg, which reported that PetroVietnam and Gazprom are already exploring for oil and gas together offshore.

With the inclusion of India, Russia, and, of course, the United States, it therefore seems unlikely that the South China Sea disputes will lead to conflict—at least with not any of these countries listed. China will not so recklessly engage in armed conflict with countries whose arsenal includes nuclear deterrence capabilities, never mind that they are not claimant states in the maritime and territorial disputes themselves. They are simply not worth the effort. China may, however, flex its muscles with a less capable nation.

Vietnam most likely to be targeted

With Vietnam and the Philippines most opposed to China, should military conflict arise from the disputes, Vietnam is the most likely to bear the brunt of China's ire.

Despite the escalating rhetoric and displays of force on the part of the Philippines, China is unlikely to do more against the country than it has already done in the past. The Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and Philippines makes any engagement between China and the latter unwise, as it would probably invite American intervention. As China wishes to keep the US out of the South China Sea, an attack on the Philippines would be unappealing. Similarly, as military conflict is far from the desires of the US, Washington has perhaps stressed to Manila the need to restrain itself.

With the Philippines out of the question, China has but only one foe in reach.

Vietnam has neither a defense treaty with the US nor the open sea for a natural barrier. It shares a border with China, which has in the past served as the frontlines of skirmishes and the Sino-Vietnamese War. There is little love lost between these two neighbors; and if Vietnam and China had ever shared good relations, they have now surely deteriorated.

Neither India nor Russia, an ally during the Soviet era, will rush blindly to defend Vietnam if it is attacked, risking unnecessary confrontation with China. Although India has been public in their partnership with Vietnam for resource exploration, Russia's recent involvement has raised questions concerning its motives.

While Vietnam may be able to count on material support from their new friends if necessary, but they cannot expect help in the way the US would intervene for the Philippines. The sobering and grim reality for Hanoi is that, of all the claimant states involved in the disputes, it is the most exposed to China. Vietnam must therefore walk a fine line between appeasing nationalist sentiments and maintaining a working relationship with China.

Indonesia: A mediating role

Divergent interests of claimant states and third parties (such as the US and India) in the South China Sea make difficult a peaceful resolution. However, if the sea can be pacified, it requires a neutral third party acceptable to all states involved.

It is unlikely that the United States would play such a role, if any, in resolving these disputes given China's insistence on not internationalizing the issue, and its misgivings over any American presence in the region. It is also unlikely that the United Nations would be able to assist for the same reasons. As such, a "neutral" third party may not be entirely neutral; however, its word must carry weight, and it must be seen to be impartial enough by all those involved.

Indonesia, a claimant state, has so far remained somewhat above the fray. It has not engaged in the same heated rhetoric against China as the Philippines or Vietnam. Of all the claimant states, it is the most populous and possesses the largest economy after China; and, as with China, its demand for energy will only increase over time. It is a founding member of ASEAN and the most recent host of the ASEAN Summit and East Asian Summit.

Indonesia has thus far refused to openly support China or the Philippines and Vietnam, which has allowed it to remain fairly neutral. Although Indonesia has claims to waters around its Natuna Islands, which are also claimed by China and Taiwan, it does not have a stake in the more contentious Spratlys. Furthermore, Indonesia has strong ties with China and the US, both of which are important commercial and economic partners.

Indonesia is ideally suited to play a mediating role if required; however, it remains to be seen if China wishes to step away from its insistence on bilateral resolutions.

Chinese influence over states like the Philippines and Vietnam is minimal; and as tensions in the region continue to rise, China may and should privately seek outside assistance. China has much to lose in any sort of conflict, if only because any war is an unnecessary burden on a burgeoning economy. While Beijing is unlikely to choose a course of action in which it risks

losing face, it would not overlook the benefits of stabilizing the South China Sea, even if stabilization is simply maintaining the status quo—India and Russia included.

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