

Understanding the World Order Contest in the South China Sea

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Volume 19, numéro 2, fall 1999

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_02re04

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Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Johnson, S. S. (1999). Understanding the World Order Contest in the South China Sea. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(2), 187–193.

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Catley, Bob, and Makmur Keliat. *Spratlys: The Dispute in the South China Sea*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1997.

Ellings, Richard J., and Sheldon W. Simon, eds. *Southeast Asian Security in the New Millennium*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996.

Zhao, Suisheng. *Power Competition in East Asia: From the Old Chinese World Order to Post-Cold War Regional Multipolarity*. New York: St. Martin's, 1997.

Until recently, few people would have thought that a cluster of islands, heretofore little more than a hazard to navigation and with no commercial value but for bird poop, would become a central issue defining the New World Order. This irony is compounded by the fact that the potential conflict lies in the middle of what has become the most successful region in the developing world. Any throwback to a military expedient would seriously set back the emergence of the new economic order. All the players well understand what is at stake. Yet the disputes over the Spratly Islands seem to defy resolution.

The Modern European or Westphalian world system posits that the world is made up of equal and sovereign states based upon the assumptions that the world had unlimited resources and that nations could exploit these resources through colonial expansion. The system has been maintained by a military balance of power which evolved into a bipolar world system but collapsed with the end of the Cold War. We currently enjoy a Pax Americana, in which the US is the dominant military power. However, it can be argued that world order issues are no longer amenable to military solution. Natural factors, such as environmental and population limitations, are at work thus presenting global issues that require a new order wherein nations must surrender their sovereignty and cooperate through multilateral negotiations, international organizations and the rule of law.

The Spratly Islands dispute presents a complex issue that requires understanding on several dimensions. There is no single work I can recommend that adequately details the issue within its more general context. However, together, the three works discussed here present an excellent package with little overlap and little disagreement. Suisheng Zhao provides us with a historical overview to focus international relations theory on the evolving world order in Asia. Richard J. Ellings and Sheldon W. Simon focus this overview with a country-by-country analysis of the post-Cold War security order in Southeast Asia. And Bob Catley and Makmur Keliat further focus on the issue itself.

With *Power Competition in East Asia: From the Old Chinese World Order to Post-Cold War Regional Multipolarity*, Suisheng Zhao presents a readable and comprehensive analysis of the history of the changing world systems in East Asia. Zhao seems rather comfortable with the neorealist approach and does not pretend to develop another theoretical perspective or a distinctive conceptual framework of international relations. With this neorealist framework, he examines power on three dimensions: military, economic and moral.

In the Chinese world order, China was, by all measures, the Middle Kingdom, at the center of the world, between heaven and earth, with the Mandate of Heaven bestowed upon the emperor and a superior military. China was surrounded by the inferior peoples of inner Asia (including those in Southeast Asia) who paid tribute and the uncivilized barbarians beyond. Much like Chinese society, the Chinese world order was hierarchical, anti-egalitarian, and closed to that part of the world that did not accept the concept of Sinocentrism and the assumption of Chinese superiority. The system itself was manifested in a rather complex tribute system which, in essence, provided the framework for all the international relations in Asia.

This system continued without challenge in Asia for centuries, until it was confronted by the barbarians at the gate. As the Europeans arrived, the tributary system gave way to the Guangzhou (Canton) trade, a short-lived compromise between the two world systems. China's transition from the tribute system to a treaty system began with the Opium Wars and ended in the first decade of the twentieth century with the fall of the Ch'ing Dynasty.

At the same time that China was resisting the European system, Japan viewed this system as liberating from the Sinocentric world system and was embracing everything the West had to offer. Shortly after the Opium Wars marked the beginning of the decline of the Chinese world order, Commodore Perry's black ships "opened up" Japan, marking the beginning of the end of the feudal Japanese system. In relatively short order, the Japanese had entered into treaties with Western powers and engaged and defeated China (1894-95) to become an Asian power; and Russia (1904-05) to become an international power. Japan began to consider itself at the center of a new Asian order the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. This new order, in essence, required the elimination of the European colonial system, and established the inevitability of the Pacific War, and eventually the end of Japan as a military power.

When the dust settled from the devastation of the Second World War, the US and the Soviet Union emerged as two opposing military superpowers. Although the horror of Hiroshima rendered traditional or total war immoral if not obsolete, several low-level conflicts erupted in the developing world and the US focused its attention on the containment of communism. In Asia, the growth of China as an independent regional military power created a strategic triangular balance of power which would continue throughout the Cold War. As China was developing militarily, Japan, with US military assurance, was developing economically to emerge as the regional economic power. And economics had begun to emerge as the primary dimension of power competition in Asia.

With the end of the Cold War, the Western powers could afford to divert some of their energies to the moral dimension of world order. Issues such as human rights and the environment have been internationalized and are redefining the limits of both unlimited growth and sovereignty. And while human rights issues are considered a matter of Western pressure, and colonial memories cause resistance on the grounds of internal sovereignty, environmental issues are beginning to be considered a matter of regional security. The fact is that none of these issues will go away. And as they become internationalized, they will require international solutions. As Asia seeks solutions, Zhao

observes the region's evolution toward multilateralism with the production of new transnational loyalties, ". . . that will change the state system and make non-state actors and international organizations as important as state actors." (p. 11)

Although Zhao presents a good background to understanding the historical dynamics behind the contest in the South China Sea, he mentions the dispute only in passing. "The dispute between China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia over the Spratly islands continued in the 1990s, which makes it clear that old-fashioned territorial disputes linger in the new age of post-Cold War era." (p. 184) The scope of his book is largely confined to the Northeast Asian perspective and concentrates on major events involving China and Japan, the two most important regional powers. Any discussion of the Western powers or the events that took place in Southeast Asia are presented within the context of Northeast Asian international relations. The student will have to look elsewhere to be able to understand world order dynamics as they apply to Southeast Asia.

As the title suggests, in *Southeast Asian Security in the New Millennium* Richard J. Ellings and Sheldon W. Simon present a well edited anthology of eight essays that focus on post-Cold War security issues in Southeast Asia. Each of the well-qualified contributors present their own different perspective both in geographic area and in discipline. In the first chapter, Simon picks up where Zhao leaves off by addressing the dynamics of multilateralism and the post-Cold War order in Southeast Asia, and ". . . argues that as regional multilateralism matures and the nations in Asia become increasingly reliant on each other as sources of trade and investment, the United States will find itself marginalized and unable to use trade as leverage to pursue its interests." (p. 6) It is generally accepted that the diminishing role of the United States is inevitable. But there is also a consensus that US military presence is necessary to maintain regional security. Indeed, there is an overriding theme addressing the current import of the US military presence and the problematic situation that will be exacerbated as that presence diminishes. Again there is a consensus that China is emerging as the key regional actor.

Karl W. Eikenberry's essay "China's Challenge to Asia-Pacific Regional Stability" presents the reader with an objective military perspective of China's abilities to threaten regional stability. His conclusions are both reassuring and disturbing. He notes that in terms of absolute power it will be several decades before China could achieve superpower status and that China's military doctrine is defensive and does not appear to have global ambitions. On the other hand, China's military is expanding its capabilities on all dimensions, well beyond what would be necessary for self-defense; and the record indicates that Beijing clearly has a regional territorial agenda. Although China is fully capable of self-defense and has shown a willingness to deploy its military in pursuit of its regional objectives, China's ability to project power beyond its borders diminishes with distance.

However, China does not stand alone as an emerging regional power. In his essay, "Japan's Emerging Strategy in Asia," Kenneth B. Pyle examines how post-Cold War dynamics have forced Japan into an uncomfortable new leadership role in the region. During the Cold War, Japan had allied itself, for both security and profit with the US, but

at the same time, through trade and aid, its economy has become an important part of the world economic order. "What began to emerge was a series of policies to promote a regional division of labor under quiet Japanese leadership -- a strategy that sought to lay the bases for a soft, region wide integration of economies under Japanese leadership." (p. 131) On the other hand, Japan left a strong legacy of distrust in Southeast Asia as a result of the Pacific War. Thus it has been imperative that Japan continue to assure its neighbors that it has no intention of becoming a military power and to reach out with cultural and aid programs. Finally, Japan can more easily play a political role by working through regional and international organizations.

The Southeast Asian nations' perspectives are presented in essays by Donald K. Emmerson (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) Clark D. Neher (Thailand and the Philippines) and William S. Turley (Vietnam). And it is obvious that these countries present different perspectives and priorities. Yet they are caught up in the same issues and are subject to the same global dynamics, the most obvious of which is the reduction of US military presence. None of the Southeast Asian nations are capable of resisting China if it chooses to fill the vacuum the US will leave behind. And all are apprehensive as to Chinese intentions. Not only do they have a long history of paying tribute to China, some such as the Vietnamese, have been actively resisting Chinese domination for millennia.

While the Ellings and Simon work addresses overall security issues and US policy, Bob Catley and Makmur Keliat's *Spratlys: The Dispute in the South China Sea* brings the facts, issues and concepts set forth in the other works to bear upon the issue itself. The collapse of the Chinese world order left the islands largely abandoned, without any nation exercising effective control over them. However, before World War II, some of the islands were occupied at various times by the British and French and during the war by the Japanese, who abandoned the islands without ceding them to any other nation. Since the end of the war, China (and Taiwan) have claimed the territory on the principle of first discovery; Vietnam has claimed all of the islands based on the earlier French claim and the principle of effective occupation; the Philippines claims to have discovered some of the islands on the grounds that they were *terra nullius* (land belonging to no nation); and Malaysia and Brunei claim those islands that fall within what they define as their continental shelf. The complexity of the historical and legal claims led the authors to conclude that ". . . an understanding of the dispute could be better reached if it were based on an analysis of contemporary power politics rather than on historical and legal arguments advanced by each of the claimants." (p. 12)

The islands themselves are little more than a collection of rocks, reefs, atolls and islands located at the Southeast Asian corner of the South China Sea which until recently were of dubious worth. However, since the adoption of the 1982 UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS III) the islands have assumed a great value. UNCLOS III established 200-mile EEZs (economic exclusion zones) permitting the coastal states the right to exploit the resources out to 200 miles of their shorelines. Each of the Spratly Islands are within 200 miles of another; together they provide a vast area to be exploited by its sovereign. Unfortunately, UNCLOS III did not provide for a legal means of resolving those disputes

that would arise within these newly acquired territorial waters. In addition to the invaluable fishing rights, there are potentially vast reserves of oil and natural gas under the seabed -- priceless commodities to the energy-poor countries of the region.

As substantial as these economic concerns are, they pale when compared to those on the geopolitical dimension. Indeed, the strategic import is incalculable. The islands are subject to the maritime jurisdiction claims of adjacent coastal states, and straddle the sea lanes of communication to East Asia and North America from points west. China's claim would cause Vietnam to be encircled by a traditional enemy, sever communications between East and West Malaysia as well as among the Philippine islands. Japan has substantial fishing and trading interests in the region and a heavy dependence on the oil flow through the South China Sea from the Middle East, and, therefore could not be expected to stand aloof as a disinterested party. Nor could the US -- which has no formal position on the issue except that it be resolved by peaceful means -- be expected to allow any nation to inhibit the freedom of navigation on the high seas.

The Southeast Asian nations are, as they have been, caught in the middle. During the Cold War, Thailand felt threatened by communist expansion from Indochina, and the other Southeast Asian nations, especially Malaysia and the Philippines, were seriously concerned with the threat of internal rebellion brought on by their weak economies. In order to counter these threats, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed. As long as the US maintained a military presence in the region, ASEAN could claim that its purpose was to promote regional solidarity through development and cooperation. Indeed, the rapid growth of the nations' economies established ASEAN as the early example of a successful regional organization.

From the security perspective, ASEAN's "victory" was complete when its former enemy became a member. Now, with Vietnam as a member, they are faced with a new challenge -- the prospect that the US no longer has an ideological commitment to the region and may very well withdraw its naval forces. This concern led to the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to address regional security issues. These periodic discussions include non-member states such as the US and China as Dialogue Partners. ASEAN's security function has come out of the closet.

With the formal introduction of a security agenda, the ASEAN nations may be taking the first of the final steps toward a collective self-sufficiency. The next step would be to overcome their mutual distrust. Once that is conquered, their first hurdle will be the resolution of the Spratly Islands claims. Unfortunately, China remains a question mark and until China makes some positive gestures, the US Navy will continue to be a vital presence in the South China Sea. If it were not for the American presence, policy and power, China could realize its claim through force of arms. As it is, China will try to reduce ASEAN's apprehensions and continue to bide its time. If China can be patient, it may just become the de facto ruler of the South China Sea.

In response, the Southeast Asian claimants have adopted two-pronged policies in approaching the issue. On the military side they are all building their air and naval forces

and redoubling their efforts to occupy as many of the islands as they can. On the diplomatic side, they are trying to "internationalize" the issue, that is, to promote multilateral negotiations and raise the subject in international organizations. Unfortunately, China has resisted all efforts at internationalization and continues to insist on bilateral negotiations.

Catly and Keliat address the changing world order in terms of realist, liberal and leftist perspectives. The realist model is rather like the Westphalian system wherein each nation pursues its own interests. Conflict within this system is inevitable as national interests overlap. And the leftist or communist model has been pretty much discredited. The authors posit that the US has been consistent in a policy that pursued an ". . . ideal of a liberal world order which rested on the pillars of free trade, national self-determination, and multilateral political action through international organizations clustered around the newly formed United Nations." (p. 174) This system is based on the assumptions that economic growth would promote democratic political systems; and that as countries become more comfortable with each other and have something to lose through armed conflict, the prospect of international war is reduced.

Of course, these assumptions might be called to question in light of China's rapid economic growth and stubborn resistance to democratic reforms. Nonetheless, as China continues to feel prosperous, we might expect the regime to be subjected to internal pressures to continue. In addition, as the issue receives international attention, China may feel external pressures from the threat of international repercussions if it were to resort to forcible action. On the other hand, if China can develop an elite who can realize some benefit from incorporating into the new international system, then it may be more amenable to a peaceful, multilateral solution.

Thus the US appears to have little choice but to sustain a multi-dimensional policy in the region. First, the US military/naval presence should be maintained at a level sufficient to deter aggressive action by any of the claimants. Second, the US economic presence should continue at an increasing rate to avoid being marginalized. By the same token, everything should be done to avoid marginalizing China. Thus the US should actively encourage and participate in the development of regional forums to address regional issues and do what it can to ensure China's active participation in those forums.

Southeast Asia is at a crossroad. It can take a leadership role for the Third World and set the example for progress. Or it can fall into a morass of destructive disputes. There are but three basic approaches to the resolution of international disputes: the rule of law, force of arms and diplomacy. There is no getting around the difficulty of the Spratly issue. The nation with the most outrageous claims has the biggest guns. We cannot count on the international courts to intervene. And China has refused to engage in multilateral diplomacy. The area is so economically dynamic that there is a realization that large military expenditures are counterproductive. Nobody wants to go to war. The issue must eventually be resolved. But there is no resolution in sight.

It has been several years since I first addressed the Spratly issue. And there has been little change over time. There have been a few incidents, some encouraging, more disappointing, none surprising. The very fact that there is no obvious solution to this issue will ensure that the works addressed here will remain relevant for some time to come.

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