What is Really Happening in the South China Sea?

The South China Sea has been described in numerous western publications as the latest potential ‘flashpoint’ in the world’s geopolitical scene. The rhetoric is particularly heated and ill-informed in about equal proportions, focusing on alleged “aggression” by the People’s Republic of China (“China”) in laying claim to a large expanse of water in the South China Sea well beyond its territorial limit (12 nautical miles) or any exclusive economic zone (200 nautical miles) recognised in international law.

This overblown rhetoric from the United States has led at least one commentator to describe so-called ‘analyses’ of the South China Sea situation as “the biggest load of analytical rubbish about South East Asia to emerge since the CIA mistook bee feces for a Soviet-supplied biological weapon in 1981.”

The South China Sea discussion in fact has several components that need to be examined separately before it is possible to draw conclusions as to their potential significance. It is useful to look first at the competing claims to the relevant parts of the South China Sea.

Most of the contemporary arguments revolve around the area of the South China Sea contained within the so-called Nine Dash Line. These are intermittent lines drawn on a map extending south from China’s Hainan Island parallel to the Vietnamese coast, and then looping back northward to China, embracing parts of the exclusive economic zones of Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Taiwan.

The first point to be made about the Nine Dash Line is that the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-Shek in 1948, two years before the PRC came into existence, drew it. After the Nationalists were expelled from the mainland in 1949 and set up in what is now called Taiwan, the Taiwanese government has maintained essentially the same claim to their “rights” within the Nine Dash Line, as has the PRC.

The Taiwanese claim remains to the present day. The Taiwanese maintain a military presence on Taiping (Itu Abu) Island, the largest of the Spratly Group, about 1600km southwest of Taiwan. Another Taiwanese military presence is on Tungsha (Pratas) Island about 400km southwest of Taiwan.

In February 2008 the Taiwanese built a 2000 metres long airstrip on Taiping Island. Although both of these facilities are well outside any claimed Taiwanese exclusive economic zone, or any part thereof, no western government, including Australia and the United States, made any adverse comment about this military activity.

The Spratlys are a grouping of 230 islands, reefs, cays and sand banks of which only 30 are above water at the high tide mark. Of the six countries claiming an interest in the Spratlys, only Brunei has failed to construct structures, mostly on stilts, on more than 40 of these islets and reefs. Yet the western media again focuses exclusively on the PRC’s “aggressive” reclamation and building activities.

One of the purposes of building up these faux islands is for the occupiers to be able to claim exclusive rights to economic exploitation of the surrounding waters. Under international law, mere rocks, reefs and sand banks cannot be the basis for a claim for exclusive economic use.

But this is not an activity limited to the South China Sea. Japan lays claim to an uninhabited atoll called Okinotori-
shima, about 1700km south of Tokyo, again well outside anything remotely approaching Japanese territorial waters. The Japanese government has spent billions of dollars creating an artificial concrete “island”, about 1.5 metres above sea level, on which it has created a research station. The surrounding area is of considerable economic and military significance, which provides a clear insight into Japanese motives.

The merits or otherwise of Japan’s claim are outside the scope of this article. The significance is that Japan’s activities, identical in nature to the activities of China in the South China Sea, have attracted no adverse comment from either Australia or the United States.

The second rhetorical element fostered by the United States and Australia is that China’s activities threaten “freedom of navigation” in waters that carry at least $5 trillion worth of world trade each year.

It is correct that the South China Sea is an important waterway for international shipping trade, but there are at least three major elements to that which are largely ignored by the western media in making inflated claims about potential threats to freedom of navigation.

The first is that, contrary to the claims made by Australia’s 2015 Defence White Paper, only about 20% of Australia’s trade with Asia passes through the South China Sea, and most of that is heading to and from China. Most of the Asia bound maritime traffic in fact passes to the east of Singapore and the Philippines.

The second salient fact is that no-one, least of all the belligerent spokespersons in Washington and Canberra, can point to a single statement from PRC officials, nor a single act by the PRC, that actually threatens freedom of navigation.

Thirdly, the overwhelming majority of the trade passing through the South China Sea is either going to or coming from China itself. The biggest potential loser in any blocking of trade activity is the PRC itself. It makes absolutely no sense for the PRC to engage in any behaviour so manifestly contrary to its own economic or political interests. But the logic of the situation is not of any interest to most western commentators.

One of the ostensible reasons for the military activity of the United States, Australia, and others in the South China Sea is to preserve what they refer to as “freedom of navigation,” by which they mean the free passage of shipping through international waters, i.e. outside the 12 nautical mile territorial limit.

This is a concept imperfectly applied by the United States, either directly or by tacit or overt support of others when they are in violation of what we are solemnly assured is an inalienable right. Israel, for example, has regularly blockaded Lebanon at various times and for an extended period since 1975 and Gaza since 2000 without a word of protest from either the United States or Australia.

The United States has at various times imposed naval blockades in support of its geopolitical goals, including against Cuba, Vietnam, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Iraq to mention only the better known ones. None of these impositions on freedom of navigation had any basis in international law.

The countries littoral to the South China Sea have taken steps to create a framework for the peaceful resolution of territorial maritime disputes arising out of the various South China Sea claims made by all the countries affected. Perhaps needless to say, that does not include Australia or the United States.

In 2002 for example, the ASEAN countries and China signed a Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea. That Declaration provided in part:

“To consolidate and develop the friendship and co-operation existing between the people and governments with a view to promoting a 21st Century partnership of good neighbourliness and mutual trust.”

The promotion of those partnerships has not been aided by outside interference. In October 2008 for example, Taiwan announced that it intended to co-operate with the PRC to develop oil and gas reserves in both the East China and the South China Seas. The United States used its influence in Taipei to kill that initiative.

In 2014 China and the Philippines reached an agreement over the Scarborough Shoal, a collection of rocks and reefs east of Luzon in the South China Sea. The agreement was as to shared use between the Philippines and China and was negotiated between China’s Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Fu Ying, and Philippines Senator Antonio Trillanes. The evidence strongly suggests that the agreement was sabotaged by the United States, acting through its
ally, Filipino Foreign Minister Albert del Rosario.

If the western rhetoric is patently false and self-serving, what then are the real motives for increased military activity by the United States and its allies, including Australia, in the South China Sea?

The military activity includes sailing a United States aircraft carrier and its supporting flotilla through the disputed waters of the South China Sea, flying armed bomber aircraft up to the 12 mile territorial limit of PRC territory, and constant belligerent language from senior military officers about the need to respond to PRC “aggression.”

In addition, the United States continues to expand its already extensive network of military bases, including recent arrangements with both Australia and the Philippines to “rotate” US military personnel through bases in those countries.

This is in addition to the already extensive US military presence on Okinawa, Guam and elsewhere, directed at the PRC. US nuclear-armed submarines also patrol in the waters of the South China Sea. It is one of the more ridiculous arguments heard from western commentators that this does not represent a policy of attempted “containment” of China.

An identical policy has been pursued by the United States against Russia with an ever-increasing encroachment of US nuclear armed forces in the countries and seas bordering Russia.

Australia has joined the United States and others in conducting military exercises in the South China Sea. There is no plausible military threat to Australia, yet it has joined in what are clearly provocations aimed at the PRC.

No western mainstream commentators ask the obvious question: what would the US response be if China (or Russia) were to establish similar bases or conduct similar military exercises in the same proximity to the US mainland? The so-called ‘Cuban missile crisis’ of October 1962 provides at least one historical precedent. The world on that occasion came perilously close to a nuclear conflagration between the US and the Soviet Union. One would not want to rely on the current US political leadership and its aspirants to show similar restraint.

The overwhelming inference to be drawn on the evidence is that the United States and Australia’s rhetoric about ‘freedom of navigation’, the ‘peaceful resolution of disputes’ and operating within the ‘framework of international law’ is no more than a smokescreen.

The dominant geopolitical feature of the 21st century is the re-emergence of China as the regional superpower. Its economic dominance is unquestioned. This is illustrated not only by the volume of maritime traffic through the South China Sea referred to above.

It is also reflected in what is the world’s greatest infrastructure project, the maritime and land based New Silk Roads that are a particular project of China’s President Xi. These projects have the potential to transform not only China itself, but the numerous countries that lie on the land and maritime routes.

The infrastructure projects are part of an ongoing China led transformation in geopolitical relationships. The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation that India, Pakistan and probably Iran will join this year is one development involving 40% of the world’s population barely understood by the western media.

Financial changes include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (which Australia joined in a rare show of defiance to the US); bilateral trading in national currencies in lieu of the US dollar; an interbank credit system (CIPS) outside the western controlled system; and the development of alternative financial aid systems separate from the western controlled IMF and World Bank.

China has made major infrastructure investments such as high-speed rail in Indonesia, dams, highways and electric power plants in Africa, and an alternative to the Panama Canal under construction in Nicaragua.

All of this (and it is only scratching the surface) threatens what has traditionally been US hegemony. The US is not taking kindly to the peaceful rise of this new superpower and is using the full gambit of its repertoire, including ‘colour revolutions’, ‘umbrella revolutions,’ Gladio type false flag attacks, and support for terrorist groups, as well as its conventional military bullying of which the South China Sea exercises are a classic illustration.

The belligerent rhetoric from US Admiral Harry Harris and US Secretary of Defence Ash Carter are symptomatic of resistance to what is the inevitable re-assertion of Chinese influence and power not only within its natural sphere of influence but increasingly on a wider geopolitical platform.
The danger of Australia is twofold. First, Australia has looked to the United States as its security blanket ever since the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942. This reliance upon whom the late Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser called a ‘dangerous ally’ has led to Australia’s involvement in a series of disastrous foreign military adventures that had nothing to do with Australia’s best interests. That list includes Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and currently Syria.

Those foreign wars did not only involve matters outside Australia’s national interest, they were also illegal under international law. In the process Australia has lost its credibility in international forums such as the United Nations. An example is where Australia is consistently literally one of a handful of nations that supports Israel against the views of the overwhelming majority of UN members.

Despite involving itself at the behest of the Americans in yet another illegal war in Syria, Australia was excluded from the Geneva peace talks at the insistence of Russia because Australia was seen as no more than a lackey of the US and as such lacked the capacity to make an independent contribution. The Australian people were sheltered from that uncomfortable fact by the mainstream media failing to address it.

The current involvement of the Australian Navy in joint exercises with the Americans in the South China Sea is a further illustration of taking steps that are inconsistent with Australia’s national interests, but acquiescing yet again to another American “request.”

The second danger is arguably even greater. Australian prosperity for at least the past four decades has been heavily reliant upon digging holes in the ground and exporting the products thereof to China. Iron ore, coal, and liquefied natural gas are by far the largest of these exports, both in volume and by value.

It is scarcely recognised in Australia that several of the countries that are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and are participating in the New Silk Roads projects are themselves producers of the same minerals that Australia has exported to China to Australia’s immense benefit.

Those countries will be linked by high-speed rail and other infrastructure developments with China. China will increasingly look to those countries as friendly, reliable and more easily accessible alternatives for resources than Australia. The same is true to a similar extent with African countries and their resources, which are also part of Mr Xi’s infrastructure and development plans.

Huge contracts have also been signed between China and Russia who both have a mutual interest in resisting western attacks upon their economic and political viability. Russia alone is capable of replacing Australia as a source of raw materials and also has little reason to look favourably upon Australia given Australia’s recent history over Ukraine and elsewhere.

Iran’s likely accession to the SCO will add another dimension to these developments.

Given a choice between sourcing its raw materials from fellow SCO and BRICS members, let alone the African countries that have been the focus of much Chinese investment in recent years, and Australia, whose foreign policy stance is inimical to Chinese interests, it is not difficult to infer where China’s trade preferences would lie.

This reality has been recognised by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull before he became Prime Minister. That he has now changed his tune and echoes the hegemonic assertions of the United States may reflect on his part recognition of the dangers of crossing the Americans. But it is hardly going to be in Australia’s interests to try and help maintain the old order when a new reality is obviously taking shape.

Both Australia and China have an interest in a stable and prosperous Asia. For Australia to be a significant contributor to, and beneficiary of, that stability and prosperity it needs a fundamental rethinking of its geopolitical priorities. The signs for such a necessary rethinking however, are not promising.

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