

The Next War to End All Wars

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The United States does not know how much of an active role it should take in the South China Sea (SCS). Though Washington has interests and allies in the region, the United States stands on the periphery politically and physically. China declares the United States should stay out of its affairs.¹ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries appeal for US ships to ensure freedom of navigation.² If Washington meddles too much, will it drag the United States into a great-power conflict? If Washington fails to defend US allies' shipping and fishing rights, will China assume control? The Korean War and the Vietnam War remain fresh in the minds of US citizens. Is all this saber-rattling a precursor to another embittered, proxy war?

The answer is yes. The countries bordering the SCS seize resources and land, jealously guarding what they have and watching for what they can take. Countries claim historical rights to the waters, which reignite memories of past wars' victories and defeats. Wartime history and territorial gains and losses spike nationalistic ire throughout the entire SCS area. This nationalism feeds the cycle, creating a hotbed of nations poised for the first strike.

The answer is also no. The hypothetical prewar escalation described above compares to no recent war. The best comparison relates to a similar scenario in the European region of Alsace-Lorraine more than a century ago. While two countries fought over Alsace-Lorraine's valuable resources, each employed diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) efforts to embroil the rest of the European continent into their machinations. As Europe divided itself into uneasy alliances, leaders expected peace, thinking that no country would dare upset the delicate balance of powers. However, as nationalism spiked, one unforeseen incident incited each country's declaration of war.

As in pre-World War I (WWI) politics, the SCS is ripe for conflict, and despite all DIME efforts, the United States faces an impossible battle in securing peace because of fierce geographic, historical, and nationalistic roadblocks. Due to their resources and natural boundaries, the physical regions of the SCS (like those of pre-WWI Alsace-Lorraine before it) make control of its resources and security highly desirable to its neighbors. Historically, both areas possess parallel trajectories, beginning with golden ages, humiliating declines, and preconflict struggles. Finally, each period's nationalistic culture fervently escalates tensions regardless of US diplomacy and military presence. If the United States properly understands its

casted role, it will transition from prevention to preparation for the upcoming multinational conflict.

Geography and Resources

Geographical hotbeds, like pre-WWI Alsace-Lorraine and the present SCS region, propagate persistent obstacles to successful negotiations. As the resource-rich geographical center of colonial Europe, Alsace-Lorraine provided political prose and military might. Similarly, the SCS represents the economic powerhouse of numerous Southeast Asian nations. In either respect, the competing countries either encourage the distant United States to take their side in the region's political and economic rights or warn Washington to stay out of SCS business.

Alsace-Lorraine is nestled among the borders of France, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Belgium. To the east, the Rhine River and its tributaries provide a natural barrier between Alsace and Germany, and to the west, the Vosges Mountains protect it from France.³ The geographic position established a "border-country separating ever hostile and seemingly incompatible peoples."⁴ However, instead of the natural land features creating a shield for the people of Alsace-Lorraine, France and Germany frequently struggled to envelop this buffer zone into their own country's fold. The French wanted the Rhine as a border, while the Germans wanted the Vosges Mountains instead.

Alsace-Lorraine's neighbors coveted the region's important lines of communication (LOC) as much as they desired its resources. Not only excellent for crops, vineyards, and livestock, the rich soil boasted "great mineral wealth: coal, iron, copper, lead, potash, petroleum, rock-salt, silver."⁵ Before WWI, Germany used large iron and coal deposits to create pig iron and steel.⁶ Transport to Germany and other neighboring countries went by rail, road, and water. The primary LOC cuts between the Southern Vosges and the Swiss Alps to the south. To the north, another railroad crosses Lorraine and Alsace.

Despite the size differential, for China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore, the SCS possesses similar appeal as Alsace-Lorraine did for its neighbors. A natural buffer from warring threats, the deep harbors protect, and the numerous islands make straight advances to the mainland slower and more difficult. Essential to regional economics, the SCS provides valuable access to China, Japan, India, and Australia. With physical terrain "not conducive to long-distance transport,"⁷ key shipping routes, such as the Strait of Malacca, provide safe passage away from rougher seas.

For the SCS littoral countries, borders reach deep into the interior SCS islands. Over the past few decades, China stretched its influence in the SCS by constructing "helipads and military structures on seven reefs and shoals" within the Spratly

Islands.⁸ Taiwan and Vietnam, which also claim all the Spratlys, occupy Itu Aba Island and 21 other islands, each similarly fortified with barracks, runways, and supplies. On the eastern border of the SCS, Malaysia and the Philippines occupy islands with naval detachments on 14 islands.⁹

Natural resources in the SCS make it hotly contested, from the single fisherman to the conglomerate. As a top resource, fish represent Southeast Asia's chief protein, making the SCS a direct food source for at least eight countries.¹⁰ Unfortunately, with overfishing and pollution, SCS nations face shortages of quality protein.¹¹ Another valuable resource, the SCS "has proven oil reserves of seven billion barrels,"¹² and China anticipates more. Local oil will reduce regional countries' dependency on Middle East oil coming through the Strait of Malacca.¹³

Examining geographic and resource-driven sources of future contention, two potential scenarios incorporate Vietnam, Thailand, and, of course, China. Now and in the near future, China and Vietnam spar for SCS territory. In 2019, China sent ships to prevent Vietnamese oil drilling near the Spratly Islands. The international protests continued for four months, until China's *Haiyang Dizhi 8* departed Vietnam's claimed waters.¹⁴ Vietnam's general secretary and president, Nguyễn Phú Trọng, declared Hanoi would "never concede the issues of sovereignty, independence, unification, and territorial integrity."¹⁵ As Robert Kaplan said, "just as German soil constituted the military front line . . . the waters of the South China Sea may constitute the military front line of the coming decades."¹⁶

As the European colonial powers sought treasure and ease of passage, China's push for Thailand to cut a canal between its northern and southern sections could bypass nearly 700 miles of navigation through the Straits of Malacca. It could also cleave Thailand in two. As discussed by Salvatore Babones, the United States created an international conflict over Colombia's Panama, eventually creating a separate independent country more malleable to America's canal project. As is the case in Thailand today, a more powerful nation craved convenient access and sought to take control.¹⁷ Thailand already "faces an active insurgency in its three southernmost provinces" and significant domestic political turmoil, including protests that might prove to be the end of the monarchy.¹⁸ To protect its interests, "it is not inconceivable that China would support an independence movement in the south and seize control of the canal" and southern Thailand.¹⁹ Oil disputes and geographic seizures could swiftly spark outrage throughout the international community.

As with the physical allure of Alsace-Lorraine, the SCS represents wealth, speed, and power. With no physical claim to the region, the United States approaches the SCS waters for trade and alliances. At the behest of weaker nations,

the United States appears as a temporary power balancer, enforcing navigation freedom while in the region, while Washington itself remains an ocean away.

Contentious History

Pre-WWI Alsace-Lorraine and the SCS possess similar cultural and developmental periods of prosperity, decline, peace, turmoil, and infighting. Because the deep, bloody, and inevitable histories parallel each other so closely, Washington should not expect US diplomatic and economic efforts to erase memories of revenge and humiliation.

China boasts a rich, ancient history, and the Han Dynasty has a particular resonance in China today. Scholars identify the second century BCE as when the Chinese discovered the SCS and its islands, undertaking expeditions within the natural water boundary.²⁰ Early maps encompass much of present-day China, and current Chinese officials use these ancient borders to establish China's claim to the SCS.²¹

Though little is known of Alsace-Lorraine before Roman rule, Julius Caesar writes that he found a population of Celts who had already “experienced the repeated shock of attempted invasion from beyond the Rhine.”²² After Caesar's conquest of the area, he declared it part of Gaul (France) and determined the boundary between Gaul and the Germanic tribes to be the Rhine (east Alsace-Lorraine).

Over the course of the subsequent centuries, warring factions, city-states, the French monarchy, and the Germanic Empire split control of Alsace-Lorraine. Though scholars differ on the legitimacy of Germany's claim to the region,²³ before the seventeenth century, Alsace “was one of the cradles of German thought, civilization, art, and architecture.”²⁴ After the Thirty Years' War, France ruled over Alsace, and Alsace-Lorraine fought with France in subsequent conflicts, thereby firmly tying the region to the French. By 1870, Prussia declared victory over the French following the Franco-Prussian War. Wilhelm I, King of Prussia, employing history as statecraft, assumed the title of German Emperor and associated his coronation with a restoration of the Holy Roman Empire to subsume many ancient Roman territorial claims—one of which was Alsace-Lorraine. He accomplished this through marriages and power plays.²⁵ The disputed Germanic annexation of Alsace-Lorraine further humiliated France and established the embittered phrase *revanche* in its modern usage, meaning to seek to reclaim lost territories.²⁶

Like Europe, through dynastic changes, the wars of Genghis Khan, and the reign of Kublai Khan, China experienced intense millennia of turmoil. China's rule over Vietnam and its SCS coastline ended in 938 CE.²⁷ Rapidly progressing

to the nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty, known as the “sick man of East Asia,” soon lost territory to Japan, Russia, France, and Great Britain.²⁸

The rest of the SCS countries fared just as poorly as China. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, six economic and political influencers dominated and partitioned the Western Pacific: Great Britain, France, Russia, the United States, Germany, and Japan.²⁹ When the European colonial powers arrived on Southeast Asia shores, wars followed, such as the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, and the Japanese Wars. From 1862 to 1945, France controlled most of Vietnam. Vietnam’s struggle for independence continued throughout most the twentieth century. Knowing France was overwhelmed by Germany’s assault, Japan invaded the French colony in World War II. When France attempted to regain control following the war, more conflict ensued, eventually involving the United States. Colonial struggle and strife existed throughout Southeast Asia, and, as countries regained their independence, interstate violence erupted for decades.³⁰

The final periods of comparison, Alsace-Lorraine (1870–1914) and the SCS (early twentieth century to present), showcase the small skirmishes and insults preceding a war. In less than five decades, tensions between Germany and France infected the rest of the European continent.³¹ Aware of the French sentiment, Germany prepared for reprisals,³² Germanizing Alsace-Lorraine. Over the subsequent decades, France and Germany courted alliances, and each nation established its own coalitions. France and Germany allied with Russia and Italy, respectively. Further, Russia sympathized with the Serbs; Germany allied with Austria-Hungary. And while Paris and Berlin both wooed Great Britain, Paris and London came to an accord.³³ Many contemporaries assumed the forged alliances would preserve peace, but instead, it proved contrary. “Considerations of prestige and the need to keep alliance partners happy meant that Russia found it difficult not to come to Serbia’s aid, no matter how recklessly that small country behaved. For their part, Germany’s leaders feared that if they failed to back Austria-Hungary, they risked losing their only dependable ally. Anxious to counterbalance to Germany, France supported Russia in a quarrel with Austria-Hungary.”³⁴ Attempting to refocus away from Alsace-Lorraine, France concentrated on its colonies, acquiring Tunis in Africa, but this only incited conflict with Italy.³⁵ In the end, not even colonizing Indochina deterred France from seeking to reclaim its lost European territory. The French vowed *revanche* against the Germans in 1870,³⁶ and approximately 50 years later, Paris exacted its vengeance, regaining Alsace-Lorraine in the aftermath of World War I.

Like prewar France, present-day China possesses intense desires to recover what Beijing perceives to be lost territories and to regain its “rightful” place as a great power following its “century of humiliation.” In addition to the European

colonial powers snipping portions of China away, Japan bloodily seized Manchuria and the Shandong Peninsula in the prelude to World War II. Western nations took more control with the Treaty Ports, and internal turmoil created more disparate divisions. Fearing complete dismemberment, China blamed outside influences and closeted itself from the rest of the world as best it could.³⁷ Now that China has emerged from its century of humiliation, Beijing seeks to insulate itself, declaring “it never again intends to let foreigners take advantage of it.”³⁸

Alike in ancient roots, war, loss, and humiliation, nations scorned demand reclamation of former glory. Because pre-WWI Europe parallels the events unfolding in the SCS, an unforeseen trigger within one of the many invested countries could escalate events. Margaret MacMillan remarks, “had Archduke Franz Ferdinand not been assassinated in Sarajevo in June 1914, World War I might not have erupted. One can only imagine the chain of potentially catastrophic events that could be set in motion if Chinese and American naval ships or airplanes collided in the South China Sea today.”³⁹ The assassination of Vietnam President Nguyễn Phú Trọng or a political coup in Taiwan would draw ire from neighboring countries. An unintended blockade or seizure⁴⁰ within the SCS waters may reach significant headlines and deepen political rifts.⁴¹ Assuming no government wishes increased conflict, mistakes still happen, and most likely, the spark that ignites the SCS tinderbox in war will surprise everyone and reside outside of US control.

Rising Nationalism

Though many factors signal a war preparation, such as increased military spending and leadership propaganda, the most subtle and yet powerful indication is when a nation’s own citizens and leaders espouse the nationalistic rhetoric. Nationalism identifies the government-state with the people, along with a religious, ethnographical, or cultural principle.⁴² In most cases since the eighteenth century, revolts and revolutions, including the American and French democratic revolutions, the Russian and Chinese communist revolutions, and both world wars, can be attributed to varying degrees to nationalism.⁴³

The pre-WWI nations politically jockeyed for allies and firmly established partners and threats for the upcoming fight. Is this not the *modus operandi* in the SCS? All the SCS nations vie for support from stronger countries, namely the Quad. With the core consisting of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan, the Quad may act as a NATO-like body to face the looming Chinese threat. Currently adding countries like South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam, the Quad looks further to incorporate more ASEAN countries to bypass the pro-China stalemate within the full consensus structure. In pre-WWI continental Europe, France courted the United States, but the most valuable allies were powerful and

nearby neighbors: Great Britain and Russia. Likewise, though SCS nations will welcome US support, they will ally themselves with powerful neighbors like India, Australia, or South Korea when opportunities arise.

Both pre-WWI Germany and present-day China have tenuous ethnic and cultural reasons to claim their respective territories. After the Franco-Prussian War, Germany claimed rights to Alsace-Lorraine because the region's citizens spoke German.⁴⁴ Sections of Italy, Austria, and Switzerland also spoke German as their first language. Still, Germany did not claim them as "historical rights,"⁴⁵ even though, when claiming the Holy Roman Empire mantle, they could have. Politically, Germany used coincidence and convenience to take what they could when they could. China continues to use the Han Dynasty and ancestral rights to claim land and waters.

Similarly, Beijing believes China owns the SCS because over the course of 2,000 years many states around the SCS—including, Vietnam, Taiwan, and others—were part of the Chinese Empire at one point or another and because maps call it the South *China* Sea. Peter Kang, a professor at the National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan, wrote on how names imply sovereignty, especially regarding this Southeast Asian sea. Though some claim naming issues began in the 1980s, when the United Nations marked exclusive economic zones, implying territorial waters,⁴⁶ neighboring countries would mark the 2010s. During this time, China's new passport map claimed the SCS, its islands, and lands disputed with India.⁴⁷ Claiming a place just because it shares a portion of a country's name may seem childish, but titles, just like languages, denote power. Many former colonies renamed themselves to establish a new national identity apart from their colonial parent, such as the Gold Coast becoming Ghana.⁴⁸ Ferooze Ali notes, in a 2015 article in *The Malaysian Insider*, that China has not always used the South China Sea moniker for the sea and that employing the relatively new name is a strategic tool that "cloaks China with the appearance of legitimizing power that allows it to continue roaming the disputed waters and launch military operations."⁴⁹ Therefore, as the name of a place evokes power and control, China holds as much of the South *China* Sea as possible. As a result of this subtle form of propaganda, Vietnam and the Philippines refer to the contentious waters as the East Sea and the West Philippine Sea, respectively,⁵⁰ and Vietnam issues Chinese visas on separate pieces of paper, refusing to acknowledge the validity of Beijing's new passport.⁵¹

As the core of SCS geopolitics, territorial disputes govern many expressions of SCS nationalism.⁵² To combat China's encroachment into the SCS, the surrounding countries appeal to the UN. As mutually supportive neighbors, in 2013–2014, when the Philippines took China to the international court, Vietnam reinforced

the Philippines' sovereignty claims.⁵³ As a consequence to Chinese encroachment, each ASEAN country plans to defend its rights to SCS waterways and resources. In recent years, the 10 ASEAN countries increased their defense budgets, some as much as 700 percent, mostly spending funds on "naval and air platforms: surface warships, submarines with advanced missile systems, and long-range fighter jets."⁵⁴ While maintaining good relationships with the United States, Vietnam paid Russia 3 billion USD for submarines and jet fighters,⁵⁵ using close and powerful neighbors to satisfy military needs. While building homeland defense, ASEAN countries, especially Vietnam, encourage a US presence in the area to dispel and prepare for Chinese disputes and interference.

Creating "us-against-them" factions, pre-WWI nations merged and allied, and SCS countries will use each other and their neighbors to protect their own land, waters, and interests. Presently, ASEAN countries hold divided opinions on China and the United States, and being a full-consensus body,⁵⁶ one dissenting vote halts progress. Nationalism will drive deeper wedges in this potentially powerful group. The ASEAN countries will not just divide, but they will seek influential neighbors to bolster their causes. Just as France and Germany pulled Russia and Great Britain into European politics, so too will the SCS countries solicit support from influential neighbors. Rotating chairs yearly, Vietnam recently handed over leadership of the community to Brunei with the advent of 2021, and ASEAN continues to build partnerships with countries outside of Southeast Asia, such as the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

As nationalism grows within the SCS, the nations will seek firmer alliances with powerful neighbors, who appear culturally, ethnically, and physically similar, diminishing alliances with the United States. Ethnic groups, such as the pan-Serb and pan-Slav movements,⁵⁷ heightened nationalism in Austria-Hungary and Russia.⁵⁸ Pre-WWI, many disparate lands joined together over common ancestry and a need to appear united before larger neighbors. Like the Germanic regions, Italian city-states and monarchies pulled together into a robust and central force to create modern Italy. Unification and nationalistic fervor turn smaller, weak nations into strong, influential ones. Swift and advantageous, Malaysia and Indonesia could join and create a monopoly on south and west freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. Controlling the shortest waterway to India, could they deny China access? If other countries bordering the SCS allied to restrict Beijing's freedom of navigation, would China strike and seize key passageways to preserve its sea LOCs?

Just as European nationalism rose before WWI, the SCS countries' nationalistic pride spikes in preparation for conflict: "Although they might not have realized it, many Europeans were psychologically prepared for war. An exaggerated respect

for their own militaries and the widespread influence of social Darwinism encouraged a belief that war was a noble and necessary part of a nation's struggle for survival."⁵⁹ With military defense surged, allies courted, and borders challenged, the SCS nations prepare to fight for their own identities and pride.

Counterpoint

If the United States applies all DIME resources available to deconflicting the SCS, could Washington reduce the geographical, historical, and nationalistic issues and deter the impending multinational, high-intensity conflict? Not all tension leads to war; some nations solve their quarrels diplomatically. In 1921, the League of Nations resolved a dispute between Finland, Sweden, Germany, and the Soviet Union regarding the Åland Islands. In the aftermath of Russia's Bolshevik Revolution, Finland desired retention of the islands, but culturally, the islanders were Swedish. The courts declared Finnish sovereignty, and yet the inhabitants could retain their Swedish heritage.⁶⁰ Being a waterway disagreement, experts may claim it as more applicable than a landlocked Alsace-Lorraine. Similarly, "during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962—probably the most dangerous moment of the Cold War—President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev found channels through which they could broker a face-saving deal."⁶¹ Like these examples, the United States could exert efforts and appeal to the UN to preserve peace. Unfortunately, China has excused itself from diplomatic arbitration meetings to avoid repercussions from poor international behavior regarding the SCS.⁶² China will continue to misbehave on the international front, and its SCS neighbors will feel emboldened to push international and physical boundaries in a similar style.

Historically, the United States could push narrative changes, such as using Vietnam's term "The East Sea." The United States can encourage the reinvigoration of Southeast Asian cultures surrounding China. Reviving narratives may diminish the Han Dynasty narrative that China works so hard to promote. Through purchase or construction, the United States could attempt to place itself physically in the SCS waters, establishing a garrison and supply base (see earlier example of the United States constructing the Panama Canal). Instead of appearing in the SCS for freedom of navigation exercises, the United States would maintain a constant presence. Outraged, China and other threatened SCS countries would increase their own military operations. These nations would demand the immediate exit of the US interloper.

Even if the United States utilized all its DIME influence, there are no guarantees of successful tension de-escalation and navigation freedom. Involved SCS parties have a vote, and whether positive or negative, determination resides outside of US control. Because an outsider cannot affect another region's geographic,

historical, and nationalistic foundation, the United States should prepare for the most unfavorable outcome.

Conclusion

The haunting comparison of turbulent, pre-WWI Alsace-Lorraine and the contentious, present-day SCS implies impending warfare. The SCS nations do not want such a fight. Instead, like the pre-WWI European nations, they position themselves to defend each other so that war seems impossible. Yet, as neighbors take over resources and LOCs, nations with the resources claim their local islands, ready to defend their piece of the proverbial pie.

During early WWI, the outsider United States applied DIME from an ocean away. Now in the twenty-first century, the United States, once again, finds itself in the same position. Washington rightly fears the SCS escalating into a large-scale conflict, but that does not mean the United States can prevent such a thing from happening. History parallels the similarities in multinational resource demands, territorial pressures, and rising nationalism. Presently, geographical, historical, and nationalistic roadblocks thwart all DIME efforts. Consequently, US intentions best appear like a nosy neighbor and, at worst, a military power trying to establish dominance. Making little progress in its Quad alliance, the United States should recognize its inability to prevent this imminent, multinational war and shift from prevention to preparation. ♣

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