

# China's War in the South China Sea

**CW2 Dylan C. Fackler**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is at war in the South China Sea (SCS). The militarization of the SCS by the PRC is already hostile. Any nation that opposes PRC hegemony in the region risks the escalation of current hostilities into outright conflict. PRC militarization of the SCS includes sophisticated basing and power projection within multiple domains. The current level of violence and coercion is nearing crisis levels of resource scarcity, a diminishing window of opportunity, and potential miscalculated escalations. Resource scarcity is increasing pressure on developing the various Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the SCS. Due to the rising global focus on the region, there is the condition for a perceived diminishing window of opportunity for the PRC to achieve its goals. This then creates an environment for potential miscalculated escalations. The following text explores to what extent this hostility could escalate if unchecked, highlighting the need for careful consideration and strategic planning to avoid unintended escalation.

Rising populations and diminishing economic prospects exist in multiple nations surrounding the SCS, resulting in fierce competition over limited resources (Frank, 2023). The PRC's aggressive actions, such as illegal fishing within neighboring EEZs, not only limit the economic vitality of these neighbors but also their ability to sustain internal food production (Khaskheli & Wang, (2023). The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) plays a crucial role in this space, where coastal nations have jurisdiction over living and non-living resources (Khaskheli & Wang, (2023). This area is beyond a nation's coastline's traditional 12 nautical mile territorial waters. Additionally, the PRC seeks to limit neighbors' ability to unilaterally exploit oil and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) fields within their EEZs. This while simultaneously seeking PRC beneficial partnerships to profit from these same fields. The increasing need for economic development by the PRC and its SCS neighbors will likely strain diplomatic efforts. Economic pressure from the PRC could negatively impact susceptible markets such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Delechat et al., 2024). The Philippines is of note, given its competing claim to the Second Thomas Shoal, where the PRC has multiple bases. These external factors and PRC internal influences may alter its assessment of its available time to achieve its end state.

The PRC's desire for regional hegemony is facing a diminishing window of opportunity due to evolving conditions within the region (Sullivan & Brands, 2020). The United States shift of its national strategy to the INDO-PACIFIC region holds the PRC's prospects for success without contest at threat (Biden, 2022). This threat is exacerbated by the PRC's aging population from its former One Child Policy (Ezrati, 2023). Additionally, the growth of the PRC domestic market has repeatedly not met CCP expectations (Leng, 2024). The 2024 sinking of the PRC's newest nuclear power submarine was a significant blow to the military readiness for any action against competitors such as the US or Australia (Reuters, 2024, September 27). These factors will likely contribute to a perceived narrowing timeframe in which the PRC can achieve its regional goals without significant military escalation. The threat of not achieving its regional goals without large-scale conflict may lead to a coup de main attempt before potential adversaries are positioned to interfere. These factors and the speed-up timeline may lead to unanticipated consequences with SCS stakeholders with competing end states and timelines.

The PRC may escalate hostilities within the SCS. However, a third party may miscalculate PRC activity and trigger an escalatory chain of events. The US and the Philippines have mutual defense assurances threatening PRC interests in the SCS. This treaty, signed in 2014, allows for the "preposition and store defense equipment, supplies, and material." (US Department of State, 2014) The PRC perceived the

2024 presidential inauguration in Taiwan as a step towards the declaration of independence of one of its sovereign territories (Davidson, 2024). Bilateral and multi-lateral regional players increasingly resist the PRC's monopolization of resources within the SCS (Reuters, 2024, August 20). As more actors seek to defend their claims within the SCS, they may inadvertently or intentionally escalate hostilities if they perceive favorable conditions. This inadvertent escalation may drag in more actors due to treaty or organizational membership.

The PRC is already conducting hostile activities within the SCS, and the conditions are set for rapid if accidental, escalation into a regional crisis. A regional crisis with some 21% of global trade, 3.37 trillion dollars, is at risk (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). Competition over limited resource fields within the SCS will only increase soon. This competition will become increasingly militarized as the PRC expands its military activities in scale and frequency, and its neighbors will respond in kind. The focus on this competition by global powers, such as the US, will likely drive a reassessment of a dwindling timeline for the PRC to achieve its goals. While the US and PRC spar over influence within the region, any nation with SCS interests may miscalculate its actions and inadvertently trigger high-end conflict. It is in the PRC's interests to instigate actions of their SCS neighbors that can legitimize the PRC's military response to achieve its end state.



Chinese claimed territory in the South China Sea, 2024.

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