CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
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CHINA'S MARITIME DISPUTES IN THE EAST AND SOUTH CHINA SEAS

Testimony by **Dr. Michael D. Swaine**
Senior Associate, Asia Program
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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Introduction

China's maritime disputes with other states over territorial sovereignty and resource claims in the East and South China Seas constitute one of three related but distinct categories of maritime disputes or sets of concerns that exist between Beijing and other nations.

Aside from the Taiwan issue (which is arguably a maritime dispute of sorts, but not the focus of this hearing), maritime sovereignty and resource disputes center on (a) the Sino-Japanese imbroglio concerning both overlapping maritime resource claims and sovereign control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands northeast of Taiwan, and (b) the complex web of disputes between Beijing and several Southeast Asian entities (Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan) over many islands, atolls, reefs, and shoals in the South China Sea.

A second set of disputes centers on the activities of naval military operations within China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and "near seas" (*jinhai*), including U.S. Navy ISR operations and exercises along China's coastline, allied concerns over PLAN naval transits and the growing PLAN presence in sensitive waters near other states, and contending interpretations of the rights of foreign navies to operate in EEZs, as defined by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

On the broadest level, a third set of concerns (they have not yet risen to the level of an active dispute, constituting instead an intensifying competition) is more strategic in nature, affecting the entire area of the so-called "first island chain." They derive from the contradiction between a long-standing American assumption of the need to maintain military supremacy across the Western Pacific and the recently emerging Chinese capability to challenge certain elements of that supremacy through the deployment of increasingly capable "counter-intervention" or anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD)-type weapons systems along China's maritime periphery.

This contradiction to some extent underlies and sharpens the above two categories of disputes by placing them in a larger strategic context involving the shifting balance of power in the Western Pacific. That is, maritime disputes in the other two areas take on a degree of potential strategic significance because many observers view them as possible indicators of this shifting military balance. In particular, the increasing capabilities and resolve that Beijing is displaying in its disputes with the U.S. and other nations over the above two sets of maritime issues are viewed as an indirect challenge to the overall maritime status quo as defined largely by Washington.

Taken as a whole, these maritime issues are vitally important because they constitute the single most likely and significant potential source of instability, and even military conflict, with China over both the near and at least the medium (if not the long) term. Moreover, such dangers—and especially those associated with the disputes in the East and South China Seas—are particularly acute as a result of the involvement of strong (and apparently rising) nationalist emotions on all sides, and the overall zero-sum nature of the sovereignty issues, which inclines claimants to adopt absolutist stances and in many instances over-react to perceived challenges to one's position.

As the dominant maritime power in the Western Pacific, with a strong commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the region, and as an Asian power with specific political, economic, and security relations with two regional allies involved in the above disputes

(Japan and the Philippines), the United States is fated to play a major role in managing these volatile issues. Indeed, in recent years, Washington has taken a much more active and direct role in the maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas.

In order to contribute to the effective management of these disputes, and of China's role in particular, it is vitally important for Washington to understand clearly their origins and drivers, especially in the case of China, as well as the limits, strengths, and dangers of various types of possible future U.S. responses. The following sections will address these issues, and specifically answer several of the questions posed by the Commission.

General Origins and Drivers

As suggested above, many factors are acting to intensify the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. While some of these are directly associated with China, others are not. The most China-centric drivers include: Beijing's overall increasing regional power and influence on one hand; and arguably intensifying levels of Chinese nationalism and the related impact of social media—such as blogs and messaging via smart phones—among the Chinese populace on the other hand.

Regarding the former, in recent years, Beijing has significantly increased its capacity to operate both military and non-military (or para-military) naval and air assets along its littoral, thereby enhancing its ability to assert its long-standing and largely unchanged claims, through a greater overall maritime presence and an increased ability to police disputed areas and respond to the actions of others. Although other claimants are also striving to increase their capacities in a similar manner, Beijing has thus far arguably been the most successful, in large part due to its size and growing economic capacity.

The latter driver of Chinese behavior has served to intensify and expand the public's awareness, in real time, of apparent challenges or behavior by other states to Chinese sovereignty claims, thereby placing greater pressure on the Chinese leadership to respond quickly and resolutely. Chinese citizens hear about sovereignty-related incidents soon after they occur, exchange responses with one another through social media in ways that often escalate exponentially in very rapid fashion, and often make excessive and ridiculous demands of the PRC government. Although Beijing is by no means a passive recipient of such pressures, it is arguably fearful of appearing weak or inactive in the face of such strong public sentiment.

The intensity of the Chinese response to sovereignty-related challenges or issues is reinforced by the emotional association of those issues with the violations of China's sovereignty that occurred during China's so-called "Century of Humiliation" at the hands of foreigners, and the fact that China's collective leadership in general is arguably more concerned today with image concerns and public pressures than in the past. Add to this the increasing level of strategic distrust existing between Washington and Beijing, which fuel Chinese suspicions of U.S. manipulation of these disputes, and the result is an acute level of concern and a tendency toward over-reaction on the part of Chinese leaders and public alike. Of course, nationalism, social media, and historical experiences also affect the behavior of other claimants. But Chinese pride, and the sheer size of China's population, makes China's behavior especially notable and intense.

Other factors that are contributing to the growing intensity of maritime sovereignty disputes include an overall trend among regional states in general to pay greater attention to the actual or potential resource benefits existing within contested maritime areas, the greater economic and hence military and para-military capacity of the participants, and the overall greater attention paid to external (as opposed to domestic) security challenges by many claimants. All this suggests that the growing activism of **all** claimants reflects the changing nature of East Asia societies and economies.

Finally, another set of factors that drive both assertive behavior and fearful concerns among the claimants in maritime disputes is the uncertainty created by America's current economic and political problems. For many Asians, the possibility of an America in decline leads to a questioning of the sustainability and effectiveness of U.S. military power in the Western Pacific as well as the so-called "pivot" toward the region, and perhaps (in the case of China) an effort to push back more energetically against what is perceived as a growing American attempt to contain China in part through Washington's greater involvement in maritime disputes.

This uncertainty, along with Washington's avowed desire to pay greater attention to the Asia-Pacific region, also increases incentives among those Asian nations contending with China in maritime disputes to draw the U.S. more actively into those disputes on their side. To some extent this is both inevitable and acceptable, at least with regard to the U.S. allies involved. But such a dynamic can also worsen the situation if improperly handled.

How Does China's Behavior Differ?

As the above suggests, the increasing pattern of assertiveness witnessed in maritime disputes occurring in the East and South China Seas is part of a competitive dynamic among **all** the states involved. Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan, and China have all engaged in highly assertive behavior in recent years, either independently of actions taken by others, or in apparent response to perceived "provocations." These actions include the passage of new domestic laws and regulations of relevance, the establishment of new administrative entities, the public submission of more clearly defined claims (usually in response to international bodies), increased attempts to explore for or extract both oceanic and energy resources in disputed waters, the increased detainment of fishermen, provocative statements by officials, apparent attempts to alter the legal status or depiction of disputed territories, and overall increases in the scope and/or frequency of patrols.

These and other actions have at times led to an increased reliance on coercion, intimidation, and the use of force, along with more absolutist, inflammatory, and provocative rhetoric. In recent years, China has engaged in some forms of both types of behavior, apparently at times to a greater extent than other claimants. Of course, from Beijing's perspective, much of its behavior has been in response to what it views as clearly provocative actions taken by others, either to alter the status quo or to depart from previously agreed upon ways of managing a dispute.

This might indeed be true in many cases. Moreover, there is little evidence that China has altered either its basic national security strategy in Asia or its core policy toward maritime disputes. It remains supportive of a strategy designed to ensure regional peace and development, requiring efforts to limit and control disputes through negotiation, sustain or deepen various forms of cooperation with neighbors, and generally avoid conflict. At the

same time, it seeks to maintain what it regards as a necessary and resolute defense against perceived attempts by others to undermine China's diplomatic, legal, political, economic, and military position involving maritime and other sovereignty disputes.

These twin objectives obviously exist in some tension with one another (i.e., the later goal can often require, from Beijing's perspective, actions that undermine the former goal). Indeed, while usually professing a desire to avoid confrontation and conflict, Beijing often resorts to language and behavior toward maritime disputes that is overly emotional and escalatory. This has been particularly evident in the current crisis with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, where Beijing at times employs inflammatory language and is clearly engaged in an effort to compel Japan to acknowledge the existence of a dispute over the issue and accept in some way China's assertion of administrative authority over the islands.

In such efforts, Beijing seems to adopt the view that it must "make up lost ground" or "end unacceptable practices once and for all" in order to prevent an erosion of its position. In general, this viewpoint apparently results in efforts to defend against future challenges to its claims and strengthen its basic position by generally increasing its overall ability to patrol and operate in disputed areas. All of this might be viewed by Beijing as defensive and precautionary, but many others view it differently.

Indeed, China has a greater capacity, and perhaps a greater willingness than other claimants, to engage in escalatory or provocative actions, for several reasons. Some have already been mentioned, such as a strong and growing economy and a particular form of nationalism tinged with bitter historical memories. Others include a tendency to regard sovereignty disputes in moralistic terms—as issues of simple right and wrong, good and bad behavior—requiring an uncompromising stance. Yet others include a crisis management approach that emphasizes signaling strong resolve, creating inexorable momentum, responding in a rigid "tit-for-tat" manner, and in some cases acting before a window of opportunity closes or a window of vulnerability opens.

All of these features, reinforced by the possibility of uncertain control over a multitude of local actors (e.g., oil companies, fishermen, scientists, maritime law enforcement agencies, local governments, and the military) can explain to a great extent why Beijing, among many assertive actors, seems prone to a particularly strong form of assertive and at times unpredictable behavior. That said, it is important to keep in mind that Beijing makes a strong distinction between civilian and military instruments in addressing territorial disputes. Although the military usually serves as a (often distant) backstop for the actions of civilian maritime agencies, China's "gray-hulled" naval ships do not become directly involved in disputes. For the Chinese, such involvement stands as a *de facto* red line for both sides.

How does China demonstrate and enforce its maritime territorial claims? What role does the PLA Navy play in China's approach to its maritime conflicts? How does that differ from the role of Chinese maritime law enforcement agencies?

To enforce its claims, Beijing primarily employs a growing number of non-military naval ships and some aircraft variously attached to its so-called Five Dragons. These include the Border Control Department's China Maritime Police, the Maritime Safety Administration, the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command or FLEC (under the Fisheries Administration

Bureau), and the General Administration of Customs and the State Oceanic Administration (particularly its China Maritime Surveillance agency, or CMS). Among these entities, the FLEC and CMS possess the most vessels, with around forty over 1,000 tons. A small minority of these vessels are apparently armed with heavy machine guns. However, both agencies have also reportedly received a few decommissioned warships. Overall, the CMS, the most capable enforcement entity regarding maritime issues, intends to add 36 new ships in the 600-, 1,000-, and 1,500-ton category by 2015.

These ships undertake a variety of operations, including patrolling, exercising, escorting fishing fleets, and responding to perceived violations of claimed territories and waters under Chinese authority.

In addition, China's large fleet of fishing vessels often serves to demonstrate China's claim to maritime areas by operating in disputed waters. These fishing vessels for the most part operate seasonally and apparently not always under the control of a coordinating agency.

The PLA Navy (PLAN) does not take a direct role in enforcing China's maritime territorial claims. As indicated above, Beijing draws a strong line between civilian and military entities in managing such claims, with the former "white-hulled" vessels of the CMS and FLEC playing the lead role. PLAN warships at times provide "stand-off" support during actions that could escalate. However, the overall intent is to avoid militarizing disputes, unless of course an opponent employs military assets. In such a case, Beijing will almost certainly respond similarly, in a classic "tit-for-tat" manner.

Some PLAN vessels have been involved in joint civilian-military maritime exercises in the vicinity of disputed areas, although these activities often focus on non-belligerent missions such as salvage or search and rescue.

How has China's approach to the East and South China Seas disputes changed in recent years? When did that change in approach take place, and why did it take place? How, if at all, has it changed since the "Fifth Generation" of Chinese leaders assumed power?

Since approximately 2007, Beijing has undertaken a variety of greater actions to reinforce and assert its claims, including increases in the numbers of vessels and frequency of patrols and training exercises, the creation of new administrative entities and the elevation of existing entities, the announcement of parcels for development in disputed waters, the cutting of seismic towed arrays by another claimant, efforts to create a new status quo in specific cases, by taking control of one land feature (Scarborough Shoal) and undertaking sustained incursions into the nearby airspace and waters of a disputed group of islands (Senkaku/Diaoyu islands), and a variety of diplomatic and not-so-diplomatic actions, from demarches to the submission of formal explanations or claims to international bodies and the leveling of threats or warnings against foreign oil companies. This general pattern of increased activity has occurred in ebbs and flows, with particularly intense periods in 2008, spring 2011, spring/summer 2012, and at present, over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The primary cause of most (but not all) of China's increased activity has been the actions of other claimants, combined with Beijing's increased overall capacity to place assets in

disputed areas. As Taylor Fravel, myself, and other analysts have pointed out, China's more assertive actions have been part of an interactive dynamic among several claimants (including most notably Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan, in addition to China).

For example, Fravel states:

> [China's] diplomatic demarches to foreign oil companies in 2006 and 2007….responded to increased Vietnamese exploration in waters that China claims. Likewise, the dramatic increase in the detention of Vietnamese fishing boats in 2009 coincides with an increased presence of Vietnamese ships in the waters around the Paracels, often within the territorial seas that China claims around these islands. The June 2012 announcement by CNOOC of new blocks in disputed parts of the South China Sea was likely a response to Vietnam's maritime law. The June 2012 bureaucratic elevation of "Sansha" from county to a prefectural-level city was also likely a response to what China viewed as Philippine and Vietnamese efforts to strengthen their own claims.
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> Source: Taylor Fravel, "Growing Competition in the South China Sea," unpublished paper.

The attached table, also supplied by Fravel, lists the major actions taken by China, Vietnam, and the Philippines in the South China Sea in the past few years, confirming the interactivity of territorial disputes and the reactive nature of assertive policies by claimant states.

Although usually intended as a kind of "tit-for-tat" response, as indicated above, in some instances Beijing has responded in a deliberately escalatory manner, seeking to create a new status quo in its favor or to undertake a more muscular or aggressive action in order to convey resolve and deter further escalations by others. Examples of such behavior include the cable cutting incident in May 2011, the seizure of Scarborough Shoal in April 2012, the announcement of exploration blocks in June 2012, and the initiation of regular incursions into the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands region in October 2012.

Some analysts believe that these and other actions are part of an overall deliberate Chinese strategy to utilize perceived provocations in order to justify pre-planned actions to change the status quo. This suggests that Beijing might even create incidents to strengthen its claims. However, this interpretation of Beijing's behavior lacks conclusive evidence and thus remains a hypothesis at best. An equally plausible alternative explanation is that China largely reacts to perceived attempts by others (e.g., Manila and Tokyo) to alter the status quo by itself establishing a new status quo.

In any event, it is important to keep in mind that, at least in the South China Sea, as Fravel observes, "…the level of tension…has not yet reached the instability that the region witnessed from 1988 to 1995. … In particular, the dispute has not yet been militarized. Claimants have not resorted to the use of force and the threat of force has usually been indirect."

Speculation abounds concerning the impact of Xi Jinping and the new leadership on the above dynamic. It is possible that Xi has exerted a major influence on China's handling of both the Scarborough Shoal and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands incidents. Since at least mid-2012, he apparently has served as the major senior member of two bodies, one formed to deal with

maritime security issues in general and the other the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands crisis in particular. According to some analysts, Xi personally approved a step-by-step plan to intensify pressure on Japan, thereby rejecting a more moderate approach advocated by some in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Others point to Xi's past experience with the PLA, his famous PLA wife (a well-known singer of patriotic songs), his espousal of the "China Dream" concept that allegedly envisions a strong nation with a strong military, and his high-profile visits to military facilities to support the notion that the new leadership will employ a far more muscular, military-oriented foreign policy, especially toward maritime and other sovereignty disputes. At present, however, this general conclusion is largely speculative, another interesting hypothesis that awaits more conclusive evidence.

How does China's approach to the East China Sea dispute differ from its approach to the South China Sea dispute?

As indicated above, in both the Scarborough Shoal and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands incidents, Beijing responded to a perceived effort to violate an existing status quo by establishing a new status quo. In the former, the Philippines was seen to be altering its past approach by dispatching a naval warship to the area and by apparently arresting Chinese fishermen inside the shoal. This was viewed as part of a broader pattern of escalatory behavior undertaken by Manila in previous months. In the latter, Tokyo was perceived as altering the sovereignty status of the islands by purchasing three of them from private owners. In addition, China's overall stance toward claimed territories in both areas has been broadly similar, involving "indisputable" assertions of sovereign authority. Also, in enforcing its claim, China has employed primarily civilian assets in both cases, as described above.

That said, in the case of its East China Sea dispute with Japan, Beijing obviously is dealing with a more formidable opponent that enjoys close political and military ties (and a nearby presence) with Washington. In the case of the South China Sea disputes, Beijing is facing several opponents with vastly weaker capabilities and somewhat differing approaches. One might think that these differences would lead Beijing to display greater caution in its approach to Tokyo. To some extent, this is probably the case. For example, it is highly unlikely that Beijing will attempt to forcibly seize the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands absent a major perceived provocation by Tokyo (and even then, the likelihood of such an action is not guaranteed). Moreover, Beijing has apparently closely controlled its incursions near the islands and avoided more provocative behavior, such as an attempt to place personnel on any of the islands.

At the same time, Beijing's "restraint" is counterbalanced, in the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands crisis, by the depth of nationalist antipathy toward Japan felt by many Chinese. This arguably inclines Beijing toward a level of inflammatory rhetoric and other "tough" verbal postures generally not evident in the case of South China Sea disputes. This presents a greater possibility of Beijing falling into a more dangerous "commitment trap" vis-à-vis Japan in which it issues warnings or takes a stance from which it is loath to retreat.

What are the prospects for a resolution of the East China Sea and South China Sea conflicts? Discuss possible roles for international institutions, such as the UN, and regional institutions, such as ASEAN.

The prospects over the short- to medium- term are not good. The combination of absolutist stances on sovereignty, intense nationalism, high public awareness, potentially major economic incentives, increasing civilian and military capabilities among the claimants, strategic calculations, and the absence of either clear and binding legal or other procedures or a supra-national authority to arbitrate or enforce disputes combine to prevent any significant movement toward any "resolution." That said, it is conceivably possible to establish a more stable basis for mediating and hence controlling disputes among the claimants. All of the actors involved have an incentive to prevent an intense arms race or escalating pattern of conflict over disputed maritime territories. In the case of China, such outcomes would threaten its overall "peace and development" strategy and reinforce the notion that it is unwilling to develop or utilize legal procedures or norms to resolve differences with its neighbors.

International institutions such as the UN or ASEAN might play a greater role in encouraging a binding code of conduct or similar set of procedures or confidence building measures. However, this would require significant agreement among all the claimants to utilize such an approach. Unfortunately, such unanimity does not exist, either within the ASEAN membership or between China and other claimants. Although committed to a bilateral approach in negotiating any resolution of the conflicting territorial claims, Beijing is apparently willing to develop at some point a binding code of conduct to maintain stability until a resolution is possible. Little progress has occurred in this effort, however, largely because of differences within ASEAN and, more importantly, due to Beijing's insistence that conditions for a binding code are "not ripe," for a variety of reasons. Unless Beijing becomes convinced that moving toward a binding code of conduct is preferable to the unstable status quo, progress will remain unlikely.

What roles should the U.S. play in reaching resolutions?

Several U.S. interests are engaged on this issue, including the maintenance of a peaceful security environment in Asia, the encouragement of rule of law and the resolution of inter-state disputes through negotiation, and the maintenance of freedom of navigation. In protecting these interests, the U.S. also has an interest in supporting its allies while avoiding actions that serve to exacerbate security competition and promote the emergence of a zero-sum security relationship with China. Advancing all of these interests simultaneously poses a significant challenge, especially during a period when Washington's capacity to influence events could be declining.

Obviously, Washington should do its utmost to encourage and support the existing effort to develop a binding code of conduct upon which all parties can agree. To do this, it needs to work with all sides to develop a process whereby China's reservations and ASEAN's differences can be addressed and resolved step by step. In this effort, it should avoid taking positions that appear to place it on one side or the other, as it has sometimes done in the past. In particular, attempts to encourage ASEAN states to develop greater unity should be undertaken simultaneously with any interactions with China, in order to avoid the impression that Washington is focused on strengthening ASEAN's ability to confront

Beijing as a bloc. Washington must also guard against the natural tendency of its allies to use its involvement in these disputes to elicit the kind of support that could exacerbate tensions or further polarization. U.S. officials are aware of these issues, but intention and action are not the same thing.

All of this will require sustained diplomacy through close, personal interactions with all parties, as opposed to occasional statements and meetings conducted on a selective basis. In general, Washington should strive to keep a low public profile while working energetically on the private level.

In addition to efforts aimed at avoiding future incidents, Washington should also encourage the joint development of resources in disputed areas, possibly through the establishment of new entities and processes. For example, it should consider supporting the formation of a type of multi-national joint venture with both legal and commercial elements, as recently advocated by Parag Khanna and John Gilman. As they state:

> This special purpose vehicle would adjudicate the exploration rights of ships registered and recognized by it in order to continue to guarantee freedom of navigation and passage for shipping, while also respecting environmental concerns with respect to economic development. Existing occupations of territories would not be forcibly overturned, but the sovereignty question would be shelved for the time being without recognizing or dismissing the claims of the current parties to the dispute.
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> Source: Parag Khanna and John Gilman, CNN Opinion, November 13, 2012, on http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/13/opinion/khanna-south-china-sea-dispute

There is no quick fix or silver bullet for resolving these complex and long-standing maritime disputes. It will require patience, sustained effort, and a very deft hand on the part of the United States. Moreover, in all of its efforts, Washington should strive to separate as much as possible these disputes from the larger question of its evolving strategic relationship with China. Many members of the media and outside analysts make such connections on a regular basis, by viewing each American or Chinese action with regard to the disputes as an indicator of alleged U.S. containment of China, Beijing's presumed search for regional preeminence, or an effort to create exclusionary spheres of influence. While the manner in which both Washington and Beijing address the disputes can certainly have an effect on their larger strategic relationship, each maritime incident or action should not be regarded as a measure of the above larger strategic issues. Ultimately, these disputes are about Asian nationalism and historical memories, not geostrategy, which should instill considerable caution among U.S. policymakers.

Major Actions in the South China Sea (Supplied by Taylor Fravel)

- 2006-2007: Vietnam increases offshore petroleum exploration projects in waters claimed by China.
- 2006: The State Oceanographic Administration's Marine Surveillance force begins regular patrols in the South China Sea.
- 2007-2008: China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues demarches and threats against foreign oil companies investing in Vietnam.
- January 2007: The Fourth Plenum of the Vietnam Communist Party's Central Committee adopts a resolution mandating the development of a national 'Maritime Strategy Towards the Year 2020.' The strategy envisions that maritime industries, especially fishing and petroleum, would account for 55 percent of GDP in 2020, up from 48 percent in 2005.
- April 2007: Vietnam establishes one township and two communes in the Truong Sa (Spratly Island) District that administers the Spratly Islands
- November 2007: The Philippine legislature begins debate on an archipelagic baselines law, which includes 53 features from the Spratlys as part of the Philippine archipelago.
- 2008-2009: The number of Vietnamese fishing boats operating near the Paracels increases significantly. China's Bureau of Fisheries Administration detains Vietnamese fishermen operating near the Paracel Islands.
- June 2008: China's 2004 joint seismic survey agreement with the Philippines and Vietnam expires and is not renewed.
- Nov 2008: A task force from the PLAN's South Sea Fleet conducts circumnavigation exercise in the South China Sea.
- February 2009: The Philippine legislature passes an archipelagic baseline law, which included claims to some of the Spratlys. The bill is signed into law in March 2009.
- March 2009: Malaysian Prime Minister Badawi makes a public visit to Swallow Reef, a feature in the South China occupied by Malaysia.
- May 2009: Vietnam independently and with Malaysia submit claims to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf for extended continental shelves in the South China Sea
- May 2009: The Philippines objects to China's claims to the UN
- May 2009: China's submits a map with the "nine-dashed line" to the UN Commission on Limits of the Continental Shelf.
- May 2009: China expands the duration of its annual fishing ban about 12 degrees north in the South China Sea. China links patrols by the Bureau of Fisheries Administration with its claims in the South China Sea.
- November 2009: Vietnam's Foreign Ministry convenes a large international academic conference on the South China Sea to launch its campaign to "internationalize" the dispute.
- January 2010: Vietnam assumes the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN and begins a

public effort to build consensus within ASEAN on the South China Sea and to engage the major powers, especially the United States.

- March 2010: The Vietnamese Prime Minister makes a public visit to one of the Vietnamese-held Spratly Islands.
- March 2010: A task Force from the PLAN's North Sea Fleet conducts training exercises in the South China Sea
- April 2010: Approximately 20 Vietnamese fishing and coast guard vessels surround a Chinese Bureau of Fisheries Administration patrol vessel.
- July 2010: The PLAN conducts an exercise held in the northern portion of the South China Sea with vessels from each of the three fleets in the Chinese navy.
- November 2010: Vietnam's Foreign Ministry convenes a second international academic conference on the South China Sea
- November 2010: The PLAN's South Sea Fleet conducts an amphibious assault exercise in the northern part of the South China Sea
- February 2011: The Philippines begins a seismic survey in the waters near Reed Bank.
- March 2011: MSF boats maneuver aggressively around Philippine seismic survey vessel operating at Reed Bank.
- March 2011: Vietnam begins seismic surveys in waters claimed by China.
- April 2011: The Philippines submits a *note verbale* to the UN contesting in detail China's claims to territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction.
- May 2011: A MSF vessel severs the towed cable of a Vietnamese seismic survey boat off the coast of central Vietnam in waters China claims
- June 2011: A Chinese fishing boat becomes entangled in the towed cable of a Vietnamese seismic survey vessel
- June 2011: Vietnam holds a live-fire naval exercise in the South China Sea.
- June 2011: Five legislators from the Philippines make high profile visit to Thitu Island held by the Philippines in the Spratly Islands.
- June 2011: Philippines unveils new plan to resolve disputes in the South China, known as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, Friendship and Cooperation. (ZoPFFC), that would limit claims to maritime jurisdiction from contested islands.
- June 2011: Calls grow in the Philippines for inclusion of contested land features in the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States
- June 2011: The Philippines names the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea.
- November 2011: Vietnam's Foreign Ministry hosts a third international academic conference on the South China Sea.
- November 2011: Philippines pushes at its ZoPFFC at the East Asian Summit
- February 2012: The Philippine pushes for ASEAN to negotiate a code of conduct before entering into any talks with China.
- March 2012: The Philippines and Vietnam reach an agreement to hold joint patrols

in a portion of the Spratly Island.

- April 2012: The Philippines moves to arrest Chinese fishermen in Scarborough. China dispatches MSF and Fisheries Administration vessels to the shoal and quarantines fruit imports from the Philippines.
- June 2012: Vietnam begins to use advanced Su-27 fighter aircraft to patrol the skies over the South China Sea.
- June 2012: Vietnam's National Legislature passes a Maritime Law that reiterates its claims to sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands.
- June 2012: China's State Council upgrades the administrative status of the Paracels and Spratlys from county to prefectural-level city named Sansha.
- June 2012: CNOOC invites bids for exploration blocks located within Vietnam's 200nm EEZ.
- June 2012: China's Ministry of Defense announces that China has already established a "combat-ready" patrol system in the South China Sea.
- June 2012: Four MSF ships conduct patrol in the Spratlys
- July 2012: A large fishing fleet from Hainan conducts a high profile trip to the Spratly Islands.
- July 2012: The Sansha military garrison is established in Sansha city.