



Assessing China's Land Reclamation in the South China Sea

By Sukjoon Yoon / *Issue Briefings*, 4 / 2015

China's unprecedented land reclamation projects have emerged as one of its key strategies in the South China Sea, yet evidence suggests that these efforts may not represent the country's broader long-term interests.

The hottest issue in the Asia-Pacific region is the huge Chinese land reclamation projects ongoing in the South China Sea (SCS). China is creating a number of artificial islands from reefs and shoals which it claims as Chinese territory, despite their disputed status. The process is proceeding rapidly, using such vessels as the 127-meter Tian Jin Hao, the largest dredger in Asia, which can extract 4,500 cubic meters of sand and rock per hour. These works have proved very controversial and sparked much heated commentary, not least of which has been from the US. But is China acting within its rights or not? Is this development helping or hindering China's broader interests?



Several issues need to be considered before these questions can be answered.

First, is China doing anything new? Some see China's land reclamation as part of a long-term geostrategic plan, a kind of salami-slicing approach to establishing Chinese hegemony in the SCS and restoring its historical dominance of the region. This is also seen as going against the spirit of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS, which China agreed to with ASEAN in 2002. According to this view, China has crossed a red line and is definitely in the wrong. In contrast, others argue that China's reclamation works on uninhabited reefs and shoals are simply a reaction to similar projects by other nations making claims to disputed SCS territories: Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Although these reclamations are much smaller in scale, they have been used to station ships and troops. From this perspective, China has as much right as the other countries to carry out reclamation work, so that any third-party involvement would constitute unwarranted interference and would likely cause a needless increase in tension.

Second, what is the purpose of a Chinese military presence on the newly created islands? According to a recently published US Congressional Research Service report, *Chinese*



Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications and Policy Options, since the works began in September 2013, the Chinese government has impinged on others' territorial rights in the SCS. Although the Chinese government is saying that its current reclamation plans are almost complete, many commentators are concerned about the evident militarization by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), noting the establishment of military bases with radar installations, anti-aircraft artillery, airstrips and port facilities. As I [argued in an RSIS Commentary in May](#), China will not be able to obtain any practical military benefit from operating such facilities on the artificial islands, because of the impact of bad weather and the lack of logistical and maintenance capacities for the ships and aircraft deployed there. This would seem, then, to be an unnecessarily provocative act on the part of China.

Less directly, however, these bases demonstrate China's willingness and increasing capacity to restrain the activities of US forces in the region, whether acting alone, for example in deploying its long-endurance maritime patrol aircraft, the P-8A Poseidon, which are replacing the aging P-3 Orion, or in multilateral naval joint patrols. The PLA Navy, the Chinese Coast Guard and China's maritime safety administration are all keen to fulfill the broader international scope set out in the



“new historical missions” announced by President Hu Jintao in 2004, and the land reclamation efforts in the SCS will extend their capacity to respond promptly to events in the SCS, in particular to conduct naval task unit operations if necessary.

Third, what is the status of China’s large-scale land reclamation operations in purely legal terms? Can they be justified? The construction of artificial islands based on reefs and shoals located in disputed areas where sovereignty has not been unequivocally established appears to directly contravene the United Nations Convention Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Specifically, China is violating UNCLOS by using living coral reefs as building materials, which is causing severe environmental damage—in this respect, China is clearly in the wrong. Moreover, the detailed application of the tidal regime prescribed by UNCLOS is very complex, and China’s current land reclamation activities in the SCS may make it difficult to measure the relevant attributes of the original maritime features, thus rendering moot any discussion of sovereignty claims and maritime rights, so that this is already a *fait accompli* for China.

Lastly, what are the diplomatic implications for China’s aspirations to become a “true maritime power”? Since March Xi Jinping has been busy rolling out his ambitious national



grand strategy known as the “One Belt, One Road Initiative (BRI)”, which combines a continental Silk Road (the Belt) with the so-called 21st Century Maritime Silk Route. This latter is intended to promote economic links with China’s neighbors, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. At the same time the US published its multi-services co-hosted maritime strategy, “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century: Forward, Engaged, Ready (CS-21R)”, revising the one published in 2007 with the same title. In this propaganda struggle between the two great powers of the region, early signs are that their longstanding SCS territorial disputes with China are disposing ASEAN members toward CS-21R rather than Xi’s BRI. Other Chinese initiatives, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) have yet to make an impact, and are still considered suspect by the US and Japan, despite offering China’s neighbors vast investment resources without political strings. The appeal of the US-led maritime strategic partnership remains strong for the small and weak nations of ASEAN: they see it as the best way to contain China’s assertiveness in the SCS. Although every country in the region stands to benefit from better infrastructural links and the consequent expansion in the flow of goods, services, people, and capital, China’s goodwill initiatives such as BRI and AIIB, which are



essentially constructive and should be welcomed by all, are currently being undermined by its land reclamation activities in the SCS.

As for China's own perspective, it appears to be tacitly justifying the construction of artificial islands by not criticizing the activities of other nations in the region, whilst simultaneously emphasizing, with the dramatic scale of its projects, that China should be considered the "big brother" to its weaker neighbors, and thus implicitly assuming that any other territorial claims in the SCS are subordinate to China's claims within its so-called nine-dashed line. Beijing often comments on the numbers of occupied territories in the Spratly Islands: China is operating on just seven, compared to Vietnam's 29, the Philippines' eight, Malaysia's five, and Taiwan's one (to which China also claims sovereignty under its One China Policy). In practice, Taiwan occupies Itu Aba, the largest natural feature of the Spratlys, and the number of discrete occupations is of no real significance.

China also tries to make an argument based on the fairness of resource allocations, commenting that five small ASEAN countries together have an annual production of 50 million tons of oil and gas from the SCS, which exceeds the 40 million tons produced by Daqing, the oil capital of China, only part of



which comes from within the nine-dashed line. Although China has been exploring for oil near Hainan Island and the Pearl River Delta, these are expected to be considerably less economically viable than the SCS resources. Here again, China is out of step with international norms, since before anyone can lay legal claim to the oil and gas beneath the SCS, it is legally necessary to come to an agreement on maritime sovereignty.

In conclusion, China's reclamation activities in the SCS are of dubious legality, and it is hard to see how they truly represent China's broader long-term interests. It is time for all the nations of the region, however their individual perspectives may differ, to come together to agree a more coherent and decisive response to China's actions.



Sukjoon Yoon is a retired Captain of the Republic of Korea Navy. He is Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy (KIMS), and a visiting professor at the Department of Defence System Engineering, Sejong University, Seoul, South Korea.

CITATION:

Yoon, Sukjoon. 2015. "Assessing China's Land Reclamation in the South China Sea." *Issue Briefings*, 4. Taipei: South China Sea Think Tank.
<http://scstt.org/issue-briefings/2015/211/>