

THE SOUTH CHINA SEAS AND CHINA'S THREAT TO AMERICA (A SUMMING UP AT EIGHTY)

by
Monte R. Bullard

Strengthen the U.S. military and deploying it appropriately in the East and South China Seas. These actions will discourage Chinese adventurism that imperils American interests in Asia and shows our strength as we begin renegotiating our trading relationship with China.
Donald J. Trump Website (<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/positions/us-china-trade-reform>)

Freedom of navigation was a "national interest" of the US, she said--a phrase that sounded like a counter to China's talk about "core interests." She said the US was determined to maintain open access to the South China Sea, in effect rejecting China's claims to sovereignty there.
Hillary R. Clinton Website http://www.ontheissues.org/2016/Hillary_Clinton_Foreign_Policy.htm

U.S. President Barack Obama said on Tuesday that Washington would stand with partners to ensure freedom of navigation and flight in the South China Sea and, without mentioning China by name, said big nations should not bully smaller ones.
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-obama-southchinasea-idUSKCN0YF0IJ>

Admiral Swift, who visited China last month, said that routine commercial and military operations in the South China Sea had become subject to warnings, interrupting the freedom of navigation, as well as air rights, to such an extent that the "unilateral assertiveness" was becoming a trend that was "unacceptable."
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/asia/us-navy-commander-implies-china-has-eroded-safety-of-south-china-sea.html?_r=0

...islands in the South China Sea "have been China's territory since ancient times," and that countries from outside the region should respect the need of Asian nations for a "peaceful and stable environment" so the nations could develop rapidly. Xi Jinping
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-south-china-sea-singapore.html>

The Spratly Islands have become one topic that emerges regularly in American political and strategic discourse. In many cases the basic assumptions and conclusions or perceptions about China are wrong... in my opinion. Chiang Kai-shek wrote a book subtitled "A Summing up at Seventy" to clarify what he thought was the threat of Russia to China. I am writing this article as "A Summing up at Eighty" to provide insights into American views about the threat of China to America.¹

¹ My credibility is based on experience and study. The observations in this piece come from previous research and interviews I conducted as the first accredited U.S. Army attaché in the People's Republic of China from 1980 to 1982 to include commanders and commissars in all over China. I hold a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley in Political Science with a China area focus. I have published two print books, one e-book (see <http://www.straittalk88.com>) and many articles about China's military and strategic perspectives. My analysis in previous research was from a political science approach... alas, now I must look at it from an historian's viewpoint. I relied heavily on Wikipedia to double check old facts, dates and place names and to bring in new facts. Although I have tried in all my writings to be value free. I admit that I believe cooperation with China is far better than confrontation... across the board.

I will focus on two over-arching questions: Is the Chinese Communist leadership inherently evil and therefore a threat to U.S. interests and is China strategically aggressive and expansive?

Is Chinese Leadership Inherently Evil?

The first task is to dissect the differences between ideologies; authoritarianism versus democracy on the political scale and socialism versus capitalism on the economic scale. It is clear that the Chinese leadership has moved a long way along the economic scale toward capitalism, although the government does still play more of a role in the economy than it did two decades ago. On the U.S. side, the government has moved quite a way toward the socialism end of the scale, by expanding government and increasing regulations. As a result of this movement by both governments there are fewer ideological differences in the economic realm.

The differences on the political side, authoritarian rule versus democratic participation, is a different story. There are major differences and they usually appear under the rubric of human rights concerns. Chinese leaders have determined that it is necessary to maintain a tighter control over society rather than allow complete democratic participation.

It is not possible to understand the Chinese leadership's rationale without understanding in detail the social and political consequences of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR). That period in Chinese history (1966-1976) probably caused more deaths and devastation to the society than any event in human history. The movement included turning children against parents in an attempt to erase the Confucian ethic and a purge of everyone in a position of authority to, ironically, create what might be considered a perfect democracy where everyone from factory worker to corporate chief, student to school principal, farmer to government official were equal. Everyone had a vote on every issue. Nearly everyone, especially students, not in a position of authority participated in the protests and killings. All schools at all levels were closed for several years resulting in what became known as a lost generation. The psychological impact on virtually everyone in the society was destructive and lasting.

The primary lesson of the GPCR, in the Chinese mindset, was that everyone feared any political policy or action that might cause a return to the chaos of that horrific time. In short, there became a resolution that social stability was far more important than freedom or liberty.

Today the Chinese who are old enough to remember the GPCR still fear any potential return to such a chaos that could be stimulated by any type of identity politics. They believe events like the Ferguson or Baltimore riots are the result of weaknesses in a society that is excessively democratic and they don't want to be told how to manage their people by American leaders. They believe that Chinese society is far larger and more complex than American society and that regional differences in China are far more delicate with different large minority groups and languages. They know that it doesn't take much for a protest to get out of control as was demonstrated in the Tiananmen protests of 1989 which was brutally put down.

They have had experiences with protests in one city that led to protests in other cities... including their own rise to power in 1949.

This history and cultural view has led the Chinese leadership to conclude that an authoritarian system is necessary because China is different and perhaps more prone to disastrous uprisings. That results in a requirement for tighter control of the mass media and some elements of society and that in the West is considered an abuse of human rights.

Is China Expansive and Aggressive?

The second question of whether China is expansive and aggressive is less complicated from an historian's point of view. It is difficult to make the case that modern China has been expansive. Several examples of military confrontation with neighbors show a willingness to compromise and not expand borders.

The Chinese Communist government formalized their control over China on October 1, 1949 as a result of a bloody civil war. Just one year later they sent troops to Korea to fight UN troops led by the United States. It was, and still is, known as the "War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea." By April 1951 the Chinese had committed over 700,000 troops to fighting. The point is that China could have taken control of North Korea, but instead supported the friendly Communist government and even reached a formal agreement that ceded some islands in the Yalu River that borders the two countries. There was no attempt to expand territory when it was possible.

The Sino-Soviet border has an even more interesting history. The first effort to settle the border was the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. Other treaties were signed later and the new Chinese Communist leadership felt that Russia had taken advantage of Qing Dynasty emperors and imposed "unequal" treaties on them; treaties that took 1.5 million square kilometers of Chinese land from them. The initial relationship between the then Soviet Union and China was good in that they were both good Communist countries. Then in the 1960's there was what became known as the "Sino-Soviet Split." It was during this period when the western and eastern border became a serious issue again and in 1969 the two sides fought battles over Zhenbao (Damansky) Island; an island in the middle of the border Ussuri River. Although the border issues lasted a long time, and were not settled until a final treaty agreement in 2008. Again, China settled border problems by negotiation and were more concerned with river navigation channels than with expanding territory.

The Trans-Karakoram Tract (1963) was an agreement between China and Pakistan over an inhospitable mountain area on the western border of China. China had included the area in Chinese maps, but Pakistan challenged the maps. Ultimately China agreed to withdraw the maps and reach an agreement on the area. Obviously there were other geo-political factors involved in the agreement.

Continuing around China's border the next major conflict was between China and India over the Aksai-chin area. Part of the problem was partially the result of arbitrary borderlines drawn by the British when they governed India. Between 1951 and 1957 China built a road across the area because it was a useful

route between Tibet and Xinjiang autonomous regions. When India discovered the road the debate over the borderlines became more serious. In 1962 India and China went to war and the Chinese won. They took more territory than they traditionally claimed, but they backed up to the “Line of Actual Control,” which included their road. It also included another area where fighting took place in what is now called Arunachal Pradesh; an area that is still contentious. This case is an example of Chinese thinking and the degree of seriousness with which they view traditionally claimed and controlled territory. It is also an example of the Chinese taking more ground than they claimed, but backing up to reach a diplomatic settlement.

The Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 was fought for three stated reasons: (1) to influence the invasion of Cambodia to end the reign of Pol Pot, famous for his killing fields, and the Khmer Rouge, (2) to stop the bad treatment of the overseas Chinese in Vietnam, especially businessmen, and (3) to punish the Vietnamese for harassing Chinese fishermen in the Spratly Islands.

The Chinese deployed around 600,000 troops to the area and the Vietnamese mobilized about 70,000 mainly militia because most of the Vietnamese regular troops were engaged in the invasion of Cambodia. China got nearly 20 kilometers into Vietnam and declared that the “gates to Hanoi are open.” The Chinese had not fought a war since the Korean War over 25 years earlier so the troops had no experience. The Vietnamese army, even the reserves, did have experience in the war against the United States. The Vietnamese were clearly superior on the battlefield and that was one of the reasons for the Chinese withdrawal only a month after they entered Vietnam. If expanding China’s border were the objective China could have introduced more troops and ultimately overwhelmed the Vietnamese, even though Vietnam was supported by the Soviet Union. There were minor border clashes throughout the 1980s. That included a major naval clash in 1988 over the Spratly Islands. Although they signed a border agreement in 1999 there were still disagreements over the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

The lessons learned from the Vietnamese case are: that China has been in a position to gain territory, but ultimately decided to observe and negotiate existing boundaries and that China has been actively fighting over the Spratly Islands for a long time and it is not a recent expansion effort.

Another instance to consider before examining China’s South China Sea activities is a similar case: the Senkaku or Diaoyutai Islands that lie between Taiwan and Okinawa. The islands are a small group of uninhabited islands with economic value from being fishing grounds and with potential oil and gas reserves. They are on China’s continental shelf 205 miles from China’s coast, 106 miles from Taiwan and 255 miles from Okinawa. Topographically they are more Chinese than Japanese.

These islands are like the Spratly Islands since they appear in early Chinese chronicles, as early as the 14th Century. However, on early maps, they have sometimes been labeled as Japanese. It was not until 1971 when China and Taiwan began to pay attention and make a claim for them. They were included in various earlier treaties and agreements between China and Japan that involved Taiwan but because there was no evident economic value none of the parties seriously pressed for a border resolution. The islands even draw in the United States in the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation with Japan, but the U.S. position is to stay neutral in

the debate. The treaty requires the U.S. to come to the defense of Japan in the event of armed conflict with anyone. Reading about the ongoing dispute between China and Japan is almost comical. Both sides commit military forces from naval ships to fighter planes to intimidate the other side... but neither indicates a willingness to go to war. Both China and Japan, however, have used the islands in political warfare to stimulate nationalism by encouraging protests about sovereignty.

This case is instructive in that it shows how China goes beyond just perceptions to demonstrate that they have hegemony in East Asia and will not back down even if a superior U.S. force is potentially involved. They are not prepared to give up sovereignty even for a greater foreign policy good.

Two additional situations are examples of China's self-restraint over what it considers to be sovereign territory.

The Chinese Communist government waited 40 years to recover Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories. A 99-year treaty was honored and part of the area Hong Kong Island and part of Kowloon, which had been ceded to Britain in perpetuity, was taken over without the use of force. China could have taken the area militarily at any time from their ascendancy to power (1949) to 1989.

Another example of a delay (76 years) in recovering sovereign territory is, of course, Taiwan and the offshore islands (Little Jinmen, Jinmen, Quemoy and perhaps the Penghu Islands). While these islands are well-defended there is no doubt that China could recover them if they deemed it necessary.

Finally, the dispute over the Spratly (Nansha) and Paracel (Xisha) Islands is the center of recent accusations that China has become aggressive and expansionist. The crux of the argument is that China has increased its military budget, modernized its Armed Forces and is building a new military capability on the islands expanding their influence into the South China Sea. They have built radar stations and airfields on which they have landed military aircraft. They control and occupy all of the Paracel Islands and some reefs in the Spratlys.

The Spratly Islands consist of 14 islands and more than 100 reefs. China, Taiwan and Vietnam claim the whole group while the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei claim part of the group. The islands are controlled and occupied by the Philippines (7 islands and 3 reefs), Vietnam (6 islands and 16 reefs) and Taiwan (1 island and 1 reef). Taiwan's island, Itu Aba is the largest and has more than 1,000 people living there. They have a post office schools and museums.²

The Spratly Island group was at one time *terra nullis*, or uninhabited. It has value because of the fishing grounds, potential oil and gas reserves and its location on major sea traffic routes. There have been frictions over fishing and the exploration of the oil fields, but China has exercised restraint and has signed agreements as well as offered to cooperate in jointly exploiting the oil reserves. Most of the claims and movement into occupation of the islands are based on the potential for oil and gas reserves and fishermen's shelters. The rationale for maintaining "freedom of the sea lanes" came later as opponents of China's activity padded their arguments.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spratly_Islands

The Taiwan, China and Vietnam claims to the entire group are based on chronicles and history similar to claims about the Senkaku (Diaoyutai) group of islands. The complicated history includes changes in ownership because of French colonial occupation of Vietnam, Japanese occupation of Taiwan, the consolidation of North and South Vietnam and World War II parceling of formerly Japanese territory.

The Philippine claim came later in 1956 when a Philippine citizen, Tomas Cloma, came across some of the islands and reefs and found that nobody lived on them. He set up his own kingdom, Kalayaari (Freedom), which was incorporated into the Philippines province of Palawan in 1972. Brunei and Malaysia have claimed some reefs based on continental shelf laws.

China's reef (Fiery Cross Reef) is the reef that is at the center of current controversy. All the claimants to islands or reefs in the Spratlys, except Brunei, have worked to expand the area of their islands by dredging and reclaiming land, but China's effort has been most extensive. Their reefs have become so large they may now be considered islands. China has built or is building airstrips and deeper water anchorages on at least three of its reefs.³ It is also putting up radar facilities and is perhaps contemplating missile sites.

Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam have also built airstrips on the islands/reefs. Forty-five islands/reefs of the group are manned by some sort of military force by all of the claimants except Brunei and all have been tolerated by China so far. There have been patrol boat skirmishes and fishing boat harassments, but there has been no attempt by China to recover any of the islands claimed by others. They have taken over previously uninhabited reefs and built them into larger areas that may now be defined as islands.

It is clear that China is gradually building an infrastructure that could be used for military purposes and to extend hegemony over the South China Sea area. The U.S. and to a lesser extent, Australia, have sent "spy" planes through the area to challenge air space boundaries. The U.S. has also sent Naval ships through the area for the same reason. China has issued warnings to planes and ships to avoid the air and sea spaces now claimed by China. The U.S. has interpreted that to mean a potential disruption of freedom of the seas and there is no doubt that the area is at the center of major international sea-lanes of communication. Like the Senkakus, the confrontation games between China and the other claimants and the United States has been primarily for the political value and not for real strategic advancement.

Conclusions

Whether or not Chinese Communist leadership and ideology is inherently evil obviously requires a value judgment. My opinion is that, although I do not agree with the lack of liberty and basic freedoms in China, I can understand the rationale for current government policies. Rather than label them evil, I would say that they

³ (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/30/world/asia/what-china-has-been-building-in-the-south-china-sea-2016.html?_r=0).

are policies that will evolve to more democratic ones... but not too rapidly because of the unique difficulties in maintaining a peaceful and stable society. China is different from the U.S. so the American frame of reference should not be used in judging China. I think the evolution of democratic policies will take a long time, perhaps two or three generations, because of the memories and stories of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The second question about China's being expansive and aggressive is easier to answer. China has doubtlessly increased its activity in the South China Sea as the country has become more advanced. It is not a matter of expanding Chinese territory since it has claimed the area for generations. It is also not something that has occurred all of a sudden to signal new expansive and aggressive posture.

The Chinese Communist government has no history of using force to expand its borders or even recover areas it believes is historically sovereign territory. It has had numerous border confrontations all around its border, but it has not used a conflict to expand the border beyond what was claimed by history and old maps.

I recall conversations with General Liu Huaqing, former People's Liberation Army Chief of the General Staff when I served as escort officer for him on his 30-day tour of the U.S. in 1980 (thirty five years ago). He was a former Admiral in the PLA Navy and stated more than once how his goal was to build the Navy and go beyond a coastal defense force and that would include an ability to project force into the South China Sea. I also recall traveling (as the first accredited U.S. Army Attaché to China) to Sanya, at the southern tip of Hainan Island, in 1981, where I saw and reported on some buildings that were labeled "Nansha (Spratly) Support Group.

These experiences and the history of Chinese border conflicts suggest that the Chinese strategy to return to the South China Sea will be slow and measured. China will abide by current treaties and agreements with other countries. The Chinese government is not likely to use force to remove others from the islands they claim. They are also not likely to disrupt the sea-lanes of communication. China's existence depends on commerce with all countries and most of it comes by sea. Any counter to perceived Chinese disruption can easily come by economic or political undertakings.

Even if the Chinese build a strong military infrastructure in the Spratly Islands I don't believe it is a major threat to sea-lanes or to the U.S. strategically. If the threat criteria were the placing of airstrips capable of handling military aircraft or the building of powerful radar stations in the South China Sea, the same criteria, from a Chinese perspective, would mean the U.S. could not introduce an aircraft carrier into the area. An aircraft carrier has far more air power and more sophisticated radar capabilities than that being built on the reefs. Further if the Chinese threat were considered from a strategic military perspective the islands/reefs would be a very easy target to destroy in the case of hostilities.

These conclusions are written to point out that current political platforms that accuse China of adventurism, expansion or aggression should be reviewed more carefully and should not be used to further the aspirations of those running for office. Even if escalated the South China Sea issue is a battle that cannot be won. China will not give up claims to sovereignty, but that does not mean they are a

threat to America. The issue is certainly not worth getting into a major war. Cooperation with China is far better than confrontation.