



François-Xavier Bonnet

The Philippines-China Relations: A European/French Perspective*

Introduction

The South China Sea conundrum is a very sensitive matter in the Philippines. There is not a single day without new articles published in the national newspapers on this question or discussed on radio and television. This important flow of information tends to overwhelm and confuse the readers, polarizing the society between those perceived as pro-China and those considered as pro-United States (US). This China-US rivalry for dominance in the region for trade and military reasons overshadows the potential interest of other international powers like the European Union (EU) as an organization and individual state members.

If the EU has no independent foreign policy per se, individual state members like France can pursue their own diplomacy in the region. In this paper, we will show that as a maritime power with a huge exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and a significant presence in the Indo-Pacific area, France follows keenly the developments in the South China Sea. It supports the position of the EU in favor of the judgement of The Hague on July 12, 2016 but also of a more peaceful relation between the Philippines and China. The freedom of navigation on and undersea and flights over the South China Sea is the main driver of the EU interests.

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France and Its Overseas Territories: A Huge Exclusive Economic Zone

On November 4, 2018, the population of the island of New Caledonia in the Pacific voted, in a referendum, against their independence and to stay under the sovereignty of France. New Caledonia is one of several overseas territories of France scattered in all the oceans of the planet. All these overseas territories totaled a land area of only 126,550 sq. km but generate a huge EEZ of 11 million sq. km (40 times the EEZ of France metropolitan).¹

The French Polynesian Islands in the Pacific Ocean alone generates an EEZ of 5 million sq. km for a small land area of 4000 sq. km. New Caledonia, with a land area of 19,000 sq. km can generate an EEZ of 2 million sq. km.² Thus, France, with a land area of 543,945 sq. km, has the second largest EEZ in the world after the US. In fact, 62 percent of the EEZ of France is coming from the Pacific Ocean and 24 percent from the Indian Ocean.³ With this huge oceanic domain, France shares 39 maritime boundaries with 30 different countries. Among the 39 maritime boundaries, 34 are in the overseas territories. The Wallis and Futuna archipelago in the Pacific, for example, is the overseas territory which generates the most number of maritime boundaries. Thus, this archipelago shares a boundary with five other countries (Fiji, Tokelau, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu). Likewise, New Caledonia shares four maritime boundaries (Solomon Island, Vanuatu, Fiji, Australia) and French Polynesia has three of them (Kiribati, United Kingdom, Cook Island).⁴

A Significant French Presence in the Indo-Pacific Region

As a maritime power, endowed with a vast EEZs, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, France's primary obligation is to protect its territories

¹ Taglioni, François. (2007). «*Les petits espaces insulaires au cœur des revendications frontalières maritimes dans le monde.*» *L'Espace politique*. vol. 1, no. 1. Retrieved from <https://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/732>.

² Taglioni. (2007). *L'Espace politique*.

³ DGRIS. (2016). "France and Security in the Asia-Pacific." Defense Department Paris, p. 6.

⁴ Taglioni. (2007). *L'Espace politique*.





and population: more than 500,000 inhabitants and more than one million inhabitants are living in the overseas territories of the Pacific and Indian oceans, respectively.⁵ It also has the duty to protect its expatriates in the countries of the Asia Pacific whose number has increased by 220 percent over the last 20 years to exceed 140, 000 in 2017 (eight percent of the total number of French expatriates in the world). More than 30, 000 French expatriates are living in China and close to 4,000 in the Philippines.⁶

To protect its overseas territories as well as monitor its EEZ, 8,000 soldiers are located throughout the whole area: 4,500 in the Indian Ocean and 2, 800 in the Pacific Ocean and 700 sailors in deployment. In the Pacific Ocean, the French armed forces in New Caledonia and French Polynesia operate two surveillance frigates, four patrol vessels, two multi-mission ships, five maritime surveillance aircrafts, four tactical transport aircrafts and seven helicopters.⁷ Moreover, France maintains a network of 18 resident and non-resident defense attachés in 33 countries in Asia and Oceania that develop the bilateral defense cooperation. The country participates in the South Pacific Defense Minister's Meeting (SPDMM) and the Shangri-La-Dialogue, and through the EU, indirectly participates in the ASEAN Regional Forum. As a maritime power, France is also involved in many regional fora specialized on maritime issues in the Indian and Pacific oceans.⁸

The EU and the Spratly Islands

Thus, this significant presence in the Indo-Pacific region sets France apart from the other member states of the EU, inasmuch as France is an important supplier of military equipment to several Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia, India, and Australia. Nevertheless, despite this unique position, France supports a joint EU policy toward this region and more particularly when it comes to developments in the South China Sea.

⁵ DGRIS. (2016). "France and Security in the Asia Pacific," p. 6.

⁶ 2017. "Quel est le nombre de Français vivant en Asie?" *Paris-Singapore*. Retrieved from <https://paris-singapore.com/nombre-francais-vivre-asie>.

⁷ DGRIS. (2016). "France and Security in the Asia Pacific," p.12.

⁸ DGRIS. (2016). "France and Security in the Asia Pacific," p. 12





The first statement issued by the EU on the South China Sea dated March 11, 2016 criticized the actions of China:

The EU is committed to maintaining a legal order for the seas and oceans based upon the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This includes the maintenance of maritime safety, security, and cooperation, freedom of navigation and overflight. While not taking a position on claims to land territory and maritime space in the South China Sea, the EU urges all claimants to resolve disputes through peaceful means, to clarify the basis of their claims, and to pursue them in accordance with international law including UNCLOS and its arbitration procedures.⁹

The second and last official statement by the EU on the issue of the South China Sea was published, following the ruling by The Hague tribunal. Federica Mogherini, the EU's high representative, issued a declaration stressing the need for the parties to resolve the dispute in accordance with international law.¹⁰ According to some observers, this declaration took Chinese leaders by surprise, as they did not expect the EU to be able to find the necessary cohesion to issue such a declaration.¹¹ Beijing tried to block the initiative by putting pressure on some EU member states that received significant Chinese investments. In the end, the declaration's final version was watered down by Greece, Hungary, and Croatia, which did not want to send too strong message to Beijing at a time of growing economic ties with the Asian giant. Since then, the EU, as an organization, has not issued any other statement on that matter except for expressing its availability to facilitate ASEAN-China dialogue on devising a code of conduct for the South China Sea.

⁹ "Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Recent Developments in the South China Sea." (2016). *European Council*. Council of the European Union. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/11/hr-declaration-on-bealf-of-eu-recent-developments-south-china-sea/>.

¹⁰ "Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the Award rendered in the Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China." (2016). *European Council*.

¹¹ Casarini, Nicola. "Beijing's Ambitions in the South China Sea: How Should Europe Respond?" Paper presented at the T.wai-IAI seminar on "Assessing Asian Regionalism: Between Functional Cooperation and Geostrategic Competition" held in Turin on April 12, 2018. *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. Retrieved from <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/beijings-ambitions-south-china-sea-how-should-europe-respond>.





However, individual member states decided to challenge the position of China in the South China Sea, notably in the area of freedom of navigation in and around the Spratlys and Paracels islands. France's former Defense minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2016 that Paris would encourage the EU to undertake "regular and visible" patrols in the area.¹² It is not known how many of these patrols were done so far by France and the United Kingdom (UK) as they are not as publicized as the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) conducted by the US Navy.¹³ Nevertheless, in early 2018, France and the UK conducted a joint freedom of navigation patrol through Mischief Reef, Subi Reef and Fiery Cross in the Spratly Islands.¹⁴

These three reefs are the main Chinese military strongholds in the Spratlys. Thus, some EU member states and the US are trying to enforce, symbolically, the ruling by The Hague tribunal in the case between the Philippines and China.

Why are the Spratly Islands So Important for the EU?

Historically, France had staked a claim, at the beginning of the 20th century, to the Paracels and Spratly islands. Challenged mostly by Japan and China over the Paracels and by Japan, China and the Philippines over the Spratly Islands,¹⁵ France has never been able to develop these islands

¹² Panda, Ankit. "French defense minister to urge EU South China Sea patrols." (2016). *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/french-defense-minister-to-urge-eu-south-china-sea-patrols/>.

¹³ According to Eric Frecon, professor at the Naval Academy of Brest in France, the French Navy is doing around two operations every year since 2016. The frigates are navigating just outside the 12 nm of the territorial seas. The US FONOPs are penetrating the 12 nm.

¹⁴ Luc, Tuan Anh. "Are France and the UK here to stay in the South China Sea?" (2018). *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/are-france-and-the-uk-here-to-stay-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

¹⁵ Elsewhere we have shown that the Philippines, under the American colonial rule, claimed the Spratly Islands in 1933 and the Scarborough Shoal in 1937. But the US State Department did not accept the claim of the Philippines over the Spratlys. During the same period, Chinese officials and civil society were confused and thought that the Spratlys and Paracels were the same archipelago. See Bonnet, François-Xavier. (2012). "Geopolitics of Scarborough Shoal." *Institut de Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est Contemporaine (Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia)*. IRASEC's Discussion Paper No. 14. Retrieved from <http://www.irasec.com/ouvrage34>.





and consolidate its titles over them. Nevertheless, the French government relinquished officially its title over the Paracelsto South Vietnam in 1956 but never did it for the Spratly Islands.

Beyond historical and legal interests over the archipelagos of the South China Sea, the freedom of navigation above and on that sea is a key matter for the member states of the EU. Researches by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and Center for Strategic and International Studies showed that around US\$3.4 trillion worth of goods passed through the South China Sea in 2016.¹⁶ The data reflected a low level of dependency of key European countries over the South China Sea for their trade. In fact, between eight percent and 11percentof total trade of countries like the UK, France, Italy, and Germany passed by the South China Sea in 2016.¹⁷

If the European countries are vigilant over the freedom of navigation above and on the sea, a close attention is also given to the freedom of navigation below the sea level. The Navy headquarters of the European countries are much aware of a special characteristic of the Spratly islands which is not very well known, as it is a sensitive matter. The literature on the Spratly Islands would explain that the main causes of the dispute would be the control of natural resources like oil and gas and fishing activities, sovereignty rights, and a large EEZ.

These factors are, of course, very important. The same literature, however, forgets the key role of the Spratlys for submarine warfare. In fact, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) classified in the 1980s the Spratly Islands as a “grey area” or “area of special concern.”¹⁸ Few places in the world have this kind of classification. During the same period, the Philippine government published a similar perception on the Spratlys (Kalayaan group of islands) from the Defense Ministry in 1982:

The area has never been adequately surveyed or mapped, but it is known to contain many islands, banks and reefs, shoals and cays separated by deep passages. If a hostile nation can map the area to a degree which will enable navigation of submerged ballistic missile submarines without

¹⁶ CSIS. (2017). “How much trade transits the South China Sea?” *China Power Project*. Retrieved from https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/?utm_content=buffer2dfa4&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

¹⁷ CSIS. (2017). “How much trade transits the South China Sea?” *China Power Project*.

¹⁸ Information given to me by Jean-François Bonnet, former director of Agence France Press in Manila.





danger of running aground, that particular nation can station Polaris type submarines in the island group and be able to control or threaten an area within a radius of 4,000 km, containing a 1/3 of the world's population, including the whole ASEAN. The area's bathymetry makes submarine detection, hence, counteraction virtually impossible.¹⁹

In fact, it is highly likely that the first journey through the Spratly Islands, by a nuclear-powered submarine took place in April 1972. The *USS Sculpin*, directed by Captain Harry Mathis, had a mission to track the movements of Vietnamese fishing boats. These boats, loaded with weapons and ammunition, were leaving Hainan Island (China) and traveling through the South China Sea to avoid the American coastal blockade of Vietnam before unloading their cargoes further south. Their routes took them through the Spratlys before reaching Vietnam. The *USS Sculpin's* journey in the Spratlys, known to mariners as the "Dangerous Ground," was described as follows:

One more challenge was that the trawler was heading south, right through the Dangerous Ground. On charts of the South China Sea, an area about 180 nautical miles wide and 300 miles long is simply labeled Dangerous Ground. Our charts had one track of soundings through that area – taken in 1885.

We assessed that the terrain was fairly level, but the depth was 200 feet or less in most of this area. So, we were in a position of running up to 20 knots in 200 feet of water, with between 30 to 80 feet under the keel at that high speed...

As the trawler headed south, she vectored a little to the east and went into an area in the Dangerous Ground where we couldn't go. Up to then, although we were in the dangerous area, we felt secure in knowing the bottom was fairly level. But now she went into an area that was littered with rocks, shoals, and shipwrecks.²⁰

It is highly probable that the *USS Sculpin's* journey in the Spratlys had other motivations than simply following a fishing boat used for smuggling weapons. In fact, an airplane P-3 Orion escorted the submarine. Our

¹⁹ *The Kalayaan Islands*. (1982). Series 1. Monograph no. 4. Prepared by the Ministry of Defense, secretariat to the Cabinet Committee on the Law of the Sea Treaty, p.11.

²⁰ Larson, Charles R. (2008). "The Sculpin's lost mission: A nuclear submarine in the Vietnam war." *Naval History Magazine*. The US Naval Institute. 22:1. Retrieved from <http://www.usni.org/node/3692>





hypothesis is that the US Navy would not have risked using a nuclear submarine for so little. It is more reasonable to imagine that the *Sculpin* had either the mission to collect more scientific data on the Dangerous Ground or to test the operability of older scientific researches.

An interesting detail given by Admiral Larson in the excerpt above show how the Spratlys are still shrouded “in secrecy;”²¹ on the charts used to pass through the Dangerous Ground, the admiral mentioned only one track of soundings dating of 1885. Thus, if we believe the writer, the crew of the nuclear submarine would have been much less equipped in charts and maps of the area than the crews of submarines during the second World War. In fact, through numerous secret surveys made by British, Japanese, and American navies since the 1920s, it showed that the maritime space of the Spratlys is deep and structured by internal sea-lanes with two main axis (north-south and east-west),²² (see Map 1).

The choice of military occupation of these geological features seems to follow the logic of control of the internal sea-lanes.²³ Thus, if in 1956, Taiwan occupied the main island of Itu Aba, Vietnamese forces would garrisoned islands and reefs which are controlling the Western entrance of the east-west sea-lane. The Filipinos, at the end of the 1960s, favored the control of the northern part of the north-south sea-lane. China, arriving last in the conquest of the Spratly Islands, had no choice but to take control of the reefs. By occupying Fiery Cross Reef in 1988, Chinese forces could control movements in the western part of the east-west sea-lane.

By taking control of the Mischief Reef in the heart of the Philippines’ claimed EEZ in 1995, the Chinese could monitor and even interfere with the Filipinos along the north-south sea-lane. The new Chinese reclamation works since 2010 allow the reinforcement of the Chinese presence along the north-south sea-lane (Tizard Bank and Union Bank) and east-west sea-lane (London Reef). The strategic positions of Chinese troops in the Spratlys are strong enough to blockade the resupply of the Philippines garrisons, mostly located in the northern part of the archipelago. Moreover, the warehouses built on the three main reefs (Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief)

²¹ Admiral Larson mentioned that his text was redacted by the US Navy Intelligence before being published in 2008.

²² Hancox, David, and Prescott, Victor. (1999). *Secret Hydrographic Surveys in the Spratly Islands*. London.

²³ Bonnet, François-Xavier. (2016). “The Spratlys: A Geopolitics of Secret Maritime Sea-Lanes.” *AMTI*. Retrieved from <https://amti.csis.org/spratlys-geopolitics-secret-maritime-sea-lanes/>.





can accommodate bombers of type H6-K.²⁴ If these bombers can't reach yet the French overseas territories of the Pacific, they could soon reach the northern part of Australia.²⁵

Conclusion

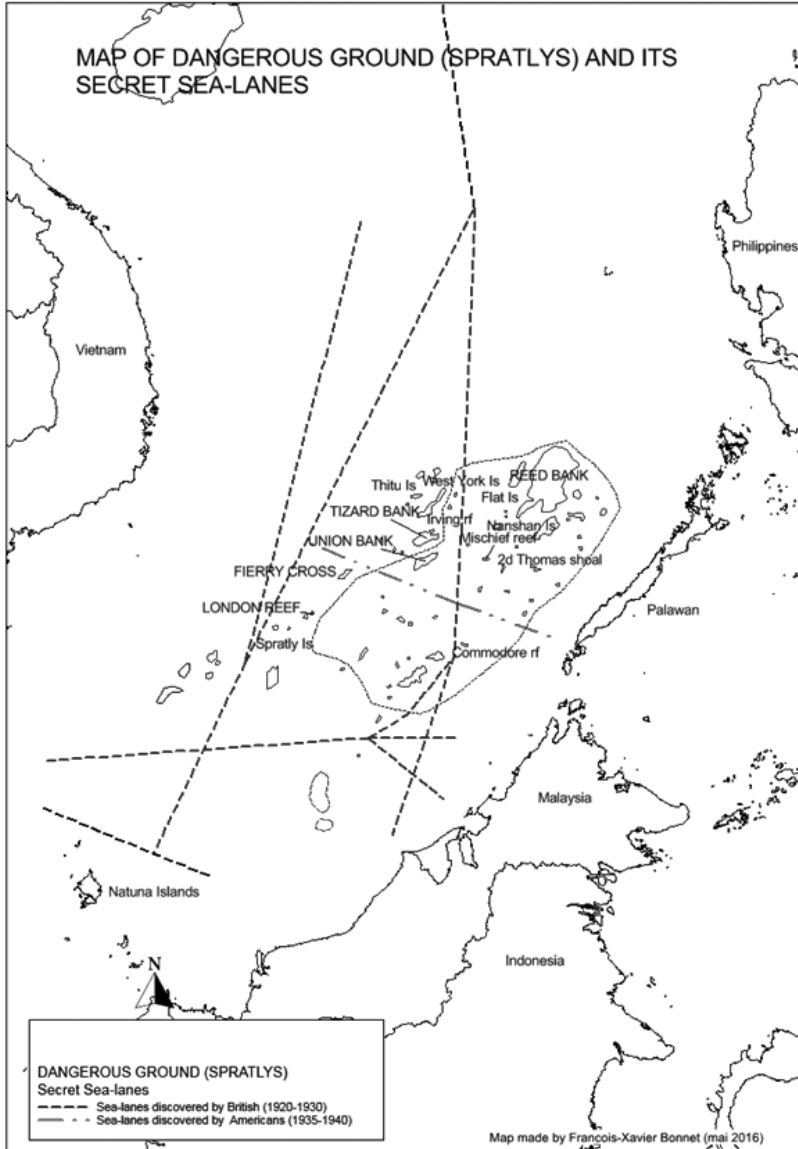
The warming ties between the Philippines and China are positively perceived by the EU, as it increases peace and stability in the region, in the context of an elaboration of a code of conduct. Arguably, the Philippines' request for international arbitration in 2012 had the unintended consequence of accelerating China's programs of island-building. These Chinese activities highlighted the importance of controlling the internal maritime sea-lanes of the Spratlys. These internal sea-lanes have long been kept secret although they are of crucial strategic importance. Their control would allow a maritime power to directly threaten an important part of the world.

For the first time in the history of the Spratly Islands, one power, China, could take control of the area. The European countries are challenging China with their freedom of navigation operations, not only to protect their trade and economic interests in the region but also because of their knowledge of the strategic importance of these islands either for submarines operations or air combat. In the words of a European diplomat, "We observe, we rejoice when there is a positive step, but we are not naïve, we remain vigilant and we monitor very carefully the events."

²⁴ "China Lands First Bomber on South China Sea Island." (2018). *AMTI*. Retrieved from <https://amti.csis.org/china-lands-first-bomber-south-china-sea-island/>.

²⁵ Communications with Carl Thayer.





Map 1. Map of Dangerous Ground (Spratlys) and Its Secret Sea-Lanes

