

The South China Sea Conundrum for the United States

What is left for the United States to do about China's militarization of the South China Sea?

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It's over in **the South China Sea**. The United States just hasn't figured it out yet.

Official statements notwithstanding, the South China Sea is a stalking horse for broader U.S. concerns over the rise of Chinese military and economic power. The installations that China has built across the region are of negligible economic value to the United States. They offer little real threat to global maritime trade patterns; even in case of war, merchant vessels could simply move farther into the Pacific, with little long-term economic disruption. They do not represent claims on core populated areas of the United States or its allies; indeed, U.S. regional allies periodically maintain claims to the South China Sea that are just as legally troubling as those of China. The United States has no substantial resource investments in the area (although it could potentially support the investments of regional players). Their direct military value is questionable. China does not need to control islands in the South China Sea in order to devastate shipping in the area. It has enough surveillance assets, long-range missiles, and long-range aircraft to push commercial shipping beyond the second island chain.



Image Credit: Francis Malasig/Pool Photo via AP

U.S. commitment to the South China Sea is also a proxy for its commitment to regional allies. Unfortunately, it performs this role altogether inadequately. Few, if any, countries in the region believe that the United States would go to war in order to forcibly eliminate China's installations; indeed, we already know that the United States will not do so. Unlike the Fulda Gap or the DMZ, the South China Sea does not offer convenient spaces for the United States to declare red lines, and to make expensive commitments to them. No American property is endangered by Chinese encroachment; unlike in Germany or Korea, U.S. soldiers do not bring families or marry and have children in the South China Sea.

Apart from perhaps the Baltic or the Black Sea, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force fight at greater disadvantage in the South China Sea than anywhere else on earth. Chinese aircraft and missile can take advantage of land bases in order to project power across the region. China can multiply the numbers of these systems as it sees fit. While U.S. military technologies remain more sophisticated than Chinese, the trendlines for regional military capabilities are not positive for the United States.

Thus, we are left with a conundrum.

The United States can declare that Chinese installations in the South China Sea are fundamentally illegitimate, and it can take steps to harass development of these installations, but it will not prevent China from building those installations. Having staked out an absolutist, legalistic position, the U.S. cannot seem to stake out a useful negotiating position; if fundamental principles of freedom of the sea are in question, then how can the U.S. compromise? China, on the other hand, can improve the size and effectiveness of its installations virtually at will. It can deploy capabilities that threaten U.S. and regional forces at considerably lower cost than the U.S. can deploy counter-measures.

It is past time for the United States to figure out what matters in its relationship with China, and to make difficult choices about which values have to be defended, and which can be compromised. Advocates of confrontation, whatever the more substantial merits of their position, should take great care in how they portray the value trade-

offs associated with competing in the South China Sea specifically, where China enjoys enormous advantages that will only grow over time.
