The South China Sea Dispute: A US-China Crisis in the Making

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CHINA-U.S. RELATIONS

US Deployments, Western Pacific: personnel numbers

Source: The Military Balance 2015
China's Defense Spending

2008 – Present

- Official Chinese defense budget
- Department of Defense
- IISS
- SIPRI constant 2015 dollars
- SIPRI current year dollars

CSIS China Power Project | Source: Vari
Background

- Competing territorial claims and clashes
- Divergent US and PRC views of the Pacific:
  - US “pivot” to Asia, end of TPP, unclear alliance politics, North Korea issue
  - PRC’s militarization of SCS, sovereignty claims, Asia economic diplomacy
- US-China incidents at sea
- UNCLOS court decision, July 2016:
  - Nine-dash line illegal, and therefore military construction too
  - Rocks, not islands
  - Environmental damage
  - Interference with Philippines EEZ fishing and oil rights
- Philippines turnabout and China’s reward. (Duterte: “China is now in power and they have military superiority in the region.”)
Problems at Sea

• US vs. PRC naval strategies
• Agreements on communications code and rules of the road
• International law and diplomacy: UNCLOS and Declaration of the Conduct of the Parties
• Impact on ASEAN, Japan, Australia
Contrasting Positions

Rex Tillerson, January 11, 2017: “We’re going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island building stops. And second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed.”

PRC Foreign Ministry, January 23: “The United States is not a country directly involved in the South China Sea. We urge the United States to respect facts and speak and act cautiously to avoid damaging peace and stability in the area.”

A Chinese commentator in 2015: “China today is no longer susceptible to U.S. coercion or bullying. Under President Xi Jinping, the more confrontational stance Washington takes, the more assertive Beijing will become in response. That’s the new reality of Chinese foreign policy.”
Future Prospects

• End of the pivot? US in retreat?
• The UUV incident
• Trump’s and Xi’s choices
• Paths to conflict management
• The central issue: US-China relations
  – “Sino-US confrontation can make a situation very bad, whereas cooperation can be a big deal.”
• Hugh White: “The contest is simple and stark: America wants to remain the leading strategic power in Asia, and China wants to replace it. The stakes are therefore very high — especially, in Beijing’s view, for China.”