



China and Its Neighbors

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In 2011, as in 2010 and previous years, much will continue to be written about the ways in which China and its Northeast and Southeast Asian neighbors are grappling with overlapping claims for islands and coastal/continental shelf zones in waters that run from the Sea of Japan down to the South China Sea. At stake is access to or control of various economic riches (fisheries and oil & gas fields), security for commercial shipping and in the case of some countries the right to maintain or establish defensive maritime positions.

A "declaration of conduct" between the Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN) and China, under which all parties pledge to exercise restraint in disputed waters, and a handful of bilateral agreements, such as the China-Japan agreement to make the East China Sea a "Sea of Peace, Cooperation and Friendship," have contributed to peaceful negotiations over claims and a few resolutions.

But there have been incidents at sea involving the use of force and arrests to enforce claims. China and Vietnam have arrested each other's nationals over disputed fishing grounds. In the fall, a collision between a Chinese fishing boat and two Japanese coast guard vessels near the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands, leading to the arrest and later release of the Chinese boat captain and his crew, made headlines.

At the level of extreme theoretical danger, Japan's Asahi newspaper ran a Dec. 31 story titled "[China's scenario to seize isles in South China Sea](#)," which used anonymous sources to report that China's military "has drawn up an internal tactical plan to seize control of islands in the South China Sea that are now under the effective control of other nations." The story noted that "Japan could also be affected because of the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands."

Less theoretical are the recent large-scale combined naval, air, troop landing and cyber war exercises held by the US and South Korea and the US and Japan in or near contested waters. The reasons given for the exercises included the threat posed by North Korea, which has inconsequential naval and air force capabilities (and troop strength that while sizeable is outmatched by better equipped US-South Korean ground forces), and the need to maintain stability in Asia.

One measure of the need for stability, unusual in that it applies less to what is commonly thought of as Asia and more to the US, was provided by US defense secretary Robert Gates, who [told](#) a May 31, 2008 Singapore gathering of pan-Asian senior security officials that the US is a "resident power" in Asia. "By that term," he explained, "there is sovereign American territory in the western Pacific, from the Aleutian Islands all the way down to Guam."

Also less theoretical is talks between the US, South Korea and Japan that could lead to a trilateral security alliance. In a Dec. 28 [interview](#) with the Asahi, Admiral Robert Willard, commander of US Pacific Command, confirmed that high-level discussions are underway among defense and ministerial officials to bring the "three nations' security establishments . . . more closely together."

For some reason, Willard's comments about the trilateral alliance formation did not travel beyond the Asahi interview. Instead, his remarks about the "initial operational capability" of a Chinese aircraft-carrier killer missile created much media excitement. However, most of the follow-up reporting failed to note Willard's crucial elaboration that China would probably put the killer missile through several more years of testing, including the first over-water tests.

Finally, what about China's land-based as opposed to its maritime relations with its neighbors, something that has perhaps received less attention over the last year or two (leaving aside North Korea)? Focusing on Southeast Asia, Australian National University professor Geoff Wade provides an excellent, up-to-date 16-page look at the burgeoning economic and infrastructure (roads, high-speed rail, ports) linkages between China (specifically, the two Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi) Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar. As Geoff writes:

The mainland Southeast Asian states together with China are now forming a Greater Mekong Region, and the links being developed will override those existing and planned among ASEAN states. ASEAN is indeed dividing. Are these changes simply a reflection of the geographic proximity of the mainland states to China, or a manifestation of a long tradition among Chinese states to keep neighbouring polities either divided from each or incorporated within the Chinese polity?

What does this mean for individual Southeast Asian countries? For some, it's a case of China's rising tide lifting boats. On the other hand, questions of economic independence arise, for as Geoff writes about Vietnam:

The degree to which Chinese interests are gaining control over most of the upstream industrial sectors in Vietnam is confirmed by Vietnamese ministerial estimates which claim that about 90 percent of all engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contracts in Vietnamese projects are being won by Chinese firms. How does this augur for the independence of the Vietnamese economy?

