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Asia: On the Rocks

By John Feffer

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Island disputes are a big thing in Asia. Japan and China both claim the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Japan and South Korea tussle over Dokdo/Takeshima. Japan and Russia still haven't definitively sorted out who owns the Kuriles/Northern Territories.

You'd think that these existing island disputes are a sufficient headache. But no: Countries in the region are making the maritime equivalent of mountains out of molehills. They are actually creating more islands, and thus more disputes.

The most prominent offender in the news these days is China, which has reclaimed 2,000 acres of sea around the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. It's built an airstrip on the Fiery Cross Reef, which had hitherto only been a couple of rocks jutting out of the sea, and installed two mobile artillery guns as well.

The U.S. government has criticized China's construction projects and worried openly that Beijing wants to solidify (literally) its claims to the vast majority of the South China Sea. Other countries bordering the sea, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, have also blasted China.

We're between the Shangri-La Asian security dialogue in Singapore (early June) and the U.S.-China Economic and Strategic Dialogue in Washington (end of June). That means two things. First, China has announced that its island reclamation is nearly over, probably to reduce a point of tension ahead of the Washington dialogue (and the meeting between President Obama and

Premier Xi Jinping in September). Second, it's time once again for pundits to predict an inevitable war involving China.

"I'd say the war with China will probably take place in the next 10 years," opined Professor Joseph Siracusa of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Former commander of the US Pacific Fleet James Lyons, along with security analyst Richard Fisher, had a pointed recommendation for the Obama administration: "Either it leads the way to a new 'armed peace' in this region, or China will soon commence a war for domination."

A new armed peace in Asia? Hmm, that's what the Pacific Pivot was supposed to usher in. And didn't Pentagon chief Ashton Carter just announce in Singapore the "next phase" of the Pacific Pivot, which includes a new \$425 million maritime security initiative?

With the Obama administration's landmark trade deal with Asia in trouble in Congress, Washington is fretting about the erosion of its influence in the Pacific region, particularly in relation to China. The US solution – throwing weapons at the problem – is counterproductive. Ongoing US efforts to construct an armed peace in the region are only encouraging the cycle of escalation in the intra-regional disputes that have kept the region "on the rocks."

Repurposing the Reefs

New island construction is not a Chinese innovation.

Japan, for instance, has a long history of creating artificial islands, beginning with Dejima, the outpost constructed alongside Nagasaki in the 17th century to regulate trade with outsiders. In the late 1930s, Japan did exactly what China has been doing today in the South China Sea when it turned a few rocks called the Douglass Reef into Okinotorishima, an island marking its southernmost territory. The outpost's usefulness as a military base was limited, but Japan claimed an Exclusive Economic Zone around the island equal to 160,000 square miles. That's a lot of potential fish, oil, and valuable minerals. No surprise then that Japan has spent \$600 million to prevent the tiny outcroppings from disappearing beneath the waves.

According to the UN Law of the Sea convention, an island deserves that designation only if it can support humans and economic life. China has called the island, which at high tide is only about 10 square meters (that's meters, not miles), a bunch of rocks. The dispute continues.

In the South China Sea, meanwhile, other countries have pioneered the building of reefs into full-fledged islands. Critics of China have argued that these island-building attempts preceded a 2002 agreement that committed parties "to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate and escalate disputes" and refrain from inhabiting "presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features." Only China, the critics maintain, has violated the moratorium.

Not so. Vietnam has also done land reclamation at two sites. And the Philippines has expanded an airstrip in the Spratlys. Both activities have taken place since 2002. China has come late to the

party but with all the determination the world's largest economy can bring to bear. China security expert Yu Bin writes:

Despite its long historical record of sovereignty claims, China physically possess the fewest islets in the Spratlys (eight compared with 29 by Vietnam and nine by the Philippines) and is the last one to construct runways and other large-scale facilities (Vietnam has constructed 10,000 square meters of facilities in its occupied reefs since 2011). Nor has China resorted to the use of force to retake the reefs in the Spratlys from other claimants but chooses instead to construct those islets it has physically possessed.

Pacific Pivot, Part Two

US allies are not surprisingly underwhelmed by what the Pacific pivot has translated into in terms of commitments of US troops or hardware. The United States is still fixated on the Middle East, where it's trying to "degrade" the Islamic State, negotiate a deal with Iran, and satisfy its obstreperous Gulf allies.

The modest Pacific pivot efforts Washington has launched so far include, according to Ashton Carter:

providing equipment and infrastructure support to the Vietnamese coast guard, helping the Philippines build a National Coast Watch System to improve its maritime domain awareness, and conducting sea surveillance exercises with Indonesia which recently included flight portions over the South China Sea for the first time.

The latest maritime security add-on only has a price tag – nearly half a billion dollars – but no specifics. After all, it originated in the Senate, not the Pentagon, and John McCain (R-AZ) just wanted to send a reassuring signal to the region. China is not thrilled by this circling of the wagons (or, more precisely, the ships of the Seventh Fleet).

But the real drivers of bilateral tension are elsewhere. US modernization of its nuclear arsenal, our sale of advanced fighters to Japan, the push for South Korea to adopt our missile defense shield: These are the more structural provocations.

Viewed from this more strategic vantage point, the South China Sea is not just about fishing rights and potential energy deposits. The real issue is the degree to which China can use the area for its new class of nuclear submarines and whether, conversely, the United States can box China in.

The South China Sea, in other words, is a make-or-break region: where the United States either holds on to its geostrategic advantage or China manages to "break out" and challenge US hegemony.

Beijing has effectively accomplished this challenge in the geo-economic sphere, with its initiatives to set up a parallel set of global financial institutions. But up until recently, China simply didn't have sufficient nuclear weapons or conventional forces to assert itself regionally,

much less globally. Creating another leg in its strategic forces – alongside a very modest number of nuclear-tipped ICBMs – represents a potential game-changer, but only if China has a home for these subs and a way for them to roam the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Stakes for Washington

When the United States wades into the South China Sea dispute, it's not just supporting allies like the Philippines or trying to drive a further wedge between China and Vietnam. Nor is it just about protecting the sea lanes through which so much of the world's resources flow.

The “who lost the South China Sea” accusation that neoconservatives, liberal hawks, and Republican presidential candidates are preparing to level against the Obama administration – so reminiscent of the 1950s debate over “who lost China?” – is really about the preservation of US global power.

Already there is much hand wringing inside the Beltway that the prospective defeat of the TPP represents the beginning of the end of global American hegemony. The recent vote against fast-track authority has sent a signal to US allies in the Pacific that the much-vaunted pivot is just a sleight of hand. “You are either in or you are out,” Singapore Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam told a US audience in Washington this week. “It's very, very serious. The president wants it, everybody knows this is important, and you can't get it through. How credible are you going to be? The world doesn't wait. Not even for the United States.”

The US inability to help resolve the myriad island disputes in Asia and its failure to overcome domestic resistance to the TPP suggest that a time will come quite soon when America no longer rules the waves in the Pacific (or has the hegemonic power to waive the rules). There's still an opportunity to negotiate a more cooperative global economic and security system that reflects the new balance of power in the world. But the more the United States clings to the quickly disappearing status quo, the less influence it will have in the new dispensation being constructed not only “on the ground” but in the world's waters as well.