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The U.S. and China Are Playing with Matches

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Russia and US warplanes are flying way too close to one another over Syria and may soon, in Iraq. Drones are all over the place. An accident is inevitable. Civilian airliners are increasingly at risk over the Mideast. US ground troops may enter Syria.

This week the missile destroyer, USS Lassen, openly challenged the maritime exclusion zone drawn by China around its latest militarized atoll, Subi reef, in the South China Sea – a sort of poor man’s aircraft carrier that hugely annoys Washington and its Asian allies.

China is building other man-made islands by dredging submerged atolls. Japan and China are at dagger’s drawn over the disputed Senkaku (Daiyou in Chinese) Islands. The Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, South Korea, and Taiwan all have overlapping claims in the region. China rejects all other nation’s claims.

Beijing says the new atolls are only for civilian use, but no one believes this. The raised reefs are a key part of China’s claim to 80% of the South China Sea, a key conduit for its trade, oil imports, and rich fishery zones. Suddenly, previously unknown bits of rock like

the Paracels, the Spratley's, Scarborough Reef, Fiery Cross, Senkakus and Subi reef have become key bits of geography. Tensions are particularly high between China, Vietnam and Japan.

America's Asian allies are too scared of China to do much about China's muscular takeover of the South China Sea – which Beijing calls “the 9 dash zone.” So the Asians are all hiding behind America's apron, hoping Uncle Sam will face down China.

Who is right in this dispute? As a former student of international law in Geneva, here's my view: Washington is on the right side of international law.

China is wrong to lay exclusive claims to the atolls and China Sea. Its claims are based on flimsy historic documents and the suspicious finding of religious relics, a dubious method long used by Israel to justify its land seizures. In fact, China is doing just what Israel has done in the West Bank, using salami tactics and seizure of high ground to back claims by creating facts.

Beijing is mulling declaring an air defense identification zone over the entire South China Sea, though it lacks ground or air-based radars to see what's going on over the vast maritime area. Such “ADIZ” zones would sharply raise tensions with the US, South Korea and Japan. When China asserted an ADIZ over the East China Sea in 2013, the US Air Force flew two B-52 bombers right through the Chinese ADIZ.

The US is right that China's aggressive intrusions into the seas around it are unacceptable and a major threat to freedom of the seas. Beijing is very sensitive to freedom of navigation in its region and potential threats posed to its essential imports of oil and raw materials. This is a vital Chinese national interest.

Fair enough. But the US has egregiously violated international law by invading Iraq, a major crime, and trying to overthrow Syria's legitimate government. Two wrongs don't make a right.

As in Syria, aircraft from all sides are flying dangerously close, warships are playing chicken, and threats are growing hotter. The China Seas are hardly worth risking war when diplomacy holds the answers. Besides, China would be unwise to go to war against the US 7th Fleet backed by Japan.

If war did erupt, might China's new ally Russia get involved on Beijing's side? Might India, newly a maritime power, decide to go after rival China's Mideast oil lifeline? Would Vietnam and China fight, as they did in 1979? Would an angry China finally invade Taiwan? Lots of dangers.

A good way to calm things down is for the US to stop buzzing China's coasts and provoking North Korea. Imagine if Chinese warships appeared off my hometown, New York City?

The US must learn to lower its profile in Asian waters and China must do deep breathing and use Confucian wisdom.