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## China's Ambitions in the South China Sea

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**Marvin C. Ott**, Adjunct Professor and Visiting Research Scholar at Johns Hopkins University and Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, argues that despite “uncertainty and disagreement” about China’s position in the South China Sea in years past, its recent recalcitrance requires a strategic reassessment of the South China Sea issue.

At the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to her Chinese counterpart’s evident surprise and consternation, put the South China Sea issue in the spotlight of international attention. Since its founding, the People’s Republic of China has published maps showing a maritime boundary—“the nine-dotted line”—that was first promulgated by the Republic of China in 1936 and encompassed the entire South China Sea. While Beijing’s other boundary claims, such as those regarding Tibet and those in dispute with India and the Soviet Union, sparked immediate controversy, the expansive notion of China’s maritime boundary generated little attention. Indeed, the South China Sea did not make headlines until 1995 when the Philippines discovered a Chinese military structure built on the aptly named Mischief Reef near Palawan. But the member states of ASEAN protested to China in support of the Philippines. Apparently taken aback, China reacted with a diplomatic effort designed to assuage Southeast Asian concerns without compromising its facility on the reef.

In the process, the South China Sea was effectively put on the diplomatic backburner. Knowing that its claim to the entire South China Sea would antagonize ASEAN, Beijing opted to soft-pedal the issue especially since it lacked the military capacity to enforce the claim. Deng Xiaoping often reminded his countrymen of a traditional Chinese aphorism that roughly translates as “bide your time and conceal your capabilities until you are ready to act.” For Beijing, clarity was a danger and ambiguity an asset when it came to the South China Sea.

In the years following, a dense conceptual fog enveloped the Chinese position. Some of this was a natural byproduct of different Chinese voices—academic, diplomatic, military, and journalistic—addressing the issue without clear guidance from on high. However, much of it was calculated. The result was uncertainty and disagreement in the small community of outside observers and officials who tried to follow the issue. The prevailing view was that China was claiming something less than full sovereignty, largely because Beijing refrained from using that word. In this view, the dotted line denoted something other than a legal international boundary, but just what remained murky.

There were ample grounds for confusion. Consider the following.

- At various times, Beijing has cited as a basis for its claim different and mutually inconsistent rationales, including historic presence, the archipelagic principle, the EEZ principle, and the continental shelf principle.
- China rebuts Japanese claims in the East China Sea by noting that the outcroppings are not habitable as required under international law. However, China has cited the same kind of land features to justify its claims to the South China Sea.
- Legislation adopted by China in 1992 that put the dotted line into law refers to “historic Chinese waters,” a category that has no standing under international law.



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- A 1958 governmental “Declaration on China’s Territorial Sea” refers to the South China Sea as “high seas.” This characterization contradicts the notion of a territorial sea.
- China has drawn archipelagic baselines around the Paracels, which it claims, but not around the Spratlys, which it also claims.
- China has ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea but with reservations that make ratification almost meaningless.
- By declaring a “coastal economic exclusion zone,” (EEZ) China has given the concept of EEZ an interpretation unrecognized in international law.
- In an effort to rebut a joint Malaysian-Vietnamese submission to the United Nations, China submitted a map with its dotted line boundary but gave no justification. Indonesia responded with a formal request to the United Nations that Beijing clarify its claim. China has remained silent.
- The dotted line has never been precisely demarcated, and large sections of it, for example the waters near Indonesia’s Natuna Islands, remain entirely opaque.

The fog begins to dissipate when we examine the proposition that China’s dotted line is intended to be exactly what Chinese officials have said it is: a demarcation of China’s maritime border. Consider the following.

- The dotted line that appears on all Chinese-produced maps extends around Taiwan, and there is no doubt whatsoever that China views Taiwan as sovereign Chinese territory.
- In 1974, China deployed naval forces to seize the Paracels from Vietnam. That archipelago has not been characterized by China as separate and distinct from the South China Sea.
- The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has built an impressive military outpost on a reef located 120 nautical miles from the Philippines and over 600 nautical miles from China.
- China’s 1992 Territorial Law affirms the dotted line and mandates its armed forces to defend China’s maritime territory.
- China’s rapid buildup in military capabilities has focused on naval and air power projection beyond China’s shores.
- The Chinese navy has stopped Vietnamese fishermen operating well within Vietnam’s EEZ, while Beijing has warned international oil companies away from Vietnamese offshore leaseholds.
- While China agreed to sign a “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea,” it refused to make the agreement legally binding or to refrain from building new structures.
- At a public symposium hosted by the U.S. Pacific Command in the early 1990s, two PLA senior colonels answered “no” when asked if America’s Seventh Fleet has a right to traverse the South China Sea without China’s permission.
- In a very recent display of technological prowess, a Chinese submersible descended to the deepest portion of the South China Sea. The crew was instructed not just to go to the bottom of the ocean but to plant a Chinese flag there.
- In various discussions, Chinese officials have referred to the South China Sea as a “core interest,” a term previously reserved for Taiwan and Tibet, which Beijing claims as components of sovereign China.

Against this backdrop, the ARF meetings in Hanoi provided a clarifying moment. Secretary Clinton put the United States on record in support of multilateral diplomacy in the South China Sea and affirmed America’s “national interest in freedom of navigation [and] open access to Asia’s maritime common”—standard fare in international diplomacy. Several ASEAN ministers spoke in support of the Secretary’s statement, but Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s reaction was emotional and incendiary. It included a heated observation that many of the ASEAN countries were “small” and China was “big.” Even more revealing, a week later the official spokesman for the PLA declared “China has indisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea.

The cat is out of the bag; the fog has lifted. Now it is time to consider the strategic implications.