

# UNDERSTANDING CHINESE STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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The South China Sea (SCS) is an area of great contention within the Asia-Pacific region. As China continues its rise as a major global power, its pursuit of sovereignty in the SCS increases. China uses several strategies to justify its sovereignty claims over large swaths of the maritime area. These strategies create concern for other Southeast Asian countries that are also making sovereignty claims in the maritime region.

The SCS is home to 180 named islands, cays, reefs, shoals as well as unnamed shoals and features (McDevitt, 2015). Claiming sovereignty over these areas gives the claimant rights over the natural resources found on the above water features and in the waters up to twelve miles out. If the territory being claimed is defined as an island, it gives the State in control a two hundred nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (McDevitt, 2015). There are currently seven different States making the majority of territorial claims in the region: People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei (Dillon, 2011). The resource benefits are not lost on these States which is part of what propels the extremely competitive and, at times, volatile nature in the region.

Since 1947, China has been producing a map of the Asia-Pacific region that includes a cartographical annotation referred to as the 'Nine-Dash Line' (McDevitt, 2015). The Chinese point to the long-term production of this map to prove the historical legitimacy of their sovereignty claims in the maritime area (McDevitt, 2015). This map includes a total of 62% of the SCS inside the nine dashes (McDevitt, 2015). There have been several stages of how the Chinese have chosen to handle these large sovereignty claims. At first, China sought to seek a diplomatic resolution to disputed territory issues.

The policy was aimed at keeping relationships friendly with other States in Southeast Asia (Zhou, 2016). However, as regional tensions started to rise over disputed territories, the Chinese policy shifted less from maintaining stability in the region and more towards protecting their sovereignty claims (Zhou, 2016). This policy shift was reflected in 2012 during the Scarborough Shoal stand-off with the Philippines. Both States made sovereignty claims to the territory, but China took an aggressive stance and gained full de facto control over the shoal (Zhou, 2016).

This showed China that they had the capacity to win these disputes if they took a more forceful stance. It also created an uptick in Chinese nationalism toward making claims in the SCS, which encouraged the government to keep with this policy change (Zhou, 2016).

While China has been using more aggressive techniques to defend their territory claims, they are reluctant to pursue a full blown, military led campaign in the region (McDevitt, 2015). The Chinese are careful to avoid direct involvement of their naval fleet when possible (McDevitt, 2015). They primarily employ their fishing fleet to challenge other non-Chinese fishing vessels and chase them out of areas that China claims as their territory (McDevitt, 2015). Another aggressive non-military stance they took in protecting their claims came in May 2014 when the Chinese installed a deep-sea oil exploration rig in Vietnam's EEZ (McDevitt, 2015).

The Chinese justified this action by stating its occupation of Paracel Island since 1974. Paracel Island is a disputed territory between the two States, therefore, the Vietnamese took the actions of the Chinese as violating Vietnam's EEZ (McDevitt, 2015). The Vietnam response to this was to send 20 coast guard and fisheries to surveil the heavily guarded area. For months, these ships would cause vessel accidents and shoot high pressure water cannons at their opposition (McDevitt, 2015).

This continued until China finally removed the rig due to the pressure applied by the Vietnamese and an impending typhoon coming to the region that could have caused major damage to the rig (McDevitt, 2015). China has since eased relations with Vietnam but this example shows how far China is willing to go to pursue their sovereignty claims over the waters in the SCS without using direct military force.

Smaller States in Southeast Asia do not currently have the economic, military, or political means to challenge aggressive Chinese claims in the SCS (Dillon, 2011). There has been data that shows a steep rise in military spending among the other Southeast Asia States, but this cannot be solely contributed to the escalating situation in the SCS (Dillon, 2011).

It does potentially signal that these smaller States may be ready if a more forceful fight for territory claims arises. As China continues to rise as a global power they will work to make their claims in the SCS more concrete. The strategies they use to defend their sovereignty claims will determine the future of stability in Southeast Asia.

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