

China Rows Against Tide of Sea Tensions as Leaders Meet

Issue of maritime disputes likely to be raised at Southeast Asian and East Asian summits

By James Hookway

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — China faces an uphill battle preventing U.S. President Barack Obama and other leaders raising the issue of navigation rights in the South China Sea at the second of Asia's big leadership summits this week.

The waters separating China from the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan and Malaysia carry some of the world's busiest shipping lanes as well as potentially rich oil and gas reserves. China claims nearly the entire expanse as its own and regards the sea as a first ring of defense surrounding the mainland, citing maps dating back centuries. More recently it has begun building up a series of artificial islands on semi-submerged atolls and reefs it occupies in the area.

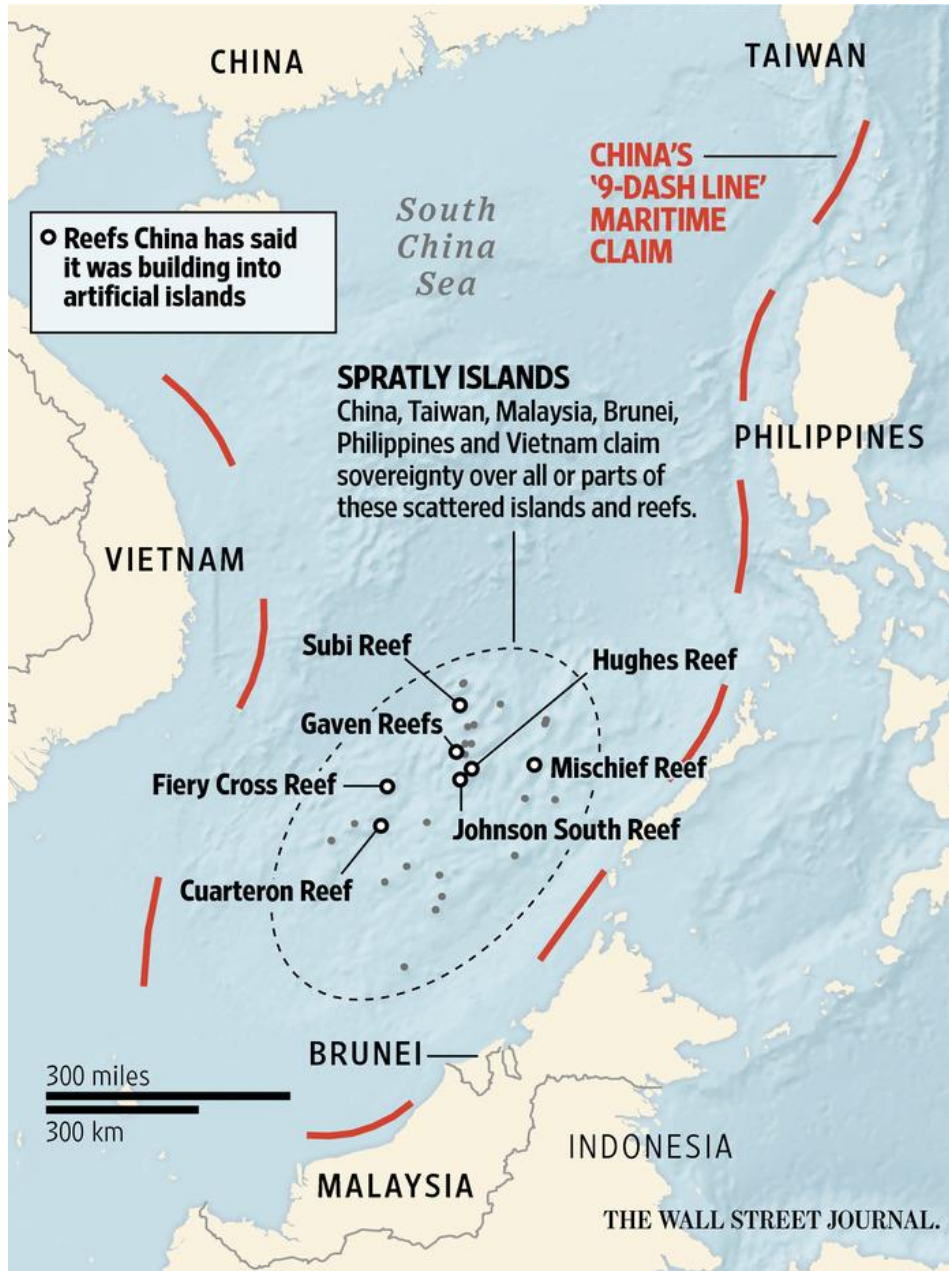
It also doesn't like discussing the matter with the many other claimants.

Beijing largely succeeded in keeping rival claims to the sea off the agenda at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Manila earlier this week, despite Washington's best efforts to bring the issue to broader attention. U.S. President Barack Obama's first public appearance in the Philippine capital, for instance, was a heavily symbolic visit to the BRG Gregorio del Pilar, a former U.S. Coast Guard cutter which America provided the Philippines to help patrol its waters. Later, Mr. Obama called on China to stop building artificial islands and militarizing disputed parts of the South China Sea.

It won't be so easy at the Southeast Asian and East Asian summits this weekend, though, which will prominently feature Mr. Obama and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. For one thing member states Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines (along with nonmember Taiwan) all claim parts of the South China Sea and in some instances complain loudly about what they say is Chinese encroachment.

Then there is the way these meetings have come to be defined by the growing tussle for influence between China and the U.S. since Mr. Obama launched the U.S. diplomatic pivot back to Asia several years ago.

“It's a symptom of the way Sino-U. S. tensions are growing,” said Ian Storey, an expert on the South China Sea disputes at the Institute of South East Asian Studies in Singapore.



Mr. Storey says that tensions have risen to the point where the usefulness of the annual meetings has been diminished and that the countries involved simply use them to reiterate their positions, and often fail to agree on a concluding statement. Speaking in Beijing last week, China's Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin said China wanted the meetings to focus on economic development instead of focusing on the South China Sea, but acknowledged that some participants are likely to bring the matter up.

“There isn't going to be a breakthrough at Asean,” Mr. Storey said, using the acronym for the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations that is hosting the meetings.

Asean Secretary-General Le Luong Minh said in an interview here Friday that he is hopeful Asean and China will eventually agree on a legally binding code of conduct to manage and contain territorial disputes in the South China Sea, despite discussions dragging on for more than

a decade so far. He described China's island-building program in the waters as a significant concern, and urged China to quickly sign on to a deal.

“It's an issue of peace and stability,” Mr. Minh said, while acknowledging that there is a gulf between discussions on sealing a code of conduct in the sedate conference rooms in Kuala Lumpur and what he described as “the real situation out at sea.”

Some analysts say the summits still provide a useful function even if nobody agrees on anything. They can “provide a crucial breathing space” — an opportune platform for much-needed engagement,” says Richard Javad Heydarian, an academic specializing in regional security at De La Salle University in Manila.

Still, the fractiousness between China, the U.S. and smaller states such as Vietnam and the Philippines is growing.

The U.S. is making a point of displaying its naval power. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter this month visited the American aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt while it was in the South China Sea, describing its presence there as “a symbol of our commitment to rebalance” the Asia Pacific region.

The previous month, the U.S. dispatched the destroyer USS Lassen to sail within 12 nautical miles of one of the artificial islands China occupies in the waters in a direct challenge to Beijing's sovereignty claims. Last week two U.S. B-52 bombers flew near a cluster of Chinese-built artificial islands.

Such moves aren't going down well in Beijing. So far China has limited its response to criticizing what it calls American provocations and shadowing the U.S. vessel. “The U.S. says they are going to do this again in the future, so their response could prove more robust in the future,” said Mr. Storey.

The coming year also sees a number of potentially pivotal events that could further complicate the picture, from elections in Taiwan and the Philippines to a scheduled leadership change at the top of Vietnam's Communist Party and next November's presidential elections in America. If the security picture in the South China Sea has quickly shifted in the past few months, the pace of change could pick up further in the months to come.