

Media reporting on the South China Sea dispute

Media coverage of the South China Sea dispute is weighted heavily toward US-China dynamics and obscures a richness of local and regional detail.

Few areas of the world attract more media attention currently than the South China Sea. This key maritime waterway and resource zone in the western Pacific is at the heart of rising tensions between China and the United States, who are rattling sabres more vigorously at one another than at any time since the build-up to the Korean War seventy years ago. Despite their demonstrable mutual interdependence, neither side seems willing to cooperate constructively enough to avoid the first superpower conflict of the 21st century.

This, at least, is the dominant narrative driving Western perceptions of US-China relations in east Asia. There are valid concerns arising from mutual Sino-American antagonism. Conflict is certainly possible. But there is another story of the South China Sea less commonly told outside the region. This alternative narrative pays greater attention to the claims and counter-claims of all the parties to the South China Sea dispute, in which there is more at stake than the fortunes of the US and China alone. Dominant modes of mainstream media reporting obscure important local dynamics, disguising a richly textured picture of regional constraints and opportunities.

Sovereign Data looks at the South China Sea dispute in its regional context and identifies the value of greater visibility and more detailed understanding of this complex geopolitical landscape.

Multiple actors, multiple disputes

Readers of Western media could be forgiven for thinking that South China Sea developments are a singular dispute between the US and China; a 'maritime game of chicken', to use the popular phrase.¹ On one side is an aggressive, revisionist China, with its sights set on regional, if not global hegemony. On the other, the US, concerned as much with its own decline as with China's apparent rise. Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea is about projecting regional power and denying adversaries operating space in the western Pacific. US naval activities seek to rebuff China's territorial expansion and preserve open sea lanes for the common good. These are caricatures, to be sure, but common enough in Western media. This type of framing underplays US-China bilateral security initiatives and encourages scepticism about Chinese intentions at every turn. Moreover, the binary logic of this narrative encourages audiences to think in terms of conflict, rather than cooperation. Inevitably, perhaps, thoughts turn also to the likelihood of war. For some members of the commentariat, war with China is passing from 'unthinkable' to 'inevitable'.² Is it possible to avoid the 'Thucydides Trap', pundits ask, in which the clash of a rising power (China) and a dominant power (US) must always end in 'bloodshed'?³

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Chinese manoeuvres in the South China Sea cannot be understood properly unless the US-China dynamic is considered alongside a complex set of regional relationships.

Framing the dispute as contingent on US-China relations makes it easy to ignore or actively write off other factors that provide opportunities for understanding and engagement. The International Crisis Group describes the South China Sea as the 'cockpit of geopolitics' in east Asia, such is its pivotal regional importance.⁴ Five countries — Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam — have competing territorial claims to islands in the area. Four others — Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand — also have reasons to protect their national interests in one of the world's densest concentrations of maritime trade and resource exploitation.⁵ China and its eastern and southern neighbours are the principal actors in the South China Sea dispute, not the United States, a detail that would — if only it were recognised and acknowledged — better serve American interests. To write, for example, that 'China's territorial conflicts with its neighbours have little if any consequence for American security', is misguided.⁶ If China's South China Sea strategy were geared solely towards the US, then it might be true. But the picture is more complex. China has multiple lines of strategic interaction, of which its relationship with the US is but one. Chinese manoeuvres in the South China Sea cannot be understood properly unless the US-China dynamic is considered alongside a complex set of regional relationships — and understanding these dynamics is as important for US-China relations as for the region itself.

Shaping media narratives

The point is not lost on regional players. The US-China relationship is characterised by abrasive rhetoric and accusations of mutual misrepresentation. So too are relations between China and its maritime neighbours. All state parties to the disputes in the South China Sea have an interest in shaping media narratives to their own advantage and to decry and defuse the attempts of their rivals to do the same. Of particular current interest are rising tensions between China, the emerging partnership of Vietnam and Japan, and the Philippines. All parties have marshalled selective resources and arguments to support their claims, an accusation frequently levelled at China and Japan, but less often at states like Vietnam and the Philippines.⁷

Vietnam and China are engaged in at least six long-running territorial disputes and shots have been fired in anger over several of these. Worst amongst them was the Fiery Cross incident of 1988, in which dozens of Vietnamese soldiers were killed in the disputed Spratly Islands. In May 2014, a naval confrontation escalated tensions significantly and spurred the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Vietnam is a member but China is not, to more vocal criticism of China.⁸ Vietnam is investing in a greatly expanded submarine defence capability, ostensibly part of a programme of 'modernisation' but clearly in response to the Chinese threat.⁹ Significantly, it is also building strong military ties with Japan.¹⁰ Japan has legislated recently for its biggest shift in defence posture since World War II, relaxing the constraints on its armed forces acting in collective self-defence, including in support of its allies in the South China Sea.¹¹ China has reacted angrily to the prospect of Japan once again becoming a regional military player.¹²

The Philippines have supported the Japanese position,¹³ while simultaneously backing the right of the US to exercise its navy in disputed waters.¹⁴ At the same time, it has identified China's 'deceitful rhetoric' as an obstacle to dispute resolution.¹⁵ China responded to a Philippine documentary about the South China Sea in June 2015 with the accusation that it was spreading misinformation, incitement and false impressions of victimhood.¹⁶ A short while later China warned its neighbours against 'excessive interpretations' of Chinese naval drills in the region.¹⁷ It will be interesting to see what further media play is made by both sides, now that the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague has agreed to adjudicate on the lawfulness of China's claims against the Philippines in the South China Sea.¹⁸

Regional criticism

These media representations of diplomatic to-and-fros only scratch the surface of regional politics in the South China Sea, but serve to illustrate the scope and texture of the 'dispute' in both space and time. Much Western reporting on the subject is excellent but it is often overlooked in mainstream news cycles titillated by prospects of major war rather than the finer grain of regional context. The criticism applies equally well to national media in the region. Some examples:

- In July 2015, a senior Philippine judge criticised domestic media for its lack of contextualisation of territorial claims against China, citing 'shallow coverage' as an obstacle to public comprehension of the official Philippine position.¹⁹ The implication is that Philippine media need to do more to explain both countries' claims in the area the Philippines refers to as the West Philippine Sea.
- One academic study finds that ASEAN media prioritise 'war' over 'peace' narratives in their support for Philippine claims against China.²⁰ In this respect, Philippine media have much in common with their western counterparts.
- Survey data also indicate that media narratives in the region are not always as effective as might be expected. Recent research in China, for example, suggests that although domestic audiences are swayed by belligerent discourses in mainstream and online media, and support for the use of armed force in the South China Sea remains high (46%), negotiated solutions receive even higher support (57%), and UN arbitration higher still (60%).²¹ This is an important potential corrective to dominant Western narratives of unchallenged Chinese control over political messages at home.

Outlook

China's territorial claims are against its regional neighbours, not the United States. Those competing claims are often mentioned in Western media but are less often discussed in depth, and very rarely outside the rubric of the US-China relationship. This creates a false impression of the political situation in the South China Sea, over-emphasising the centrality of the US and discounting the influence and interests of littoral states in the region. The prioritisation of the US-China conflict narrative is justified on account of these states' global importance, but it also risks being consumed by its own logic of inevitability, thereby restricting debate and polarising opinion. Perhaps most relevant for outside observers – analysts and investors among them – is that such a limited view threatens to reduce the pool of available data on everything from emerging bilateral and multilateral arrangements to their potential economic impact on local industry and trade.

Such complexity is underscored by recent developments that suggest China is willing to employ a range of tactics to press its South China Sea interests. Naval manoeuvres and environmental engineering in disputed waters are certainly headline items. So too should be the use of armed irregulars and – particularly notable – cyber warfare tactics.²² China is thought to be responsible for taking offline the website of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. What is extraordinary about this is that in a Western media climate obsessed with all things Chinese, especially as they pertain to cyber security, the attack on the court's website has received almost no mainstream media coverage.²³ China is accused of hacking into its systems to obtain an informational advantage in the case brought by the Philipines against Chinese territorial claims. Were this a US court, or if an American company or case was involved, the media would be aflame with reportage and opinion. As it stands, little external scrutiny is being applied, at least publicly. This does all parties a disservice and demonstrates a paucity of attention granted to China's neighbours. One cannot help but wonder what other details of local reporting have been elided.

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Notes

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