

The heart of the matter in the South China Sea

The battle for the contested maritime region is over before the shooting even begins and China has won

by Pepe Escobar

When the USS Ronald Reagan and USS Nimitz carrier strike groups recently engaged in “operations” in the South China Sea, it failed to escape cynics that the US Pacific Fleet was doing its best to turn the infantile Thucydides trap theory into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The pro forma official spin, via Rear Admiral Jim Kirk, commander of the Nimitz, is that the ops were conducted to “reinforce our commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, a rules-based international order, and to our allies and partners.”

Nobody pays attention to these clichés, because the real message was delivered by a CIA operative posing as diplomat, Secretary of State Mike “We Lie, We Cheat, We Steal” Pompeo. “The PRC has no legal grounds to unilaterally impose its will on the region,” he proclaimed, in a reference to the nine-dash line that lays claim to most of the disputed sea.

In the State Department’s view, Beijing deploys nothing but “gangster tactics” in the South China Sea. Once again, nobody paid attention to that view because the actual facts on the sea are stark.

Anything that moves in the South China Sea – China’s crucial maritime trade artery – is at the mercy of the People’s Liberation Army, which decides if and when to deploy its deadly DF-21D and DF-26 “carrier killer” missiles. There’s absolutely no way the US Pacific Fleet can win a shooting war in the South China Sea.

Electronically jammed

A crucial Chinese report overlooked or unavailable to Western media, and translated by Hong Kong-based analyst Thomas Wing Polin, is essential to understand the context. The report refers to US Growler electronic warplanes rendered totally out of control by electronic jamming devices positioned on islands and reefs controlled by China in the South China Sea.

According to the report, “after the accident, the United States negotiated with China, demanding that China dismantle the electronic equipment immediately, but it was rejected. These electronic devices are an important part of China’s maritime defense and are not offensive weapons. Therefore, the US military’s request for dismantling is unreasonable.”

It gets better: “On the same day, former commander Scott Swift of the US Pacific Fleet finally acknowledged that the US military had lost the best time to control the South China Sea. He believes that China has deployed a large number of Hongqi 9 air defense missiles, H-6K bombers, and electronic jamming systems on islands and reefs. The defense can be said to be solid. If US fighter jets rush into the South China Sea, they are likely to encounter their ‘Waterloo.’”

The bottom line is that the systems – including electronic jamming – deployed by the PLA on islands and reefs in the South China Sea covering more than half of the total surface are considered by Beijing to be part of the national defense system.

I have previously detailed what Admiral Philip Davidson, in 2018 when he was still a nominee to lead the US Pacific Command, told the US Senate. Here are his top three conclusions:

- 1) “China is pursuing advanced capabilities (e.g., hypersonic missiles) which the United States has no current defense against. As China pursues these advanced weapons systems, US forces across the Indo-Pacific will be placed increasingly at risk.”
- 2) “China is undermining the rules-based international order.”
- 3) “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States.”

Implied in all of the above is the “secret” of Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy, at best a containment exercise, as China continues to solidify the Maritime Silk Road linking the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean.

Remember the Nusantara

The South China Sea is and will continue to be one of the prime geopolitical flashpoints of the young 21st century, where a great deal of the East-West balance of power will be played out. A short historical background is absolutely essential to understand the current juncture as the South China Sea increasingly looks and feels like a Chinese lake.

Let’s start in 1890, when Alfred Mahan, then president of the US Naval War College, wrote the seminal *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*. Mahan’s central thesis: The US should go global in search of new markets and protect these new trade routes through a network of naval bases.

That is the embryo of the US Empire of Bases, which remains in effect.

It was Western colonialism, American and European, that drew up most land borders and maritime borders of states adjacent to the South China Sea: the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam. We are talking about borders between different colonial possessions – and that implied intractable problems from the start, subsequently inherited by post-colonial nations.

Historically, it had always been a completely different story. The best anthropological studies (Bill Solheim’s, for instance) define the semi-nomadic communities who really traveled and traded across the South China Sea from time immemorial as what modern academics have termed Nusantara – a compound word derived from Austronesian for “south” and “people.”

The Nusantara were not a defined ethnic group. They were a maritime internet. Over centuries, they had many key hubs reaching along the coastline of the South China Sea. They were not attached to any state. The Western notion of borders did not even exist.

In the mid-1990s, I had the privilege of encountering some of their descendants in Indonesia and Vietnam. So it was only by the late 19th century that the Westphalian system managed to freeze the South China Sea inside an immovable framework.

Which brings us to the crucial point of why China is so sensitive about its borders: They are directly linked to the “century of humiliation”, when internal Chinese corruption and weakness allowed Western “barbarians” to take possession of Chinese land.

A Japanese lake

The nine-dash line is an immensely complex problem.

It was invented by the eminent Chinese geographer Bai Meichu, a fierce nationalist, in 1936, initially as part of a “Chinese national humiliation map” in the form of a “U-shaped line” gobbling up the South China Sea all the way down to James Shoal, which is 1,500 kilometers south of China but only some 100 kilometers off of Borneo.

From the beginning, the nine-dash line was promoted by the Chinese government – remember, at the time not yet Communist – as the letter of the law in terms of “historic” Chinese claims over islands in the South China Sea.

One year later, Japan invaded China. Japan had occupied Taiwan way back in 1895. Japan occupied the Philippines in 1942. That meant virtually the entire coastline of the South China Sea was controlled by a single empire for the first time in history. The South China Sea had become a Japanese lake.

Well, that lasted only until 1945. The Japanese did occupy Woody Island in the Paracels and Itu Aba (today Taiping) in the Spratlys. After the US nuclear-bombing of Japan and the end of World War II, the Philippines became independent in 1946 and the Spratlys immediately were declared Filipino territory.

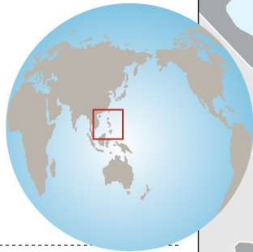
In 1947, all the islands in the South China Sea got Chinese names. In December that year, China placed all the islands under the authority of Hainan (itself an island in southern China).

New maps duly followed, but now with Chinese names for the islands, reefs and shoals. But there was a huge problem: No one explained the meaning of those dashes of which there were originally eleven.

Disputed claims in the South China Sea

Claims

- China
- Philippines
- Malaysia
- Brunei
- Vietnam



Area:

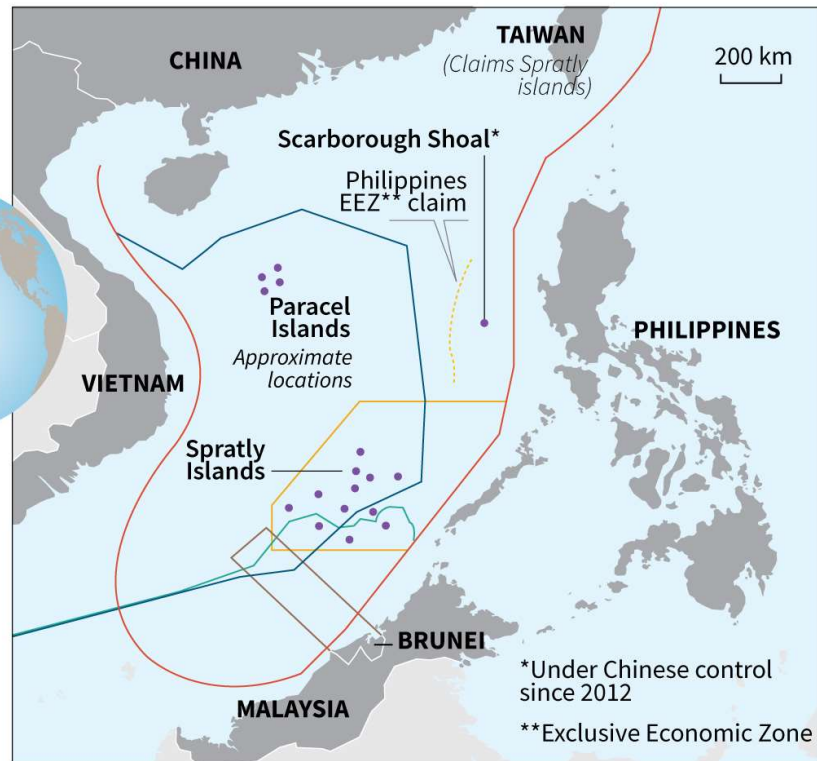
South China Sea covers more than 3 million sq km

Trade:

Over \$5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes through the sea annually

Oil and gas:

Major unexploited oil and gas deposits are believed to lie under the seabed



Sources: CSIS/AMTI/D.Rosenberg/MiddleburyCollege/HarvardAsiaQuarterly/Phil govt/ChinaMaritimeSafetyAdministration

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In June 1947 the Republic of China claimed everything within the line while proclaiming itself open to negotiating definitive maritime borders with other nations later on. But, for the moment, there were no borders.

And that set the scene for the immensely complicated “strategic ambiguity” of the South China Sea that still lingers – and allows the State Department to accuse Beijing of “gangster tactics.” The culmination of a millennia-old transition from the “maritime internet” of semi-nomadic peoples to the Westphalian system spelled nothing but trouble.

Time for a new code

So what about the US notion of “freedom of navigation”?

In imperial terms, freedom of navigation from the west coast of the US to Asia – through the Pacific, the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait and the Indian Ocean – is strictly an issue of military strategy.

The US Navy simply cannot imagine dealing with maritime exclusion zones or having to request an “authorization” every time it needs to cross them. In this case, the Empire of Bases would lose “access” to its own bases.

This is compounded with trademark Pentagon paranoia, gaming a situation in which a “hostile power” – namely China – decides to block global trade. The premise in itself is ludicrous because the South China Sea is the premier, vital maritime artery for China’s globalized economy.

So there's no rational justification for a freedom of navigation program. For all practical purposes, aircraft carriers such as the USS Ronald Reagan and the USS Nimitz showboating on and off in the South China Sea amount to 21st century gunboat diplomacy. And Beijing is not impressed.

As far as the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations is concerned, what matters now is to come up with a code of conduct to resolve all maritime conflicts among the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and China.

Next year, ASEAN and China celebrate 30 years of strong bilateral relations. There's a strong possibility that relationship will be upgraded to "comprehensive strategic partner" status.

Because of Covid-19, all players had to postpone negotiations on the second reading of the single draft of the code of conduct. Beijing wanted these to be face-to-face because the document is ultra-sensitive and, for the moment, secret. Yet China finally agreed to negotiate online via detailed texts.

It will be a hard slog because, as ASEAN made clear in a virtual summit in late June, everything needs to jibe with international laws including the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas, or UNCLOS.

If they can all agree on a code of conduct by the end of 2020, a final agreement could be approved by ASEAN in mid-2021. Historic does not even begin to describe it; this negotiation has been going on for nearly two decades.

Not to mention that a code of conduct will invalidate any US pretension of entitlement to secure "freedom of navigation" in an area where navigation is already free.

But freedom was never the issue. In imperial terminology "freedom" means that China must obey and keep the South China Sea open to the US Navy. Well, open is possible, but you gotta behave.

You don't have to be Mahan to know that the day when the US Navy is "denied" the South China Sea will mark the end of its imperial rule over the seven seas