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## More Trouble in the South China Sea

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|  
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Tensions in the strategically and economically important waters of the South China Sea spiked again late last week. The Chinese Foreign Ministry [accused](#)<sup>[3]</sup> Vietnam of “gravely violating” China’s sovereignty and maritime rights when a Chinese fishing boat became entangled in cables from a Vietnamese ship that was conducting seismic surveys. Beijing’s protest followed Hanoi’s accusation that the fishing trawlers had deliberately harassed the survey vessel and interfered with its work by trying to use a device to cut the cables.

This latest incident is a reminder that the South China Sea is one of the world’s potential flashpoints for conflict. China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan all have made claims to various rights in that body of water. China’s claims are especially breathtaking, asserting an exclusive economic zone that covers well over half of the area. That position has created nasty disputes not only with those neighboring countries having rival claims but with the United States. U.S. officials fret that the assertion of such a huge exclusive economic zone is intended as a half-way house on the course to converting the South China Sea from international waters to Chinese territorial waters.

That move would have major economic implications. Experts believe that there are extensive oil and gas reserves (and possible valuable mineral deposits as well) beneath those waters. Beijing’s position also has [important strategic implications](#)<sup>[4]</sup>. Most of the crucial trade routes leading to Japan, South Korea, and other countries in East Asia run through the South China Sea. Chinese control of that body of water would give China a grip on the economic jugulars of all of those nations.

As the world’s leading maritime power, the United States is taking a growing interest in the South China Sea dispute. Last summer, the Obama administration directly injected itself into the controversy when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed a meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In that [speech](#)<sup>[5]</sup>, Clinton emphasized that Washington had an interest in the issues at stake and proposed a collective regional solution that included a U.S. mediation role.

Chinese officials interpreted her comments as a tilt toward the claims of various ASEAN

members and a hostile stance toward Beijing's position. The Chinese Foreign Ministry rather curtly stated that any U.S. involvement in the dispute, in a mediation role or otherwise, was most unwelcome.

Washington faces a dilemma with the South China Sea controversy. The United States is the quintessential maritime trading state and, by far, the world's leading naval military power. U.S. leaders have always been vigilant to challenge any actual or potential disruption of navigation rights in international waters. That position goes back to the first decades of the Republic, epitomized by the U.S. naval and marine expedition against the so-called Barbary pirates during Thomas Jefferson's administration.

On the other hand, Washington places a high priority on maintaining good relations with China—relations that are already somewhat strained because of other issues. U.S. officials face a difficult choice. To prevent further damage to the bilateral relationship, they can mute their opposition to Beijing's rather transparent power play in the South China Sea—even though that would weaken America's traditional emphasis on unimpeded maritime rights. Or they can take a strong position against China's territorial claims, even though that stance may cause the bilateral relationship to fray further. But a choice has to be made, because the South China Sea problem is not going to go away.

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