

# War and Peace around the South China Sea, 1938-98

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This is an attempt to present a naval strategic perspective on the contemporary political history of the South China Sea and the states and provinces surrounding it. The paper is meant to serve as intellectual underpinning for a three year research project on the role of naval strategy at critical junctures in East Asian international relations since the late 1930s.

## Why a naval strategic perspective?

Seabased regional perspective rather than landbased national perspective. Demonstrate this by showing two different mental maps.

Regional history written integratively, rather than as series of juxtaposed national histories.

Consider a region around the South China Sea rather than operating with the conventional distinction between Southeast and Northeast Asia.

Sea power is different from land based power because it is:

- not dependent on a civilian population or public opinion in the areas where it operates, but only in the country to which the navy belongs,
- more dependent on technological sophistication and air support,
- more costly
- more mobile, thus making it possible for a distant power to dominate far away seas
- less constant, more volatile
- depends on ports and bases rather than territories

Thus naval power:

- cannot automatically be translated into power in adjacent territories. Navies can move and act quickly and demonstratively, but are not good at sustaining drawn out struggles against a determined land-based adversary.
- can be used as a thermometer for the relations between great powers.

Coasts and rivers form rand zones between sea and land

Air power links sea and land power

## Stakes in the South China Sea

Sealanes of communication (SLOCs)

Naval bases/ports

Fish

Oil and gas

Legal claims and international law

- islands / islets / reefs / atolls
- demitinal waters
- EEZ

National pride

Relations between mainland China and overseas Chinese

The Environment

### Phases and chronology

∴ *intel politics; NEA; dual affairs.*

There have been frequent changes in the balance of naval power in and around the South China Sea during the period under study, which may be separated into four phases:

*d) 4 power regime / balance to top navy.*

- 1) 1938-49 Japanese aggression is defeated by a Sino-American-British alliance. Euro-American supremacy at sea is restored.
- 2) 1950-70 Land based communism challenges US sea based supremacy.
- 3) 1971-91 Sino-American detente in face of a Soviet naval challenge.
- 4) 1992- Local powers go to sea. US supremacy in doubt.

The following chronology of events may provide a basis for a historical account of the changing strategic situation within each phase:

#### *Prelude*

- 1930 France declares formal possession of the Spratlys and occupies the largest of them (Itu Aba).
- 1933 France notifies the world of its possession of the Spratlys. Only Japan protests.

*(1938-49)*

#### *Phase 1 Japanese aggression and defeat*

- 1939 Japan occupies the Spratlys, Paracels and Hainan by force, thus gaining naval supremacy in the South China Sea.
- 1941 Japan acquires base rights in French Indochina through agreement with the French government at Vichy and the colonial administration of Admiral Decoux.
- 1942 Japanese bombers sink *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* off Malaya. Japan occupies all of Southeast Asia including Singapore, and gains control of all land around the South China Sea, thus making it an "internal lake" in the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere.
- 1945 In January, after two-three years of advancing the US naval position westwards in the Pacific, Admiral Halsey's fleet (serving under Nimitz) ventures into the South China Sea for the first time and conducts raids along the coasts. After the Japanese surrender, the US Navy is the strongest power in the region, but British naval forces return to Hong Kong and Singapore, and pave the way for the return of the French and Dutch navies to their bases in Indochina and Indonesia.
- 1946 Concern for the security of French naval bases is one of the main factors behind the French decision to seek confrontation with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, leading to the First Indochina War.
- 1947 The United States and the Philippines sign a base agreement allowing the US to develop a modern naval base at Subic Bay.  
Forces of Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese government occupy Itu Aba, the largest island in the Spratlys.

*\ French protests?*

- 1949 Establishment of a unified communist republic on the whole of the Chinese mainland, but with weak naval forces. Chiang Kai-shek takes most of China's navy to Taiwan (?)

(1950-70)

Phase 2 Communist land against capitalist sea

1.10.49 by time of communist expansion

- 1950 Chinese communist invasion of Hainan, but not of Hong Kong or Taiwan. Chiang Kai-shek's troops are withdrawn from Itu Aba.
- 1951 The San Francisco peace treaty with Japan. US-Japanese security agreement.
- 1954-5 First Taiwan Straits crisis.  
The French Navy leaves Indochina.  
Chinese naval forces occupy half of the Paracels.  
President Eisenhower pronounces the domino theory.  
The Manila Pact leads to the formation of SEATO.  
The Bandung conference becomes the precursor of the non-aligned movement.
- 1956 Taiwanese forces reoccupy Itu Aba.
- 1957 Indonesia declares to base its claims to sovereignty on the archipelagic principle.
- 1958 US and British-supported rebellion in Sulawesi and Sumatra fails.  
Second Taiwan Straits crisis.
- 1963-65 Indonesia occupies and annexes West Irian.  
The Malaysian Federation is formed with territory on both sides of the South China Sea. This leads to rebellion in Brunei (which remains a British colony to 1984), to confrontation with Indonesia, and to a crisis with the Philippines (over Sabah). Malaysia gains the upper hand because of British military, not least naval, supremacy.
- 1964 One attempted and one alleged Vietnamese missile attack against US destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf lead to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and US bombing of North Vietnam.  
China successfully tests a nuclear bomb.
- 1965 US marines go on shore and establish base at Da Nang in South Vietnam.  
Singapore is thrown out of Malaysia, but the British navy retains base rights.  
A political crisis in Indonesia, caused by a failed coup attempt, leads to the downfall of Sukarno and the establishment of a pro-American military regime under Suharto by March 1966. Thus Chinese regional influence suffers a serious setback, reducing US strategic anxieties, and also much of the rationale for waging war in Vietnam (the domino theory).  
Fears of a Taiwanese/US invasion leads China to remove industrial facilities from the coast, and forms part of the background for the cultural revolution 1966-69.
- 1967 ASEAN is formed as an organisation to prevent conflict between the non-communist states of Southeast Asia.
- 1968 Britain decides to accelerate its military withdrawal from east of Suez.
- 1969 Official US-Vietnamese peace conference opens in Paris.  
Nixon pronounces a new doctrine, saying that US allies must thereafter do most of the ground fighting while the US provides air and naval support, supplies and training.
- 1970-71 Sino-US rapprochement removes the remaining strategic rationale for the US war in Vietnam.

(1971-91)

Phase 3: Soviet-Indochinese challenge enhances regional growth under Sino-US wings

- 1971 ASEAN declares Southeast Asia a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN).
- 1972 The US returns Okinawa to Japan, but retains a base area comprising 13% of the island.
- 1973 The Paris peace agreement leads to a phased withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam.
- 1974 Chinese naval forces seize the rest of the Paracels from South Vietnamese forces.
- 1975 The US Navy leaves its bases in South Vietnam after the North Vietnamese conquest.
- 1978-79 Socialist reforms, repression of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia lead to a temporary Chinese invasion of the Vietnamese border provinces, and to the exodus of "boat people" from Vietnam, comprising much of the fishing population on islands and coastal villages along the coast.  
In November 1978 the Soviet Union and Vietnam sign a treaty of friendship and cooperation with a secret clause on military cooperation. After the Chinese invasion of Vietnam the Soviet Union deploys a naval force off the coast preventing China from blocading Haiphong. The USSR subsequently establishes a permanent naval presence at Camranh Bay.
- 1979 After the US recognition of the PRC, Congress adopts the Taiwan Relations Act, committing the US to maintain a capacity to defend Taiwan.
- 1980 Under US pressure to assume a greater military burden, Japan accepts responsibility for protecting the seas within a thousand miles radius of Tokyo.
- 1982 The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
- 1984 Soviet-Vietnamese naval exercise in the Tonkin Gulf.  
Britain agrees to revert Hong Kong to China in 1997.
- 1986-88 After Gorbachev's accession to power, the Soviet Union scales down its ambitions in far off places, thus leaving Vietnam more vulnerable to Chinese pressure.
- 1988 Sino-Vietnamese naval clash in the Spratlys leads to Chinese occupation of five reefs.
- 1989 China occupies two more reefs in the Spratlys. Presumably, however, Gorbachev's visit to Beijing in June and the student revolt on Tiananmen square compel the Chinese government to deject or postpone a plan to seize all Vietnamese-held islets in the Spratlys by force.  
APEC is being set up to promote free trade.  
In December, a full company of Soviet naval troops is repatriated from Camranh Bay.
- 1990 The Soviet Pacific Fleet is drastically reduced.  
Indonesia initiates a workshop process with annual unofficial multilateral conferences to discuss matters related to the South China Sea.  
Sino-Indonesian relations are normalised.

(1992- )

Phase 4: Local powers go to sea : US supremacy in doubt.

- 1991 The Soviet Union annuls its aid programme in Vietnam and almost eliminates its presence, leaving Vietnam in a vulnerable international position.  
Sino-Vietnamese relations are normalised.
- 1992 The US bases in the Philippines (Subic Bay and Clark) are closed down after a referendum and volcanic eruption.  
The Chinese People's Congress proclaims a new law declaring virtually all of the South China Sea to belong to China.  
China awards to a US oil firm a bloc of exploration in waters claimed by Vietnam.  
The foreign ministers of ASEAN launch a joint declaration on the South China Sea.

- The ASEAN countries agree to establish an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to hold annual discussions about security matters, with participation of external powers.
- 1994 China becomes a net importer of oil.
- 1995 The Chinese navy builds military structures on Mischief Reef, within a sector of the Spratly archipelago claimed by the Philippines. The Philippines and ASEAN issue strong protests. Vietnam becomes a member of ASEAN.
- 1996 The first Asia-Europe summit is held in Bangkok.  
The third Taiwan Straits crisis leads to reaffirmation of the US naval presence. The US notifies China that it will resist any attempt to interfere with the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.  
Big Indonesian naval exercise is conducted north of Natuna island.  
The rape of a young girl leads to a strong protest movement in Okinawa against the US bases. The result is a decision to construct a new large offshore base.
- 1997 Hong Kong becomes part of China.  
Financial crisis weakens the positions of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia and relatively strengthens the position of "Greater China" (the PRC, Taiwan and Singapore). The Philippines and Vietnam remain weak.
- 1998 The US navy is promised access to a new base under construction at Changi in Singapore. The US and Philippines sign Visiting Forces Agreement.  
Economic crisis in Indonesia leads to the resignation of Suharto and to widespread anxiety for Indonesia's stability.

### **The explanatory power of a naval strategic perspective**

#### *Hypothesis:*

Naval strategic considerations and naval institutions have played a more prominent role than generally assumed in determining great power policies in the region around the South China Sea. This is the case for some of the major French, British, Dutch, Soviet and US policy decisions. Notably the role of the US Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) and the strategic concerns of his command in US decision-making have been underestimated by diplomatic historians. The reasons why the importance of naval strategy has been underestimated are:

- a) a general tendency to consider each national history as separate (mental map based on nation-states separated by national borders)
- b) a tendency to think about regional affairs in the context of the global cold war with its nuclear weapons-based political strategies of aligning nations with either of the two super powers, rather than as a naval contest for supremacy in the South China Sea itself.
- c) the fact that diplomatic archives, organised in accordance with a filing system based on nation-states, are opened to researchers much earlier than the naval archives, whose filing systems are based on theatres of command. Thus the major syntheses are written on the basis of diplomatic archives before the naval archives become accessible.
- d) the status of naval history as a specialised field which is often not taken seriously by the most prominent historians of international affairs.

#### *Research question:*

Which major policy decisions may be better explained if we take naval strategic concerns and the influence of naval institutions into account?

- The Japanese decision to attack Southeast Asia in 1941–42,
- The US decision to allow the French return to Indochina in 1945, and the Dutch to Indonesia,
- The French decision to confront the Viet Minh in 1946,
- The British decision to postpone independence for Malaya (with Singapore) while conceding independence to Burma, India and Ceylon in 1947–48,

- The Dutch insistence on keeping West Irian out of Indonesia in 1949,
- The US decisions to support Taiwan in the Taiwan Straits crises of 1954 and 1958,
- The formation of SEATO 1954–55,
- The US decision to abstain from intervening at Dien Bien Phu in 1954,
- The decision by the US, Britain, Taiwan and the Philippines to sponsor rebels in Sulawesi and Sumatra in 1958,
- The Soviet decision to withdraw aid to Vietnam in 1963,
- The US decision to intervene in Vietnam 1964–65,
- The Soviet decision to resume aid to Vietnam in 1965,
- The US attempts to find a way out of the Vietnam War as from 1967–68, and the Nixon doctrine of 1969,
- The Soviet decision to sign a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Vietnam in November 1978,
- The Chinese decision to adopt a new law on sovereignty in 1992,
- The Chinese decision to improve relations with Taiwan after the presidential elections of March 1996 and to seek improvement of Sino-American relations.

These are only some of the significant policy decisions on which naval strategic concerns must have had a more or less significant bearing. My intention is to dig into the background for some of these decisions and try to determine the relative weight of naval strategic motives and of naval institutions in determining the outcome. Which of the decisions should I choose? To what extent is it possible to measure the weight of naval strategic considerations relative to other concerns (political commitments, economic interests, etc.) The further back in time I choose my cases, the better chance I shall have of getting access to primary sources to top-level decisions.

## References

Before conducting archival studies, it is necessary to familiarise myself with the main literature, and also to learn more about navies and naval strategy in general. So far I have found that the following books and articles seem useful:

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## Appendix

Abstract for paper to be presented at the EUROSEAS conference in Hamburg, 3–6.9.98.

Stein Tønnesson:

### Southeast Asia in Great Power Naval Strategies

This paper will explore a naval strategic approach to Southeast Asian history in the period 1930–89, as a way of transcending the straitjacket of national histories. Rather than writing regional history as a number of parallel national histories it should be possible to apply a comprehensive regional perspective. One way of doing this is to use Christopher Goscha's network approach (see his abstract), another to focus on the role of regional institutions such as Admiral Mountbatten's war time SEAC and, from 1967, the ASEAN. A third is to consider great power naval strategies.

Governments in command of huge navies often allow naval strategic concerns (security of bases and Sealanes of Communication; SLOCS) to influence their foreign policies, but navies are extremely costly and demand a strong accompanying air force. Naval power is therefore also volatile. There have been frequent changes in the balance of naval power in and around the South China Sea during the period under study. The paper will divide the period into phases in accordance with shifting power relations. An important insight is also that naval power cannot automatically be translated into power in adjacent territories. Navies can move and act quickly and demonstratively, but are not good at sustaining drawn out struggles against a determined land-based adversary.

The paper will try to draw on these insights and combine them with a perspective of the South China Sea as a kind of Asian Mediterranean (or "Southeast Asian maritime heartland" to use the expression of President Marcos' security advisor José Almonte), and explore the shifting naval strategies of regional and outside powers in either determining or mirroring significant regional developments.