



South China Sea

Full unclosure?

As oil-and-gas exploration intensifies, so does the bickering

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"THE South China Sea," noted the *People's Daily* this week, "is currently calm and peaceful". As far as that goes, the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece was quite right. But the sea also remains in dispute, with China and five other countries having claims to some or all of its islands, rocks and waters. It is also a cause of superpower rivalry. America asserts its own "national interest" in the freedom of navigation in the sea, and, like the South-East Asian claimants to the sea, sees China as the threat. For that, the ambiguity that shrouds China's own position has much to do with it.

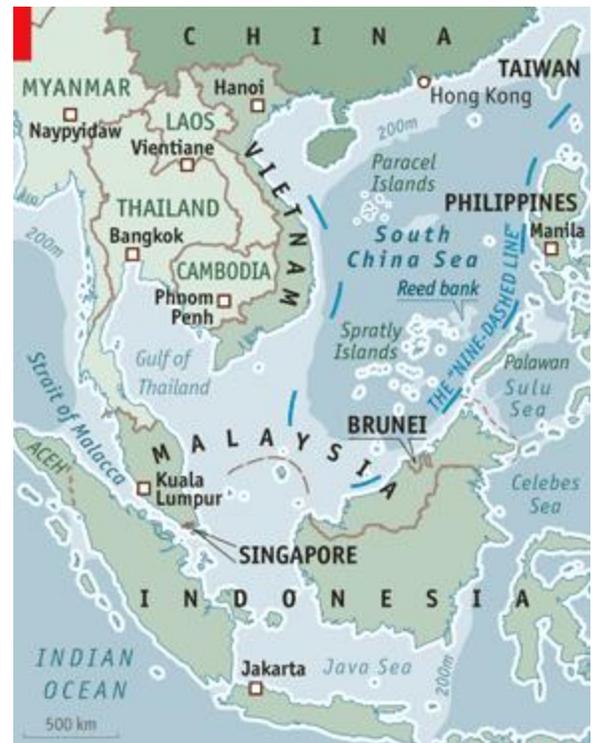
The two most active disputes concern the right to exploration for what may be enormous reserves of hydrocarbons, making the sea such a prize. On March 15th Vietnam protested against an announcement by China's state-owned offshore-oil company that it was seeking bids for the rights to drill in 19 blocks. Vietnam pointed out that one block was just one mile (1.6km) from an island in the Paracel chain, which Vietnam claims, having been evicted from there by China in 1974.

Meanwhile, to the south, China itself has objected to plans by the Philippines to open areas in the Reed bank, off the island of Palawan, for oil-and-gas exploration. The Philippines claims the area as part of the "exclusive economic zone" (EEZ) attached to its main archipelago.

The area falls within the "nine-dashed line", dating to maps from the pre-Communist era in the late 1940s, that China says proves its sovereignty. That line, which has no basis in international law, is one reason other countries are so wary of China's intentions.

However, in this case, China does seem to be basing the claim on the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China (like Taiwan and Vietnam) also claims the entire Spratly archipelago. These are mainly tiny, uninhabitable rocks and islets which, under UNCLOS, would be entitled to "territorial waters" of just 12 nautical miles (22km). **However, Robert Beckman, a professor of international law at the National University of Singapore, has pointed out that China could claim that some features near Reed bank qualify as "islands", under UNCLOS, having their own full 200-mile EEZ, which would overlap with the Philippines'.**

If China were to limit itself to claims based on UNCLOS, things would be clearer. In this context, Taylor Fravel of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has pointed to a seemingly encouraging statement from the Chinese foreign ministry in late February that "no country including China has claimed sovereignty over the entire South China Sea."



This could be interpreted to mean that the nine-dashed line is not a claim to all the sea's waters, simply to the land features. But it does not quite say so—after all, the line does not encompass all of the South China Sea, just nearly all.

With the Philippines, China does seem to be taking a somewhat softer line, pushing the possibility of joint oil-and-gas development. And the *People's Daily* was keen to blame America for any tension in the sea. It was responding to a press conference by General Burton Field, the commander of American forces in Japan, at which he called on China to respect the freedom of navigation.

The *People's Daily*, rightly again, argued that this is not at present under threat. It had a point when it argued that America may be blurring the issues as part of its "return to Asia" strategy, which includes strengthening its ties with China's neighbours. But for the uncomfortable realisation that this strategy has been broadly welcomed in the region, China has itself to blame.

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