

Challenging Chinese coercion

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Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, nations can claim territorial sovereignty over seas up to 12 nautical miles from their coastlines, including natural islands and rocks. But they cannot make such claims around reefs submerged at high tide, even if the reefs have been made into islands through land reclamation. China's claims over the waters surrounding the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are highly provocative. Australians who have followed the row on the ABC news may not realise it, but the islands and waters in question are 750 nautical miles from China's mainland. Freedom of navigation on the high seas is a global right, which the US was correct to exercise given China's tenuous claims to sovereignty over reefs and waters so far from its borders.

No intention of “militarising” the newly built islands – yeah, right

A UN arbitral tribunal in The Hague is expected to decide soon if Beijing has jurisdiction over the islands, which are also claimed by The Philippines, 150 nautical miles away. President Xi Jinping, on his recent visit to Washington, was vague about how Beijing's claim to sovereignty over the islands accords with its ratification of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea. In the absence of any legal framework, “the islands and reefs in the South China Sea are Chinese since ancient times ... they are left to us by our ancestors”, he claimed dubiously. He also insisted that China had no intention of “militarising” the newly built islands. Yet that is clearly the intention behind the vast reclamation operation, which includes three airstrips capable of landing military aircraft. One of these, with a 3000m runway, is finished and two more are being built.

The Obama administration lacklustre record

The push is incontrovertible evidence of Beijing's determination to overturn the US-led regional order that has prevailed since World War II. Washington's credibility as the dominant maritime power in the Asia-Pacific has been at stake as Beijing has pursued its expansion, even producing its notorious “nine-dashed line” map that laid claim to sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea. The Obama administration has a lacklustre record setting notional “red lines” to assert US authority in Syria and Crimea. But neither it nor its successor can afford to allow Beijing's claims to sovereignty over vast tracts of the South China Sea become a fait accompli.

Incompatible strategic interests in the region

As Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, writes today, Washington and Beijing's strategic interests in the region are incompatible. The likely outcome is not open conflict but harder-edged competition and stalemate, heightening the risk of a new cold war in Asia. Strategically, China's interest is about pushing the US Navy as far away from its own shores as possible, which would complicate any US action aimed at defending Taiwan or Japan from Chinese aggression — a remote but much dreaded scenario. China also wants to dominate its sea approaches to safeguard its nuclear-armed ballistic missile-carrying submarines. To fulfil its objectives, Beijing is willing to wear opprobrium from the US, Australia, Japan and most Southeast Asian nations. Such a situation should stir the self-

preservation instincts of those nations, including Australia, for more effective defence investment.