

THE CHINESE OCCUPATION OF ROCKS AND REEFS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA (and how China may regard it)

May 2017

Despite being the most populous country on earth, with one fifth of the world population, the second richest, and the third largest with 7.4% of all emerged lands, China commands only 4,500 km of maritime frontage. This compares with the continental United States' 15,500 or Australia's 12,500.

Because of her relatively compact frontage and her lack of overseas territories, China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers only 877,000 square kilometers, whereas the U.S.' encompasses 11,400,000, Australia's 8,500,000 (and France's 11,700,000). China's EEZ ranks 33rd and represents only 0.6% of all the world's EEZ's.

In addition, China is encircled by a dense network of barriers consisting of islands controlled by foreign nations, most of which, if not all, are hostile to Chinese inroads (see [*"Barriers" maps below*](#)). If a military conflict arose, a Chinese blockade could be enforced relatively easily, although it would certainly require not only a consensus of all parties involved but also large resources. There is little doubt that China's strategists are vividly aware of this dire situation (see [*note 1*](#)).

China will commission her second comparatively small aircraft carrier in 2020, non-nuclear and already obsolete, but is incapable of projecting force past the South China Sea, although she is quite invincible at home.

Vietnam, only 1/30th the size of China, commands an EEZ larger than China's, when including the solid claims on the Paracel islands Vietnam occupies physically (see [*"Existing recognized EEZ's" map below*](#)).

The public in the West is apparently not well aware of China's viewpoint, but China quite understandably must feel asphyxiated not only by Vietnam and the Philippines, but also Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Japan, Russia, and the U.S., who control together the straits, passages, and oceans to and from her shores, and she probably remembers vividly her past subjugation at the hands of the West.

In the South China Sea, the tiny rocks China recently occupied in the Spratly Islands and at Scarborough Shoal (see [*“Chinese claim and de-facto occupation” map below*](#)) are either barely above water at high tide, and give title to sovereignty over only a 12 mile territorial sea and a 24 mile contiguous zone, but over no EEZ at all, or are submerged reefs which give title to no sovereignty whatsoever and are officially attached to whatever firm land lies within 200 nautical miles (see [*note 2*](#)). These rocks and reefs could be considered as a consolation prize for China’s failed attempts to break the barrier in the Japanese Ryukyu islands, for her inability to grab Taiwan, and for her comparatively petite EEZ.

China probably satisfies her nationalistic pride when her colours fly over the miniscule rocks or reefs she turned into artificial islets through reclamation, a process in which she only followed the paths of Vietnam and the Philippines, although on a grander scale.

The disadvantages for China are possibly the high cost and surely the resentment expressed by her neighbours, by whom she is perceived as a petty thief, and by the West, although from a moral standpoint the latter shouldn't feel too aggrieved by China’s appropriation of a few square meters of uninhabited rocks and underwater reefs a relatively short distance from home, even if she later enlarged them somewhat by artificial means, in view of the 80 million square kilometers or so currently occupied by peoples of European descent, that cover nearly 60% of all emerged lands, many of which were in distant regions that were far from being uninhabited at the time they were colonized.

China has built 10,000 feet runways on the reclaimed islands, capable of accommodating any type of aircraft, civilian and military, and also deep water harbours. It is likely that China will claim an EEZ around the artificial islands, although it is almost certain that the rest of the world will not recognize these claims at first (see [*“The probable resulting EEZ’s” map below*](#)). An arbitral tribunal constituted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) found in July 2016 that in occupying and reclaiming these islets China had breached her obligations as a member party of the Convention

Beside defensive self-satisfaction, there seems to be no clear advantage for China to occupy islets and patches of sea inside the prison walls of the South China Sea (and no advantage for the rest of the world either).

One argument frequently invoked by commentators in the West is that these outposts have the potential to threaten maritime traffic in the busy South China Sea (see [*“Shipping Routes through Southeast Asia”*](#) map below). However, it seems the threat from the Spratly islands and Scarborough Shoal is only marginally more acute than it would be from the large Chinese island of Hainan. In fact, part of the traffic, coming from the Strait of Malacca and the Sunda Strait, is bound for Hong Kong and Canton, and thence Shanghai and ports in northern China through the Taiwan Strait, while the other is bound for Japan, Korea and the Pacific coasts of Russia and the Americas, through the Luzon Strait. The routes not bound for China could easily and economically skirt the EEZ's potentially claimed by China and would come within 200 to 250 nautical miles of the artificial islands, about the same distance as from the Chinese island of Hainan. It is unclear how China could try threatening and perhaps even blockading all traffic not bound for her own shores without bringing her own commerce to a halt, since China has no unencumbered access to the oceans and the outcry from her commercial partners would be general and retaliatory with the resulting sealing off of the South and East China Seas to all Chinese traffic. In such an unlikely event, traffic not bound for China would anyway bypass the South China Sea altogether, through either the Strait of Malacca or the Sunda or Lombok Straits, and thence the Macassar Strait, the Mindanao Passage, or even the Halmahera Sea. For ships coming from the west the passage would be lengthened by 815 miles, a 7.5% increase from Western Europe through the Suez Canal, and a matter of two days sailing for a ship going 17 knots. There is no sizable difference from the Cape of Good Hope. The consequences of such an improbable blockade would be certainly annoying and severely disruptive for most of the world, but the economic damage would be disproportionately devastating for China, and the asphyxiation she seems to dread so much would be total.

Regarding petroleum resources, apart from fields already in production and located in substantially shallower waters southwest of the Spratly Islands in recognized Vietnamese EEZ, there is, quite likely, no serious hope of significant recoverable petroleum resources around those tiny reefs, the waters surrounding them being apparently far too deep to allow any commercial development (see [*“Petroleum blocks”*](#) and [*“Bathymetry of the Spratly Islands”*](#) maps below).

Although it is understandable that China's incursions should be officially resisted for the sake of not appearing to give in too easily, the issue should probably not be taken too dramatically. Besides, although severe typhoons do not normally hit the southernmost of the reclaimed islands, they are not infrequent around the northernmost, so the world could just wait for the first strong typhoon to wipe clean some of these islands, which are built of sand on top of madreporic reefs.

Furthermore, the islands will probably sink, slowly or swiftly, if the theory first described by Charles Darwin in "*Coral Reefs*" in 1842 is to be believed.

Note 1

Although in an interesting mirroring of perspective the People's Republic of China officially claims the barriers are a line of defense that she must preemptively secure for herself, and some in the West believe she is on her way to securing soon what she dubs the *“First and Second Island Chains”*, so far the chain is controlled not by China but by Vietnam, Malaysia, The Philippines, Japan, Russia, and the United States, from south to north. It seems improbable that securing the chain could be the result of a preemptive move, rather than the final spoils of an unconditional victory in the conduct of a general military conflict against the rest of the world.

China's official policy is to *“seal off the Yellow Sea, South China Sea and East China Sea”*, apparently from outside pressure, China seemingly fearing the improbable invasion of her otherwise invincible mainland, when in fact it may be understood that the chain actually seals-in China instead, from inside rather than outside pressure. Despite the official jingoist stance probably intended for her own people, it is quite implausible that Chinese strategists ignore the real nature of things.

The concept of an *“Island Chain Strategy”* was first articulated by John Foster Dulles in 1951, the purpose being to seal-in China's and the USSR's potential ambitions.

[Back](#)

Note 2

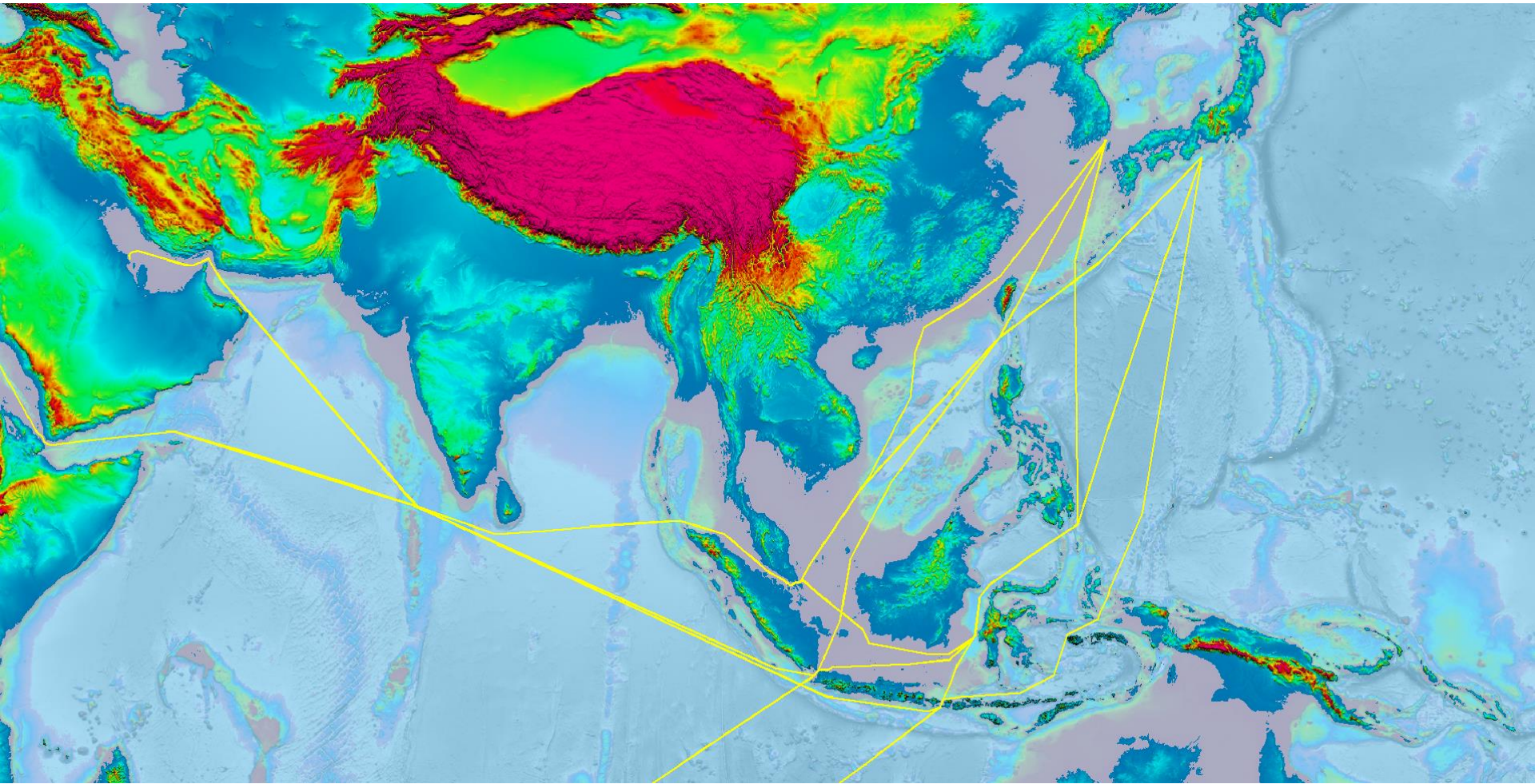
Part VIII, Article 121 of UNCLOS (*Regime of islands*), states that:

1. *An island is a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide.*
2. *Except as provided for in paragraph 3, the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf of an island are determined in accordance with the provisions of this Convention applicable to other land territory.*
3. *Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.*

However, it seems the latter rule is not universally enforced, as the EEZ delineation between some Coral Sea reefs and around some reefs in the Pacific could demonstrate, to cite a few examples.

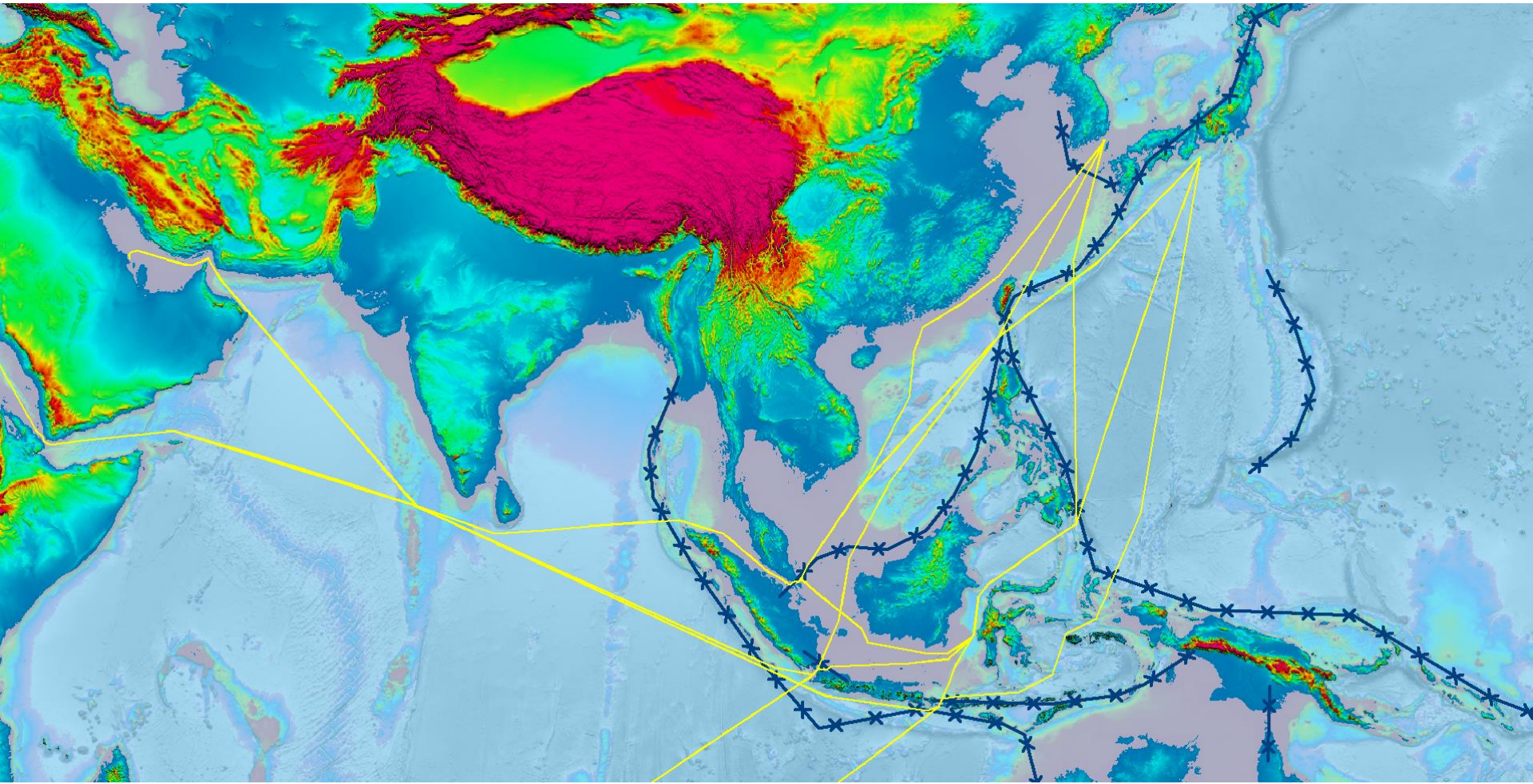
[Back](#)

Shipping routes through Southeast Asia



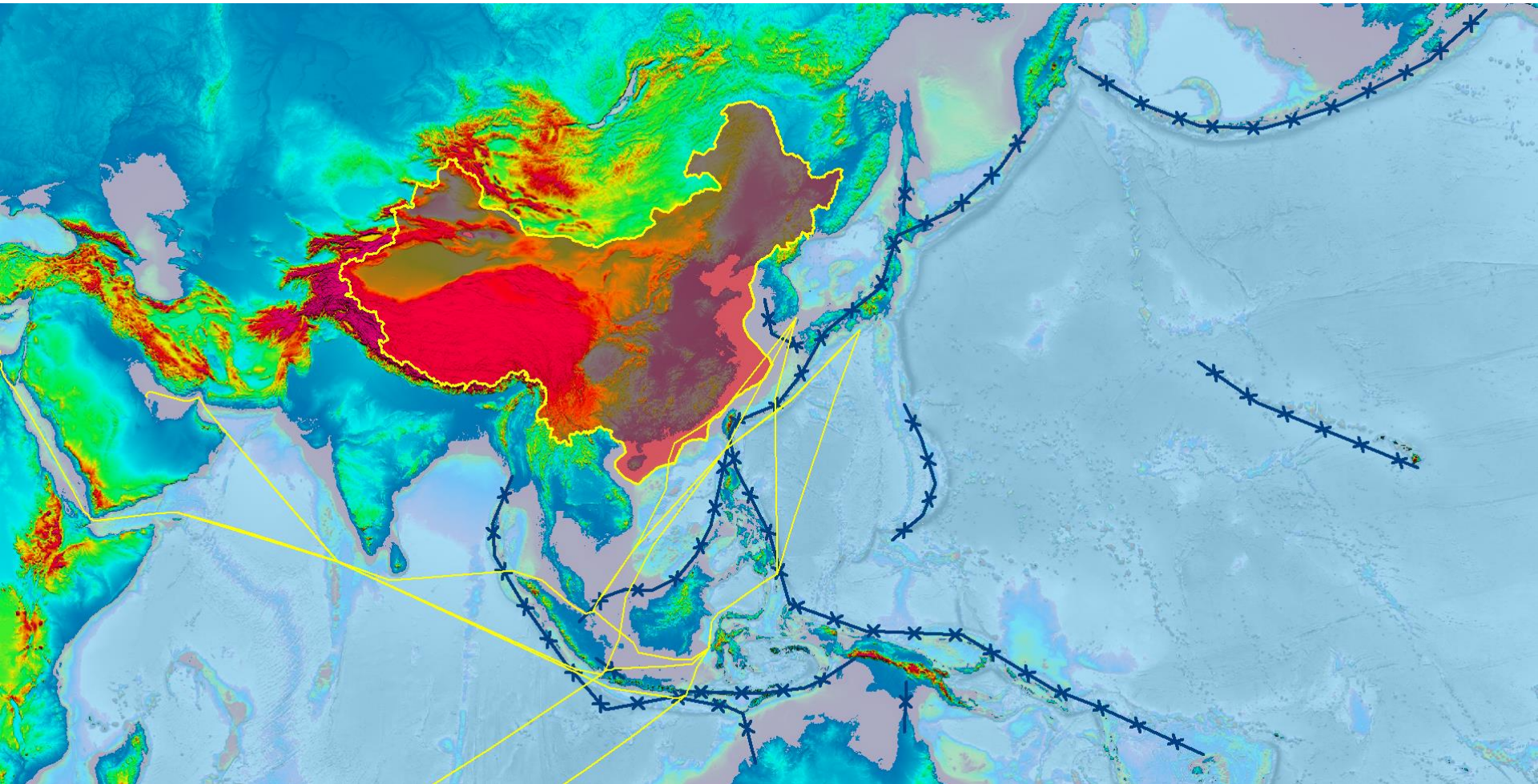
Shipping routes (yellow), from Suez, the Persian Gulf, and the Cape of Good Hope to China, Japan, and Korea

The barriers

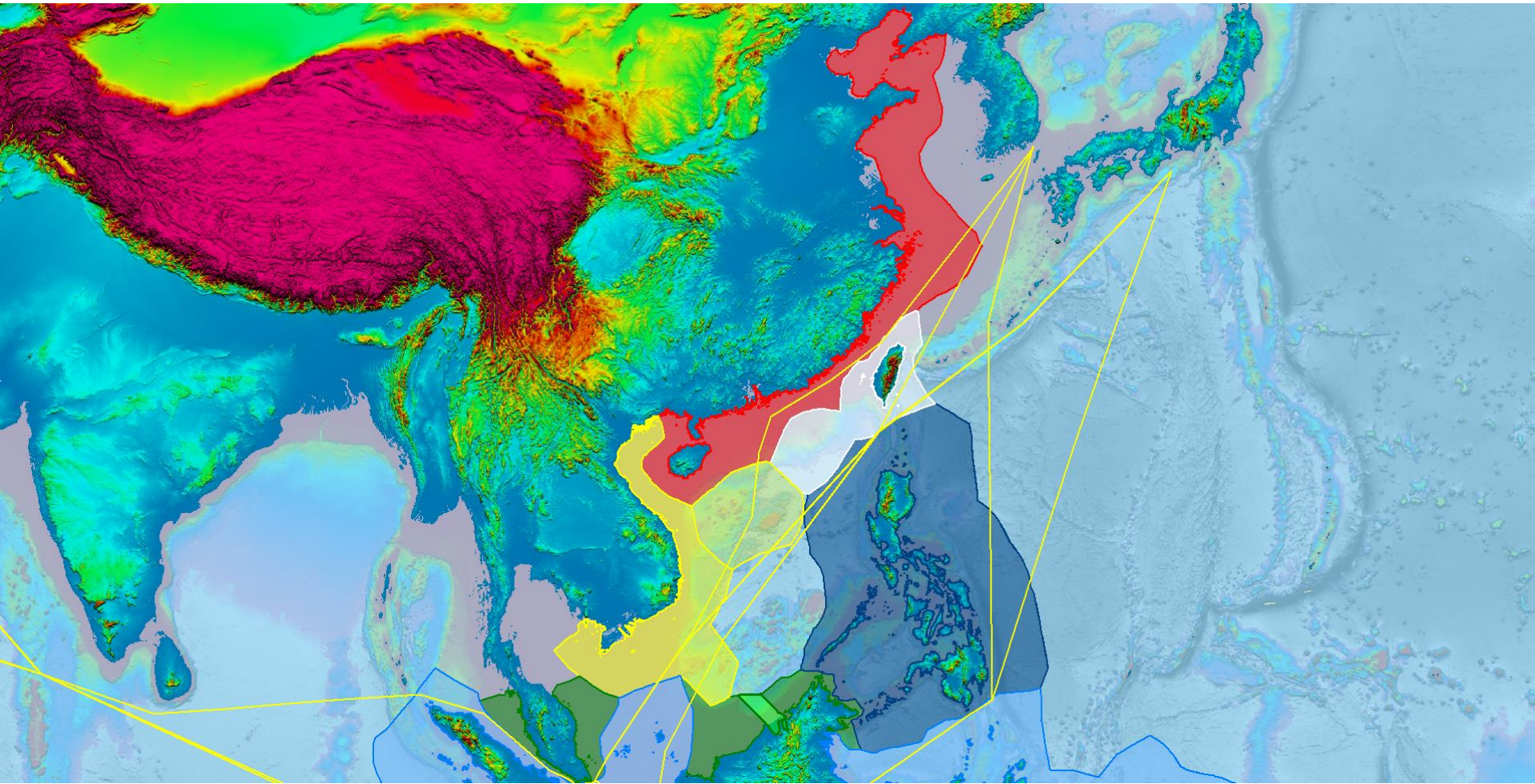


Arcs of adjacent islands as well as shallow and narrow straits create a multilayered girdle around the Southeast Asia region and the Pacific Ocean

Extended barriers

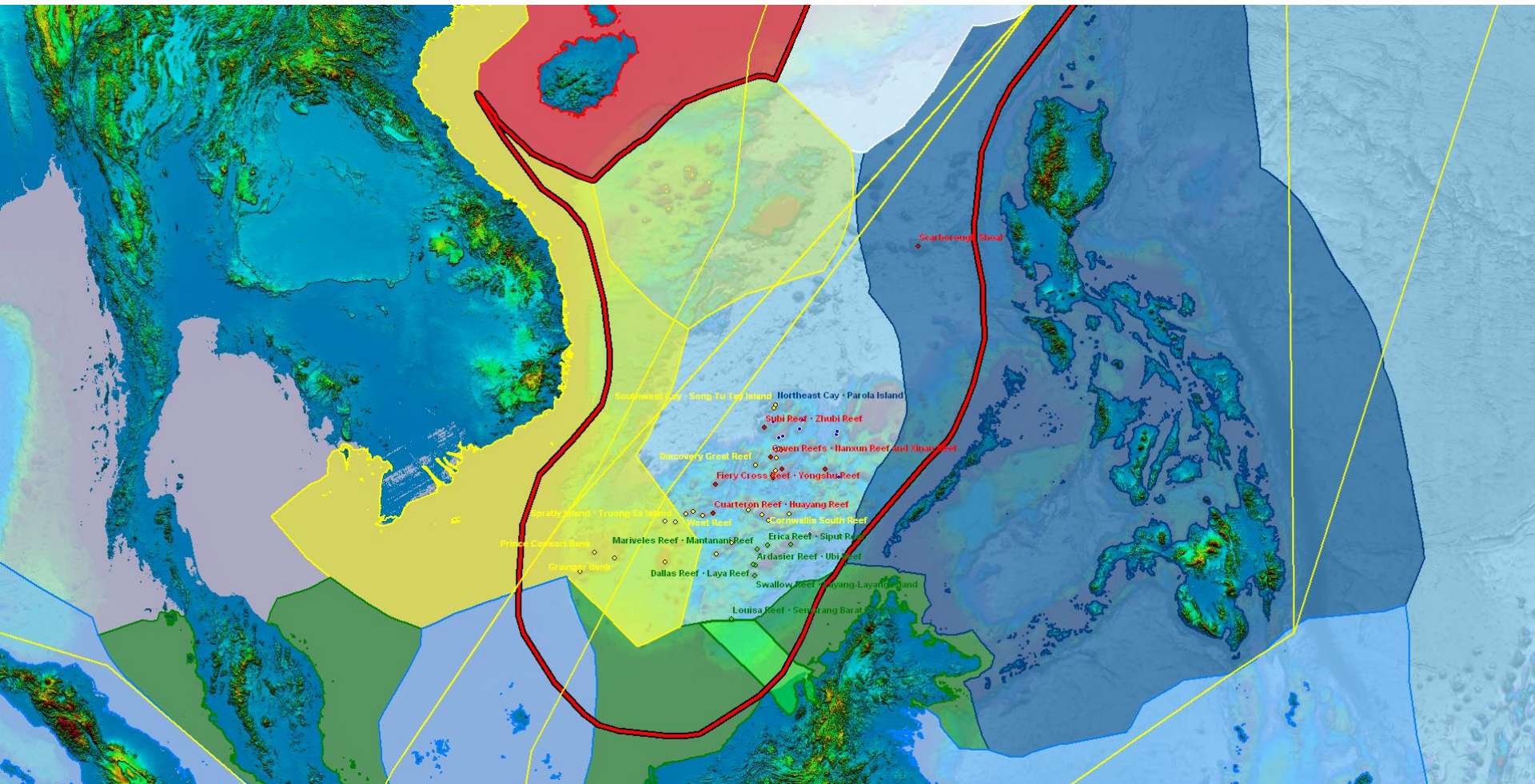


Existing recognized EEZ's



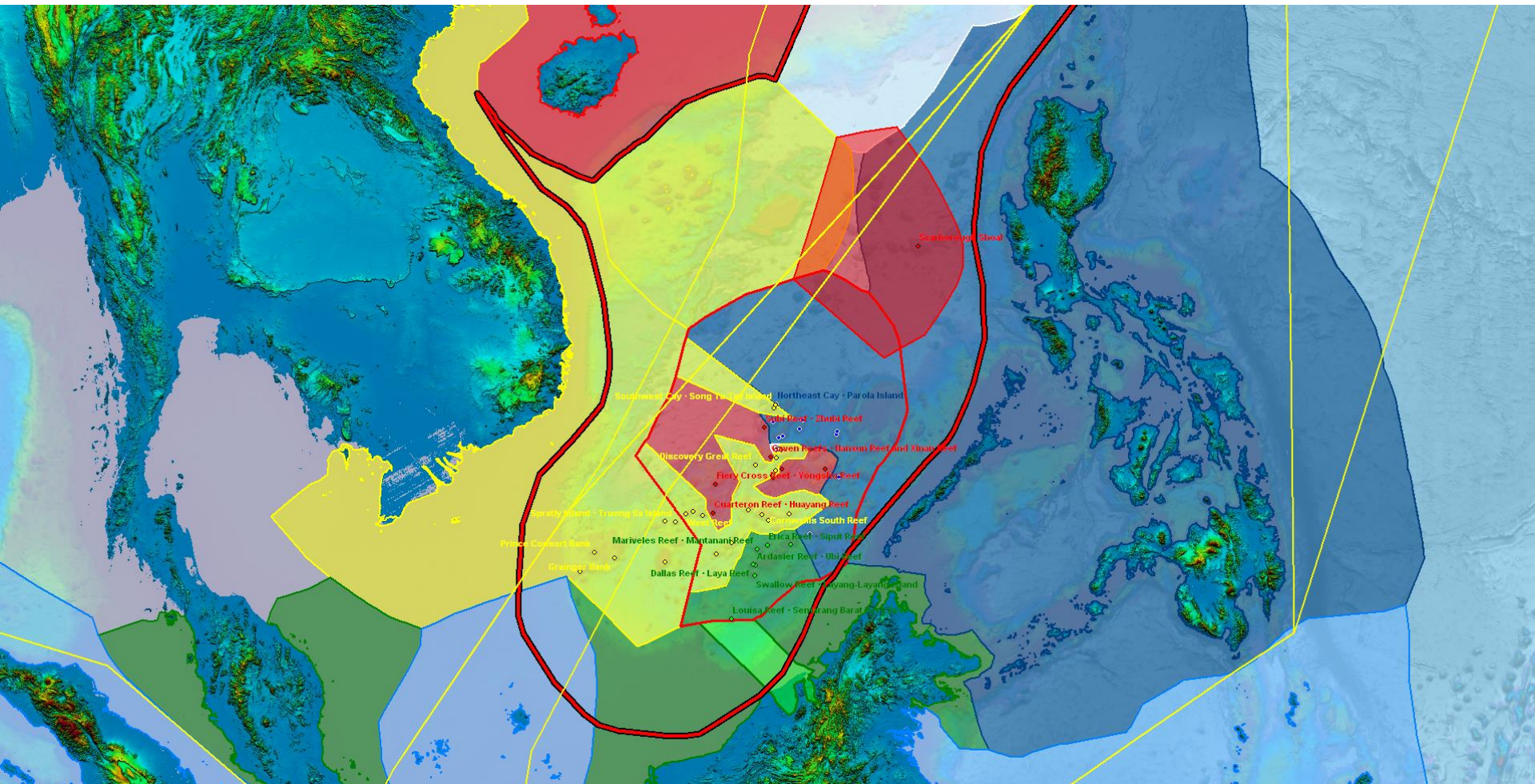
China: red; The Philippines: dark blue; Malaysia: green; Brunei: light green; Vietnam: yellow; Taiwan: white

Chinese claim and de-facto occupation



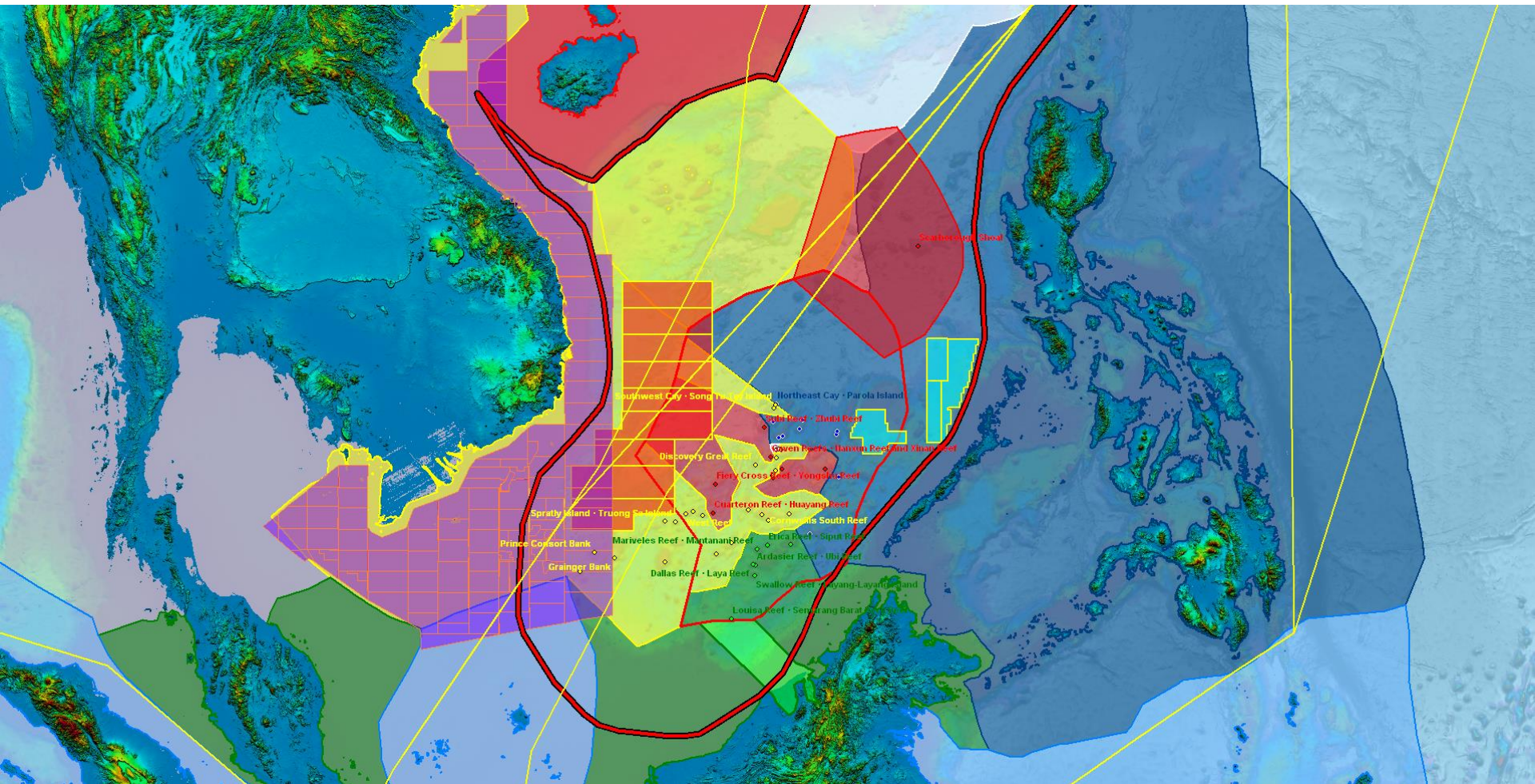
China: red, including the inferred “Nine-dash line”; The Philippines: dark blue; Malaysia: green; Brunei: light green; Vietnam: yellow; Taiwan: white

The probable resulting EEZ's



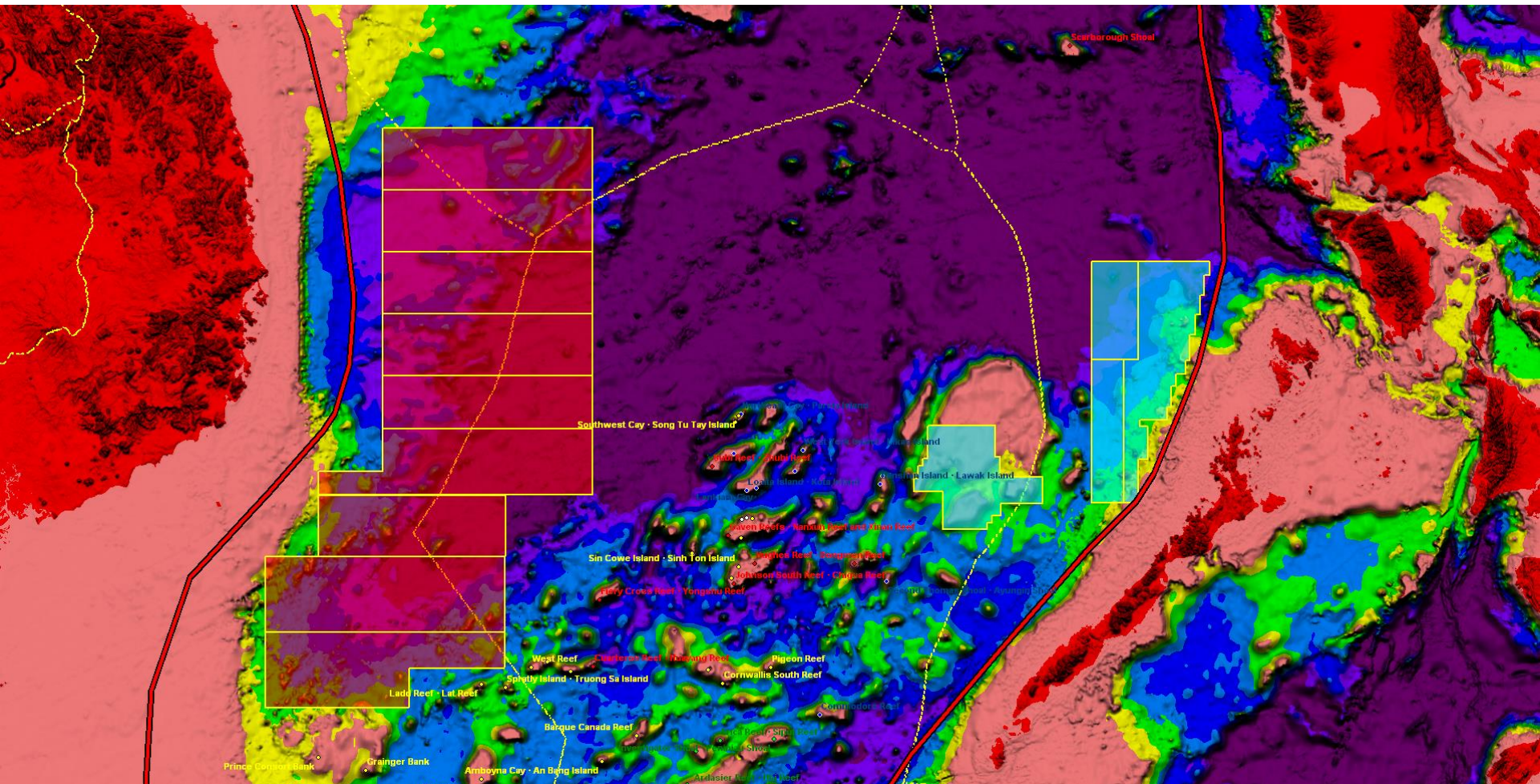
Brunei claims not shown as there is apparently no prior occupation

Petroleum blocks



CNOOC blocks (China): orange; The Philippines blocks: cyan; Vietnamese blocks: purple

Bathymetry of the Spratly Islands



CNOOC blocks (China) in the west; The Philippines blocks in the east

3 May 2018

Beside the fact that Chinese assertiveness is annoying as a principle and has a destabilizing potential, commentators neglect to explain exactly in which way the Chinese occupation of tiny rocks, reefs, and shoals in the South China Sea represents any practical menace for the world, other than perhaps defensive, inside the tight barrier that encircles China. This defensive danger, by definition, can only be triggered if China is attacked by others, but her presence on the rocks can hardly constitute a grave offensive danger for the region and the world.

1. Although the reefs are within reach of both the Chinese navy and air force, they could not be used as advanced bases from a maritime perspective, since they are abutted to other land masses, within easy reach from Hainan, and they offer no advantage inside the South China Sea in comparison to the island of Hainan.
2. From these possible advanced air force bases, any air strike not directed at the South China Sea (which is easily covered from Hainan) would necessarily have to fly either over the land masses of Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, or Brunei, or over the archipelagic waters of the Philippines and Indonesia, which are territorially sovereign. Any such strike would be a *casus belli*.
3. In case of war, air force strikes from the reefs using the most modern Chinese fighters could not reach Java or Sumatra, although they could reach the Philippines, but so could strikes from Hainan.
4. Being tiny and concentrated, the rocks and reefs are particularly vulnerable to retaliatory strikes from the neighboring mainland.

5. The establishment of an air force base on East Timor could theoretically put eastern Java within strike reach (although not Jakarta, nor Sumatra), and also parts of northern Australia, but the survivability of such an isolated base would be quite doubtful.
6. Regarding the so-called threat to the sea lanes, for one thing Hainan is about the same distance to the lanes as the southern reefs are, and for another half the traffic is bound for Chinese ports and the balance could easily by-pass the South China Sea altogether, through either the Strait of Malacca or the Sunda or Lombok Straits, and thence the Macassar Strait, the Mindanao Passage, or even the Halmahera Sea. Although annoying to the world, any attempt by China to disrupt maritime traffic would hurt herself more than anyone else, and devastatingly so.

The party that is probably most bemused by foreign alarm about the Chinese military assertiveness and recent technological boasting is probably the Chinese military themselves.

Irrespective of whether one likes or dislikes China's form of government and new-found assertiveness:

- A. The Spratly Islands comprise 49 tiny reefs and rocks, 22 of which are occupied by Vietnam, 11 by the Philippines, 7 by Malaysia, 7 by China, and 2 by Taiwan. China occupies one in seven Spratly Islands only, commanding potentially 13.9% of the Spratly potential EEZ.
- B. The Paracel Islands comprise 46 rocks and reefs or so, all currently claimed by Vietnam, China, and Taiwan.
- C. To the north, Scarborough Shoal is under Chinese, and the Pratas Islands under Taiwanese control.

-
- 1. Relative distances: If relative distances to the mainland had any relevance regarding territorial sovereignty over islands (refer to the Falklands, or Tahiti, or the New Caledonia, the list is long), Vietnam would lose all but 8 of her 22 Spratly reefs and rocks to Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines, and all but 2 of the 46 reefs in the Paracels would go to China.
 - 2. Absolute distances: the closest of the disputed Spratly and Scarborough reefs is 475 nautical miles from mainland China. Vietnam controls reefs that are 365 nautical miles from her shores. Although the islands are more distant from China, the order of magnitude is quite similar.
 - 3. Nine-dash line: it is hard to find any justification for the nine-dash line claim by China, no matter how far the matter is twisted. However, the occupation of the South China Sea rocks and reefs is a different matter and it is odd that China should have conflated the two concepts.

4. Reef occupation and reclamation: historically, some of the reefs have been occupied and partly reclaimed by the Philippines and Vietnam for quite some time. It is reefs left untouched by the two that China occupied. In retrospect, had the Philippines and Vietnam taken care of business in due time, the Chinese wouldn't have had the opportunity to step in. No power has ever been able to retain territory it would not occupy while another power was prepared to step in.
5. Potential threat to the sea lanes: there are two flows going through the South China Sea, one to the Chinese ports, South Korea, and Eastern Siberia through the Taiwan Strait, and one to Japan and elsewhere through the Luzon Strait. In the bizarre event that China would desire to disrupt maritime traffic (mostly hers), she could control the Taiwan Strait traffic bound for Korea from her mainland shores much easier than from the South China Sea reefs, and the Luzon Strait traffic could either easily skirt the Chinese EEZs commanded by the occupied reefs, or avoid it altogether in case of more serious difficulties, by sailing through the Strait of Macassar. The detour would be annoying but nothing like the closing of the Suez Canal in the late sixties and early seventies that forced all traffic around the Cape of Good Hope. In addition, any disruption would be economically suicidal for China.
6. Military import: the occupied rocks and reefs are located inside the barriers which tightly enclose China, and quite far from them, which prevents to help her project force outside the barriers.
7. Moral justification: it must be hard for the Chinese to comprehend how the United States and her allies could find a serious moral issue with the occupation of totally uninhabited tiny rocks a few hundred nautical miles from China's shores, while the U.S. owns territories 5,000 miles from home, the U.K. 8,000, and France 9,000, all of which are much closer to some other power.

8. Petroleum resources: the Paracel Islands are located in an area significantly shallower than those of the Spratly rocks occupied by China. Although the petroleum potential in the Paracel Islands is proven, that in the Chinese occupied Spratly rocks and reefs is hypothetical. It is unlikely China would risk the security of her own petroleum supply from the Middle East just for the sake of unproven, difficult, and contested resources in the Spratly Islands.
9. Possible swap: if China hadn't invested so heavily in the Spratly Islands, one would think that her eventual purpose could be to swap with Vietnam the few bare rocks she controls there for the 44 petroleum-rich Paracel Islands, over which her claim is quite solid, if only in terms of relative distance. On the other hand, if value hadn't been added to the Spratly rocks, it is difficult to see why the Vietnamese would be interested in doing the swap at all.

7 June 2018

World War I was triggered by an event that presented almost no peril for Western Europe and about which the public in Western Europe knew very little and could not care less. The event took place in a remote and irrelevant country that very few could locate on a map. The South China Sea could evolve in a similar fashion: the issue presents virtually no menace to the outside world, reporters are confused about the geography of the region, mistaking one group of islets for another, and although the public seems to be genuinely concerned, it clearly lacks a sound sense of perspective.

China's "*vast territorial claims*", as one respected Asian newspaper portrayed it, cover so far a combined surface area of 17 sq. km of uninhabited islets (a whopping 0.00017% territorial aggrandizement for China), with very questionable strategic importance and no possibility of an internationally recognized marine exclusive economic zone past the 12 nautical miles territorial sea, which together commands a 2,750 sq. km surface area, less than 0.1% of the South China Sea and less than 0.02% of France's maritime exclusive economic zone, to provide some examples for the sake of proportion.

Furthermore, the contested islets are located inside, not outside, the natural barrier of islands that denies China unencumbered access to the outside world, and consequently present no advance offensive position to China.

Finally, the relatively close islets contested to *China* are located in an expanse of water we call the South *China* Sea, ironically, while the U.S. and Europe lie half a world away. Together, we deny to China an insignificant territorial claim over tiny rocks she considers hers, while we apparently forget that we strongly controlled and occupied militarily all of Asia for several centuries, including China and the contested islands as well as all the neighboring countries, a fact that is certainly not lost on the Chinese and Asian publics. In addition, the populations of Asia cannot fail to notice that peoples of European extract and culture continue to control huge expanses of land both north and south of Asia. In their eye, quite a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

It is incontestable that any attempt by a particular power to depart from the *status quo* in matters of national sovereignty should be met with a marked reticence by the rest of the world, which should endeavor to present their opposition in an unarguable fashion and base their argument on facts, logic, and morals only, the ultimate purpose being to convince the opponent that his actions cannot be condoned. However, despite the current outrage and indignant brouhaha, it will soon be found that our common very vocal strategy does not rest on either fact, logic, or morals, and we will lose both credibility and the current dispute, with the additional danger that the situation could escalate in an ominous fashion, as it did elsewhere 104 years ago.

It seems we may have taken the wrong road.

8 June 2018

There is no reason for military escalation, but since the U.S. Secretary of Defense's bellicose words in Singapore and the French and British rodomontade to show who's boss in the South China Sea, one wonders where reason has gone.

Based on reason alone there shouldn't be an escalation, but where was reason in 1914? Apparently not in France, nor in Britain (although France was more at fault than Britain).

The islets and rocks are claimed by several of our allies, and by China. When you think of it, the Paracels are claimed by Vietnam mostly because France had annexed the Paracels to Indochina, and most are significantly closer to China than to Vietnam. As to the reclamation and militarization of the Spratlys, the Philippines and Vietnam paved the way, although China followed suit with much more energy.

In the end, reason alone cannot decide which party is legitimately entitled to which rock, and if there is a stand-off the party with the least stake in the venture (that's us), will back off. I doubt the peoples of the western democracies would support military escalation on the other side of the planet, even if the biggest loser of a limited military conflict would be China, but when playing with dynamite there is always the risk of an accident.

I wrote there is a risk of escalation, although I believe that if reason prevails nothing will happen, except us losing face and burying the hatchet in a hurry. The rationale is that when addressing a breach of territorial *status quo* the defending party (us) should spend more time building a credible case and avoid notions that could be easily dispelled, such as the so-called "*security of the waterways*". So far, I believe our case is shaky, and as such will be difficult to argue. We should avoid wobbly argumentation, especially when we think we're right. Remember the 2003 "*weapons of mass destruction*"?

9 June 2018

There is a conflation of issues in the South China Sea, which are in fact quite distinct from each other and should be addressed separately, lest ultimate credibility be forfeited:

Territorial sovereignty over uninhabited emerged land

This issue can only be decided by either force or negotiation between the claimants. History teaches us this much. Distance to the mainland is irrelevant in this case (ref. Clipperton Island, which lies 1,000 km offshore Mexico and 10,000 km from France but still belongs to France and commands 430,000 sq. km. of EEZ despite its tiny surface area of 6 sq. km.). In the South China Sea no claim over any of the Spratly and Paracel Islands is more valid than any other, historically or morally. Despite UNCLOS having given an opinion recently, it is hard to understand how control over water could dictate land ownership, when the opposite applies historically.

Exclusive Economic Zones

EEZ boundaries can only be decided by negotiation between parties, with possible mediation by UNCLOS and the UN. No party can claim EEZ rights unilaterally, especially in areas closer to foreign entities than 200 nautical miles. Tiny rocks are not entitled to any EEZ, although the case of reclaimed islands is not as straightforward. At any rate, claims over EEZ are not recognized until endorsed by the UN, since only the UN has jurisdiction over waters other than EEZs (the Area, Part XI of UNCLOS).

Safety of the sea lanes

This topic can be easily dispelled as mostly fictional, as has been described earlier.

Nine-Dash Line

The line is either:

- a claim simply over emerged land, in which case points 1. and 2. above apply, or
- a claim of full sovereignty over maritime areas that can be equated to a claim over archipelagic waters. While the Philippines and Indonesia were both granted large areas of archipelagic waters by UNCLOS, which the UN considers to be uncontested internal waters, the South China Sea is quite a different proposition, with its 7 claimants. Short of obtaining the endorsement of not only the other 6 claimants' but also the UN, the claim is frivolous and the Chinese know it.

In the end, it seems the only real issue is the occupation of uninhabited rocks, which can be addressed by other claimants by doing just what the Chinese have done, and before them the Philippines and the Vietnamese: occupy whatever desert rock subsist in the area. Short of garrisoning and building the islands they consider theirs, claimants risk losing them to another party, which is a constant of history. All the Chinese did was filling a vacuum, and the other claimants have only themselves to blame.