

# The Exchange



## Beijing in the South China Sea — belligerent or assertive?

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An anti-China protest in Hanoi on Monday to mark the anniversary of the 1988 Johnson South Reef battle © Getty Images

Is Beijing being belligerent in the South China Sea? Or is it being assertive? And is there a difference between the two? Yes, there is — and China is being assertive, but not belligerent.

The world is convinced China is being belligerent. Pictures of new military landing strips, anti-aircraft missiles and massive reclamation works in the disputed Spratly Islands have given that impression. But Beijing did not initiate the reclamation. Other claimant states started it: Vietnam began building an airstrip on Spratly

Island in 1976; the Philippines built one on Thitu Island in 1975; and Malaysia started building an airstrip and a resort on Swallow Reef in 1983. However, most of this construction took place before the 2002 Asean-China Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea. Since then, other states have made only minor upgrades and repairs, while China's extensive work began in 2013-14.

When China joined the reclamation game, it did so on a big scale. According to a Pentagon report: "Since Chinese land reclamation efforts began in December 2013, China has reclaimed land at seven of its eight Spratly outposts and, as of June 2015, had reclaimed more than 2,900 acres of land. By comparison, Vietnam has reclaimed a total of approximately 80 acres; Malaysia, 70 acres; the Philippines, 14 acres; and Taiwan, 8 acres." It says China has reclaimed 17 times more land in 20 months than the others combined over 40 years.

Clearly, China has been assertive. But, if it were truly belligerent, it could militarily remove the other island occupants. Fortunately, it has made no such effort, and in fact, military clashes appear highly unlikely; the guns in the area have been mostly silent since the March 1988 skirmish between China and Vietnam at Johnson South Reef that left 74 Vietnamese soldiers dead.

The question remains: why did China decide to become more assertive in the South China Sea? Here are some credible speculations:

Mira Rapp-Hooper, with the Asia-Pacific security programme at the Center for a New American Security, says: “What Washington and its friends and allies may see as punctuated, lightning-speed construction is likely viewed in China as a perfectly legitimate game of catch-up.”

According to Tran Truong Thuy, director of the Center for East Sea (South China Sea) Studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam: “Chinese officials and scholars have cited several reasons to justify Beijing’s strategic move including a need for improved search and rescue capability in the South China Sea, a desire to improve the working and living conditions of Chinese nationals working there, and a need for a base to support China’s radar and intelligence system.”

My colleague Professor Huang Jing says: “While Beijing tends to be accommodating in dealing with the US, China strives to increase its military capabilities in the East and South China Seas, not necessarily to prevail in a confrontation with the US, but to increase both the military and economic costs the US would have to bear in confronting China, such that Washington would rather drive a bargain than go to war with China.”

Unfortunately, as a result of its assertiveness, Beijing has made some serious mistakes. It caused the first public division within Asean at the group’s foreign ministers’ meeting in July 2012. Since its founding in 1967, Asean had issued a joint communiqué after each such meeting. However, in 2012 it failed to do so, because it could not agree on the paragraph referring to the South China Sea. Nine of the 10 countries agreed to reiterate the agreed wording on the issue from the year before. But the host country, Cambodia, refused to do so. It later emerged that Cambodia had come under heavy pressure from Chinese officials to hold out. Clearly, China’s rise had made some of them arrogant.

The second mistake was to carry out oil exploration on the coast of Vietnam in May 2014. Tensions between Hanoi and Beijing ran high. There were riots in Vietnam and fears that the two would come to blows. Fortunately, China quietly withdrew the oil rig after a few months.

While military clashes between China and the other claimant states are not likely, one with the US is possible. America’s decision to send its guided-missile destroyer USS Lassen to the waters of Subi Reef on October 27 2015 was a challenge to Beijing’s claim. China warned the vessel, but let it pass.

The US is right in saying that under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, countries claiming rocks and shoals are not entitled to 12 nautical miles of territorial seas around them. The convention puts a limit of 500m around “artificial islands, installations or structures”.

Many media reports suggest that the Asean countries are privately cheering on the US when it conducts freedom-of-navigation exercises — the latest of which was in January. However, if they are, they are doing so nervously. None of them wants to have to choose between the two in the event of a clash. They know that the US is the number one power today and probably for 100 years. But they also know that China will be the number one tomorrow and is likely to remain so for 1,000 years.

So is there a solution? Actually, yes. Despite their posturing, the world's two biggest naval powers share a common interest on fundamental issues such as freedom of navigation and "innocent passage". As the largest goods exporter China's interests are greater than those of the US. Hence, if American and Chinese interests can converge over 95 per cent of the oceans, they can also do so over the South China Sea. What is required is a little wisdom. It may be in Beijing's interest to settle this quickly while Barack Obama is in office. Donald Trump could prove to be much more difficult.

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