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Tensions are indeed rising in the South China Sea which has become a pivotal area for a test of wills between a China that is apparently convinced that America is a declining power, and a US that is determined to prove otherwise.



In July China confronted the US over the staging of annual naval exercises with South Korea in the Yellow Sea. After China protested the US moved the exercises to the Western side of the Korean Peninsula. China staged a diplomatic confrontation with Japan in September 2010 over the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands after the Japanese Coast Guard arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing vessel in the disputed waters. Japan backed down and released the captain an act which defused a dangerous situation. Nonetheless, the Chinese would be emboldened to adopt similar ways of dealing with other territorial disputes. These events may reveal that the Chinese leadership is confident enough about a weakened US and indecisive Japan to assert its interests throughout the Western Pacific and in the South China Sea in particular. They also point to a power struggle that is taking place in Beijing at a time when power is being transferred

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to a new leadership, always a critical period. The military is contesting the right to speak for the nation and the civilian leadership has come under increasing pressure. More vocal and aggressive voices are being heard from the Chinese military directed against the US and Japan which may have unforeseeable consequences. If this trend continues the prospects for a cooperative resolution of the South China Sea look dim.

China, multilateralism, and the balance of forces

The literature on Chinese foreign policy has focused on China's adaptation to multilateralism and China's willingness to accommodate to the norms and rules of the cooperative resolution of disputes. Some have claimed that China has become a responsible member of the international community and a stakeholder in the international system. Lowell Dittmer wrote that China has undergone a shift in orientation is a result of "cognitive rather than simply instrumental learning" and that it is posing as a "new model of good international citizenship," and a "responsible great power." Beijing, he argued, has played its new role with "unusual sensitivity." On the South China Sea Beijing's adherence to ASEAN's Declaration on a Code of Conduct [DOC] in November 2002 and the ASEAN Treaty of Amity [TAC] in October 2003 was regarded as an intention to resolve the dispute peacefully. On this issue "Beijing seems to have assuaged ASEAN concerns with promises of peaceful resolution and joint development of the islets."

[1] This assessment was based on China's steady integration into the international economy, its membership of international organizations and its role during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 when it resisted pressure to devalue its currency. Other observers of Chinese behavior have noted that China's involvement in multilateralism is "highly selective," that it seeks to "strengthen its status as a regional and a world power, and to enlarge the space of its own influence." Where China can benefit from multilateral economic arrangements it becomes a responsible stakeholder. Indeed its economy depends upon a predictable international economic environment that would ensure a continued flow of investment and stable access to markets for its products. In terms of security, however, China's approach has been different. It seeks to undermine US influence and to develop common cause with other countries against the US to extend its own influence.

Above all it seeks to prevent the emergence of a "multilateral security structure" directed against itself.

[2]

The events of the past few years indicate, moreover, that China calculates its moves according to the balance of forces, that is to say, the disposition of opportunities created by relative shifts in economic and military power. Previous assessments of Chinese foreign policy

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seemed to have neglected this factor on the basis that China would be permanently “locked in” into multilateral arrangements that would constrain any effort at adventurism on its part. What was not understood was that a rising and more powerful China would break free of these constraints and would adopt ways of reshaping those arrangements to accommodate its own interests by intimidating others with its sheer weight and presence or by outright diplomatic confrontation. While the American military presence and the strength of the US economy ensured that the balance of forces was regarded as unfavourable in the Western Pacific, China resisted moves that could have risked conflict. Until recently, China avoided protesting against the annual American–South Korean military exercises in the yellow Sea and it also desisted from confronting American surveillance vessels that operated close to its shores. It also attempted to control domestic pressures that would push it into a confrontation with Japan over the range of issues that divide them, in the 2005 text book issue Chinese leaders struggled to muffle the outcry. Moreover, over the South China Sea after the signing of the DOC in 2002 it adopted a policy of reassurance while avoiding a commitment to a resolution of the issue that would have foreclosed its future options. In 2010, however, there have been signs of a shift in attitude in China as a more assertive posture has been adopted towards the US and Japan for which there are two explanations.

The first explanation is based on the rational actor model and has it that the top leadership effectively controls policy and has found new confidence in China’s economic strength. It and regards the US as a declining power which would not be able to prevent China from claiming its rightful place in Asia. China is responding to the new balance of forces that has developed since the global financial crisis dealt a severe blow to American pretensions to global hegemony. The regional and global levels of policy are linked in China’s game plan in that for China to claim leadership in Asia, to reclaim Taiwan, to cower the Japanese into submission and to extend Chinese rule over the entire South China Sea the American military presence has to be suitably deterred by Chinese military power. China will not take unacceptable risks which would disrupt economic and investment ties and alarm the international community but will resort to confrontation at particular times to convey the message that its interests should be accommodated in a new regional order. The new order would require that America deal with China as a equal partner in an Asian condominium that would exclude Japan. For the US the price would be the surrender of Taiwan, the Korean peninsula and acceptance of the neutralization of Japan as an ally and serious regional power. For ASEAN and Vietnam in particular the price of this great power bargain would be the surrender of their claims to the South China Sea and eventual recognition of China’s sovereignty over the area.

The second explanation if is based on the power model of decision making which has it that decision making is subject to a struggle for power among different agencies within and outside government, political parties, the various ministries and the military. Agencies have particular influence over decisions which affect them by reason of specialized knowledge or, in the case of the military, a superior claim to defend and represent the national interest. Democracies are naturally given to this form of decision making where elected leaders are responsive to political

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parties and sensitive to public opinion and where bureaucracies compete for budgets and influence. Theoretically, authoritarian systems have greater control over decision making and are more able to maintain consistency in policy and to devise long term strategy without being swayed by different domestic forces. However, suppressed public opinion system, which lacks the formal channels to express itself in an authoritarian system, may resort to public protests and violent demonstrations which could force the leadership into externally confrontational actions to divert attention from domestic issues. If the military is allowed a privileged position in an authoritarian system then the right to speak for and defend national sovereignty becomes subject to a power struggle. Rather than adopting a deliberate strategy the Chinese system is simply responding to competing pressures that it is unable to contain, lacking as it does formal means for the resolution of decision making disputes and channels for the articulation of alternative views. In an authoritarian system of this nature the blocks and prohibitions against the free expression of alternative views results in extremism and at times a disturbing and uncontrollable irresponsibility. If this approach depicts the situation in China then the political leadership is being buffeted by forces it is increasingly unable to control. There is an angered public opinion which uses territorial issues to vent its anger against the top leadership and which threatens to derail China's relationship with Japan. There is also the military which demands of the leadership that it seize the opportunity created by the shifting balance of forces to resolve China's territorial disputes and to push the American military presence away from China's maritime borders. If control over policy in China is indeed weakening then the consequences could be dangerous and the future unpredictable.

Most revealing was the Chinese idea about their "core interest" which has gained wider currency in Chinese foreign policy circles. When in March 2010 Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Cui Tiankai told two senior U.S. officials that China regards the South China Sea as its "core interest" similar to Tibet and Taiwan. Chinese commentaries then picked up on the cue and began to use the language of "core interests." A *Xinhua* commentary claimed that "by adding the South China Sea to its core interests, China has shown its determination to secure its maritime resources and strategic waters." The commentary asserted that China's "territorial sovereignty, strategic resources and trade routes comprise its core interests, and like any other country China will never compromise them."

[\[3\]](#)

This indeed was a considerable expansion of the notion of core interests which provoked much discussion in the international press.

[\[4\]](#)

One report claimed that "China has drawn a red line down the map of Asia and defies anyone to cross it".

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Another report noted that this would imply that China could "use force or the threat of force to protect its claimed national sovereignty on land or at sea in the area."

[\[6\]](#)

Yet another asked whether the idea of "core interest" differed appreciably from the notion of "national or permanent interests" and whether a "core interest" was "so vital and sacrosanct" that

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any discussion of it was absolutely forbidden. The commentary noted perceptively that “one would normally expect core interests to be predictable and durable” and their expansion would make “the motives and intentions suspect.”

[\[7\]](#)

US

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell said that he knew of much Chinese language material that referred to the South China Sea as a “core interest” but it was not official policy.

[\[8\]](#)

Certainly Chinese Foreign Ministry officials regularly refer to the idea of China’s “core interests” and demand that the US respect them.

[\[9\]](#)

This seems to indicate a division of the Western Pacific into spheres in influence with the South China Sea in China’s sphere. Why a sphere of influence should be a “core interest” which indeed would mean that China would go to war to defend it is a intriguing question. What is the difference between core and noncore interests? It could be that the Chinese are using language loosely without regard for meanings simply to make a point in a rapidly changing domestic situation..

The strident voice of the military is more in evidence over these territorial disputes. Rear Admiral Yang Yi of the National Defense University wrote in the Liberation Army Daily that the US is “engaging in an increasingly tight encirclement of China and constantly challenging China’s core interests,” In relation to the joint naval exercises that the US had planned with South Korea in the East Sea he claimed that they were intended to provoke “enmity and confrontation in the Asia-Pacific region.”

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In relation to the South China Sea retired PLA general and researcher at the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association Xu Guangyu claimed that “China’s long absence from its exclusive economic waters over the past decades was an abnormal historical accident and now it is just advancing to normal operations.” He added that “We kept silent about territory disputes with our neighbours in the past because our navy was incapable of defending our economic zones, but now the navy is able to carry out its task.” Xu also stressed that “It’s natural for the PLA to speak out first on these issues,” and “It’s the PLA’s sacred duty to defend China’s territory and interests.”

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Chinese military representatives have been appearing with greater frequency in regional conferences and have brought with them a noted belligerence with contrasts markedly with the sophistication of foreign ministry officials. At the Shangri La conference which was held in Singapore in June 2010

Major General Zhu Chenghu, who is Dean of the Defence Affairs Institute in the National Defence University, publicly objected to US Defense Secretary Robert Gate’s support for arms sales to Taiwan and for the breakdown in military relations with Beijing. Zhu reportedly told Gates “you, the Americans, are taking China as the enemy.”

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[12]

Zhu was no stranger to controversy as in July 2005 he warned the Americans that if China clashed with the US over Taiwan it could destroy American cities with nuclear weapons.

[13]

This was an insight into Chinese strategic thinking in that deterrence at the nuclear level could leave China with the advantage at the conventional level in relation to Taiwan. The same strategic logic would no doubt apply to the South China Sea. In any case with the greater involvement of military representatives in the public discussion of China's territorial claims the rhetoric is being ratcheted up which compels others to follow suit lest they be accused of lack of patriotism. D

Domestic pressures seem to be compelling Chinese representatives to demonstrate patriotism, particularly over so called "sacrosanct" territorial issues in which case a volatile and unpredictable environment for foreign policy is being created. Positions would harden and opportunities for the peaceful resolution of disputes may be missed with the result that tensions would increase in an action-reaction effect. The responses of the US and others would be used to justify hard line views and moderates would be sidelined and victimized in decision making.

The South China Sea

China continues to strengthen its presence in the South China Sea and the prospects for a negotiated resolution of the issue that would take into account ASEAN views is increasingly looking fanciful. With the surge of patriotism that has been stimulated by China's military representative no leader in Beijing would be in a position to consider the prospect. The Chinese State Council reportedly has been discussing plans to develop tourism in the Paracel Islands which entail the building of hotels, airstrips and related facilities. The plans were intended to support the economy of Hainan Island which administers both the Paracels and the Spratly Islands in the Chinese administrative structure. [14] A Vietnam's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Nguyen Phuong Nga expressed Vietnamese opposition saying that the plan "seriously violates Vietnam's sovereignty, causes tension and further complicates the situation".

[15]

China already has a presence in the Paracels and has built a 2,600 m runway on Woody Island

[
Yongxing Dao in Chinese or

Đảo Phú Lâm
in Vietnamese]

and SIGINT

facilities on other outposts. The Paracels would become much more important to China for strategic reasons as the underground base for nuclear submarine

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s is developed in Sanya in Hainan Island. It has been speculated that Sanya would house not only new types of nuclear ballistic missile carrying submarines [SSBNs], but also aircraft carriers and their escort vessels when they are deployed. These deployments would give China a capability that would allow it to project power further south to reinforce its claim to the Spratly Islands and also into the India Ocean to defend its oil lifeline from the Persian Gulf. China would also be able to challenge the American navy in areas where it operates close to Chinese waters, and to demonstrate the means to launch an effective naval blockade of Taiwan. In October 2010 it was reported that two

Shang

class nuclear submarines had docked in Sanya and the number is expected to increase.

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In this strategy the Paracels assume an important role providing aircover and signals intelligence in relation to American naval movements. This explains Chinese sensitivity to American surveillance

vessels and why they confronted the USNS when it came too close to Sanya in March 2009.

China's fishing ban in the South China creates recurrent problems for Vietnamese fishermen who are regularly arrested and their vessels confiscated *Impeccable*. They are then required to pay an exorbitant fine. China's unilateral fishing ban in 2010 was imposed for ten weeks from May to July. The extent of the ban was kept vague though it covered an area around the Paracels but not as far south as the Spratlys.

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Vietnam has vociferously protested against the ban as the livelihood of its fishermen is affected. To enforce the ban and to protect its own fishing vessels in the South China Sea China regularly despatches what it claims are "fishery patrol" vessels but which are converted naval vessels. Fisheries Administration vessels the

Yuzheng 311

and the

Yuzheng 202

operated alongside Chinese fishing vessels in what has become a regular pattern of deployment. A Chinese patrol vessel seized a Vietnamese fishing boat and its 12-man crew around the Paracels in March which prompted a Vietnamese protest and a demand for their release.

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In July 2010 China staged some naval exercises in the South China which were regarded as a response to the US-South Korean naval exercises which were planned for the Yellow Sea, against which it protested so vehemently. The scale of the exercises was surprising to observers as PLA Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde and naval commander Wu Shengli both members of the Central Military Commission were directly involved, a rare event. Vessels from three naval fleets took part indicating the scale of the operation which the Chinese media claimed was unprecedented.

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In August, Vietnam accused China of conducting seismic exploration near the Paracels and on

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its own continental shelf

which was another source of tension. Vietnamese foreign ministry spokesperson Nguyen Phuong Nga claimed that Chinese vessels had been conducting seismic exploration activities since the end of May.

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All these moves may indicate a coordinated strategy to assert a stronger presence in the South China Sea or, more likely, they are separate moves by different actors and in response to different events.

US involvement

The Chinese seemed to have assumed that America would continue to maintain its distance from the South China Sea dispute and would have no reason to become involved to risk yet another clash with Beijing over an issue that did not concern it. When US Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Manila in May 2009 and stressed that America had “no position” on the territorial claims his remarks were applauded by the Chinese. [\[21\]](#) This outwardly disinterested policy represented American policy over the issue since it first erupted and in the Chinese view there was no apparent reason for the US to change. Chinese thinking was that each would understand the other’s “core interest” and that the US would withdraw from extended positions in the Western Pacific where there was the danger of a clash with China. America would concede the dominant influence over the South China Sea to China in what would be a great power bargain and a mutual recognition of spheres of influence. Public bluster was a means to cajole the Americans in this direction and to remind them that China had arrived on the stage of history as a key player whose views should be respected. If America would accept China’s claim for a sphere of influence in the Western Pacific ASEAN would fall naturally under Chinese sway and the resolution of the South China Sea dispute would be negotiated bilaterally with each claimant on Chinese terms. Reports indicate that, China’s state councilor in charge of foreign policy Dai Bingguo had told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in May that the South China Sea was a “core national interest” for China. As preparations for the ASEAN Regional Forum

[ARF] began China’s embassy in Washington apparently requested the State Department not to raise the issue of the South China Sea in the expectation that the Americans would agree.

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In the face of Chinese pressure the US faced a dilemma

but the Americans decided that conceding to a Chinese sphere of influence in the way expected would jeopardize American strategic interests. One reason was that that the US would lose influence over ASEAN rather quickly as a consequence in which case the regional organization would come under Chinese sway. As a related effect political leaders and parties in Japan and

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Korea which have prioritized economic relations with China above alliance ties with the US would gain ascendancy and the alliances with both countries would be undermined. Such a demonstration of public pusillanimity before Chinese stridency would risk impairing America's role in the Western Pacific and could let loose political forces that would readily accommodate Beijing over foreign policy to the detriment of the US. In addition, the Americans were concerned about Chinese pressure on international oil companies operating in the South China Sea to desist from working with Vietnam. In 2007, BP abandoned planned exploration in the Vietnamese claim zone and in March 2009 negotiated with Vietnam Oil & Gas Group to withdraw from exploratory work there.

[\[23\]](#)

The Chinese apparently warned American and foreign oil and gas firms to cease working with the Vietnamese in the South China Sea otherwise they would face the consequences in their business dealings with China. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scot Marciel in a testimony before the Senate expressed this concern about Chinese restrictions on legitimate commercial activity in the South China Sea.

[\[24\]](#)

The issue was also raised by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates at the Shangri La dialogue in Singapore in June 2010 when he said that Washington objected to any effort to intimidate US oil firms engaged in lawful contracts in the region. Conceding the area to China would oblige American oil companies to deal with the Chinese on their own terms and to risk the favorable conditions that may be obtained by working with ASEAN claimants



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One way or another, the US was compelled to make a stand at the Hanoi ARF in July 2010. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised the issue of the South China Sea directly and in her press briefing afterwards she made three key points; first she stressed that the US opposes “the use or threat of force by any claimant” and supported a “collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion.” China had insisted that negotiations over the issue should be between bilaterally with the ASEAN claimants and that third parties should not get involved. Clinton mentioned the need for “institutional architecture” in the Asia Pacific as the basis for this collaborative diplomatic process which undercut Chinese efforts. Secondly, Clinton reiterated standard American policy towards the issue by saying that US does not take sides on the competing territorial disputes in the South China Sea. She stressed that that claimants should pursue their territorial claims in accordance with UNCLOS and that “consistent with customary international law, legitimate claims to maritime space in the South China Sea should be derived solely from legitimate claims to land features.” [25] This also challenged the Chinese position as the as yet undefined nine dash line which represents the Chinese claim to the South China Sea is not based on land features such as the continental shelf or occupation of any of the islands there but history.

[26]

The Chinese insist upon rights of first discovery and historical contact which carries less weight with UNCLOS and is insufficient to serve as a basis for a claim. Thirdly, the Secretary of State declared that the US was “prepared to facilitate initiatives and confidence building measures” consistent with the DOC of 2002. She stressed the importance of “unimpeded commerce to proceed under lawful conditions,” a lingering concern for the Americans and “respect for the interests of the international community.” In her address to the ARF on 22 July she was reported to have said that the resolution of the dispute was “a leading diplomatic priority” for the US and that ending disagreements in the South China Sea “is pivotal to regional stability”.

[27]

Other reports add that the Secretary of State said that it was America’s “national interest” to mediate a resolution to the dispute.

[28]

The Secretary of State clearly surprised the Chinese in a move that was described as an “ambush.” [29] One senior ASEAN diplomat said that the discussion was quiet tense at one point and that Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was “clearly exasperated.” Another said that Yang responded with “a very strong and emotional statement essentially suggesting that this was a pre-planned mobilization on this issue.” [30] A very irritable Foreign Minister Yang left the meeting for an hour and upon his return gave a rambling 30-minute

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response in which he attacked the US, and criticized Vietnam and Singapore.

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The Chinese press vociferously objected to Clinton's statements claiming that "history has repeatedly proven that the involvement of a superpower in disputed areas did, more often than not, complicate the situation and bring tragedy to parties concerned". Superpowers, continued the commentary "stirred up tensions, disputes and even conflicts, then set foot in to pose as a 'mediator' or a 'judge' in a bid to maximize their own interests." The US, added the commentary, attempted to maintain its "long-held sway in the western Pacific Ocean," a candid admission by the Chinese of what the game was all about.

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Reports indicate that American officials were "alarmed by the refrain that the US was a declining power and US officials spoke privately of the need to reassert US strategic primacy in Asia."

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American officials worked with their Vietnamese counterparts to line up the other ASEAN members behind the US, concerned as they were by China's detention and harassment of their fishermen and the prospect of instability in the area.

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With this concern the US could rally ASEAN resistance to the Chinese so that by the time the forum opened on 22 July some 11 ARF members including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam Indonesia, the EU, Australia and Japan had already prepared statements.

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The Americans understood that if they provided leadership ASEAN claimants to the South China Sea would pull themselves together over this issue because of accumulated resentments directed towards the Chinese.

The Obama administration has countered Chinese pressure in the Western Pacific by adopting a stronger posture over the South China Sea. The US had no choice but to act otherwise its position in that area would have slowly unraveled. The Americans explained that the US would accept China's emergence but would also resist Chinese moves where they clash with American interests. [\[36\]](#) The US could not accept a division of the region based on spheres of influence with defined "core interests" in the way the Chinese seemed to pushing for, that indeed would conflict with US strategy in the Asia Pacific and some other *modus vivendi*

had to be negotiated with China. Part of that effort of signaling to the Chinese has entailed the search for allies not only in relation to the South China Sea but other issues that bedevil America's relations with China.

[\[37\]](#)

The US has moved to strengthen defence ties with ASEAN states which share concerns about China, Indonesia and Vietnam in particular. The US terminated the ban on ties with the Indonesian Special Forces unit called

Kopassus

on 23 July 2010. This ban was introduced in 1997 and prohibited the US from having contact with foreign military units that have a history of human rights violations.

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Significantly, in September Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natelagawa rejected China's view that the US should not become involved in the South China Sea dispute which was an expression of long standing Indonesian wariness of China.

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Most important have been American moves to strengthen defence ties with Vietnam.

The US and Vietnam

The American navy had been eyeing the the former Soviet Naval base at Cam Ranh Bay since the 1990s. In the wake of the closure of the US naval base in Subic Bay in the Philippines the navy searched for alternative berthing facilities within ASEAN and also around the South China Sea to position itself for possible conflict over Taiwan. The Vietnamese were interested in closer ties with the US but not to the point of allowing the Americans to return to Cam Ranh Bay, the base they had constructed during the Vietnam war. That would have been a provocation for China. Various notable visits have taken place which have demonstrated that both sides have maintained that interest without actually moving forward beyond the constraints imposed by Vietnamese solicitude for Chinese sensitivities. Two US defence secretaries have visited Vietnam, William Cohen in March 2000 and Donald Rumsfeld in June 2006; President Bill Clinton made a well publicized visit to Vietnam in November 2000, which was the first for an American president. Two Vietnamese defence ministers visited Washington; Pham Van Tra in 2003, and Phung Quang Thanh in December 2009. Relations have developed quickly over 2009-2010; The US naval supply ship USNS *Richard E. Byrd*

was repaired in Vietnam in Van Phong which is close to Cam Ranh Bay. This was regarded by the American navy as a step towards building a capacity for emergency and voyage repairs. The US continues to seek an agreement to service and re-supply its ships and access to Vietnamese ports, including Cam Ranh Bay.

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In August 2010 the American carrier the USS *George Washington*

travelled along Vietnam's coastline and received visits from high ranking Vietnamese military officials.

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In October US Defence Secretary Robert Gates visited Hanoi for the Inaugural ASEAN-Plus Defence Ministers' Meeting.

[\[42\]](#)

America's alignment with a Vietnam which is rapidly modernizing its defence capability may prove to be a formidable combination. In 2009 Vietnam became Russia's biggest arms

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purchaser; in April of that year Vietnam purchased 6 Project 636 Class Kilo class submarines and 12 SU-30MKK fighters from Russia in a deal estimated at \$2.4 billion deal. Russia also concluded a deal to build Vietnam's first nuclear plant.

[\[43\]](#)

Russia had already been contracted to construct two *Gepard*

3.9 class frigates for the Vietnamese Navy in 2006; the first frigate was to be delivered in October 2010, and the second by the end of the year.

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In addition, France declared its willingness to supply equipment required for Vietnam's defence modernization when French Minister of Defence Hervé Morin visited Vietnam in July 2010 but no deals have been announced.

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Conclusion

Tensions are indeed rising in the South China Sea which has become a pivotal area for a test of wills between a China that is apparently convinced that America is a declining power, and a US that is determined to prove otherwise. Within China a struggle for influence over foreign policy is evident as military voices have become more prominent and demand demonstrations of patriotism from the party leadership. These voices insist on more respect for China from the US and Japan and call for a relationship with America based on sphere of influences, core interests, and the sanctity of China's territorial claims. It is difficult to imagine that the Chinese would be responsive to any proposals to resolve the South China Sea issue at this juncture while they seem convinced that history is on their side. It may be useful to explore ways and to formulate proposals for such a resolution which may be utilized at some future date when, as Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen once said, "conditions are ripe." Not until intentions are clarified in Beijing would these proposals be given the serious attention they deserve and that may take some time yet. It may be that the Obama Administration's reassertion of interest in the dispute may provoke a counter reaction against this trend in China. The Chinese leadership may have been made aware of the limits to rising ambitions and it may adopt a more cautious approach to prevent the development of an anti China coalition which it has always feared. It may take a firmer stand in relation to the demands raised by the patriots in the military and elsewhere. Once the transition to a new leadership under the heir apparent Xi Jinping is consolidated the situation may stabilize and the power struggle may ease. Whether this happens, however, will be borne out by time.

Author's Biography

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Leszek Buszynski was professor of International Relations in the Graduate School of International Relations at the International University of Japan. In 2010 he joined the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in the Australian National University as a visiting Fellow. He has published widely on Asia Pacific security issues and is co editor of the Routledge series on Asia Pacific Security.

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