Title
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Accessing Future Flashpoints in the South China Sea

Brad KAPLAN

SUMMARY

Confrontations between China and other rival claimants in the South China Sea have gained increasing prominence in regional and international media, most recently during a 2012 standoff between Manila and Beijing over sovereignty of the Scarborough Shoals. The potential for miscalculation and escalation during these confrontations is of concern to policymakers in Washington in that the waterway is of vital strategic interest to the United States, and several of the rival claimants facing China are defense partners. A serious confrontation between China and one of these defense partners could well result in a broader crisis between China and the United States. This paper examines data relating to “significant” military confrontations in the South China Sea from 1974 to the present in an attempt to identify trends in the confrontations, the most likely future flashpoints, and the most likely antagonists. The brief concludes with policy recommendations related to deterring aggressive assertions in the South China Sea.
BACKGROUND

The South China Sea (SCS) is a major sea lane of communication for commercial ships, connecting oil from the Middle East with ports along the Pacific Rim and Americas. Maritime resources in the area include fisheries and hydrocarbon deposits. While the extent of these hydrocarbon deposits is debated, the U.S. Geological Survey mission estimates the SCS holds more than 725 billion cubic meters of recoverable gas and 28 billion barrels of oil. Characterized by predominantly shallow waters with numerous reefs, rocks, and shoals, the sea stretches roughly from the Strait of Malacca in the Southwest to the Taiwan Strait in the Northeast.

Sovereignty within the SCS has been disputed by China and Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. All of these nations, with the exception of Brunei, have military outposts in the disputed waters, mostly in the Spratly Islands. Historically, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines have been the primary coastal states involved in significant confrontations. In the past, escalation of such confrontations was limited by lack of military power among the claimants. As China’s military power has grown substantially, that dynamic is beginning to change, particularly as other claimants expand maritime security zones and increase economic exploitation in the disputed areas. Given the importance of the region, such confrontations have potential to precipitate rapidly spiraling instability that could potentially result in a confrontation between the United States and China.

A map of the SCS including overlapping claimed territorial areas is shown in Figure 1.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were derived from the Center for a New American Security’s web-based research tool “Flashpoints: Security in the East and South China Sea” (http://www.cnas.org/flashpoints). For the purpose of this study, “significant” confrontations were defined as one of the following:

• Naval forces exchanging gunfire between (surface engagement)
• Collisions between naval forces and fishing boats (surface collision)

Application of this selection criteria resulted in identification of 30 significant confrontations from 1974 to the present. These confrontations and their associated data are summarized in the appendix. Statistical analysis was conducted to examine: 1) the frequency that each country was involved in confrontations (Who); 2) the nature of the confrontation (What); 3) the date of the confrontation (When); and 4) the location of the confrontation (Where). The resulting tabular data and corresponding percentages are summarized in Table 1.

KEY FINDINGS

Several interesting findings emerged from the data analysis. First, China was involved in 83 percent of the confrontations, followed by the Philippines (43 percent), and Vietnam (40 percent). Encounters between other SCS claimants were relatively infrequent. While the United States was not involved in an SCS incident until 2001, the number of confrontations between the United States and China has increased since 2009.

Second, the application of deadly force—that is, firing shots to destroy or disable—accounted for a
relatively small number of the total encounters (10 percent). Conversely, harassment of surface vessels (including collisions) and incidents involving fishing boats accounted for 77 percent of the confrontations. Incidents involving aircraft have been relatively infrequent (13 percent). China, the Philippines, and Vietnam were participants in 85 percent of the incidents in which shots were fired.

Third, there were two periods in which relatively few confrontations occurred: from 1974 to 1994 (4) and from 2000 to 2009 (6). The high-water mark for incidents was 11 in 1995–1999, and this number has been approached in the first three years of the period 2010–2014 (9).

Fourth, 47 percent of the encounters occurred in the vicinity of the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands, with an additional 23 percent occurring in the vicinity of the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Only 10 percent of the encounters occurred in Vietnam’s EEZ, with two of the three incidents associated with China’s interference in Vietnam’s oil exploration. The number of incidents in and around Hainan Island—all involving the United States and China—has increased since 2001. Figure 2 overlays the locations of the most frequent encounters on the map shown in Figure 1.

**ASSESSMENT OF FLASHPOINTS**

Above and beyond sovereignty for its own sake, the pattern of confrontations between China, the Philippines, and Vietnam is likely to reflect the importance that leaders from the respective countries place on fishery and, more importantly, hydrocarbon resources in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Vietnam</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Taiwan</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Brunei</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 (.83)</td>
<td>12 (.40)</td>
<td>13 (.43)</td>
<td>1 (.03)</td>
<td>3 (.10)</td>
<td>2 (.07)</td>
<td>1 (.03)</td>
<td>0 (.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What</th>
<th>Surface engagement</th>
<th>Surface incident</th>
<th>Surface collision</th>
<th>Fisheries incident</th>
<th>Air collision</th>
<th>Air incident</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 (.10)</td>
<td>11 (.37)</td>
<td>2 (.07)</td>
<td>10 (.33)</td>
<td>1 (.03)</td>
<td>3 (.10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 (.03)</td>
<td>0 (.00)</td>
<td>1 (.03)</td>
<td>2 (.07)</td>
<td>11 (.37)</td>
<td>4 (.13)</td>
<td>2 (.07)</td>
<td>9 (.30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where</th>
<th>Paracels</th>
<th>Spratlys</th>
<th>MY EEZ</th>
<th>RP EEZ</th>
<th>Scarborough Shoal</th>
<th>Reed Bank</th>
<th>VN EEZ</th>
<th>ID EEZ</th>
<th>Hainan Island</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 (.10)</td>
<td>11 (.37)</td>
<td>2 (.07)</td>
<td>4 (.13)</td>
<td>1 (.03)</td>
<td>3 (.10)</td>
<td>2 (.07)</td>
<td>3 (.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Percentage equals number of times country was involved in a confrontation over total number of confrontations

2 Percentage equals number of occurrences by confrontation type over total number of confrontations

3 Percentage equals number of confrontations grouped in five year intervals over total number of confrontations

4 Percentage equals number of confrontations by area over total number of confrontations

**Table 1. Summary of Confrontation Statistics**

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**Figure 2. Locations of the Most Frequent SCS Encounters**

Flashpoints key:
1. Vicinity Hainan Island (10 percent)
2. Vicinity Paracel Islands (10 percent)
3. Vicinity of Vietnam EEZ (10 percent)
4. Vicinity Scarborough Shoals (13 percent)
5. Vicinity Philippine EEZ (0.07 percent)
6. Vicinity Spratlys (0.37 percent)

the region. China’s growing military power provides
Beijing with the capability to more frequently patrol
the disputed region, surging maritime forces when
necessary to aggressively assert sovereign claims. At
this point, there is little that either the Philippines or
Vietnam can do in response to such a show of force.4
Additionally, Washington finds itself increasingly in-
volved in SCS encounters as Beijing’s patience
with long-standing air surveillance missions and military
maritime research along China’s littoral erodes.5

While the use of deadly force in the SCS has
decreased since 1974, the overall frequency of confronta-
tions has been increasing steadily, and straight-line
projections for the period 2010–2014 suggest that such
incidents will reach a record high. Of note, the first
major confrontation between China and Vietnam in
1974 occurred after the U.S. withdrawal of forces from
Vietnam and its surrounding maritime area. The period
1974 to 1994 is of interest in that only three encounters
occurred over a 20-year period. This period of relative
stability was followed by five years in which nine con-
frontations occurred. One possible explanation for this
dynamic is that the U.S. military left its bases in the
Philippines in 1992, and without this deterrent pres-
ence Beijing has been able to more aggressively assert
its sovereign claims in the region, particularly those
involving the Philippines.6

As alluded to previously, it is quite likely that con-
frontations in the South China Sea will increase in fre-
quency as well as scope and intensity. Indeed, trends
suggest that an all-time high number of confrontations
will occur in the period 2010–2014. Among a num-
ber of factors that may contribute to this dynamic are
Beijing’s increasing confidence in its regional influ-
ence relative to the United States, the PLA Navy’s
rapid modernization, and the PLA’s increasing focus
on “new historic missions” that include safeguarding
sovereignty in the maritime domain.7 Given the primac-
y of resource exploitation, the most likely flashpoint
areas for these confrontations are in disputed oil explo-
ration zones along Vietnam’s littoral, in the vicinity of
the Philippines EEZ, and in fisheries zones proximate
to the Spratlys, Paracels, and the Scarborough Shoal.
Secondarily, there is an increasing likelihood that U.S.
military surveillance aircraft and research vessels will
be involved in a significant number of confrontations
similar to the EP-3 incident in 2001.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The official U.S. position has been to not take sides
in SCS sovereignty disputes and to urge the countries
concerned to resolve their issues in a peaceful manner.8
This policy notwithstanding, the United States clearly
cannot afford to adapt a passive SCS strategy. The
potential for miscalculation and escalation in future SCS
confrontations should be of immediate concern to poli-
cymakers given the U.S. defense relationship with a
number of the rival claimants facing China, including
a bilateral defense treaty with the Philippines. Should
a standoff rapidly spiral out of control, it is altogeth-
er possible that the United States would be dragged
into a confrontation between China and one of these
rival claimants, perhaps precipitating a broader crisis
between China and the United States. Even if such a
development were not the case, the consequences of a
significant encounter between China and a rival claim-
ant could well have a significant impact on U.S. re-
geonial security concerns.

It is unlikely that the United States can continue to
unilaterally maintain stability in the South China Sea
through military presence. Washington should seek
to deter future aggressive assertions by all parties by
working through and with regional partners and allies,
including China. This goal should be pursued through
a six-tiered approach, to include:

• Multilateral fora in which peaceful resolution of
SCS disputes is pursued, including the develop-
ment of a binding code of conduct for the coun-
tries concerned. Active U.S. leadership in this
process is critical.
• Bilateral consultations with allies and defense
partners in which the U.S. priority on maintaining
SCS stability is stressed.
• Bilateral consultations with China which stress
both U.S. neutrality relative to SCS claims and its
resolve to maintain stability in the area.

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base-at-subic-bay.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm. Accessed October 8,
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8 K. Campbell, “Maritime Territorial Disputes and Sovereignty Issues in
Asia,” testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcom-
## Appendix: Summary of Selected Confrontations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Countries Involved</th>
<th>Type of Confrontation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 1974</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Surface engagement</td>
<td>Paracels</td>
<td>Battle of the Paracel Islands, CH takes control of the Crescent Group. Thirty-six troops from both sides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 1988</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Surface engagement</td>
<td>Spratlys</td>
<td>Johnson Reef Skirmish. 74 VN sailors killed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul 1994</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>VN EEZ</td>
<td>CH military vessels turn away VN commercial vessels vic. of an oil rig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1995</td>
<td>CH-RP</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>Spratlys</td>
<td>RP evicts CH from Mischief Reef.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1995</td>
<td>CN-MY</td>
<td>Fisheries incident</td>
<td>MY EEZ</td>
<td>MY navy fires on CH trawler.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1995</td>
<td>TW-VN</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>Spratlys</td>
<td>TW artillery fires on VN freighter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1999</td>
<td>CH-RP</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>Spratlys</td>
<td>CH harass grounded RP naval vessel vic. Spratlys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1999</td>
<td>CH-RP</td>
<td>Surface collision</td>
<td>Scarborough Shoal</td>
<td>CH fishing boat sunk by RP naval vessel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun 1999</td>
<td>CH-RP</td>
<td>Surface collision</td>
<td>Scarborough Shoal</td>
<td>CH fishing boat sunk by RP naval vessel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 2009</td>
<td>CH-US</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>Hainan Island</td>
<td>5 CH ships surround and harass the USNS Impeccable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun 2009</td>
<td>CH-US</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>Hainan Island</td>
<td>CH sub damages USS McCain’s towed array.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun 2010</td>
<td>CH-ID</td>
<td>Fisheries incident</td>
<td>ID EEZ</td>
<td>ID patrol boats confront CH fishing vessels that are escorted by armed fisheries management vessels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul 2010</td>
<td>CH-ID</td>
<td>Fisheries incident</td>
<td>ID EEZ</td>
<td>CH and ID naval ships seize control of fishing vessels suspected of illegal fishing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 2011</td>
<td>CH-RP</td>
<td>Fisheries incident</td>
<td>Spratlys</td>
<td>CH frigate fires warning shots at an RP vessel after warning it to leave the area near Jackson Atoll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>VN EEZ</td>
<td>CH marine surveillance ship severs cables of VN seismic vessel chartered by the Vietnam Oil and Gas Corporation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun 2011</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>VN EEZ</td>
<td>CH fishing vessel snared on the lines of a VN survey ship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul 2011</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Fisheries incident</td>
<td>Paracels</td>
<td>CH soldiers assault a VN fisherman and threaten crew members before expelling them from waters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 2011</td>
<td>CH-RP</td>
<td>Surface collision</td>
<td>Reed Bank</td>
<td>RP naval vessel rams a CH fishing boat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 2012</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Fisheries incident</td>
<td>Paracels</td>
<td>CH detains 21 fishermen near the Paracel Islands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 2012</td>
<td>CH-VN</td>
<td>Surface incident</td>
<td>Scarborough Shoal</td>
<td>Naval standoff between CH and RP vic. of Scarborough Shoal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Abbreviations**

CH: China; TW: Taiwan; VN: Vietnam; RP: Philippines; MY: Malaysia; ID: Indonesia
• Periodic U.S. military posturing in the SCS to demonstrate commitment, including routine patrols and freedom of navigation assertions. When possible, such operations should be conducted with other regional actors, including China.

• Increased access to Philippine bases and routine military operations conducted from these locations. Surveillance aircraft flying out of the Philippines is of critical importance to maintaining U.S. situational awareness.

• A comprehensive strategic communication campaign that fully integrates U.S. diplomatic and information initiatives related to the SCS with demonstrations of military capability and resolve.

The United States has significant security interests in the South China Sea, and the stakes are extremely high as coastal states aggressively assert their respective sovereignty claims in the region. Without proactive U.S. engagement, confrontations between China and the Philippines or Vietnam are inevitable. Such confrontations could well escalate to the extent that the United States becomes involved in a protracted crisis with China. Policymakers can decrease the possibility of such a crisis by making the U.S. commitment to maintaining regional stability clear and by working with all parties to peacefully resolve disputed claims. Diplomacy—backed by tangible demonstrations of military capacity and commitment—will be integral to the achievement of these goals.

Brad KAPLAN served for 30 years in the United States Navy as a surface warfare officer. He now works for a major defense contractor as a senior military analyst.