

Stop the South China Sea Charade

America's angst about Chinese aggression in the South China Sea is overblown – and China knows it.

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Judging from the foreign-policy commentary produced and consumed in the United States, you'd think the South China Sea lay just off America's East Coast. Every Chinese move in disputed maritime territories is analyzed as though it's an existential threat to America's lifelines.

There's no doubt that China's growing assertiveness in waters far from its own coasts has sparked great angst in the region. The "nine-dash line" that Beijing pushes as the basis of its claims includes virtually the whole of the South China Sea, including areas claimed by its neighbors, like Vietnam and the Philippines.

But the reality is that U.S. core interests are not really at stake, and China knows it. The ferocity of the debate among Washington wonks reflects far less the actual importance of the rocks and islets than the uncertainty of a United States struggling to rethink its post-World War II preeminence now contested by a re-emergent China. It would be better to simply have that conversation in the open.

Yes, the importance of the sea lanes in the South China Sea through which \$3.4 trillion in goods passes each year cannot be overstated. But those sea lanes have never been under serious threat (in peacetime), as the United States and China share an economic interest in the uninterrupted flow of commerce.

Historically, U.S. national security interests in the South China Sea have been limited and consistent since the first clipper ship, the Empress of China, sailed to Canton (now Guangzhou) in 1784. The United States has always sought freedom of navigation — which today includes airspace — and commercial access in Asia.

Freedom of navigation does reflect a vital interest that the United States can and should defend, unilaterally, if necessary. To that end, U.S. Navy exercises in the South China Sea should be stepped up — and coordinated with allies and strategic partners — to underscore continuing U.S. presence and commitment. The Trump administration's assertive naval operation last week (on Aug. 10) near the Chinese-controlled islet Mischief Reef was a good example of such U.S. resolve and continuing presence. But China's howls of protest notwithstanding, ultimately, such tactics can have only a marginal effect on China's own actions.

China is willing and able to go much further than the United States, as it has already demonstrated by transforming facts on the ground.

People in the region watching Beijing stake claims to disputed South China Sea rocks and shoals have no illusions that China is being deterred by the United States. They have come to understand the reality of an asymmetry of respective Chinese and U.S. geopolitical interests. Beijing's interest in the South China Sea is political and strategic in nature. Island building is aimed at asserting sovereignty to reverse the

“century of humiliation,” which has become a key to legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party. Strategically, China is pushing out its defense perimeter and enhancing China’s maritime sway in the region.

But for the United States, the South China Sea is just one part of the larger, complex U.S.-China relationship. Former President Barack Obama’s policy priorities for China were the Paris climate change accords and the Iran nuclear deal; Donald Trump’s policy priorities for China are North Korea and trade. Look no further than Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s appearance at last week’s meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum: Though the meeting was held one year after an international tribunal at The Hague rejected all of China’s territorial claims, the issue that dominated the discussions was North Korea. The lingering disputes in the South China Sea were a second-order matter, and in the chairman’s statement only “some member states” expressed “concerns” regarding the South China Sea.

China knows that the Trump administration lacks a comprehensive strategy toward the Asia-Pacific region. Whatever its shortcomings in terms of implementation, the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” did conceptually integrate the diplomatic, military, and economic elements of a comprehensive regional strategy. In contrast, the present administration’s rejection of the hard-fought Trans-Pacific Partnership was a strategic shock and a blow to U.S. credibility. That has left Chinese projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank unchallenged. Like the global financial crisis of 2008, perceived U.S. weakness has emboldened China.

But even in the face of the Obama administration’s cautions against unilateral change and support for a rules-based international order, Beijing disregarded U.S. diplomacy, trashed the Hague tribunal’s ruling against its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, and effectively changed the status quo.

The Chinese bet, correctly, that, as long as shipping lanes are not threatened, the United States will not risk war with a nuclear weapons state over rocks and reefs to which it has no claims, just to defend the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which it won’t ever ratify. Washington’s absence from the governance councils at UNCLOS makes it easier for Beijing to push its largely bogus interpretations of the treaty.

Beijing is several steps ahead of Washington in moving to consolidate the new facts on the ground it has created in the South China Sea. It has been quietly negotiating with ASEAN a code of conduct for the South China Sea. It has announced multibillion-dollar aid and investment projects in the Philippines and has now agreed to explore joint energy production with Manila, effectively neutralizing a U.S. ally. Similarly, Beijing has announced more than \$30 billion in loans and investments in Malaysia, as well as stepping up military ties to Kuala Lumpur and Thailand. If ASEAN and China reach a weak, nonbinding code of conduct that affirms the new realities, the United States will have little choice but to support it.

China seems to have learned from the Thucydidean observation that great powers “do what they can.” During the 2010 ASEAN meeting, then-Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi told assembled leaders, “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries — and that’s just a fact.” Rules can be broken or ignored by great powers if their interests dictate, and Beijing displays a similar a la carte approach to the rules-based order as other major powers do.

China’s irredentism is very troubling. But whether we like it or not, China is going to have a much larger role in the region. The United States needs to come to terms with the great strategic question of our

time: What Chinese role in the Asia-Pacific can it live with? Similarly, Beijing needs to forget its hope that the United States will fade away and answer the key question: What sort of U.S. posture in the region can China live with?

Over time, both the United States and China need to learn to distinguish between what their respective interests dictate they must have and what they merely prefer. That is the key to finding a balance of interests and a modus vivendi for U.S.-China relations in the 21st century.

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