

The Foreign Policy Association
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South China Sea Geopolitics

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Robert Daly, director of the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States in Washington, DC, , addressed the Foreign Policy Association of Harrisburg on April 27 to offer his analysis and possible solution to the ongoing territorial dispute involving the South China Sea.

To briefly summarize the issue, China has constructed man-made islands in the sea and has claimed territorial water rights extending from those islands. Although the islands are legal, the nearby waters are clearly international waters, Daly said, a point being made by the U.S. and China's neighboring countries.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has said China should be denied access to the islands, but Daly argued that the tense situation was not that simple. Daly's main point was that China and the U.S. do not have to be adversaries regarding the South China Sea.

To fully understand the circumstances and form a comprehensive solution, Daly said, China's perspective must be clearly understood.

China maintains that their man-made islands bear no effect on commercial sea traffic and therefore do not infringe on the freedom of navigation. However, China bristles when the U.S. sails warships through the waters.

Daly said that China desires to reassert its power in the region, aiming for a China-centric sphere of influence, much as the U.S. enjoys in the Western Hemisphere.

In recent years, China has advanced greatly both economically and militarily, Daly said, adding that the country's rise has come through exercised restraint rather than raw assertiveness. China's strategy has been one of gradualism, or what Daly called "salami slicing."

The U.S., mainly prepared for a strategy of hard power, appears to be unsure how to approach the South China Sea issue, Daly said. The bigger picture that encompasses the issue is that China aims to be the guarantor of security in the region, but this cannot happen unless the U.S. pulls out.

What Daly prescribed was a spectrum of approaches, including an abandonment of the prospect that the U.S. can be the sole protector of the region. He said the U.S. should consider whether it can afford to maintain a global presence, what possible harm or benefits might come from China's rise, and the fact that the U.S. simply does not have the bandwidth to be strategic in all places at all times.

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