

## The Red Dragon's Archipelago

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Prior to an all-out invasion of the Taiwanese mainland—the scenario that has captured the imaginations of many pundits and policy makers—China may seek to probe how the U.S. might respond to actions against Taiwan by militarily engaging with islands held by other nations in the region.

China has become increasingly assertive about its desires to fully bring Taiwan under the PRC's control as of late, in accordance with its "One-China Principle." Increased control in the South China Sea can help China realize this goal and further establish itself as a regional hegemon—efforts that the U.S. has attempted to resist though a number of security commitments with other countries in the region. China has been ramping up its presence and control of the South China Sea, arguably since the early 1950s, but especially in the past decade. Recently, China's increased maneuvering around Taiwan's air defense identification zone has put the Taiwan issue under a microscope, and bipartisan groups of legislators in the United States are starting to reconsider America's "strategic ambiguity" established by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979.

In the latest print issue of *The American Conservative*, Ted Galen Carpenter explored how China might test the United States' commitments to defend Taiwan through taking military actions against islands the Republic of China claims as its territory.

Taking military action against small, outlying islands that Taipei claims as its own would be a bold warning to Taipei, and it would test the nature, extent, and reliability of the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan... Such a move certainly would not be without risks, but the gamble would be far less perilous than a military assault on Taiwan itself.

The options before China, according to Carpenter, are taking Taiwan's Kinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu islands or Taiwan-controlled island chains in the Paracels or Spratlys. Of these options, procuring Kinmen and Matsu with force, Carpenter argues, is more likely. They are almost completely demilitarized, compared to the Cold War when they housed numerous troops, which means victory for the PLA would be relatively swift and almost a guaranteed success. Though closer to the Taiwanese mainland, taking these two islands is less diplomatically complex compared to going to

the Spratlys or the Paracels to test the West's commitments to Taiwan's defense. For example, Taiping (Itu Aba) and the islands around it are not only claimed by Taiwan and China, but also Vietnam and the Philippines.

If the primary purpose of capturing these islands is to test the United States' resolve to keep its defense commitments to its Asian allies in the South China Sea, China does indeed have other options on the table, though some are far less likely than others. Because of the international focus currently on Taiwan, however, it's possible that China would opt for one of the following options.

In 2013, the Philippines challenged China's escalating activity in the South China Sea under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was signed in 1994. Three years later, the UNCLOS arbitration tribunal determined that China's nine-dash line, which carves out a large portion of the South China Sea that encapsulates the Spratly and Paracel island chains as Chinese-controlled waters, had "no legal basis." Furthermore, the UNCLOS tribunal found that Chinese actions against Philippine vessels and other undertakings in the region constituted violations of the Philippines' sovereignty.

China, which refused to participate in the arbitration, said the UNCLOS ruling was "null and void," and has refused to recognize it. Beijing may find it is time to further assert itself in the Spratly Islands by taking Philippine holdings, given its current position is isolated and difficult to defend. But, unlike with Taiwan, the U.S. has an explicit mutual defense treaty with the Philippines, which Biden's State Department has indicated covers the Philippines' claims to islands in the South China Sea. Despite this defense agreement, China may still find testing the Philippines—and the commitments America has made to its former territory—in a little-known island chain as more desirable than escalating conflict over Taiwan.

Another option is that China tries to make a move on smaller holdings in the Senkaku Islands, which both China and Japan declare as their own. Japan has already claimed it is militarily prepared to defend the islands if China attacks. Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi confirmed as much during an interview with CNN, stating that the Senkakus are considered Japanese national territory. For its part, the Biden administration claimed that the U.S. would intervene on behalf of Japan if a conflict over the Senkakus broke out, in line with the security agreement between the two nations.

Rather than fighting other countries over small island territories, China could also decide to just make more islands in close proximity to islands held by its neighbors. While countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines have built man-made islands in the South China Sea in the past, China began building islands on an unprecedented scale, particularly in the Spratly and Paracel Island regions, in the early part of the last decade. By 2016, China had created more land area in the South China Sea than all other countries combined, and fundamentally changed the purpose of island building when it began positioning military assets on its artificial islands.

Expanding and cementing control over the South China Sea will also increase China's control over the region's massive energy reserves. The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that at least 11 billion barrels of oil reserves (equal to the entirety of Mexico's reserves), and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas lie under the ocean floor in the South China Sea. What's more, around 40 percent of the world's liquified natural gas—not to mention \$3.37 trillion worth of trade goods—passes through the South China Sea each year. Annually, nearly 40 percent of China's total trade and 80 percent of its energy imports are shuttled through the South China Sea. Furthermore, vast numbers of other oceanic resources, such as fish and coral, can be found throughout the region.

At this point, the West is rightly preoccupied with preventing its own collapse, and will likely be grappling with domestic and civilizational issues for the rest of the century. China, on the other hand, sees great opportunity in the 21st century to not only reclaim but advance the greatness of its civilization. To prudently engage with China, the United States must take these considerations into account. Understanding the extent to which fulfilling security obligations in the South China Sea can stabilize the region, rather than overreaching and risking destabilization in China's backyard—raising the specter of World War III—is crucial to resolving the security challenges the awakened Red Dragon presents.