
A Security Message for the South China Sea

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Secretary John Kerry's Asia trip this week comes amid heightened tensions between China and its neighbors over maritime disputes in the strategically significant South China Sea. Although the sea spans over 1.3 million square miles and borders seven countries and Taiwan, China claims nearly all of the sea as its own—and with it, vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and fish.

China's assertions of sovereignty over the area are nothing new. What is new is that China is feverishly building [artificial islands](#) in an apparent effort to bolster its claims. Although it is not the first country to build on these contested reefs and rocks, China is doing so at an unprecedented pace. According to Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris, China has [reclaimed](#) some three thousand acres of land from the ocean in the past eighteen months, while the five other claimants—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam—have built a combined total of one hundred acres over the past forty-five years.



U.S.

Secretary of State John Kerry speaks at Singapore Management University in Singapore August 4, 2015. (Photo: Brendan Smialowski/Reuters)

China's building activities have been causing anxiety throughout the Asia Pacific, particularly as the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, and Vietnam have run up against Chinese boats in what each consider its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The Philippines has filed a case against Beijing for infringement of its EEZ at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. Beijing has resolutely rejected that process, while engaging in an escalating war of words.

Against this backdrop, new Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet Admiral Scott Swift told a press conference in Manila on July 20 that the Pacific Fleet is **ready to respond** to any contingency in the disputed waters. The Pacific Fleet later released a photograph of the admiral on a surveillance mission in the South China Sea aboard one of the United States' newest and most sophisticated spy planes.

These not-so-veiled messages to China are the latest in a string of public efforts by top U.S. military and government leaders to put Beijing on notice that the United States will not tolerate changes by force to the status quo in the South China Sea.

In separate trips to Asia this spring, Kerry and U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter openly called Chinese actions a threat to the stability of the region. U.S. President Barack Obama added his voice to this chorus, accusing China of failing to abide by international norms.

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This public pushback reflects a growing level of anxiety in the Obama administration about Beijing's intentions. The world's second largest economy, China has embarked on an aggressive military modernization program explicitly designed to give the People's Liberation Army global reach. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the Chinese have grown increasingly assertive in sending ships into disputed areas, and a new generation of Chinese is being raised to be militant about China's sovereignty claims.



At the same time, over \$5 trillion worth of global commerce and up to 50 percent of global oil tanker shipments flow through the South China Sea annually. While the United States takes no position on the maritime disputes themselves, it has a profound interest in ensuring that those disputes are resolved peacefully and in a manner

that preserves freedom of navigation at all times. On economic grounds alone, any escalation of tensions in the South China Sea could undermine the fragile state of the global economy.

With Xi Jinping set to visit the United States in September, Kerry should use this week's trip to Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam to emphasize that the United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate in the region to protect the freedom of navigation and overflight permitted by international law.

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Kerry's upcoming attendance at the ASEAN Regional Forum, a regional security dialogue that groups together the ten nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with seventeen other partners, also provides the United States with an opportunity to rally the countries of Southeast Asia to present a more united front in the face of Chinese assertiveness.

Beijing's strategy has long been to divide and conquer the countries of the region through economic largesse. China's slowing economy and aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, however, provide an opening for the United States to recalibrate that balance and get the relevant

members of ASEAN to stand together. A good starting point would be ASEAN insistence on the conclusion of a binding Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, which China has resisted since 2002. The United States should also try to get ASEAN claimants to forge an agreement among themselves—if not resolving boundaries, then regarding shared development of resources.

The United States has the power to push forward such a consensus, but doing so will require more focus and resources than Washington has been able to muster as part of its "rebalance."

In recent years, the United States has strengthened its military partnerships with the Philippines and Vietnam, but it will need to do more with both countries to ensure that they can help be part of the solution.

Specifically, the Obama administration partially [lifted](#) an embargo on the sale of lethal equipment to Vietnam that had been in place since the end of the Vietnam War. Kerry will celebrate the twentieth anniversary of normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam when he visits Hanoi this week. The Obama administration should lift the remaining ban in order to accelerate Vietnam's ability to provide its own minimum credible deterrent capability.

Lastly, with negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement in its final, critical stage, Kerry will want to use his trip to Asia to solidify support for the deal. The trade pact will be essential to cementing relations between the U.S. and critical partners in the region. Once the negotiations on a final deal are concluded, the administration will need to prevent election politics from scuttling it at home.

The United States has been the guarantor of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific for more than half a century, providing a platform for miraculous economic growth across the region. Given the high global stakes, the United States must ensure a diplomatic resolution to the growing menace of regional maritime disputes, or run the risk of miscalculation or worse in the increasingly tense waters of the Pacific.