



Citation for published version:

Kivimaki, T 2015, *Dispute over the South China Sea could put East Asia at war again..*

Publication date:

2015

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Publisher Rights

CC BY-ND

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

The Conversation, 20 February 2015, 1.48pm GMT

Dispute over the South China Sea could put East Asia at war again

China is building artificial islands to exert military influence in the South China Sea. Could this bring military conflict back to a long-peaceful region?

Author



[Timo A. Kivimäki](#)

Professor of International Relations at University of Bath

Disclosure Statement

Timo A. Kivimäki does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any



Taking no chances: a joint US-Philippines military exercise. [EPA/Noel Celis](#)

Philippine authorities have [released satellite pictures](#) of six reefs in the Spratly archipelago that indicate that the Chinese are building artificial structures in the disputed territories of the South China Sea. According to some observers, these features could allow China to extend the range of its navy, air force, coastguard and fishing fleets into the disputed areas.

In response, the US and the Philippines announced they would further strengthen their alliance to [increase their military capacity](#). The Philippines have already given the US military [access to bases on Philippine soil](#), two decades after [the closing](#) of the last American bases there.

The news about Chinese building projects and the possible military consequences have not yet been commented on by the Chinese media or by Chinese officials, but it seems clear that the reinforcements are yet another move in a long, steady game of escalation between the US and China.

The disputed maritime area may not be worth the risks. The natural and artificial features in the disputed areas of the South China Sea are generally too small and too far away from the mainland to sustain life, and many of the oil and gas fields in the disputed areas could also be drained from areas that are not disputed – avoiding conflict at least for the time being.

But there are reasons to believe that this escalation of military tension could still be very dangerous. The buffers that have prevented wars in South-East Asia and North-East Asia – such as strong norms of sovereignty – seem weaker in the disputed maritime areas, and worries are growing that a military build up could surge out of control.

War and peace

In the three decades after World War II, East Asia saw more conflict fatalities than any region in the world, and it was host to the postwar era's three deadliest military conflicts: the Vietnam War, the Korean War and the Chinese Civil War.

But since the 1970s, things have changed dramatically, and in terms of battle-related fatalities, East Asia has been more peaceful than Europe, the Americas or any other area in the world.

This is partly down to the collective East Asian impetus for development that took root in the 1970s. A country cannot develop its economy sustainably if it is busy fighting wars and destroying important markets in its neighbouring countries. But there's another buffer against open conflict in East Asia: a strong respect for sovereignty, which has held sway in the area for decades.



Hackles raised in Manila. [EPA/Francis R. Malasig](#)

In my [own research](#), I found that two thirds of East-Asian conflict fatalities after World War II were incurred in conflicts that started as internal disputes, but expanded when other countries got involved.

On average, with the interference of external powers, conflicts became 95% more intensive (in terms of fatalities per battle month) and also more durable. Ultimately, up to 98% of

fatalities in these conflicts only came about after the entry of external powers, such as China, the USSR and the US.

All this changed after the [Association of South-East Asian Nations](#) was established, and took a firm stand against external military involvement in domestic wars. Alongside that development, the US and China both developed political doctrines, the so-called Nixon Doctrine (1968) and the Deng Doctrine (1978) that avoided military involvement in the conflicts of East Asian countries. As long as sovereignty held sway, large-scale international conflict was off the table.

But the problem with an escalation of tension in the South China Sea is that these buffers are not so firmly in place.

Our gain, their loss

The South China Sea dispute is so explosive precisely because it is about competing claims of sovereignty. It is impossible for China and the Philippines to recognise each other's sovereignty in areas they both claim. If the Philippines does not react to the Chinese building in areas it claims, it is therefore no longer sovereign – but if it does react, China will in turn lose its sovereignty without deploying its military.

And any Chinese build-up in an area the Philippines considers its own already constitutes external involvement – meaning that reciprocal reinforcements from the US no longer count as the first sign of “external involvement” in the dispute.

Meanwhile, since energy is the principal bottleneck for Chinese development, the country's obsession with growth does not necessarily encourage peaceful behaviour in the way it did when trade topped the economic agenda. In trade matters, countries can benefit from each other's prosperity – but when it comes to energy resources, one's gain is often another's loss.



Asserting his claim. [EPA/Noel Celis](#)

And while the South China Sea could turn East Asia back into the status of world's most belligerent region, they also have the potential to trigger a military conflict between the two most powerful countries in the world.

China cannot promote its legal claims by expanding natural islands and creating artificial ones, as [only natural islands](#) can claim exclusive economic zones around themselves. But by increasing its military capacity in disputed areas, China is provoking the US to protect its ally with enhanced military capacity of its own – something Washington is [treaty-bound](#) to do.

That these standoffs are taking place in a largely uninhabited area with a questionable economic potential makes them all the more absurd, but no less disturbing. East Asian peace cannot endure a spiral of reciprocating deterrent moves by China and the US. A solution must be found.

Turn down the heat

A temporary way to defuse things would be to strengthen the [code of conduct](#) that has been agreed in principle by the states abutting the South China Sea, which needs to be consolidated and made more binding.

But at some point, the disputes have to be resolved in a way that meaningfully takes account of all parties' interests. And there are plenty of ways for China to earn more respect and prominence in East Asia besides foisting territorial claims on its neighbours.

China is [committed to increasing its energy efficiency](#), and tying foreign assistance and investment in energy efficiency to disputes over energy-rich territories could kill two birds with one stone. There is no reason why Beijing's legitimate interest in securing its own energy resources can't be satisfied without oil and natural gas from disputed territories.

Inflammatory moves to increase and demonstrate power in the South China Sea (and, for that matter, the [East China Sea](#)) will do anything but deter opponents from their own militarism. Instead, China and the US are legitimising each other's military bullying by engaging in it themselves – a dangerous cycle indeed.

Republish this article

We believe in the free flow of information. We use a [Creative Commons](#) license, so you can republish our articles for free, online or in print.