

China's South China Sea Overreach Faces Growing Obstacles

By Dr. Denny Roy

A Chinese Coast Guard vessel blasting a smaller Philippines boat with a powerful water cannon reinforces the perception that Beijing is successfully advancing its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Several aspects of the PRC's policy have made pushback difficult.

First, with considerable success, Beijing has blocked the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from opposing major Chinese objectives. Second, Beijing has used "gray zone" tactics to improve its position and intimidate the other claimants without incurring military retaliation.

Third, China's huge economic and industrial capacity has enabled the Chinese to fill the South China Sea with more and larger Coast Guard and Navy ships than other claimants can match, not to mention deputizing swarms of Chinese fishing boats to carry out strategic tasks.

The United States has provided crucial leadership in opposition to unreasonable PRC claims. This is no time for that leadership to slacken.

The stakes are high. First, China's South China Sea policy represents a case of expansionism by a large country at the expense of weaker neighboring countries. China claims ownership over nearly all of the South China Sea based on its "nine-dash line" map, including areas within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of other countries. Beijing asserts an argument expressly rejected by the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea Treaty, of which the PRC is a signatory. Moreover, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague ruled in 2016 that China's nine-dash line claim is invalid. Nevertheless, China has acted with unusual aggressiveness in unilaterally enforcing its claims, of which the water-cannoning was but one example.

A key principle of the modern international system is that states should resolve political disputes peacefully rather than through bullying. As the chief enforcer of the current set of international norms and rules, the United States has a particular interest in upholding this principle.

A second reason for opposing China's South China Sea policy is that if widely accepted, China's claims would impose heavy practical costs on the international community. In effect, Beijing seeks to turn international waterways and other countries' EEZs into PRC territorial waters. China already asserts the rights to unilaterally close large parts of the South China Sea to foreign fishing, to forbid other governments from extracting resources within their own EEZs, and to prohibit foreign naval and air traffic beyond what could legally constitute China's territorial waters.

The PRC routinely uses economic power to coerce or punish trade partners over political disagreements. If it became the gatekeeper of the South China Sea, through which trillions of dollars of trade pass annually, China could threaten to withhold access to the South China Sea to countries that Beijing considered unsupportive of the CCP's political agenda. Furthermore, the US armed forces rely on the South China Sea to expeditiously move forces between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The environment for Washington to lead pushback against PRC expansionism, however, is becoming more favorable, helping to offset some of China's advantages.

Dr. Denny Roy, Senior Fellow at the East-West Center, explains that the environment for Washington to lead pushback against PRC expansionism is becoming more favorable.

An increasingly negative view of China's international citizenship among many governments makes them more willing to confront specific instances of bad PRC behavior. Even without the mandate of a formal international organization, coalitions of willing governments can coalesce around the task of dissuading China from enforcing invalid South China Sea claims. A growing list of countries—including Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—have recently signaled China by sailing naval vessels through the South China Sea or warned China against trying to forcibly change the status quo in the South China Sea, or both. ASEAN's indecisiveness has not prevented recently enhanced [security cooperation](#) among ASEAN members Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam as well as these governments' deepening [partnerships](#) with the [United States](#).

The countries that oppose PRC expansionism in the South China Sea should tirelessly invoke international law as a rallying point to counter the PRC narrative of a US-led campaign to "contain" China. As of July 2023, [43 countries](#) have endorsed or have made positive statements about the 2016 PCA ruling; conversely, only seven—including Russia, Pakistan, Syria, and Sudan—have supported China's condemnation of the decision.

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China is patient and cautious, aggressive only when it expects no substantial retaliation. Around 2010, PRC officials experimented with designating China's claim over the South China Sea as a "core interest," suggesting Beijing would go to war over it, but they soon [backed off](#). Beijing has also long threatened to declare an air defense identification zone over the South China Sea, as it did over the East China Sea in 2013, but has thus far not done so. Unusually robust, albeit low-profile, US military signaling might have [deterred China](#) from building another artificial island base on the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the Philippines' EEZ.

Washington can take advantage of this opening by demonstrating it is willing to incur something more than zero risk. Until then, even a risk-averse China will feel emboldened. The USA should strongly consider sending US Coast Guard or Navy vessels to escort Philippine supply missions such as the one that suffered the water cannon attack in August.

Beijing can compromise on a territorial dispute if it so chooses. The Chinese government has [done this](#) on other occasions. PRC officials currently choose not to highlight the one million square kilometers of territory that Russia took from a weakened Qing government in 1858—1860 via two "unequal treaties." This suggests that if PRC leaders assess that the problems created by over-expansive claims have become too burdensome, they could scale back these claims, relying on the state's control over political discourse to manage public reaction.

Expansionism requires a strong economic base. China is apparently moving toward permanently slower economic growth, with added challenges due to the Xi regime's prioritization of political correctness and reduced international appetite for doing some kinds of business with the PRC. Since the South China Sea is a strategic liability, far from China and totally dependent on power projection, a slowing Chinese economy makes a bold PRC South China Sea policy less tenable, especially if the United States remains a major strategic player.

Mounting domestic and international problems burden PRC leadership. They can decide to lighten their burden by moderating their South China Sea policy, and Washington can help them make that decision.

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