

A Pivotal Moment in the South China Sea

U.S. challenge of Chinese-made islands kicks off an open contest for control

By Andrew Browne

SHANGHAI — Great-power rivalry in the South China Sea has just reached a pivotal moment.

U.S. rhetoric against provocative Chinese claims to maritime sovereignty in the area has turned to military action. By sending a U.S. warship within 12 nautical miles of one of China's artificial islands, Washington has signaled the start of an open contest for the future of a critical waterway that carries more than half of the world's maritime trade, connecting the oil riches of the Middle East with the powerhouse economies of the Western Pacific.

Beyond that, America's challenge speaks of much broader struggle that will play out over decades.

The dredged platforms have only limited military value, though several are equipped with runways long enough to land Chinese jet fighters. More importantly, they are tokens in Beijing's efforts to overturn a U.S.-led regional order that has prevailed since World War II.

They proclaim China's intent to break free from what it sees as American encirclement — a system of alliances that reaches in a broad arc from the Korean peninsula through Japan and the Philippines. And they are symbols of a thrusting nationalism under President Xi Jinping.

In a strongly worded commentary, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua said America had transformed the South China Sea into "tumultuous waters," adding that "the Chinese people aren't afraid of trouble." China's foreign ministry expressed its "strong discontentment and resolute opposition" to the U.S. action.

For America, the stakes are equally high: Its future as a maritime power in the Asia-Pacific; the credibility of its security guarantees to its allies — all of them concerned about China's growing military might, and the principle that territorial disputes must be resolved on the basis of law, not coercion.

The White House has been agonizing for months about this "Freedom of Navigation" exercise, even as U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter vowed that the U.S. "will fly, sail or operate wherever international law allows." The delay in matching tough words with action risked making America look like a paper tiger. In the end, the Navy opted to dispatch not a flotilla, or a combination of ships and aircraft, but a single guided missile destroyer, the USS Lassen, to waters off Subi Reef.

That sent a blunt but nonetheless restrained message, although the Pentagon has made clear that the exercise will be repeated.

The U.S. action went without incident, according to the Pentagon, though later Tuesday, China's foreign ministry said Chinese authorities followed and warned the U.S. warship. It appears China held back on any further action. In previous encounters, China has displayed barely contained

hotheadedness, most recently when a Chinese fighter rolled over and flashed its missile payload to the crew of an American spy plane.

Full-on conflict remains unlikely, although there's always the danger of an accident if U.S. and Chinese vessels start maneuvering in close proximity around the atolls, reefs and sandbars of the Spratly Islands.

For a start, the U.S. and China aren't enemies. This isn't the Cold War, and although their relationship is increasingly marked by strategic competition, powerful forces compel them to cooperate, not least two-way trade that reached \$592 billion last year. And they have an imperative to work together on pressing global issues like climate change, terrorism and epidemics.

Though the man-made islands have only recently mushroomed, this moment has been building for years.

A U.S. Navy destroyer sailed within 12 nautical miles of an artificial island built by China in the South China Sea, a direct challenge to Beijing that raises the stakes in disputed waters.

A watershed came in 2008, when Wall Street plunged the world into financial crisis. China reached the conclusion that America was a superpower in decline and its own time had come. The U.S. economy has since recovered, but the image of an America sapped by Middle East wars and unable to fix its budget problems emboldened China and forced Asian countries to contemplate a new balance of power in the region.

But China overplayed its hand. Its brash assertiveness— of which the manufactured islands is just the latest example— alarmed its neighbors and was met by America's pivot to Asia. Washington pledged to rebalance its naval forces from a 60-40 split between the Atlantic and the Pacific to 50-50.

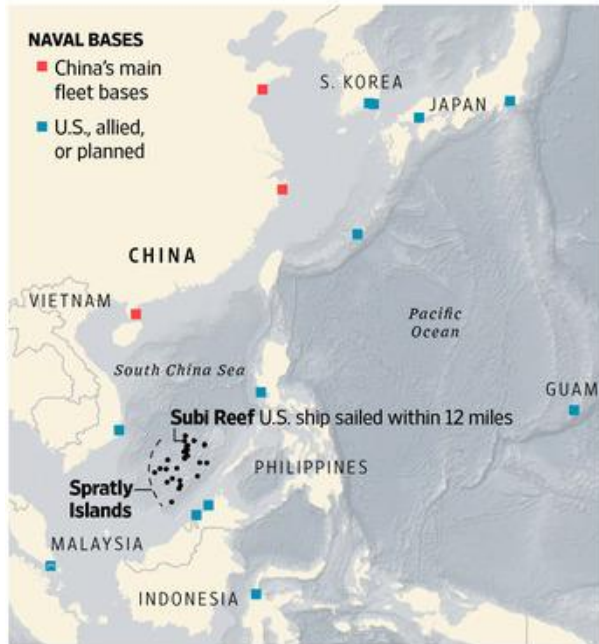
The U.S. must be careful not to push China too far; its allies don't want to have to choose sides in a fight. And although the U.S. would prevail in any conflict, China's expanding blue-water navy and missile force could exact a terrible price.

For its part, China has plenty to lose if tensions spill into risky encounters in the South China Sea. The bulk of its oil and raw-material imports traverse the shipping channels. And it needs the goodwill of its neighbors to make a success of Mr. Xi's signature foreign-policy initiative to expand trade routes to Europe by building ports, bridges, highways and other infrastructure.

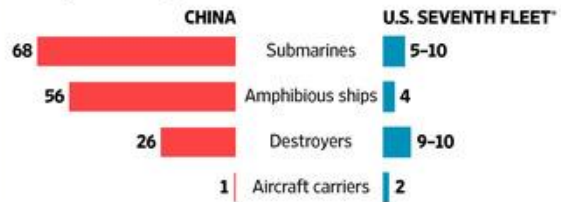
But nationalism is the wild card. It's inconceivable that Mr. Xi, a popular strongman, won't respond in some way, and he'll be under greater pressure to act if public opinion becomes inflamed. The next move belongs to the Chinese president. Fresh from his triumph in presiding over a military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, he is not about to signal weakness.

Hot Waters

As China has expanded its efforts to enforce territorial claims in Asia, it has taken steps to build up and modernize and its navy.



Comparable regional naval assets



Other regional assets

CHINA

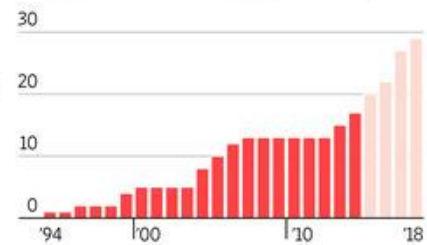
86 Missile patrol craft, 52 Frigates, 20 Corvettes, 42 Mine warfare ships

U.S. SEVENTH FLEET

45 Supply ships†, 3 cruisers, 1 Littoral combat ship, 1 Command ship

Destroyers commissioned by China's navy

(cumulative, projections after 2014)



*Area of responsibility includes western Pacific; †Including logistics ships Sources: U.S. Department of Defense; regional naval officers; Congressional Research Service

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