

The South China Sea: A Geopolitical Analysis

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Abstract

Since 1945 the South China Sea and the western Pacific has functioned as an uncontested global common patrolled by overwhelming U.S. naval and air power projected from a series of peripheral and over the horizon bases. The dramatic rise of China alters this situation and has transformed the South China Sea into a frontier of control as China seeks to morph this maritime theater into a landward extension of the Chinese coast where it can deploy land-based tactics into an arena previously dominated by maritime power and tactics to secure the South China Sea as a de facto territorial water that serves multiple Chinese strategic interests. Hence, the attempt by a land-based Eurasian power (China) to carve a permanent bridgehead into Spykman's Eurasian maritime periphery. Against, this trend the United States has countered with President Obama's Asian Pivot. However, the implementation of the Asian Pivot is limited by several post Cold War developments and certain constraints inherent in the geographic setting of the South China Sea. Beyond the South China Sea, the geographic setting favors the U.S. and its allies. Consequently, American options acting singly or in coalition with other nations, most notably Japan and Australia, remain more flexible and able to serve as a long term counterweight to Chinese force projection capabilities into the western Pacific proper.

Keywords: South China Sea, Asian Pivot, Eurasian maritime periphery, hard and soft power; force projection capabilities, anti-access/area denial

1. Introduction

1.1 Antecedents

At the close of the 19th century, the Royal Navy ruled the world's oceans, or in the words of Alfred Thar Mahon, the global commons (Mahon, 1890). Beset by the Boar War in South Africa and a rapidly industrializing Germany, the British withdrew from the greater Caribbean basin to concentrate their forces on containing Germany (Spykman, 1942). Consequently, the U.S. Navy effectively became the chief agency for enforcing the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary during the early 20th century. For the United States, its Pacific possessions acquired in the late 1800s, mostly through the Spanish-American War and the antecedent purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, laid a foundation for a series of bases that functioned as a network of nodes for projecting military force throughout much of the Pacific basin. Following World War II, a victorious but fatigued United Kingdom effectively handed over the global naval baton to the United States. Possessing similar cultures and strategic outlooks, such a "passing" occurred rather smoothly.

This situation meant the U.S. Navy became the chief agency for patrolling one of the world's most strategic thoroughfares, namely the Strait of Malacca, which joins the Indian and Pacific Oceans and is bordered by Indonesia and the Malaysian Peninsula (Mahon, 1890). Compounding this transition, the United States, by vanquishing Japan in World War II: (1) recaptured its previous bases and added the home islands of Japan and the Ryukyu Islands to its network of Pacific bases; and (2) acquired additional basing rights in Australia. As such, the U.S. Navy was able to contain the Soviet Naval expansion and pin the Chinese military to its immediate coastline during the Cold War (1945-1991).

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Geopolitics Defined & Applied

Geopolitics combines an analysis of geographic setting relative to the economic, political, military and cultural conditions of a single nation or coalition pursuant to their evolving strategic interests and tactical ability to execute such interests. Indeed, a combination of first hand visits to the region, various academic and public policy articles and non-classified reports documenting force projection capabilities comprise the data for

analyzing developments in the South China Sea relative to the conceptual framework stated below.

Geographic setting remains a more constant variable (Kaplan, 2012), while economic, political, military and cultural conditions prove more dynamic and can change greatly over time. Although Cohen (2015) argues geographic setting is not deterministic, it still provides certain inherent advantages or challenges for various countries attempting to: (1) Secure certain areas for themselves; and/or (2) Pre-empt, minimize or evict an existent nation's presence or ability to control a said area. Cohen (2015) stresses the idea of places as bounded settings. Such settings utilize a variety of physical and cultural variables in fixing borders. As Lea (1909) noted, borders are transitory and always in a state of flux, which includes peacetime. While Lea's statement can be applied to legal or statutory borders, his intention was focused on boundaries of influence and control. Such boundaries are influenced by: (1) Geographic setting, and (2) A nation's ability and willingness to project hard and soft power. Defined as the application of military force often in concert with coercive economic policies, hard power is often paralleled by soft power, a term coined by Nye (2004), which consists of a nation's ability to attract or influence another nation through cultural and non-coercive economic policies. This flux in borders and particularly the jockeying for strategic position often occurs in peacetime so as to enhance a nation's ability to deploy hard power to its advantage in any future conflict (Mahon, 1890; Lea, 1909).

In tandem with geographic setting and shifting borders, Mackinder (1904), Fairgrieve (1924) and Spykman (1942) wrote extensively about the Eurasian heartland dominated by a land power (Russia and/or China) with its surrounding maritime periphery being dominated by sea power, most notably British and later American naval power. Consequently, force projection by a land power into the Eurasian maritime periphery proved difficult, as did landward penetration into Asia by a peripheral or external maritime power. As the forthcoming examples illustrate, this geographic setting effectively set the stage for long-term managed tension between the Eurasian heartland and its maritime periphery, a situation that applies aptly to present economic, political and military developments pursuant to the South China Sea.

Russia's failures in the Russo-Japanese War and Japan's defeat in World War II with its consequent withdrawal from the Asian Mainland (Korea and Manchuria) serve as examples from the first half of the 20th century. Later, American advances onto the Asian mainland were limited to the southern half of the Korean peninsula, mostly because of Chinese intervention with ground forces during the Korean War. During the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese and Soviet backed land-based Asiatic movements (North Vietnam's communist party, the Viet Cong, Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge) prevented the United States from establishing a landward penetration into southeast Asia through its own interventions combined with economic/military support for South Vietnam's government, the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia and the CIA's secret Hmong army in Laos.

Although the Soviets had access to Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay from 1975 through 1991, a global network of American bases located along the Eurasia's maritime periphery thwarted Soviet advances into the Pacific and Indian Ocean basins during the Cold War. Relative to China, the U.S. Navy intervened twice in the 1950s to preempt Chinese invasion of Taiwan and a planned re-conquest of the Mainland by Kuomintang (KMT) forces based on the near shore islands of Matsu and Quemoy (Manthorpe, 2005). A subsequent U.S. intervention occurred in 1996 when the Nimitz carrier battle group cruised through the Taiwan Strait, and then with an additional carrier task force, took up positions east of Taiwan to provide security cover for Taiwan's democratic transition (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010; Haddick, 2014). Opposed by China, which had fired a series of ballistic missiles into waters near Taiwan to intimidate Taiwanese electorate, the U.S. deployment frustrated China while reassuring the Taiwanese (Gargan, 1996). This frustration resulted in a Chinese focus on projecting force into its Near Seas to counter future U.S. deployments and thwart any attempt by Taiwan to declare independence. Indeed, by 2005, China had positioned over 700 ballistic missiles along its shore aimed at Taiwan (Pan, 2005).

1.3 South China Sea: Setting and Spatial Context

The South China Sea encompasses roughly 3.625 million sq. km (1.4 million sq. mi). Its northwest shore abuts the southeast Chinese coast and its western margins front Vietnam and the Malay Peninsula (Figures 1 and 2). To the south, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei comprise its southern coastline, near the eastern terminus of the Strait of Malacca. Meanwhile, northern Australia lies over the horizon. To the east, the Philippines, most notably Luzon, Mindoro and Palawan form the South China Sea's eastern margins. Finally, Taiwan caps its northern extent. The Luzon strait, separating Taiwan from Luzon, comprises an open channel into the western Pacific proper. The South China Sea contains two sets of hotly contested island groups, i.e. the Spratly and Paracels. The Paracel Islands are contested by China and Vietnam. About half the islands are located within 370 km or 200 nautical miles (n.m.) of Vietnam, whereas all of them are within 370 Km (200 n.m.) of China's Hainan Island. Various parts of the Spratly Islands are claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan, Malaysia

and China.

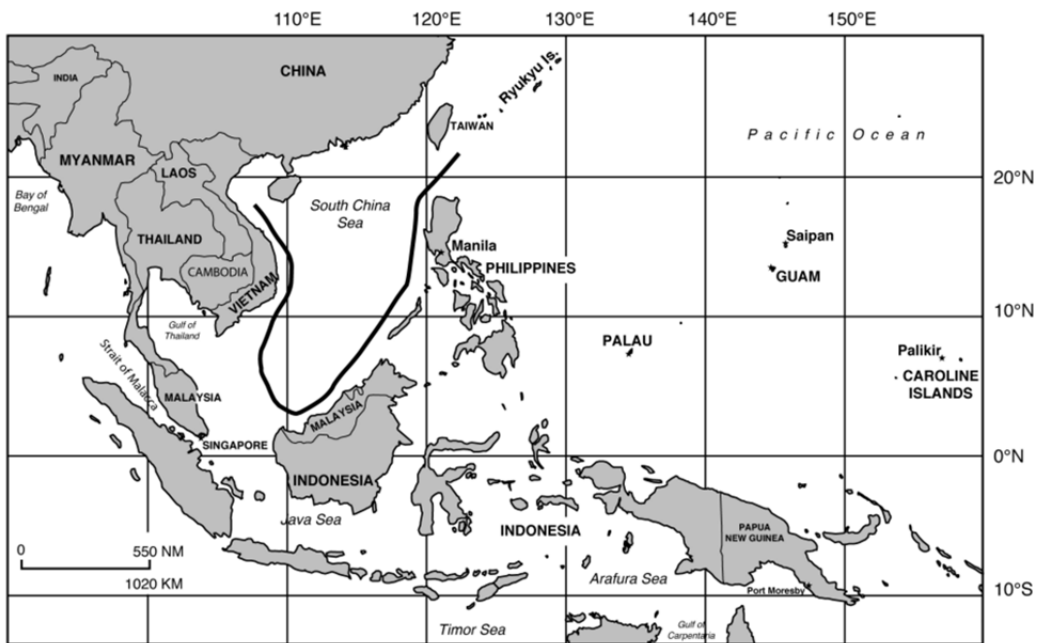


Figure 1. Regional context of China's claim pursuant to the South China Sea

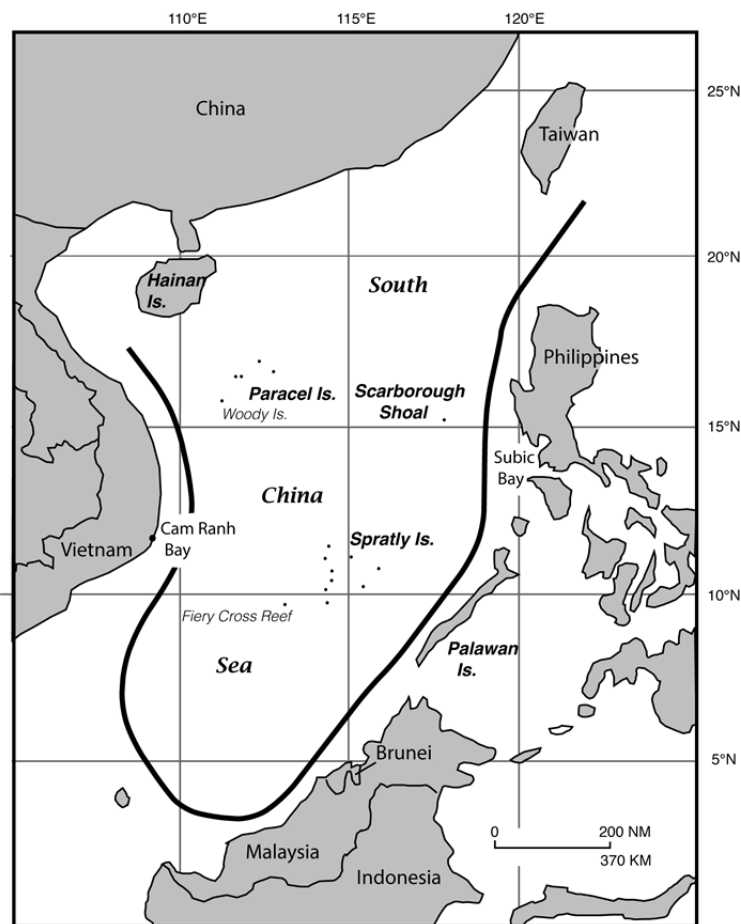


Figure 2. Cow Tongue Map

China claims substantial portions of the South China Sea and its various islands and shoals based on a 1947 Kuomintang (KMT) map, also known as the Cow Tongue map (Figure 2). Indeed, China refers to the South China Sea as its territorial waters (Cohen, 2015). While the legal history behind these various claims would prove an interesting historical geography, this paper argues that the strategic interests of one such claimant (China) and its increasing tactical ability to implement such strategic interests trump any findings that an impartial legal/judicial inquiry may find. Indeed, in 2014 China refused to participate in international arbitration involving Philippine claims to portions of the Spratly Islands and refers to its claims in the South China Sea as a non-negotiable "core interest" (U.S. Defense Dept. 2015). Moreover, China's actions seek to reinforce hierarchy rather than sovereign equality, since hierarchy comprises a longstanding principle in Asia's historic international system with China accustomed to being at the top of such a hierarchy (Kissinger, 2014).

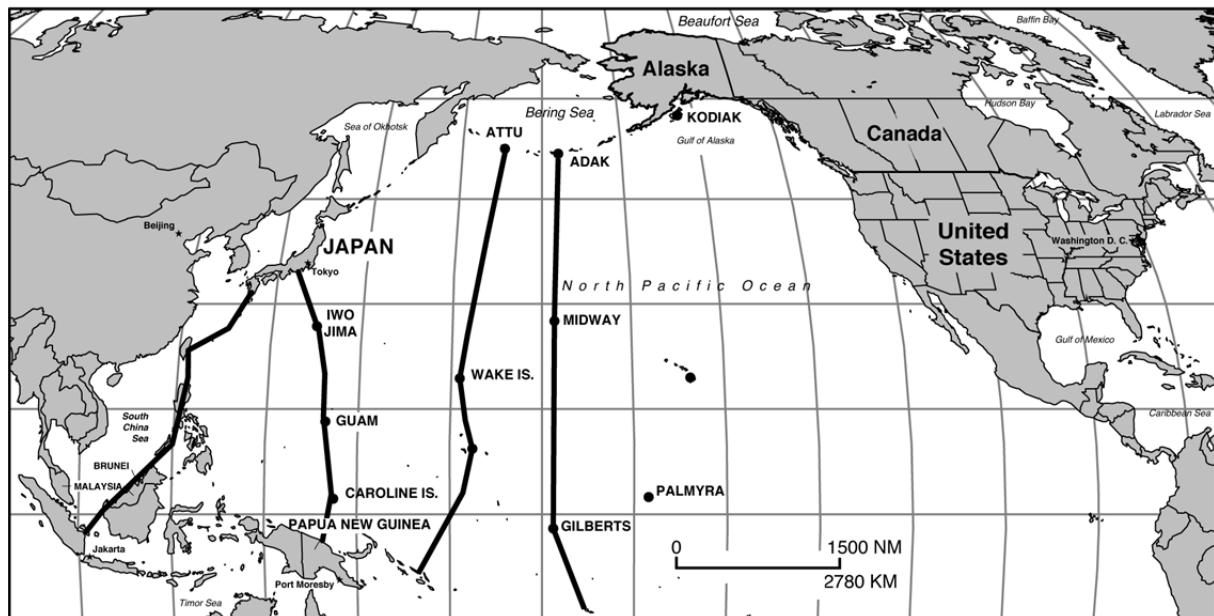


Figure 3. Island chains within the western Pacific Ocean

From a larger vantage point, the western Pacific consists of a series of successive island chains located at various junctures off the Asian coast. As depicted in Figure 3, the first island chain consists of Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines. The second chain consists of a line extending from central Japan through Iwo Jima and then arcing through the Marianas (including Guam) and the Caroline Islands to New Guinea. A third island chain extends from the outer Aleutians (Attu and Kiska) south through Wake Island and then through the Marshalls terminating in the Solomon Islands northeast of Australia. Forming a fourth island chain is a line extending from Adak, AK through Midway and the Gilberts and terminating in Samoa. Behind these four chains sits Hawaii, in the midst of the Pacific, with Palmyra 1850 km (1000 n.m.) south-southwest and Kodiak Island, Alaska located roughly 4,630 km (2,500 n.m.) to the north.

Beyond Hawaii, the north Pacific is devoid of islands until reaching the immediate environs of California, British Columbia and southeast Alaska (Figure 3). As such, this void means that any expanding Asian power is denied an offshore platform for projecting power into North America or for limiting U.S. Naval access to the open Pacific from its west coast ports including Hawaii. Owing to its 19th century acquisitions and the defeat of Imperial Japan, the island chains mentioned above comprise a foundation for a network of American force projection nodes into the western Pacific. For China, this geographic setting functions as a series of Great Walls that serve to restrain or inhibit this Asian power's ability to access and control portions of the Pacific. For the United States, the first two island chains also afford the opportunity to project hard power into the coastal zones of mainland Asia, as was the case in Korea 1950-1953 and then in Vietnam from 1965-1973.

2. China's Rise: Basing and Force Projection

The opening of the 21st Century has witnessed the dramatic rise of China, which presently possesses an economy second only to the United States. This industrial "workshop of the world" is all the more remarkable when

considering the socio-economic chaos that resulted from Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the ensuing Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The market reforms ushered in by Deng Xiaoping and sustained by his successors have produced a dynamic hybrid socialist-capitalist economy while retaining a one-party centralized political apparatus. Commensurate with such a rise has been China's ability to settle most of land border disputes, most notably those with the Russian Federation.

China's enhanced national economy provides the capacity for modernizing its army, air force and for the first time since the Ming Dynasty, the construction and deployment of a blue water navy. A blue water navy provides a means of extending or contesting control over the Near Seas (South and East China Seas) as China more aggressively asserts its unsettled maritime claims. As applied to the East and South China Seas, this endeavor serves multiple strategic interests (discussed later), yet simultaneously constitutes a push-back to uncontested American naval and air supremacy that has prevailed since 1945 (Kaplan, 2012). As such, the South China Sea comprises a 21st century pivot or frontier featuring the outward expansion of a rising land-based Asian power (China) versus the control of an existent maritime superpower (United States) in a portion of the Eurasian maritime periphery flanked by weaker states such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia. Suggestive of the greater Caribbean in the early 1900s when the United States was the rising power and the United Kingdom's Royal Navy served as the arm of the then existent power, the South China Sea setting possesses a major difference: British withdrawal from the Caribbean did not result in arms race between various countries in North and South America, whereas such a withdrawal by the United States today from the Near Seas theaters of the western Pacific would likely spark an arms race between Japan and China and foster a scenario of greater regional instability (Haddick, 2014).

The South China Sea, located further from Japan than the East China Sea, comprises the Chinese version of the American Caribbean (Spykman, 1942; Kaplan, 2014). As Mahon (1890) stated, the United States needed to secure its near seas, so must China and hence its focus on the South China Sea. The Paracels and Spratly Islands offer platforms from which the Chinese Navy/Coast Guard can by sheer presence exert control or varying degrees of coercion throughout the South China Sea. These island platforms also serve as a forward defense that limits the exposure for the southeast Chinese coast and its extensive naval facilities, including submarine pens on Hainan Island, to projections of American sea power. The installation of surface-to-air missiles in February 2016, along with J-11 fighters (modified Russian SU-27 Flankers) in late 2015 on Woody Island within the Paracels, illustrates this point (Thayer, 2016).

As the Panama Canal formed and continues to function as a strategic lynchpin for American control, so too does the Strait of Malacca through which transits over 80% of all the crude oil from the Middle East destined for East Asian ports (Haddick, 2014). China's ability to contest existent American control over Malacca serves three objectives. First, it secures China's sea lines of communication and trade at crucial points within the Eurasian maritime periphery that links the Indian Ocean basin including the Persian Gulf to the Pacific. Despite two Asian pipelines, China imports 85% of its crude oil through the Strait of Malacca (U.S. Defense Dept. 2015). Second, it adds insecurity to rival Japan, which also imports nearly all its oil through the Strait of Malacca. Finally, it tangibly reasserts China's role at the top of a far eastern Asian hierarchy.

The selection of Fiery Cross reef within the Spratly group and the construction of a 10,000-foot runway, along with an artificial harbor, again illustrate this point (Grady, 2015). Located over 370 km (200 n.m.) relative to the Philippine coast, its position allows for the Strait of Malacca to become within range of Chinese fighters and bombers, with the latter being capable of launching anti-ship cruise missiles from comfortable stand-off distances. The positioning of tanker aircraft on Fiery Cross would magnify this ability. With the addition of radar and other intelligence and communications hardware at Fiery Cross, the Chinese will be positioned to unilaterally assert an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) as occurred in the East China Sea in 2013, even though such an ADIZ overlapped a pre-existing Japanese ADIZ covering the Senkaku Islands (China also claims these islands) (Chen & Glasner, 2015).

From a tactical standpoint, the incremental militarization of selected islands within the Paracels and Spratly islands groups allows the Chinese to transform a maritime theater into one that more closely resembles a landward extension of the Chinese coast as China pursues an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) set of tactics pursuant to U.S. Naval intervention. Based on Chairman Mao's land-based offensive/defensive strategies that were successful in the Chinese Civil war, the A2/AD doctrine aims to make U.S. Naval intervention very costly thereby increasing the chances that the United States will not intervene or simply accede to Chinese control and presence (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010). The incremental nature of the build-up relies on low but consistent levels of coercion that makes a hard power intervention by an outside maritime power politically difficult to implement or justify. (O'Rourke, 2015; Haddick, 2014; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010). In the meantime, the cumulative impact

of these incremental actions results in the build-up of a hard power force projection capability that eventually becomes a credible threat to the existent power.

Although limited in range, the more difficult to track offensive yet defensive deployment in the South China Sea of 12 Russian built Kilo-class diesel/electric attack submarines, eight of which are equipped with supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles, becomes problematic for any U.S. Naval battle group operating in the South China Sea's A2/AD context (O'Rourke, 2015a). Similarly, U.S. long-range anti-submarine planes such as P-3 or P-8s will have to contend with surface-to-air missile batteries and Chinese fighters, something that until recently was not in the tactical equation. Adding to its A2/AD capability, the DF-21 and DF-26, shore-based anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) designed specifically to target aircraft carriers possess ranges of 1,500 and 3,900 km (810 and 2,150 n.m.), respectively. The DF-26 when launched from Hainan Island, places Guam within its range (O'Rourke 2015a and U.S. Defense Dept. 2015).

The ASBMs accentuate the A2/AD doctrine by greatly leveraging Beijing's 'at sea power' with 'shore-based' assets. All the more troubling from an American perspective, the targeting and elimination of the ASBMs at the source would require direct strikes on the Chinese mainland, thereby ratcheting up the volatility of conflict significantly. Moreover, sharply contrasting to the United States which possesses multiple security interests across the globe that all require in-theater deployments of varying magnitudes, China's lack of formal military commitments elsewhere, means nearly 100% of the Chinese Navy and a substantial amount of its Air Force and ground-based missile complements can be deployed relative to the South China Sea theater.

3. United States: Basing and Force Projection

The United States' ability to project force into the South China Sea stems from the Seventh Fleet's home base at Yokosuka, Japan and Kadena Air Force base located on Okinawa. Additional U.S. Marine Corps ground forces and air units are also stationed on Okinawa, roughly 2,040 km (1,100 n.m.) northeast of the South China Sea. Meanwhile, 1,700 NM east of the South China Sea, the United States possesses an enormous Air Force base on Guam. While the Marine Corps basing arrangement on Okinawa remain locally controversial, Guam comprises U.S. sovereign territory and sits squarely in the second island chain. Upheld by the Philippine Supreme Court in 2016, a ten-year U.S.- Philippine security agreement comprises another scenario that has yet to completely manifest itself. This agreement allows the U.S. to rotate air and naval units on a temporary basis in the Philippines and envisions at least a partial re-opening, of Subic Bay and adjacent Clark Field (Figure 2) (Hernandez & Whaley, 2016). A U.S. Navy logistics base in Singapore, a former British colony, near the Strait of Malacca completes the U.S. presence.

For the United States, the current basing arrangement relative to South China Sea essentially consists of a few well-defined over-the-horizon positions. Thus, U.S. forces operate at the end of lengthy supply lines and flight ranges involving in-air refueling for its land based air superiority fighters operating from Guam or Okinawa (F-15s and F-22s). Moreover, portions of flight lines from Okinawa to the South China Sea flank the Chinese coast with its numerous air bases. A nearly opposite scenario of multiple bases utilizing several sets of shorter interior lines of communication and supply occurs relative to the Chinese ability to exert air power into the South China Sea.

Off-setting the Chinese missile threats, 16 of the 18 Aegis class cruisers in the Pacific possess ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems in 2007 and as of 2014, 33 ships in the U.S. Navy possessed BMD capabilities (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010; O'Rourke, 2015b). However, a sea-based anti-missile defense must overcome numerous incoming missiles with 100% efficiency to be truly effective. Moreover, the U.S. Navy is not in a position to absorb casualties to its highly valuable capital ships (Aegis cruisers and aircraft carriers) because the American capacity to replace them has been greatly reduced by deindustrialization and a commensurate national debt, a situation Lea (1909) warned about over 100 years ago and Cohen (2015) reiterated as a current problem.

Finally, the U.S. Navy with its carrier capabilities has the option of deploying air power within the South China Sea, however such a deployment has two shortcomings. First, the F/A-18 and the F-35 fighters are limited to just under 1,100 km (600 n.m.), whereas the current force of 350 Chinese land based Su27/J-11 Flankers possess ranges of 1,500 km (800 n.m.) and when armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, their ranges increase by an additional 250 to 400 km (135 to 215 n.m.) (Haddick 2014). Second, an aircraft carrier becomes increasingly vulnerable against numerous land-based planes and missiles, especially when these planes and missiles can be launched from multiple bases and directions beyond the ranges of the carrier's fighters. To counter this situation, the U.S. Navy is developing an anti-ship Tomahawk cruise missile with an improved range beyond the present 1,500 km (810 n.m.) limit to increase its standoff distances relative to Chinese bases and is modifying the defensive the SM-6 anti-ballistic missile to carry an offensive anti-ship payload (Gibbons-Neff, 2016).

Nonetheless, an American failure to maintain robust ABM defenses and to develop longer-range weaponry for the Navy and Air Force to counter the Chinese buildup remains an immediate problem. This problem is further complicated by the *Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty* (INF), which banned intermediate range ground based missiles both for the United States and contemporary Russia (Erickson, 2016).

3.1 United States: Asian Pivot & Surrounding Countries

When President Obama announced the "Asian Pivot" in 2010, he declared that 60% of U.S. Naval and Air Force assets would be deployed in the Pacific theater. Cohen (2015) dismissed the pivot as premature and stated that China cannot militarily compete with the West. In fact, the Asian Pivot is overdue and recognizes correctly that the flow of history and geography is moving from an Atlantic centered world to one focused more closely on the Pacific basin. As Haddick (2014) noted, over 60% of all exported U.S. goods are destined for Asia-Pacific ports and U.S. Allies and friends such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan import over 80% of their oil through the Strait of Malacca. Overall, the United States exported \$320 billion worth of goods to Pacific Rim ports in 2010 that supported 850,000 U.S. jobs (Clinton, 2011). As for competing militarily with the West, this paper argues China can compete quite well with the West in certain theaters, most notably the South China Sea.

Consequently, the challenge for the United States is two-fold. First, can it deploy enough hard power in the region? Second, can it parallel a hard power deployment with sufficient soft power? For many, including this author, the answer to these questions was simply a matter of priority, a scenario that fits the former Cold War era quite well. However, much has changed since 1991. To answer these questions accurately, one needs to factor in several post-Cold War "contextual variables" discussed below.

First, the United States Navy presently consists of 280 ships, less than half its size of 592 ships in 1989 (Haddick, 2014). Similar reductions also apply to the U.S. Air Force, which has traditionally served as a force multiplier for the U.S. Army in Europe and the Middle East, but in a Pacific context would serve as a force multiplier for the Navy. Second, the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy has meant that a significant portion of its tax base, and hence capacity to fund military programs, has decreased. Ironically, China's tax base and its capacity to fund its military buildup, have been augmented because of the geographic direction of deindustrialization associated with American outsourcing (Cohen, 2015). Third, the United States has found itself beset by costly and seemingly unending interventions in the Middle East. Fourth, the United States has failed to systematically evaluate its entangling alliance structures in light of a post-Cold War world order. As such, the U.S. remains firmly entrenched and committed to a NATO alliance that has actively expanded in the post-Soviet era and now fronts Russia's borders, while in the Pacific, the balance of its forces remain tied to the northwest Pacific (Korean peninsula) because of its obligation to defend the Korean Armistice. Fifth, the United States with its enormous national debt, some of which is funded by China, is to a certain extent vulnerable to foreign economic coercion and is facing limits as to what it can fund pursuant to developing, procuring, operating and replacing (in the event of battlefield losses), the advanced weapons systems and platforms from which they are based.

Pursuant to soft power, the United States has negotiated the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multi-lateral free trade agreement between the U.S. and various Pacific states, which attempts to bind such states closer to the United States (Clinton, 2011). The TPP excludes China and serves as a means for countering China's diplomatic moves aimed at tying these Pacific states closer to China. Whether or not the U.S. Congress will ratify the Trans Pacific Partnership remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the following two questions need to be measured against the TPP's probable benefits: Would the TPP result in a significant loss of U.S. manufacturing jobs and industrial base (de-industrialization) and if so, would such losses remain in the national interest given the existent degree of deindustrialization? The first question examines the probability of direct impacts while the second takes a cumulative impact perspective.

3.2 The Philippines and Vietnam

Another regional complication within the South China Sea basin involves the Philippines and Vietnam. Traditionally a hub for American naval and air power and affording prime strategic position with Manila facing the South China Sea, the U.S. military has had only limited presence since 1991 when the Philippine Senate vetoed an extension of U.S. basing rights at Subic Bay and Clark Air Force base. A short time later, Mt. Pinatubo erupted and left Clark Air Force base buried in ash. Subsequently, the U.S. announced withdrawal from the Philippines, which meant that the positioning of hard power air and naval assets along the shores of the South China Sea terminated and defaulted to the current over-the-horizon basing arrangement.

Haddick (2014) stated that for the Philippines the demise of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War meant: (1) Vietnam, their chief rival in the South China Sea would be placed in a difficult position pursuant to military aid, much like Cuba in the American Caribbean, and (2) the removal of a Soviet land war threat along China's

northern border fostered a security environment from which China could focus its turn towards the sea. The complete failure of the Philippine government to realize the latter and to a certain extent, U.S. indifference, accentuated this window of opportunity for China.

Indeed, the Philippine government has continued to stress the importance of an army at the expense of a navy and air force in the post-Cold war period. While this scenario squares with the cultural traditions of Spanish colonial countries, including the Philippines and nearly all of Latin America, it simply does not fit the insular nature of the Philippines and its South China Sea coast, where air and naval supremacy or at least a conscious focus on those services, better fits the country's external security environment. Consequently, the Philippine government lacks the hard power ability to resist Chinese encroachment in the contested Spratly Islands. For example, in 1995 China occupied Mischief Reef, 325 km (175 n.m.) west of Palawan, and more recently in 2012, China seized part of the Scarborough Shoals, located about 140 km (75 n.m.) southwest of Palawan and simultaneously imposed restrictions on Philippine agricultural exports to China (U.S. Dept. of Defense 2015). Against this backdrop, the Philippines have renewed U.S. access rights to Clark Field and Subic Bay in 2016 and have allowed the naval vessels of the Japanese Self-Defense forces to make a port of call in April 2016 (Parmeswaren, 2016a).

The Soviets enlarged and operated the naval base at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam from 1975 through the end of the Cold War and then to 2002. Russian naval presence served as a potential counterweight to China. In a policy paralleling the Philippines relative to the United States, the Vietnamese demanded higher payments from Russia to renew the lease and the Russian government balked. Although the Vietnamese have recently purchased Russian kilo-class submarines and a more limited 2004 agreement with Russia allows Cam Ranh Bay to be used for refueling operations per the Russian Air Force (Thayer, 2015), Vietnam for the most part lies exposed to the escalating Chinese presence in the South China Sea (Figure 2). To partially counter this exposure, Vietnam signed an agreement to allow Japanese warships to visit Cam Ranh Bay in 2015 (Parmeswaren, 2015). Meanwhile, United States has expressed interest in a similar agreement as the facility retains facilities for aircraft carriers (Parmeswaren, 2016b).

4. Future Trajectories

4.1 Short-term Options

China's ability to propel the South China Sea into a landward extension of the Chinese coastline means that land-based strategies and tactics will be deployed and become operational norms for exerting hard power. Paralleled with bi-lateral rather than multi-lateral negotiations utilizing China's soft power, in a classic divide and conquer modus operandi, China will then be positioned to unilaterally dominate the South China Sea and use its demarcated Economic Exclusion Zones and Air Defense Identification Zones as a means for excluding foreign air and naval assets. This situation, should it occur, directly conflicts with Ikenbury's (2008) assumption that a rising China will simply adhere to inherited international rules set by overwhelming American influence following World War II, rules made with nominal to zero Chinese input relative to their initial formulation and subsequent implementation (Kissinger, 2014; Jaques, 2009).

Others such as Cohen (2015) cite the economic interdependence between China and the United States as a reason limiting conflict, however a similar situation between the U.S. and Japan existed in the early 20th century and Lea (1909) discounted this argument as a misapplication of commercial trade principles and accurately predicted the ensuing conflict with Japan. Moreover, as China's domestic market grows, its dependence on the U.S. market will weaken. Consequently, from a Chinese perspective, their overall geo-political strategy in the western Pacific: (1) focuses on controlling numerous islands and shoals between the Chinese coastline and Malacca, much as the West Indies bridge the American coastline to the Panamanian Isthmus; and (2) attempts to capitalize on possessing strategic positions during peacetime, particularly in cases where sovereignty is not a settled issue. This situation differs markedly from the eastern Pacific where off-shore islands relative to the North American coastline are essentially non-existent or so close to the mainland that their sovereignty has long been settled and they have been functionally linked to the U.S. or Canadian mainland.

Ultimately, this slow but steady set of geo-political processes serves to transform the South China Sea from being part of the global commons into a frontier where Chinese control, and possibly sovereignty, comprise a push-back to uncontested American naval and air supremacy that has underpinned the international rules governing freedom of navigation and air transit for the past 70 years. Should this Chinese push-back prove successful they will have carved a bridgehead into Spykman's Eurasian maritime periphery, something no Asian continental power has been able to accomplish in the post-1800 modern era.

Against this trend, the United States possesses both short and long-term sets of responses. Reinforced by U.S.

entanglements in the Middle East, a foreign policy that has pushed Russia towards China, a Pacific deployment focused on the Korean peninsula and a national debt that likely precludes a military build-up or repeat of the Reagan 1980s, the near term deployment of reduced U.S. Navy and Air Force assets, combined with a very limited set of over the horizon bases, means any likely clash of forces will occur on terms set largely by China. This situation comprises a distinct disadvantage for the United States and one Americans are not used to addressing (Jaques, 2009). A basing arrangement in Vietnam at Cam Ranh Bay would comprise a break from a near exclusive over the horizon set of basing positions, a situation that remains speculative at the time of this writing.

As Haddick (2014) succinctly notes, regional partners in the South China Sea generally favor the United States military presence and have security interests that align accordingly. Consequently, he recommends building a working coalition of forces. However, the leading would-be partners of Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines are not wealthy countries and whether or not they have the wherewithal to finance and operate contemporary high-tech naval and air assets and the integrated communications and command systems needed for successful deployment and deterrence against China is an open question. As noted earlier, the Philippines, despite possessing a crucial location within the first island chain, has a military tradition more akin to a Latin American country and presently possesses a navy and air force completely inadequate for the task at hand. Again, the American national debt and the U.S. Government's various other entanglements, including Iraq/Afghanistan fatigue, militate against any sort of "military-building" for the Philippines or Vietnam financed and operated by Washington. In summary, the short-term options for the United States are constrained.

4.2 Long-term options

Longer-term options at limiting Chinese force projections capabilities into the Pacific are brighter for the U.S. because the geography begins to work in favor of the United States and against China. China's ability to transform the Pacific into an extension of the Chinese coast beyond the first island chain deteriorates as its ability to leverage at-sea assets with shore-based assets diminishes or disappears completely. In addition, this theater lacks islands where sovereignty remains contested or unsettled. Moreover, the western Pacific proper, as the major battleground between the United States and Japan in World War II, affords a geography where the U.S. and Japan possess key locations and have a long history of naval warfare. As democracies, U.S. and Japanese public support for resisting Chinese attempts to control or influence this former World War II battleground would likely remain strong. Finally, the Chinese Navy has no experience in modern open ocean warfare, lacks an historical presence in the area from which to build a case for hegemony, and as an authoritarian state, its governing regime could be quite vulnerable to any setbacks that conjure emotions associated with China's century of humiliation.

Returning to Haddick's (2014) recommended coalition building strategy, a strong U.S.-Japanese alliance combined with Australian and Indian participation poses a substantial long-term obstacle to Chinese extensions of force into the Pacific or Indian Oceans. These coalition partners, most notably Japan and Australia, are first world nations experienced in naval warfare, while India as a former British colony possess a growing economy, British based naval institutions and a democratic form of governance. Joint U.S., Australian and Indian naval exercises occurred in 2007 and are likely to again resume (Wilkes, 2015). Moreover, India has unsolved land disputes with China along its northeastern border. This alliance structure minimizes the U.S. contextual variables of national debt and its numerous other foreign entanglements and works with the geography beyond the first island chain. Within the first island chain, a more robust Japanese presence with U.S./Japanese basing arrangements with the Philippines and Vietnam also parallels American interests and minimizes the "contextual variables" operating against the United States both in the short and long-term.

The worst option for the United States, both in the short and long term, is to deny or ignore the realities at hand and proceed with strategies and tactics that simply do not fit changing conditions, but remain comfortable because they are tethered to a familiar past set of circumstances. As Diamond (2005) stated: "The values to which people cling to most stubbornly under inappropriate conditions are those that were previously the source of their greatest triumphs." For example, when the Royal Navy chose to remain reliant upon battleships, something dating back to the 1906 commissioning of the *H.M.S. Dreadnaught*, she paid heavy price when hostilities broke out with Japan. The *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk easily on the high-seas by Japanese carrier-based planes in December of 1941. Consequently, the Royal Navy ceased to be an effective force in the Pacific.

5. Conclusions

China is systematically developing and incrementally deploying an array of land-based weapons systems with

ranges that effectively morph the South China Sea into an extension of the Chinese coast thereby creating a tentative bridgehead in Eurasia's maritime periphery, something no Asian continental power has been able to achieve in the modern era. Chinese strategy and tactics have effectively created a pivot or frontier zone of control within the South China Sea from what has been since 1945 through roughly 2010, an uncontested global common defended and patrolled by overwhelming U.S. naval and air forces.

Taking advantage of unsettled claims to numerous islands and shoals, China, through seizing such locales from other claimants and subsequently basing military assets and personnel upon them, secures strategic positions to: (1) Enhance defense of Mainland's south China coast, (2) Serve as off-shore platforms for further projecting force in tandem with a backdrop of shore-based assets, (3) Pre-empt the independence of Taiwan, and (4) Secure the South China Sea as territorial waters pursuant to the 1947 Cow Tongue map, thus ultimately allowing China to exclude or attempt to exclude foreign military naval and air assets from much of the South China Sea. This situation exemplifies Lea's (1909) warning that seizure of key strategic positions often precedes armed conflict. This strategy's tactical implementation relies on anti-access/area denial wherein much, if not all of the Chinese air and naval arsenal, can be deployed so as to preempt or exact such a high price for battle that a potential adversary (singly or in coalition) will not enter the South China Sea arena. Moreover, the leveraging of shore-based assets means that any attack to suppress them must strike targets in China proper, thereby escalating the scope and intensity of any conflict significantly.

Against this situation, the United States seeks to continue the prevailing security order through President Obama's "Asian Pivot" and does not contemplate passing the proverbial naval baton to a rising China. However, the U.S. currently possesses a much-reduced Navy and Air Force within the context of several limiting variables ranging from protracted Middle Eastern conflicts, a burgeoning national debt, and a foreign policy that has pushed Russia towards China along with other aforementioned factors. As such, any near-term conflict in the South China Sea will occur on geographic terms set by and large by China with U.S. weaponry operating from a select group of over the horizon bases that lacks the sufficient standoff ranges needed to cover expansive Pacific distances. Renewed basing arrangements with the Philippines and Vietnam paralleled by similar Japanese accords, works to minimize these issues. In the meantime, the Chinese can leverage sea-based power by using shore-based assets and can deploy much of their total force in-theater, an option not present for the U.S. The American attempt to build a coalition of partners based on other countries with South China Sea littorals (most notably the Philippines and Vietnam) is beset by a combination of financial constraints and cultural characteristics that limit, rather than accentuate, the ability of these countries to fund and operate a Navy and Air Force capable of projecting legitimate deterrence against a rapidly modernizing Chinese military force structure.

On the other hand, China's longer-term ability to project force decisively beyond the first island chain encounters greater difficulty as its ability to morph the sea into a land surface deteriorates or diminishes completely. In addition, this World War II battleground between the U.S. and Japan lacks uncontested islands and shoals. Instead, these islands comprise U.S. or Japanese possessions or if independent, align with the United States. The ability to build a coalition based on former British Colonies (India and Australia) along with the U.S.-Japanese alliance will prove a more tenable and sustainable force operating to limit China and exact higher costs upon China, should it attempt to extend its hegemony beyond its Near Seas. Finally, U.S. developments of longer range and more low cost weaponry, some of which may be operated remotely, may in the long-term result in American hard power being exerted in the South China Sea on conditions far more favorable to the United States than China. Admittedly, the latter situation remains speculative and whether it becomes a reality remains to be seen.

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