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Mitigating risk of US-Beijing conflict in South China Sea

By MICHAEL BRADY

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The foreign-policy issues confronting the United States are vast and complex. They range from terror groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to Russia's attempt at re-exerting its status as a major world power. One issue, competition to control the South China Sea, pits mainland China against its lesser rivals: Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei, the Philippines and Malaysia.

Territorial disputes, coupled with Beijing's increased militarization of the South China Sea, may sway US policymakers to believe that military conflict with China is inevitable. However, such a conflict is avoidable if the US chooses its policy carefully and implements a strategy that all but eliminates military action.

The South China Sea is rich with natural resources. According to the US Geological Survey, 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas can be found in the hotly disputed region. The Chinese, however, indicate the area may hold more than 200 billion barrels of oil and up to 750 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Regardless of the exact quantity, these estimates are the primary reason Beijing continues to assert its claim over the region. For China to continue its economic initiatives, unrestricted access to oil and gas remains a national priority.

In addition, 12% of the world's fish catch is in the South China Sea. Since China consumes about 25% of all seafood globally, it's no wonder it continues to claim vast swaths of the region and insists its fishermen have the right to catch there.

At a recent US Senate confirmation hearing, now Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated: "We're going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops. And second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed." Tillerson's comments clearly indicate that President Donald Trump and his administration are willing to use military force if Chinese activities continue. This comment is similar in tone to Steve Bannon's during a podcast in March 2016 when he stated, "We're going to war in the South China Sea in five to 10 years." (Bannon is now senior adviser to President Trump.)

Trump and his national-security team need to understand that China's claims are primarily driven by the need for resources, not sovereignty. According to recent reports, China's population will reach approximately 1.4 billion by 2020. As China's population continues to increase, demand for resources such as fisheries and oil will rise. China's inability to feed its population in the future may ultimately lead to conflict, with or without US intervention.

The United States is rightfully concerned over China's expansion and militarization of the South China Sea. Tillerson should move the issue to the top of his agenda. However, for all the saber-rattling on both sides of the political aisle, China is still 10 to 15 years from having a legitimate military capability to threaten US forces in the region.

Trump and his administration have other elements of national power available to limit China's expansion. Diplomatic efforts should be its highest priority while engaging Beijing.

The United States should consider a summit including China and other claimants to begin a serious dialogue on how resources in the South China Sea can be shared.

Beijing would not be an unreasonable location for the first of a series of meetings that would demonstrate Washington's seriousness and willingness to work with the Chinese.

The United States has a long history of intervention that leads to unnecessary loss of life. It can no longer be the world's policeman, but it does have a responsibility to protect its strategic interests in East Asia. Freedom of navigation should be its primary issue when dealing with Beijing in the South China Sea. Washington cannot risk military confrontation over disputed territory until all diplomatic options are pursued.

The South China Sea has about US\$5 trillion worth of goods flowing through it annually. Only if these shipping routes are threatened should the US consider blockading China from the region. To risk a military conflict would be an unwise use of the limited resources the US currently has deployed in theater. Until, if at all, China impedes the trading activities in the South China Sea, Trump and Tillerson should develop a diplomatic strategy where resources are shared with rather than denied to any claimant.

Washington must send a clear signal to Beijing: that it understands its concerns and is willing to address them in a responsible way that benefits all claimants in the region. Doing so should mitigate the risk of military conflict and prevent a strategic miscalculation on both sides.