

Deciphering Island Issues from a Sinocentric Perspective:

Looking Back on the “Maritime Security Environment in East Asian Seas” Research Project

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1. Introduction

South Korea illegally occupies Takeshima, whose territorial rights belong to Japan. With regard to the Senkaku Islands, also under Japanese sovereignty, again and again China behaves high-handedly, departing from international accepted norms. This has been demonstrated, for instance, by the intrusion into Japanese territorial waters of Chinese public vessels. Interstate confrontation over islands is not limited to the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Even in the South China Sea, there are fierce disputes over the territorial rights of islands and reefs that are part of the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, and the like.

The seas adjacent to the eastern edge of the Asian continent have many rich fishing grounds and seabeds with confirmed oil and gas reserves. Consequently, confrontation for control of islands that define the baselines of continental shelves and exclusive economic zones represents a serious issue, one in which the national interest is at stake. In recent years, China’s dramatic advancement into the seas through its buildup of naval military power and high-handed diplomatic posture has significantly destabilized the security environment of East Asia’s seas.

The Ocean Policy Research Foundation engaged in a three-year research program, “The Maritime Security Environment in East Asian Seas,” from 2010 to 2012. It invited specialists from eight countries to participate in study groups and held three international conferences. The study groups aimed at understanding how a changing power balance—originating from interested parties’ response to island disputes and China’s advancement into the seas—impacts the security environment. Moreover, they explored the strategies

adopted by extraregional countries, such as the United States, Russia, and India, as well as the foreign and security policy Japan ought to pursue.

The results of the three-year research program have been published in a book titled *Chugoku no kaiyo shinshutsu – Konmei no Higashi Ajia kaiyoken to kakkoku taio* (China's Advancement into the Seas: Maritime East Asia's Turmoil and National Responses, Tokyo: Seizando Shoten, 2013). In order to stabilize the security environment of the seas in East Asia, the book's final chapter urges "selective confrontation" vis-à-vis China and what ought to be selectively confronted is China's advancement based on the *Tianxia*¹ worldview. In this small essay I look back on the research undertaken by the OPRF throughout the project's three years and present my views on the background of China's high-handed posture aimed at island claims and the proper course of action to take in response.

2. Island Issues in the Debate

The disputes over territorial rights to islands in the South China Sea involve a large number of countries and are complicated issues, tangled with the vestiges of ambiguous control during the colonial era. That is also the reason why these are lumped under the "problems in the South China Sea" label. The Spratly Islands have the highest number of interested parties: China, Taiwan, and Vietnam claim territorial rights to all of the islands, and the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei to part of the archipelago. Each of these countries exercises effective control over a number of islands.

Vietnam and China claim and do not yield territorial rights over the Paracel Islands. The history of the Paracels, too, is complicated. Prior to World War II, these were under the administration of the French colonial authority, but they fell under Japanese military control during the war. Following the end of the fighting, Vietnam and China divided the territory into two. However, ever since China's 1974 military invasion of islands under Vietnamese jurisdiction, the Paracel Islands have been under China's effective control.

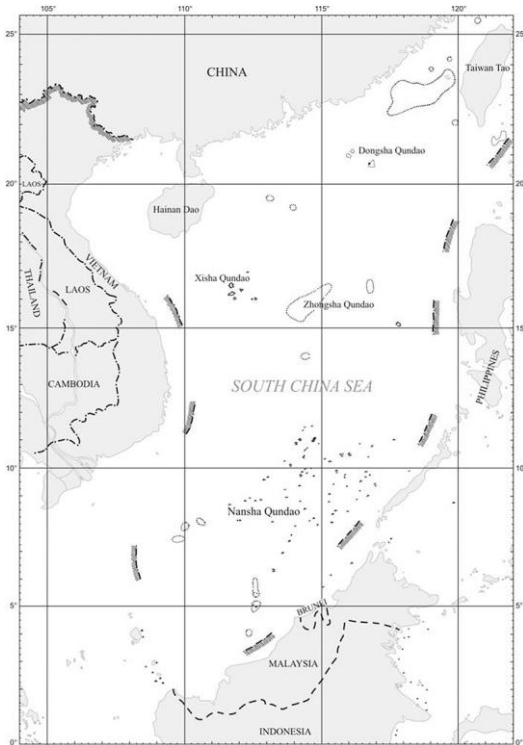
The Pratas Islands are under Taiwan's effective control; however, China also lays territorial claims there. The Macclesfield Bank is mostly made up of sunken rocks, but China, Taiwan, and the Philippines furiously compete over the one that uniquely stands out above sea level, the Scarborough Shoal.

¹ Literally "all under heaven," this is "the traditional Chinese notion of global order . . . It has some distinctive features, such as a holistic and inclusive view . . . with a foundation in benign hierarchical relationships. . . . The Tianxia worldview claims to offer a posthegemonic order but, when articulated, it often gives the impression that China seeks to impose its views on the world." Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 41–72.

The “Maritime Security Environment in East Asian Seas” research project undertaken by the OPRF included international conferences, where problems in the South China Sea consistently turned into the central subjects of discussion. The anatomy of the political conflicts involved in the South China Sea problems juxtaposes China against states from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations at the superficial level. However, ASEAN is no monolith. At present, ASEAN countries that engage in fierce competition with China over islands are Vietnam over the Parcel Islands and the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal. Other ASEAN countries emphasize economic relations with China and would rather avoid confrontation.

On one hand, present-day China seeks to accomplish its “manifest destiny,” namely, the restoration of its historical borders. In other words, China is intent on restoring the national power and national borders that it lost at the end of the Qing era, in particular the lost sphere of influence in the East Asian seas. Contemporary international society—made up of modern nation-states—does not recognize at all this concept of lost national power and borders. It is necessary, though, for regional countries to understand that China’s territorial claims are based upon its “manifest destiny” narrative. A clear example of China’s lost maritime sphere of influence is shown by its U-shaped “nine-dotted line,” as it figures on the South China Sea map below.

Figure: The nine-dotted line claimed by China



The U-shaped line formed by the nine dashes reflects China's claim over the waters and islands of the South China Sea. Three types of legal disputes arise from the claim: sovereignty disputes related to the island features, disputes over resource jurisdiction in the surrounding waters, and disputes over the extent of coastal-state authority to prohibit foreign military activities. (United Nations, www.un.org.)

Source: Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives: China and the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 64 (4) (2011), p. 46.

In 1947 the Republic of China's Ministry of Internal Affairs compiled a checklist of islands in the South China Sea, adjusting their denomination. The next year it published a map of the South China Sea's islands presenting the above U-shaped line. At the time the line had eleven segments, but in 1953 the government of the People's Republic of China changed it into a nine-dotted line. The 1933 French military advancement into the South China Sea led the ROC to the compilation of the aforementioned checklist; according to some Chinese scholars, it was compiled to display the extent of China's territory to the Great Powers. With regard to the legal significance of the nine-dotted line, claims have been forwarded that China has territorial rights, historical rights, and the like over islands within that perimeter, but there is no official interpretation supporting this.

It is often said in China that its continental shape resembles a rooster. In fact, though, the last two or three years have seen the emergence of maps that depict China's territory as torch-shaped. The body of the torch is outlined by the nine-dotted line, while the continental rooster part represents a flame that burns briskly. This should be understood as demonstrating that China has recovered, or that time has come for China to recover, its traditional sphere of influence in a large portion of the South China Sea, defined by the nine-dotted line. Debates on territorial rights over islands in the South China Sea also bring to the fore China's design to advance into the seas—that is, its design to recover its sphere of influence.

3. Territorial Claims Based on the *Tianxia* Worldview

The main factors contributing to destabilization the maritime security environment in East Asian seas are China's rapid buildup of naval military power and its high-handed demonstrative behavior through the deployment of ocean and fisheries surveillance ships to claim territorial rights over islands. Undoubtedly, behind such maritime activities, meant to display China's power, is the country's desire to gain sovereign rights over ocean resources and to exercise effective control of islands that define the baseline of the seas under state jurisdiction. In addition, however, we must not overlook the importance of Chinese discourses on national borders and national defense that are based on distinctive Sinocentric thought.

It is possible to note that successive Chinese dynasties, whose empire centered on administered territories, have considered peripheral areas under the reach of Chinese might as a sphere of influence. According to this view, in the Chinese empire the political center coincides with the central part of the *Tianxia* state; and peripheral areas under the

reach of China's imperial might are treated as borders or portions of the sphere of influence. When China's imperial might outweighs that of neighboring countries, it behaves as a hegemonic power, swallowing up neighboring countries and expanding its sphere of influence. As a result, the Sinocentric borders expand to form concentric circles beyond the empire's geographic borders.

This *Tianxia* philosophy also shaped the Chinese empire's views on national defense. That is defense extending to the outermost limits of China's might—or, to put it the other way round, the exercise of hegemony. It is also possible to decipher China's advancement into the seas from the vantage point of such a *Tianxia* worldview. It is thus possible to understand the significance of the nine-dotted line in the South China Sea if we consider the recovery of the lost sphere of influence as present-day China's "manifest destiny." In that regard, the international legal implications of the nine-dotted line can be dispensed with, and questions about effective Chinese rights there can be left unanswered.

The Chinese view on national defense probably originated from the sources of conduct defined by the *Tianxia* philosophy. In other words, in present-day China the recovery of lost imperial borders constitutes the very principle of military conduct. The People's Liberation Army is the Communist Party of China's military, not the Chinese state's military forces. It is said that its military strategies are deeply intertwined with the principles of the CPC's conduct, which I intend to analyze hereafter.

The program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union included the international propagation of socialism. On the contrary, the CPC's program contains no references to world revolution. In fact, the Soviet Union sought a communist domino effect in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, drawing an iron curtain vis-à-vis the Western bloc. On the contrary, China did not engage in ideological confrontation with liberal democracies. It rather supported borderless interstate relations, and today it has become a major pillar of the global economy.

For China, socialism is but a political means for national prosperity. Nowadays, the PLA's task is not to liberate people through communism, but to guard the national interest. In the authoritarian communist party regime, the Communist Party's military is merely responsible for the preservation of the national interest. Hence, there is a "manifest destiny" for the PLA as well—especially now that China has become the world's second largest economic power, as well as a major military power whose national defense budget has kept rising by double digits for more than 20 years.

Problems in the South China Sea heavily impact on the security environment in the East China Sea. If ASEAN states were to accept Chinese claims in the territorial disputes over islands in the South China Sea, it would enable China to commit even more of its power in the East China Sea, an additional stage for the recovery of lost spheres of interest. In order to counter this, Japan must increase its maritime defense and patrol capabilities,

strengthen its security alliance with the United States, and offer cooperation and support to encourage capacity building in and cohesion with ASEAN countries.

4. Conclusion

It is thought that China aims to enhance its defensive capacity on the basis of an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, preventing an eventual US military deployment in the Western Pacific Ocean and East Asian seas. In this context, the waters targeted for anti-access operations stretch along the areas within the second island chain, that is, from the Ogasawara Islands to south of Guam. The waters for area-denial operations stretch along the first island chain that connects the Nansei (Ryukyu) Islands to the Philippines. On the map, the so-called first and second island chains overlap with the anti-communist Acheson Line.² In other words, for the United States this qualifies as a containment perimeter aimed at China's advancement into the Pacific; on the contrary, for China, this qualifies as a line for breaching US containment.

Many understand China's first and second island chain scheme as a "defense in depth" strategy that targets assumed US power-projection capabilities aimed at the Chinese continent. It is hard to think that its perimeter coincides with the Acheson Line by chance. It is thought that China drew up a plan to secure strategic capabilities beyond the first island chain by 2010. The first island chain is a breach line based on the *Tianxia* worldview, and China's claims over territorial rights to islands are based on a grandiose state vision. Nonetheless, both are incompatible with international law and the concept of sovereign nation states, which shape modern international society.

As mentioned in the introduction, the results of the "Maritime Security Environment in East Asian Seas" research project have been put together in a book on China's advancement into the seas, which advocates selective confrontation vis-à-vis China.³ "Confrontation" here stands for containment, a course of action originally advocated against the Soviet Union by George Kennan in his article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." There, Kennan indicates the contradictions of socialism and advocates a patient and firm containment of socialist expansion that would lead to the Soviet Union's

² In 1949, US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, anticipating the establishment of communist China, drew the so-called Acheson Line against communism. The first line connected the Aleutian Islands and the Japanese archipelago to the Philippines.

³ OPRF, ed., *Chugoku no kaiyo shinshutsu—konmei no Higashi Ajia kaiyoken to kakkoku taio* (China's Advancement into the Seas: Maritime East Asia's Turmoil and National Responses) (Tokyo: Seizando Shoten, 2013), pp. 173–80.

disintegration from within.⁴ After all, it is appropriate to think that, in the real world, military containment brought the Cold War to an end.

What is needed to confront China? Today every state is after prosperity within the global economy and, in this context, it is impossible to pursue a policy that resembles Soviet containment from the Cold War years. A resolute confrontation between the mutually incompatible *Tianxia* worldview and the concept of modern, sovereign nation-states must be undertaken. That is because a patient and firm confrontation should lead China to eventually follow the universal principles of international society.

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⁴ George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, originally signed as X. For more details on the theory of containment, which is the article’s basis, see George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).