

Which South China Sea Island Holds the Greatest Military Significance?

Greg Austin
The Diplomat (Tokyo)
October 13, 2015

Hainan and China's unfinished frontier wars.

We in East Asia are indeed living in peaceful times. That is the inevitable conclusion one draws in reflecting on the archives of U.S. military intelligence files from the 1930s and 1940s. In one document, Japan's ambition, declared in January 1941 by its foreign minister, was frightening. Fresh from negotiations with the Dutch for an oil concession in the Netherlands East Indies, and mediation between Thailand and French Indo-China, he told the Diet that the whole world should accept Japan's racial idea of "hakko ichiu" (eight directions of the world under one roof), a nationalist slogan interpreted variously as a call to "universal brotherhood" (the soft version) or Japanese military domination of East Asia, and then the world, through a sacred or holy war (the main meaning as events came to show).

In 1945, American psyops teams—foreshadowing the collapse of Japan's militarist regime—capitalized on this phrase by telling the Japanese people that they were being invaded from "eight directions," a rather bitter irony for them.

At a more granular level, another lesson leaps off the pages of the U.S. archives, at least for me. This is a reminder of the role of Hainan in the geopolitics of the South China Sea compared with the much less significant, at least in military terms, Spratly Islands. The history of Hainan and its strategic significance both during the long Sino-Japanese war (1931-1945), and after, is not often canvassed in current discussions of the shifting geopolitical realities.

A U.S. diplomatic cable from February 10, 1939 reports the Japanese invasion and capture of Hainan. It notes that control of the island "would have a great effect on the matter of control of the South China Sea between the mainland and the island of Luzon as well as limiting the sphere dominated by [British] Singapore." While represented at the time by Japan's foreign minister as intended to help "suppress the Chiang Kai-shek regime," some in China correctly interpreted it as part of Japan's plan for territorial expansion towards the East Indies.

This action by Japan was met with far greater concern, as reflected in the archive documents, than its annexation seven weeks later of the Spratly Islands on March 30, 1939, followed by its occupation of the Paracel Islands. Japan claimed the Spratly Islands were terra nullius prior to their being occupied by Japanese nationals in 1921, but at least two of the islands had been annexed by Britain decades earlier. These documents from 1939 cast some light on how the U.S. government viewed the sovereignty of the Spratly Islands at the time, since the Japanese annexation was protested by it. The scope of the protest however was not that Japan had no claim but that it could not annex the entire Spratly group, spread out over a vast territory and comprising quite distant groupings of reefs and islets, on the basis of prior administrative action in respect of a couple of small islands.

Of greater interest today in respect of the Spratly islands, is a discussion of the French annexation of several of the islands in 1933. Reference is made in one U.S. intelligence report from 1933 to China's sending a warship to the region as part of its protest against the French annexation. The report notes that these were tiny coral reefs or desert islands, "a few are frequented by Chinese fishermen," but hitherto

they “have been unclaimed by any nation and apparently mostly uncharted.” The same report mistakenly says that China calls these islands the “Sisha,” almost certainly an erroneous rendering of the Xisha (or Paracel Islands), which the U.S. document reports were claimed by China at that time. In 1933, even with Japan in military occupation of China and the U.S., Britain and France pursuing colonial control of diverse territories, the islands were judged to be insignificant.

Later U.S. official documents from 1943 concerning the post-war disposition of the Spratly Islands, once Japan was defeated, are a rich source of understanding how the islands were viewed strategically by the United States. But the overriding U.S. concern in the postwar disposition was with strategically important territories. According to the excellent analysis by Kimie Hara, a 2006 book, *The Cold War Frontiers in the Asia Pacific*, several U.S. official reports looking at the disposition of the Paracel and Spratly islands judged them not to be of vital concern to any country, though of interest to coastal countries such as China, the Philippines and Indo-China, and to the safety of commercial shipping.

The first years of communist rule after 1949 were marked by campaigns to defeat Republic of China forces on the many islands along the coast of China from south to north.

In the first month after the declaration on October 1, 1949 of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, it attempted to take Kinmen Island with a force of 30,000 soldiers but failed. In March 1950, People’s Liberation Army forces began a campaign to take Hainan Island and after victory there in May, began preparations in June for an invasion of Taiwan, involving 4,000 motorised junks and 200,000 troops.

The U.S. diplomatic position on the ending of the Chinese Civil War had been to remain neutral, a position which altered three days after the North Korean invasion of South Korea on June 24, 1950. The Korean War and the accompanying change of U.S. position on the defense of non-communist ROC forces on Taiwan brought U.S. naval forces to China’s borders in great numbers in 1950.

China cancelled its planned invasion of Taiwan. The decision has been described in a 1996 commentary as follows: “Taiwan was not attacked for the time being. The Navy command of New China had no choice but to swallow the first bitter pill of losing the opportunity for combat owing to lack of strength.” The author observed that with the decision, the offensive phase of the War of Liberation ended, and the Navy’s primary tasks became defense “against possible imperialist aggression and guarding the safety of the republic’s coast.”

For China, and for all mainland Chinese with any knowledge of this history, the claim for the Spratly Islands, like the claim for Taiwan, is seen (regardless of how we see it) as a the final stages of the war of liberation and national unification. The “island campaign” launched by Mao in 1949 continues. China only regained its islands of Hong Kong in 1997 and those in Macau in 1999 from two former colonial powers. For China, that war with Japan which began in 1931, and its own civil war which began in 1927, are not finished yet. China’s ocean frontier is yet to be stabilized after almost five hundred years of foreign interference.

China will continue to pursue its claim to the Spratly Islands, but we must not lose sight of the fact that for China, the two great pearls of its maritime frontier in military strategic terms are still, as they were at the historic turning points in 1945 and 1949, the islands of Taiwan (36,000 sq km) and Hainan (33,000 sq km).

It was former leader Ye Jianying who was in political command from the Guangdong Military Region of Chinese forces that recaptured Hainan in 1950 and it was he who made the first peace opening to Taiwan in 1979.

As China navigates its understandable historical revanchism, declaring peaceful resolution of the outstanding territorial disputes to be its aim, it must be careful to avoid historical mistakes of others. Xi Jinping in Washington D.C. last month said that his dream for the rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation was all about the human potential of Chinese. This was a new twist. Most people in China see the China dream as more chauvinist, more nationalistic.

There are a number of Chinese commentators who link the rejuvenation ambition to the old Chinese doctrine of “tianxia” (“all under heaven”), characterized by “harmonious development” and unified under a Sino-centric view of world order. For me, “tianxia” sounds too much like “hakko ichiu.”

I think we can be comfortable with the idea Xi Jinping rejects it, but his “human development” twist to the Chinese dream idea seemed a little too artificial, and too simply concocted for an American audience for my liking.

Source: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/which-south-china-sea-island-holds-the-greatest-military-significance/>