

An Arms Race in the South China Sea?

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Introduction

The South China Sea is host to a complex web of overlapping maritime jurisdictional and sovereignty claims, complicated by the presence of two disputed archipelagos of island and reefs known as the Spratly and Paracel Islands. There is a widely held perception among the littoral states that in addition to important fisheries resources, the area under dispute also boasts considerable seabed resources, especially hydrocarbons. Furthermore, the South China Sea represents a strategic waterway of global significance, providing the key maritime link between the Indian Ocean and East Asia.

Six coastal states - China (Peoples Republic of, PRC), Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei - lay claim to all or part of the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos and their surrounding maritime space. Of these six claimants, all save Brunei maintain a military presence on one or more islands.

In light of the seemingly intractable nature of these complex jurisdictional disputes, coastal states have placed increasing emphasis on their ability to enforce their sovereignty claims militarily. In the 1980s this tendency led to increased military activity in and around the Spratly Islands culminating in a bloody Sino-Vietnamese clash off Johnson/Landsdowne reef in 1988¹.

Clearly, whilst sovereignty disputes remain unresolved and the states continue to enhance their military presence in the region as a means of physically reinforcing their territorial claims, the potential for confrontation and, ultimately, conflict exists. The Sino-Vietnamese clashes in the Paracels (1974)² and Spratlys (1988) illustrate that parties to the dispute have not been afraid to use military force to assert their respective claims.

These developments have led several observers to the conclusion that the claimant states are on the verge of - or, indeed, in the midst of - an undeclared regional arms race³. This view has been largely based on high procurement expenditure coupled with expanding domestic arms production to facilitate force modernisation throughout South East Asia in general, but by China in particular⁴. The

ongoing and ambitious transformation of the Chinese navy from an essentially coastal or 'brown water' force to a fully fledged 'blue water' navy capable of projecting sustained military force over hundreds if not thousands of kilometres from bases in mainland China has fuelled this argument considerably⁵.

The recent confirmation of the sale of 18 Russian MiG-29 *Fulcrum* fighters to Malaysia on 7 June has served to highlight the issue still further. Despite the Malaysian Defence Minister's statement that the sale "*should not be construed as contributing to a regional arms race, but as our contribution to regional security*", the Far Eastern Economic Review's (hereafter *FEER*) analysis of the reaction of Malaysia's neighbours to the MiG deal was that it had led to an "*unmistakable*" scaling up of their own military purchases (*FEER*, 16/6/94: 20, *The Guardian*, 8/6/94).

The aim of this paper is thus twofold: to provide a brief survey and assessment of the relative military strength of the claimant nations, with particular reference to their ability to project force in order to back-up sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, and to attempt to answer the question of whether it is correct to characterise the sustained increases in military expenditure in the region as constituting an arms race. It should be noted in this context that accurate, authoritative information on defence procurements is hard to come by and thus often of a suspect nature⁶.

China

By far the strongest force among the claimants, unsurprisingly, is that of China. The People's Liberation Army (Navy) (PLA(N)) has embarked upon an ambitious modernisation programme over the last two decades. Prior to the 1974 action whereby Chinese forces evicted (South) Vietnamese troops from the Paracel Islands, the PLA(N) was essentially a coastal defence force. Since that time the PLA(N) has striven to transform itself from a 'brown water' to a fully fledged 'blue-water' navy⁷.

This change in emphasis reflects a shift away from a continentalist military doctrine dominated by fears

of a massive Soviet air and naval (predominantly) land attack where the navy's role was envisaged as merely providing maritime support for land forces. The PRC's other post-war strategic concerns were all also land-bound, notably the Korean War (1950-53), and border conflicts with India (1962) and Vietnam (1979). Essentially the PLA(N) was viewed as little more than a "*coastal appendix of the ground forces*" (Cheung 1990, 3).

Naval modernisation was initially spurred in the mid-1970s by the rapid build-up of the Soviet Pacific Fleet and the presence of Soviet bases in Vietnam at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang. These developments "*extended the Sino-Soviet border confrontation into the maritime arena*" (Cheung 1990, 4). A major reappraisal of Chinese strategy, however, only came about with the waning of Cold War tensions and with it the threat of Soviet invasion, discernible from the mid-1980s. As a result the concept of 'local war' rather than a Maoist 'people's war' became the dominant theme and can be seen as being closely related to the western concept of low-intensity conflict⁸.

In terms of naval strategy, 'local war' doctrine translated into a strategy of 'offshore defence', and a substantial widening of the scope and type of the navy's operations to include the defence of maritime claims encompassing 200nm EEZs around the Spratly Islands in excess of 1,000km south of the Chinese mainland.

In addition, the opening up of the Chinese economy to the west has led to a phenomenal growth in international trade with China. As a result, China has become increasingly reliant on seaborne trade for her economic survival, so that the projection of maritime power in order to protect and control strategic lines of communication and chokepoints (such as the sea lanes passing through the Spratly area) has become a vital consideration⁹.

Surface Ships

The PLA(N)'s surface fleet is made up primarily of *Luda*-class destroyers and *Jianghu*-class frigates. Although these vessels are of some antiquity (1960s and 70s designs) they have been extensively refitted and substantially improved with the addition of new ship-to-ship missiles, ASW capability, satellite navigation equipment and helicopter deck. In addition new destroyer and frigate designs, for example the *Kaifeng*-class frigate, are gradually entering service.

With regard to the Spratly issue it should be noted that the South Sea Fleet is presently not thought to be regarded as top priority within the Chinese navy. The North Sea Fleet, as first line of defence against the Russian Pacific Fleet, still takes the lion's share of resource allocations and new ships. Thus the South Sea Fleet is largely (i.e. nine out of the twelve frigates thought to be assigned to the fleet) equipped with ageing *Chengdu*, *Jiangnan*, and *Jiangdong* designs.

This bias towards the North Sea Fleet reflects the perceived threat of the large Russian Pacific fleet in comparison with the relatively modest naval forces of the other South China Sea coastal states¹⁰. Having made that observation however, the recent warming of Sino-Russian will offer the Chinese considerable flexibility in terms of naval deployments allowing forces from the North Sea Fleet to be transferred to other fleets as required¹¹.

Despite major improvements to the PLA(N)'s key surface units there is clearly a lot of scope for further development. Indeed, according to some assessments, "*..the vast majority of their arsenal is woefully obsolete*" (FEER, 8/7/93). At present the majority of the Chinese surface fleet is deficient in terms of high-tech equipment, particularly ASW, anti-aircraft capabilities and missile technology. As Cheung notes: "*A particular weakness of Chinese missile developments has been the inability to produce effective defensive missiles. Until this happens, Chinese warships will remain highly vulnerable against more high-tech opponents.*" (Cheung 1990, 30).

The PLA(N) has, however, significantly enhanced its 'reach' as well as inter-fleet and inter-service cooperation. The introduction (from 1977) of large (c.10,000tn) long-range logistic support ships, including tankers, has greatly extended the PLA(N)'s combat range and sustainability of its operations at sea¹². This is amply illustrated by the navy and airforce's successful staging of a long-range combined arms exercise in the western Pacific near Iwo Jima in May 1986¹³. Similarly, in October 1988, units drawn from the East Sea Fleet were able to conduct another major exercise in the western Pacific cruising as far south as the southern tip of the Spratly archipelago in coordination with elements of the South Sea Fleet¹⁴. To some analysts these exercises prove that the PLA(N) is "*successfully developing 'blue water' capabilities*" (Lee 1990, 7).

Submarines and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW)

As a whole the PLA(N) boasts a numerically impressive inventory of as many as 130 submarines¹⁵. This seeming strength is, however, composed almost exclusively of virtually obsolete designs borrowed from the Soviets from as early as the 1950s. On paper the submarine fleet includes one *Xia*-class strategic missile nuclear submarine (SSBN), five *Han*-class nuclear attack submarines (SSN) with conventional armaments, one improved *Romeo*-class submarine modified to carry cruise missiles, up to six improved *Ming*-class, an estimated 83 *Romeo*-class submarines (including c.50 in store or non-operational), a design hailing from the 1950s - plus approximately 30 even more antiquated *Whiskey*-class submarines¹⁶. Estimates of the number of Chinese submarines actually in operation vary considerably as it is unknown how many of the older models have been mothballed or are simply no longer seaworthy.

Clearly the Chinese submarine fleet is in dire need of a serious overhaul. The *Romeo* and *Whiskey* classes in particular, despite frequent refits and improvements, look increasingly dated and are of dubious value. Of the other attack submarines the *Ming* type vessels, intended as an improvement on the *Romeos* reportedly ran into technical difficulties leading to only a very limited number being produced. The *Han*-class submarines do represent a significant step up from the *Romeos* but even these submarines - among the most modern in the fleet - entered service two decades ago, are limited in number and are believed to be deployed with the North Sea Fleet along with the strategic nuclear vessels. While it is believed that Chinese submarines "...are capable of forming an adequate ambush platform at strategic choke points" (Lee 1990, 7), particularly with regard to the defence of the northeastern Chinese coastline from Soviet attack, their long-range patrol capabilities are questionable. As far as the South Sea Fleet is concerned the submarine force is made up predominantly of *Romeo*-class units whose operations are generally restricted to coastal patrols.

In order to overcome these technological deficiencies it has reported that China is in negotiations with Russia for the purchase of two *Kilo*-class conventional submarines together with rights to manufacture them under licence¹⁷. It should be stressed, however, that the complex bathymetry of the South China Sea "makes submarine detection, hence counteraction, virtually impossible" (Haller-Trost 1990, 7). In any case the limited nature of other claimant states' navies' ASW

capabilities means that even China's ageing submarine fleet might conceivably pose a potent threat to shipping in the South China Sea.

Air Power

Without adequate air cover the PLA(N)'s surface units, however much improved, merely represent so many floating targets for an opponent's airforce. Even Vietnam's antiquated inventory of MiG-21s, MiG-23s and Su-20/-22s have been viewed as a significant threat to the Chinese Navy's operations in the South China Sea¹⁸.

The PLA's large naval airforce includes 30 *Hong*-6 type (Tu-16 *Badger*) bombers, approximately 100 Q-5s and some 600 J-5/-6/-7/-8s. Of these aircraft the H-6s are by far the most potent. Armed with C-601 anti-ship cruise missiles the Chinese H-6s have the capability to reach the Spratlys without recourse to in-flight refuelling¹⁹. On arrival, however, their loiter time over the islands is likely to be highly restricted. The remainder of the naval aircraft are relatively short-range, offering air cover only as far as the Paracels. As the *Economist* noted in early 1993: "Most of China's fighter aircraft, whether in the airforce or the navy are decrepit" (20/2/93).

Coming to terms with shortcomings in naval aviation has been identified as a priority by the Chinese military and is being addressed in a number of ways. Foremost among these developments has been the boosting of frontline naval airpower through the acquisition of 26 sophisticated, navalised Su-27 *Flanker* fighter aircraft from Russia in 1992. These aircraft are reported to be close to attaining operational status soon. In addition it has been reported that China is keen to acquire another batch of 26 Su-27s as well as rights to manufacture the MiG-31 *Foxhound* high-level interceptor, and possibly even several supersonic Tu22M *Backfire* strategic bombers²⁰. A fleet of approximately 52 Su-27s, let alone an unspecified complement of MiG-31s and long-range *Backfires*, would represent a potent tactical force and a major enhancement of Chinese airpower in the region and should ensure air superiority over the Spratlys²¹.

In order to extend the naval airforce's power projection into the South China Sea, China is believed to have extended its airstrip on Woody Island in the Paracels to in excess of 2,500m, providing a forward base and staging area for extending the range of her aircraft including the already long-legged Su-27²². Priority has also been given to the development of in-flight refuelling technology. It was reported in 1990 that China has

acquired the necessary 'probe and drogue' systems from Iran²³.

It has also frequently been suggested that the Chinese navy is keen to acquire an aircraft carrier or carriers. These rumours have been fuelled by reports that the carrier HMAS Melbourne, bought from Australia in 1985 for scrap, was meticulously examined prior to being broken up²⁴; that the Chinese navy had begun training for carrier-based operations²⁵; and that PLA(N) delegations had visited the Ukraine in June and December 1992 with a view to the purchase of the uncompleted former Soviet carrier *Varyag*²⁶.

It seems unlikely in the extreme, however, that a carrier will enter service with the PLA(N) in the near future. Severe technical, operational and ultimately financial constraints have apparently forestalled progress down the path to a carrier-based force. The cost of either domestically building²⁷ or purchasing²⁸ a carrier is viewed as being prohibitively high and if opted for would dominate the defence budget for years. Even if funds were made available for such a project, including the expense of acquiring suitable aircraft and training, severe questions would remain. For a start some commentators have argued that a single carrier would make little operational sense as it would be forced to spend much time in port for routine maintenance, thus lessening its effectiveness²⁹.

The implications for the rest of the PLA(N) would also be significant. Realistically, a carrier requires a battle group to afford it adequate protection. At present the Chinese navy, weak as it is in terms of ASW and anti-aircraft technology, would be extremely hard pressed to muster such a force. Given the South China Sea's semi-enclosed nature, were a carrier to operate there it would also be highly vulnerable to attack from shorebased missiles or aircraft. In addition:

"The disputed island flashpoints in the South China Sea are in shallow, reef-strewn waters that make navigation by deep-hulled ships treacherous at the best of times." (FEER, 9/7/92: 8).

A brief study of the 1982 Anglo-Argentinean conflict illustrates the point. Whilst the Royal Navy was forced to deploy numerous dedicated anti-aircraft ships in a cordon to shield the carrier group (incidentally sustaining several casualties in doing so), the Argentine navy, lacking escorts with sophisticated ASW capabilities, had no option but to

confine its carrier to port for fear of British submarines³⁰.

It has also been rumoured that China may be modifying a container or roll-on, roll-off ship into a 'carrier'. If true one can speculate that this is likely to be some form of helicopter platform or assault ship since it is unlikely in the extreme that such a vessel could function as a base for fixed wing aircraft and highly doubtful that the Chinese possess the necessary technical expertise to build a fully fledged carrier³¹.

It is therefore widely believed that the idea of a Chinese carrier-based force has been shelved. The substantial increase in the quality and reach of Chinese naval aviation would seem to fulfil the PLA(N)'s need for aircover in the South China Sea at least for the short-term - negating the requirement for an aircraft carrier at present³².

Amphibious Capabilities

China's ability to deploy forces to the islands and reefs of the archipelagos of the South China Sea in order to enforce claims has improved gradually over recent years. The entry into service of new amphibious assault transports and tank landing craft reportedly gives the PLA(N) the capability of lifting in excess of 30,000 men and 400 tanks over a distance of several hundred kilometres³³. These additions to the navy's inventory have been described as "*ideal kit for island-hopping operations*" (Spick 1993, 14).

Although disbanded as unnecessary in 1957 the PLA marines were reformed in 1980 and consist of a brigade-sized force of approximately 5,000 - 6,000 men. The marines are attached to the South Sea Fleet - perhaps a significant deployment. As one analyst commented: "*their inherent role as quick reaction expeditionary force cannot be ignored in the Spratly scenario*" (Lee, 1990: 7). The PLA also has substantial reserves of airborne troops at its disposal, for instance the 15th Airborne Army based in Shanxi province, central China. This capability was demonstrated in 1990 when it was reported that a Chinese exercise in the South China Sea included the successful dropping of some 600 paratroops onto a Chinese occupied island³⁴.

Taiwan

Although Taiwan is a South China Sea claimant and maintains a garrison on Itu Aba island, her armed forces are almost exclusively devoted to the

protection of Taiwan itself from mainland aggression, rather than projecting power into the South China Sea. Whilst it is believed that the threat of an outright invasion has waned, Taiwan, as the most trade-dependent state in the region save Singapore and Hong Kong, is concerned with countering any threat of blockade, particularly by the PLA(N)'s large submarine force³⁵.

The Taiwanese navy, boasting 22 destroyers (a mix of *Gearing*, *Sumner* and *Fletcher*-class ships built by the US in the early 1940s), 12 frigates (including the first of the new *Perry*-class vessels³⁶ and three *Knox*-class boats on renewable lease from the US navy³⁷) and four submarines as its principle units, is equipped mainly with relatively old but significantly upgraded US designs and is in the process of being modernised and strengthened. The addition of six (reduced from the 16 planned due to budgetary pressures³⁸) French-built *Lafayette*-class frigates plus eight US-designed and Taiwanese-built *Perry*-class frigates will make the navy a relatively small but technologically advanced and effective force for the limited purpose of defending Taiwan and perhaps breaking any blockade imposed on the island by virtue of advanced ASW capabilities.

The airforce, reliant in the past mainly on a substantial fleet of 277 US supplied F-5s and 141 F-104s, will in the near future be greatly boosted by the purchase of 150 F-16s plus 60 Mirage 2000s as well as continued development of the indigenous *Ching-Kuo* fighter. These purchases may be seen as a response to China's acquisition of advanced Su-27s from Russia. The airforce also took delivery of the first of four E-2T airborne early warning aircraft from the US in May this year. The remaining aircraft are scheduled for delivery before the end of the year³⁹.

Theoretically, with in-flight refuelling, these aircraft could provide aircover for Taiwanese forces operating on and around the Spratlys but, *"...proximity to the Chinese mainland would make the use of tanker aircraft a very dubious proposition in the event of hostilities"* (Spick 1993, 14). In contrast, their main role is likely to be the maintenance of local air superiority over the Straits of Taiwan.

Vietnam

The Vietnamese armed forces are in a parlous state. The air and naval arms possess largely obsolete and frequently inoperable equipment due to a paucity of

spares and adequate maintenance. As far as the navy is concerned:

"On paper, the Vietnamese navy has seven rusting US and Soviet Petya II frigates and 40 fast patrol craft but analysts say these ships are virtually non-operational for lack of spare parts." (FEER 13/8/92, 20).

At best these vessels have a very limited operational capacity and pose little competition to the naval forces of other coastal states and in particular those of China's South Sea Fleet⁴⁰.

The mainstay of the airforce is a fleet of some 175 short-range MiG-21 *Fishbeds*. Of a slightly more threatening nature are Vietnam's complement of around 30 - 36 MiG-23 *Floggers* and 65 Su-20/-22 ground attack aircraft which have been described as *"a major deterrent against the Chinese navy"* (FEER 13/8/92, 20).

While it is true that equipped with drop-tanks these relatively out-of-date aircraft could conceivably reach the westernmost islands of the Spratly archipelago it is likely that they would have extremely limited loiter time over the area⁴¹. It is, however, an open question as to what proportion of Vietnam's antiquated inventory is still operational. Furthermore, none of Vietnam's aircraft would prove any sort of a match for China's new Su-27s once they attain operational status.

At present Vietnam is in no position economically to afford an inevitably expensive modernisation programme for its armed forces. As a result the Vietnamese have sought to redress the technological imbalance by resorting to fortification of its numerous occupied islands and reefs in the Spratlys⁴². One asset Vietnam does have in this context is a substantial reserve of some 30,000 naval infantry, even if amphibious capability is severely limited to three old ex-Soviet, and four ex-US landing craft of World War II vintage plus 30 smaller craft.

In some senses this is a strategy inspired by desperation. Bereft of adequate air and naval support such isolated outposts are highly vulnerable to blockade, assault and piecemeal capture. Given the parlous state of its air and naval assets however, it is probable that Vietnam currently has few alternatives.

Philippines

The Philippines' navy has been spurred into an attempt at modernisation by the departure of US forces from the country. Scant resources were devoted to the navy and airforce in the past as it was taken for granted that the US would look after the Philippines external defence requirements and the armed forces were preoccupied with action against domestic insurgents.

As a result the Philippine navy is restricted to just one outmoded frigate and ten corvettes of various types, all dating from World War II. The navy has therefore embarked on a modernisation programme that includes the acquisition of fast patrol boats and mine warfare ships from Spain and Australia. The navy does possess some amphibious capability in the form of nine old ex-US landing craft backed up by 8,500 marines.

The Philippine airforce is also extremely poorly equipped. Its only planes of note amount to seven F-5s. It is rumoured that the acquisition of a dozen ex-Israeli *Kfirs* is mooted⁴³. It is, however, doubtful if this development is financially viable.

In a similar fashion to Vietnam, the Philippines has sought to compensate for its weak position in terms of hardware by pursuing a policy of fortification of the garrisons it maintains on the Spratlys. It has been estimated that the Philippines has the strongest military presence among the claimant states dug in on the islands themselves.

Although the Philippines maintains a valuable mutual security treaty with the US, the extent of the American commitment has been questioned with regard to the Spratlys:

"Washington has stated that its umbrella covers only the metropolitan territory [of the Philippines] as defined in 1951." (FEER 13/8/92, 17).

As the Philippine-claimed Spratlys, known as the Kalayaan group, were only officially annexed in 1978 they presumably fall outside the scope of the US's defence commitment.

Malaysia

The Malaysian navy and airforce are faced with severe geographical difficulties. In addition to a substantial maritime area to defend, the services must divide their attentions between peninsular

Malaysia and the provinces of Sarawak and Sabah across the southern reaches of the South China Sea on Borneo. To make matters worse the intervening sea is interrupted by the presence of several Indonesian islands (the Natuna group).

The key elements of the Malaysian navy's modest forces, viewed by some defence analysts as approximately half the size required to fulfil its portfolio of tasks, are four frigates. These are set to be supplemented with the addition of two new destroyers from the UK and potentially two submarines.

It is in the sphere of airpower, however, where much of Malaysia's military modernisation has been concentrated. In addition to the purchase of 18 MiG-27s Malaysia is also acquiring eight high performance F/A 18 *Hornets* from the US plus 28 British made BAe *Hawk* 100 and 200 ground attack aircraft. These new acquisitions join an ageing US supplied fleet of 33 A-4 *Skyhawks* and 13 F-5Es marking a major enhancement of Malaysia's airpower. Malaysia also has the advantage of possessing land bases in relatively close proximity to the Spratlys, particularly at Labaun in Sabah which lies approximately 150nm from Swallow Reef.

Brunei

The Royal Brunei Armed Forces have very limited power projection capabilities, possessing just three fast patrol boats and a few armed helicopters. This insignificant force may soon be upgraded with the possible addition of between one and three corvettes and 16 *Hawk* 100 armed trainers. Brunei's forces are, however, likely to remain modest.

Other Potential Combatants

In addition to the claimant states, several other countries or organisations have been touted as having significant strategic and military interests in the region, making them potential combatants in a South China Sea conflict:

Asean - Although the Association of Southeast Asian Nations - a disparate group of states comprising Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore - is gradually building a framework for security cooperation in the region, these faltering steps fall well short of an integrated defensive alliance and military command. As O'Neill notes: "*Prospects for military co-*

operation are limited because the assessments of Asean members still differ markedly on both threats and the issues for which force could usefully be employed." It thus seems unlikely at present that the non-claimant Asean states would be drawn into a military conflict sparked by rival claims to jurisdiction in the South China Sea.

The USA - The departure of US forces from their bases at Subic Bay and Clark air base in the Philippines marks a significant scaling down of the US military presence in the region, spurred by the absolute demise of a Soviet/Russian threat (at least for the foreseeable future) in the Pacific theatre. This is not to say that the US does not retain extremely impressive power projection capabilities and the ability to rapidly deploy overwhelming air and naval assets to the region - if it wants to. It is highly questionable whether the USA would become directly involved in a conflict over the Spratlys unless the conflict were to escalate or interrupt international navigation through the region.

Russia - The former superpower's Pacific Fleet has been described as possessing "fighter pilots without fuel and rusting ships" (FEER 13/1/94, 21). Having quit her bases in Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang, Russia's defensive alliance with Vietnam may be viewed as a dead letter and it seems unlikely that the Russians will be able to mount sustained operations in the South China Sea for some time yet, even if they had a desire to. In any case Russia would in all probability not wish to jeopardise her deepening and lucrative defence ties with China by supporting her former client over the Spratlys.

The Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA) - Set up to compensate for British military withdrawal from the Far East in 1975, the FPDA links Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. The Agreement provides for consultations among the parties leading to a combined response in the event of aggression against the latter two states. The FPDA's worth in the context of a conflict over the Spratlys is open to question. It seems unlikely that the Agreement would be triggered by such a clash unless the fighting were to spread to include the territory of Malaysia and Singapore proper.

Japan - Japanese dependence on strategic seaways passing through the South China Sea, particularly for its crucial oil supplies from the Gulf, together with an expansion in the scope of operations of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) in the early 1980s to 1,000 nautical miles from Japan, partially in response to US demands for 'burden-sharing'; the impressive nature of those forces, the

country's economic dominance and history of aggression in the region have all contributed to an alarmist scenario of a reemergent militaristic Japan.

For example Spick (1993, 15) notes that if Japan's vital oil supply route was threatened "...a response would seem inevitable." Similarly, as recently as June 1994, *Xiandai Jianchuan* (Modern Naval Vessels), a monthly publication of a Chinese navy think-tank, alleged that Japan had embarked upon a "...new militaristic path".

Despite such fears the JMSDF retains a very defensive posture, lacking carrier-based aircraft and adequate logistical support to sustain long-distance operations. Were Japanese naval forces to deploy to the South China Sea they would be bereft of air cover unless provided with friendly bases in the region - highly unlikely given Japan's historic baggage from World War II. As *The Economist* aptly summarises, Japan remains: "...a power but a neutered one" (20/2/93, 22).

India - According to some commentators India's development of a blue water navy, plus long-range air and missile capabilities is cause for alarm on the part of South China Sea littoral states. Although India is the only Asian state to possess aircraft carriers it may be argued that Indian military power projection capabilities "remains seriously flawed" (Sridharan 1993, 138). India's two carriers hail from World War II, and neither boasts conventional fixed-wing, rather than short take off and landing aircraft. In addition the Indian navy is probably incapable of providing the sort of heavily armed battle group vital to carrier operations, particularly as the Indians lack anti-missile missiles. Furthermore, lack of support ships limits range and sustainability of operations, whilst the Indian navy's amphibious capability is dismissed by Sridharan (1993, 137) as "marginal". India is therefore very unlikely to become involved in a South China Sea fire-fight.

Conclusion

A number of points may be drawn from the preceding brief survey. With regard to the claimant states' relative military strengths, it is clear that the Chinese have a significant edge and, in the absence of extra-regional intervention particularly from the US, could be expected to deal with any opposition in the South China Sea comfortably.

As far as an arms race in the region is concerned, that force modernisation is proceeding apace is

undeniable. Whether this constitutes an arms race is more debatable. In virtually all cases there is a dire need to replace antiquated equipment and despite recent procurements this factor remains - there is a lot more modernisation to be undertaken. Arms procurements have also been driven by rapid economic growth after generally more depressed expenditure in the 1980s. This has served to highlight the regional defence spending in comparison with, for example, the 'peace dividend' in Europe. In addition such acquisitions reflect an understandable reaction to offset the removal of Cold War certainties.

Overall then it seems to overstate the case to claim that there is an ongoing arms race in the South China Sea region. It is worth noting, however, that the steadily increasing military presence in the region will inevitably enhance the probability of incidents and clashes occurring. It is to be hoped that the littoral states and in particular China's preoccupation with domestic issues and economic growth will serve as mitigating factors forestalling or limiting potential conflict.

Notes

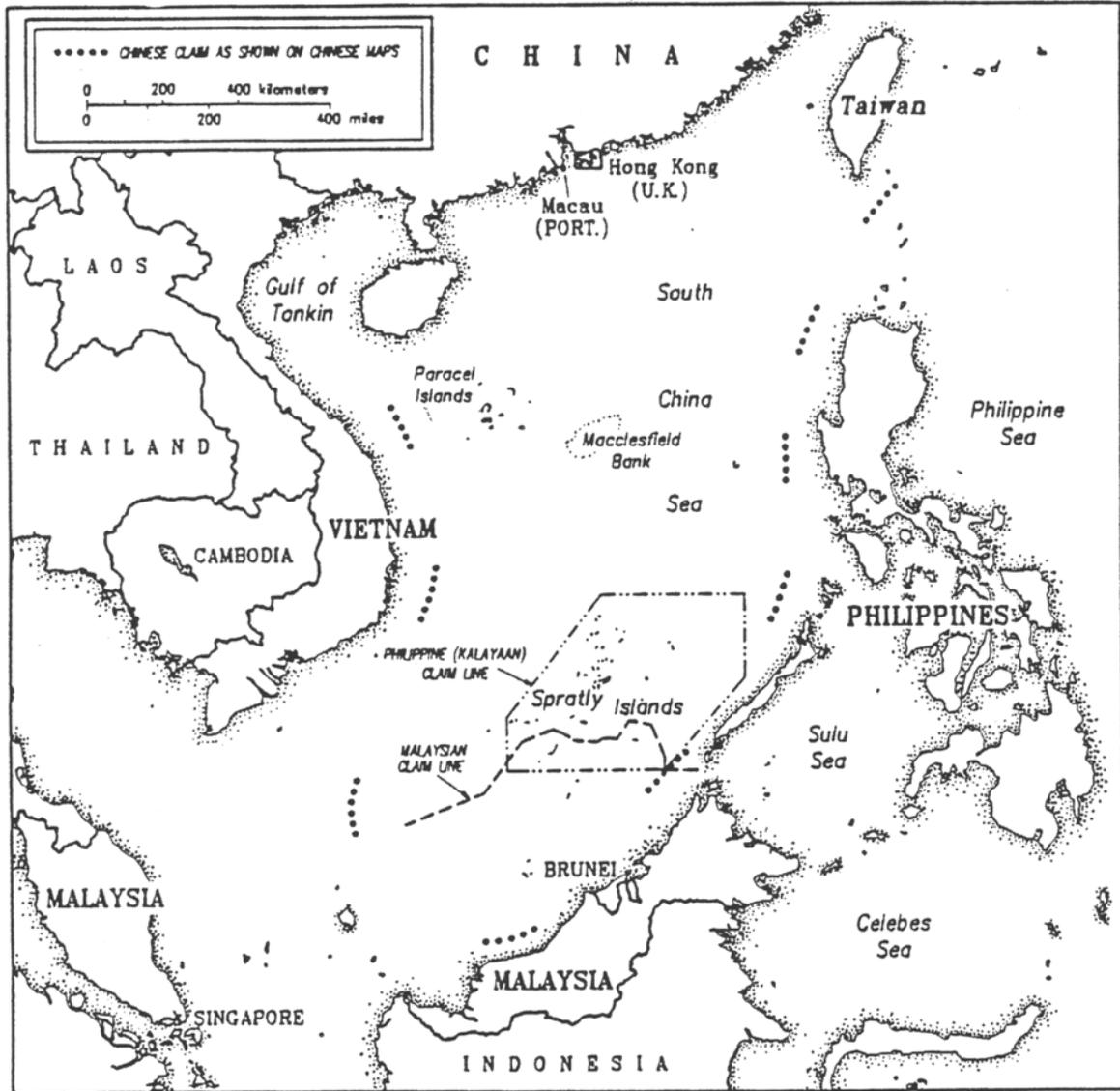
- 1 Reported by various sources, for example FEER 13/8/92, 15 and Spick 1993, 14. A fuller account of the action is provided by Garver 1992, 1008-1017.
- 2 FEER 13/8/92, 15; Garver 1992, 1001.
- 3 For instance Van der Kroef 1990, 4-5.
- 4 Sipri 1993, 386-390.
- 5 Cheung 1990, 5; Lee 1990, 7.
- 6 Unless otherwise stated, military figures are drawn from the IISS's *Military Balance 1993-1994*.
- 7 For example, Lee 1990, 7.
- 8 Lee 1990, 4-5.
- 9 Cheung 1990, 5.
- 10 Cheung 1990, 32-34.
- 11 For example it was reported in April 1993 that China had: *"..recently redeployed three Romeo-class conventional submarines from its North Sea Fleet where they were used to monitor Russian naval activity, to the South Sea Fleet. Their new mission is to patrol the contested areas of the South China Sea.."* (FEER 8/4/93, 9).
- 12 Garver 1992, 1024.
- 13 According to Lee (1990, 8): *"The 'Two Jima' exercise of May 1986 demonstrates great progress made by the Chinese in joint operations. Success in conducting task force level exercises over 1,000 nautical miles from the coast demonstrate Chinese capability both in force projection and probable far reaching consequences for the naval balance in the Asia-Pacific"*.
- 14 Cheung 1990, 34-36; Lee 1990, 7-8.
- 15 Cheung 1990, 23.
- 16 IISS 1993, 152-155; Cheung 1990, 23-26; Lee 1990, 7.
- 17 FEER 8/4/93, 23.
- 18 FEER 13/8/92, 20.
- 19 The first patrol of Chinese H-6 aircraft to the Spratlys area reportedly occurred on 8 November 1980 when two planes visited the area and undertook extensive aerial photography. By 1983 there were apparently frequent PLA(N) air patrols over the Spratlys (Garver 1992, 1008).
- 20 Reported in FEER 3/9/92, 21: *"Russian arms manufacturers are believed to have offered the supersonic Tu22M bomber to Peking, which would substantially increase China's military 'reach'. The Tu22M has a range of more than 4,000km, has air-refuelling capabilities, can carry heavy bomb and missile loads"*.
- 21 FEER 8/4/93, 23.
- 22 Cheung 1990, 28; Garver 1992, 1014; Spick 1993, 14.
- 23 Lee 1990, 11; The Economist 20/2/93, 24.
- 24 Spick 1993, 14.
- 25 Cheung 1990, 27; Spick 1993, 14.
- 26 Spick 1993, 14; FEER 9/7/92, 8-9; 3/9/92, 21; 12/11/92, 28
- 27 According to Cheung (1990, 27): *"It is also estimated that it would cost at least two to five renminbi (US\$420 million to \$1.08 billion) to build a relatively modest 30,000-ton to 48,000-ton carrier."*
- 28 Estimated at US\$2 - 2.4 billion in FEER (3/9/92, 21 & 12/11/92, 28).
- 29 FEER 9/7/92, 8.
- 30 Cheung 1990, 27.
- 31 Cheung 1990, 27; Spick 1993, 14.
- 32 For example Lee (1990, 16) notes that there is *"...little incentive for the Chinese to opt for the expensive formula of building carriers..."* as, *"The vulnerability of carrier battle groups is well known..."* and while China *"...will continue to be disadvantaged by a land-based Naval Air Force..acquisition of in-flight refuelling technology will go a long way towards satisfying aspirations to exert influence on its neighbours."*
- 33 Cheung 1990, 32.
- 34 Lee 1990, 14.
- 35 FEER 9/7/92, 9-11.
- 36 The first ship was reportedly personally commissioned by Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui on 7 May 1993. The remaining ships in the series are scheduled to be delivered at a rate of

- one every eleven months thereafter (FEER 20/5/93, 14).
 37 FEER 9/7/92, 10.
 38 FEER 3/3/94, 15.
 39 BBC SWB FE/2018, 9/6/94.
 40 Speed (1989, 12), for example, assesses the Vietnamese navy as being "incapable of fighting a major naval engagement".
 41 Spick 1993, 14.
 42 For example according to FEER (13/8/92, 20): "To compensate for its lack of frontline equipment, Vietnam has been beefing up its garrisons on some of the islands in the Spratlys, including burying tanks into the ground and using them as gun emplacements."
 43 Spick 1993, 15.

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Names and boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

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