**[The South China Sea Is the Future of Conflict](http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/15/the-south-china-sea-is-the-future-of-conflict/)**

The 21st century's defining battleground is going to be on water.

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Europe is a landscape; East Asia a seascape. Therein lies a crucial difference between the 20th and 21st centuries. The most contested areas of the globe in the last century lay on dry land in Europe, particularly in the flat expanse that rendered the eastern and western borders of Germany artificial and exposed to the inexorable march of armies. But over the span of the decades, the demographic and economic axis of the Earth has shifted measurably to the opposite end of Eurasia, where the spaces between major population centers are overwhelmingly maritime.

Because of the way geography illuminates and sets priorities, these physical contours of East Asia augur a naval century — naval being defined here in the broad sense to include both sea and air battle formations now that they have become increasingly inextricable. Why? China, which, especially now that its land borders are more secure than at any time since the height of the Qing dynasty at the end of the 18th century, is engaged in an undeniable naval expansion. It is through sea power that China will psychologically erase two centuries of foreign transgressions on its territory — forcing every country around it to react.

Military engagements on land and at sea are vastly different, with major implications for the grand strategies needed to win — or avoid — them. Those on land enmesh civilian populations, in effect making human rights a signal element of war studies. Those at sea approach conflict as a clinical and technocratic affair, in effect reducing war to math, in marked contrast with the intellectual battles that helped define previous conflicts.

World War II was a moral struggle against fascism, the ideology responsible for the murder of tens of millions of noncombatants. The Cold War was a moral struggle against communism, an equally oppressive ideology by which the vast territories captured by the Red Army were ruled. The immediate post-Cold War period became a moral struggle against genocide in the Balkans and Central Africa, two places where ground warfare and crimes against humanity could not be separated. More recently, a moral struggle against radical Islam has drawn the United States deep into the mountainous confines of Afghanistan, where the humane treatment of millions of civilians is critical to the war’s success. In all these efforts, war and foreign policy have become subjects not only for soldiers and diplomats, but for humanists and intellectuals. Indeed, counterinsurgency represents a culmination of sorts of the union between uniformed officers and human rights experts. This is the upshot of ground war evolving into total war in the modern age.

East Asia, or more precisely the Western Pacific, which is quickly becoming the world’s new center of naval activity, presages a fundamentally different dynamic. It will likely produce relatively few moral dilemmas of the kind we have been used to in the 20th and early 21st centuries, with the remote possibility of land warfare on the Korean Peninsula as the striking exception. The Western Pacific will return military affairs to the narrow realm of defense experts. This is not merely because we are dealing with a naval realm, in which civilians are not present. It is also because of the nature of the states themselves in East Asia, which, like China, may be strongly authoritarian but in most cases are not tyrannical or deeply inhumane.

The struggle for primacy in the Western Pacific will not necessarily involve combat; much of what takes place will happen quietly and over the horizon in blank sea space, at a glacial tempo befitting the slow, steady accommodation to superior economic and military power that states have made throughout history. War is far from inevitable even if competition is a given. And if China and the United States manage the coming handoff successfully, Asia, and the world, will be a more secure, prosperous place. What could be more moral than that? Remember: It is realism in the service of the national interest — whose goal is the avoidance of war — that has saved lives over the span of history far more than humanitarian interventionism.

**EAST ASIA IS A VAST, YAWNING EXPANSE** stretching nearly from the Arctic to Antarctic — from the Kuril Islands southward to New Zealand — and characterized by a shattered array of isolated coastlines and far-flung archipelagos. Even accounting for how dramatically technology has compressed distance, the sea itself still acts as a barrier to aggression, at least to a degree that dry land does not. The sea, unlike land, creates clearly defined borders, giving it the potential to reduce conflict. Then there is speed to consider. Even the fastest warships travel comparatively slowly, 35 knots, say, reducing the chance of miscalculations and giving diplomats more hours — days, even — to reconsider decisions. Navies and air forces simply do not occupy territory the way that armies do. It is because of the seas around East Asia — the center of global manufacturing as well as rising military purchases — that the 21st century has a better chance than the 20th of avoiding great military conflagrations.

Of course, East Asia saw great military conflagrations in the 20th century, which the seas did not prevent: the Russo-Japanese War; the almost half-century of civil war in China that came with the slow collapse of the Qing dynasty; the various conquests of imperial Japan, followed by World War II in the Pacific; the Korean War; the wars in Cambodia and Laos; and the two in Vietnam involving the French and the Americans. The fact that the geography of East Asia is primarily maritime had little impact on such wars, which at their core were conflicts of national consolidation or liberation. But that age for the most part lies behind us. East Asian militaries, rather than focusing inward with low-tech armies, are focusing outward with high-tech navies and air forces.

As for the comparison between China today and Germany on the eve of World War I that many make, it is flawed: Whereas Germany was primarily a land power, owing to the geography of Europe, China will be primarily a naval power, owing to the geography of East Asia.

East Asia can be divided into two general areas: Northeast Asia, dominated by the Korean Peninsula, and Southeast Asia, dominated by the South China Sea. Northeast Asia pivots on the destiny of North Korea, an isolated, totalitarian state with dim prospects in a world governed by capitalism and electronic communication. Were North Korea to implode, Chinese, U.S., and South Korean ground forces might meet up on the peninsula’s northern half in the mother of all humanitarian interventions, even as they carve out spheres of influence for themselves. Naval issues would be secondary. But an eventual reunification of Korea would soon bring naval issues to the fore, with a Greater Korea, China, and Japan in delicate equipoise, separated by the Sea of Japan and the Yellow and Bohai seas. Yet because North Korea still exists, the Cold War phase of Northeast Asian history is not entirely over, and land power may well come to dominate the news there before sea power will.

Southeast Asia, by contrast, is already deep into the post-Cold War phase of history. Vietnam, which dominates the western shore of the South China Sea, is a capitalist juggernaut despite its political system,seeking closer military ties to the United States. China, consolidated as a dynastic state by Mao Zedong after decades of chaos and made into the world’s most dynamic economy by the liberalizations of Deng Xiaoping, is pressing outward with its navy to what it calls the "first island chain" in the Western Pacific. The Muslim behemoth of Indonesia, having endured and finally ended decades of military rule, is poised to emerge as a second India: a vibrant and stable democracy with the potential to project power by way of its growing economy. Singapore and Malaysia are also surging forward economically, in devotion to the city-state-cum-trading-state model and through varying blends of democracy and authoritarianism. The composite picture is of a cluster of states, which, with problems of domestic legitimacy and state-building behind them, are ready to advance their perceived territorial rights beyond their own shores. This outward collective push is located in the demographic cockpit of the globe, for it is in Southeast Asia, with its 615 million people, where China’s 1.3 billion people converge with the Indian subcontinent’s 1.5 billion people. And the geographical meeting place of these states, and their militaries, is maritime: the South China Sea.

The South China Sea joins the Southeast Asian states with the Western Pacific, functioning as the throatof global sea routes. Here is the center of maritime Eurasia, punctuated by the straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar. More than half the world’s annual merchant fleet tonnage passes through these choke points, and a third of all maritime traffic. The oil transported through the Strait of Malacca from the Indian Ocean, en route to East Asia through the South China Sea, is more than six times the amount that passes through the Suez Canal and 17 times the amount that transits the Panama Canal. Roughly two-thirds of South Korea’s energy supplies, nearly 60 percent of Japan’s and Taiwan’s energy supplies, and about 80 percent of China’s crude-oil imports come through the South China Sea. What’s more, the South China Sea has proven oil reserves of 7 billion barrels and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, a potentially huge bounty.

It is not only location and energy reserves that promise to give the South China Sea critical geostrategic importance, but also the coldblooded territorial disputes that have long surrounded these waters.Several disputes concern the Spratly Islands, a mini-archipelago in the South China Sea’s southeastern part. Vietnam, Taiwan, and China each claim all or most of the South China Sea, as well as all of the Spratly and Paracel island groups. In particular, Beijing asserts a historical line: It lays claim to the heart of the South China Sea in a grand loop (widely known as the "cow’s tongue") from China’s Hainan Island at the South China Sea’s northern end all the way south 1,200 miles to near Singapore and Malaysia.

The result is that all nine states that touch the South China Sea are more or less arrayed against China and therefore dependent on the United States for diplomatic and military support. These conflicting claims are likely to become even more acute as Asia’s spiraling energy demands — energy consumption is expected to [double by 2030](http://www.eia.gov/cabs/South_China_Sea/Full.html), with China accounting for half that growth — make the South China Sea the ever more central guarantor of the region’s economic strength. Already, the South China Sea has increasingly become an armed camp, as the claimants build up and modernize their navies, even as the scramble for islands and reefs in recent decades is mostly over. China has so far confiscated 12 geographical features, Taiwan one, Vietnam 25, the Philippines eight, and Malaysia five.

China’s very geography orients it in the direction of the South China Sea. China looks south toward a basin of water formed, in clockwise direction, by Taiwan, the Philippines, the island of Borneo split between Malaysia and Indonesia (as well as tiny Brunei), the Malay Peninsula divided between Malaysia and Thailand, and the long snaking coastline of Vietnam: weak states all, compared with China. Like the Caribbean Sea, punctuated as it is by small island states and enveloped by a continental-sized United States, the South China Sea is an obvious arena for the projection of Chinese power.

Indeed, China’s position here is in many ways akin to America’s position vis-à-vis the similar-sized Caribbean in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The United States recognized the presence and claims of European powers in the Caribbean, but sought to dominate the region nevertheless. It was the 1898 Spanish-American War and the digging of the Panama Canal from 1904 to 1914 that signified the United States’ arrival as a world power. Domination of the greater Caribbean Basin, moreover, gave the United States effective control of the Western Hemisphere, which allowed it to affect the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere. And today China finds itself in a similar situation in the South China Sea, an antechamber of the Indian Ocean, where China also desires a naval presence to protect its Middle Eastern energy supplies.

Yet something deeper and more emotional than geography propels China forward into the South China Sea and out into the Pacific: that is, China’s own partial breakup by the Western powers in the relatively recent past, after having been for millennia a great power and world civilization.

In the 19th century, as the Qing dynasty became the sick man of East Asia, China lost much of its territory to Britain, France, Japan, and Russia. In the 20th century came the bloody Japanese takeovers of the Shandong Peninsula and Manchuria. This all came atop the humiliations forced on China by the extraterritoriality agreements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, whereby Western countries wrested control of parts of Chinese cities — the so-called "treaty ports." By 1938, as Yale University historian Jonathan D. Spence tells us in [*The Search for Modern China*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393307808/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=fopo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399369&creativeASIN=0393307808), because of these depredations as well as the Chinese Civil War, there was even a latent fear that "China was [about to be dismembered](http://books.google.com/books?id=vI1RRslLNSwC&lpg=PP1&dq=The%20Search%20for%20Modern%20China&pg=PA300#v=snippet&q=%22about%20to%20be%20dismembered%22&f=false), that it would cease to exist as a nation, and that the four thousand years of its recorded history would come to a jolting end." China’s urge for expansion is a declaration that it never again intends to let foreigners take advantage of it.

**JUST AS GERMAN SOIL** constituted the military front line of the Cold War, the waters of the South China Sea may constitute the military front line of the coming decades.As China’s navy becomes stronger and as China’s claim on the South China Sea contradicts those of other littoral states, these other states will be forced to further develop their naval capacities. They will also balance against China by relying increasingly on the U.S. Navy, whose strength has probably peaked in relative terms, even as it must divert considerable resources to the Middle East. Worldwide multipolarity is already a feature of diplomacy and economics, but the South China Sea could show us what multipolarity in a military sense actually looks like.

There is nothing romantic about this new front, void as it is of moral struggles. In naval conflicts, unless there is shelling onshore, there are no victimsper se; nor is there a philosophical enemy to confront. Nothing on the scale of ethnic cleansing is likely to occur in this new central theater of conflict. China, its suffering dissidents notwithstanding, simply does not measure up as an object of moral fury. The Chinese regime demonstrates only a low-calorie version of authoritarianism, with a capitalist economy and little governing ideology to speak of. Moreover, China is likely to become more open rather than closed as a society in future years. Instead of fascism or militarism, China, along with other states in East Asia, is increasingly defined by the persistence of old-fashioned nationalism: an idea, certainly, but not one that since the mid-19th century has been attractive to intellectuals. And even if China does become more democratic, its nationalism is likely only to increase, as even a casual survey of the views of its relatively freewheeling netizens makes clear.

We often think of nationalism as a reactionary sentiment, a relic of the 19th century. Yet it is traditional nationalism that mainly drives politics in Asia, and will continue to do so. That nationalism is leading unapologetically to the growth of militaries in the region — navies and air forces especially — to defend sovereignty and make claims for disputed natural resources. There is no philosophical allure here. It is all about the cold logic of the balance of power. To the degree that unsentimental realism, which is allied with nationalism, has a geographical home, it is the South China Sea.

Whatever moral drama does occur in East Asia will thus take the form of austere power politics of the sort that leaves many intellectuals and journalists numb. As [Thucydides put it](http://books.google.com/books?id=pjt3ZGU61wIC&lpg=PA352&dq=%22The%20strong%20do%20what%20they%20can%22&pg=PA352#v=onepage&q=%22The%20strong%20do%20what%20they%20can%22&f=false) so memorably in his telling of the ancient Athenians’ subjugation of the island of Melos, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." In the 21st-century retelling, with China in Athens’s role as the preeminent regional sea power, the weak will still submit — but that’s it. This will be China’s undeclared strategy, and the smaller countries of Southeast Asia may well bandwagonwith the United States to avoid the Melians’ fate. But slaughter there will be not.

The South China Sea presages a different form of conflict than the ones to which we have become accustomed. Since the beginning of the 20th century, we have been traumatized by massive, conventional land engagements on the one hand, and dirty, irregular small wars on the other. Because both kinds of war produced massive civilian casualties, war has been a subject for humanists as well as generals. But in the future we just might see a purer form of conflict, limited to the naval realm. This is a positive scenario. Conflict cannot be eliminated from the human condition altogether. A theme in Machiavelli’s [*Discourses on Livy*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199555559/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=fopo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399369&creativeASIN=0199555559) is that conflict, properly controlled, is more likely than rigid stability to lead to human progress. A sea crowded with warships does not contradict an era of great promise for Asia. Insecurity often breeds dynamism.

But can conflict in the South China Sea be properly controlled? My argument thus far presupposes that major warfare will not break out in the area and that instead countries will be content to jockey for position with their warships on the high seas, while making competing claims for natural resources and perhaps even agreeing to a fair distribution of them. But what if China were, against all evidential trends, to invade Taiwan? What if China and Vietnam, whose intense rivalry reaches far back into history, go to war as they did in 1979, with more lethal weaponry this time? For it isn’t just China that is dramatically building its military; Southeast Asian countries are as well. Their defense budgets have increased by about a third in the past decade, even as European defense budgets have declined. Arms imports to Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia have gone up 84 percent, 146 percent, and 722 percent, respectively, since 2000. The spending is on naval and air platforms: surface warships, submarines with advanced missile systems, and long-range fighter jets. Vietnam recently spent $2 billion on six state-of-the-art Kilo-class Russian submarines and $1 billion on Russian fighter jets. Malaysia just opened a [submarine base on Borneo](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0%2C9171%2C2019534%2C00.html). While the United States has been distracted by land wars in the greater Middle East, military power has been quietly shifting from Europe to Asia.

The United States presently guarantees the uneasy status quo in the South China Sea, limiting China’s aggression mainly to its maps and serving as a check on China’s diplomats and navy (though this is not to say that America is pure in its actions and China automatically the villain). What the United States provides to the countries of the South China Sea region is less the fact of its democratic virtue than the fact of its raw muscle. It is the very balance of power between the United States and China that ultimately keeps Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia free, able to play one great power off against the other. And within that space of freedom, regionalism can emerge as a power in its own right, in the form of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Yet, such freedom cannot be taken for granted. For the tense, ongoing standoff between the United States and China — which extends to a complex array of topics from trade to currency reform to cybersecurity to intelligence surveillance — threatens eventually to shift in China’s favor in East Asia, largely due to China’s geographical centrality to the region.

**THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE SUMMATION** of the new Asian geopolitical landscape has come not from Washington or Beijing, but from Canberra. In a 74-page article published last year, "[Power Shift: Australia’s Future Between Washington and Beijing](http://www.quarterlyessay.com/issue/power-shift-australia%E2%80%99s-future-between-washington-and-beijing)," Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University, describes his country as the quintessential "status quo" power — one that desperately wants the situation in Asia to remain exactly as it is, with China continuing to grow so that Australia can trade more and more with it, while America remains "the strongest power in Asia," so as to be Australia’s "ultimate protector." But as White writes, the problem is that both of these things cannot go on. Asia cannot continue to change economically without changing politically and strategically; a Chinese economic behemoth naturally will not be content with American military primacy in Asia.

What does China want? White posits that the Chinese may desire in Asia the kind of new-style empire that the United States engineered in the Western Hemisphere once Washington had secured dominance over the Caribbean Basin (as Beijing hopes it will over the South China Sea). This new-style empire, in White’s words, meant America’s neighbors were "more or less free to run their own countries," even as Washington insisted that its views be given "full consideration" and take precedence over those of outside powers. The problem with this model is Japan, which would probably not accept Chinese hegemony, however soft. That leaves the Concert of Europe model, in which China, India, Japan, the United States, and perhaps one or two others would sit down at the table of Asian power as equals. But would the United States accept such a modest role, since it has associated Asian prosperity and stability with its own primacy? White suggests that in the face of rising Chinese power, American dominance might henceforth mean instability for Asia.

American dominance is predicated on the notion that because China is authoritarian at home, it will act "unacceptably abroad." But that may not be so, White argues.China’s conception of itself is that of a benign, non-hegemonic power, one that does not interfere in the domestic philosophies of other states in the way the United States — with its busybody morality — does. Because China sees itself as the Middle Kingdom, its basis of dominance is its own inherent centrality to world history, rather than any system it seeks to export.

In other words, the United States, not China, might be the problem in the future. We may actually care too much about the internal nature of the Chinese regime and seek to limit China’s power abroad because we do not like its domestic policies. Instead, America’s aim in Asia should be balance, not dominance. It is precisely because hard power is still the key to international relations that we must make room for a rising China. The United States need not increase its naval power in the Western Pacific, but it cannot afford to substantially decrease it.

The loss of a U.S. aircraft carrier strike group in the Western Pacific due to budget cuts or a redeployment to the Middle East could cause intense discussions in the region about American decline and the consequent need to make amends and side deals with Beijing. The optimal situation is a U.S. air and naval presence at more or less the current level, even as the United States does all in its power to forge cordial and predictable ties with China. That way America can adjust over time to a Chinese blue-water navy. In international affairs, behind all questions of morality lie questions of power. Humanitarian intervention in the Balkans was possible only because the Serbian regime was weak, unlike the Russian regime, which was committing atrocities of a similar scale in Chechnya while the West did nothing. In the Western Pacific in the coming decades, morality may mean giving up some of our most cherished ideals for the sake of stability. How else are we to make room for a quasi-authoritarian China as its military expands? The balance of power itself, even more than the democratic values of the West, is often the best safeguard of freedom. That, too, will be a lesson of the South China Sea in the 21st century — another one that idealists do not want to hear.