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The Growing Threat of Maritime Conflict

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For centuries, nations and empires have gone to war over disputed colonies, territories, and border regions. Although usually justified by dynastic, religious, or nationalistic claims, such contests have largely been driven by the pursuit of valuable resources and the taxes or other income derived from the inhabitants of the disputed

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lands. Many of the great international conflicts of recent centuries—the Seven Years' War, the Franco-German War, and World Wars I and II, for example—were sparked in large part by territorial disputes of this type. By the end of the twentieth century, however, most international boundary disputes had been resolved, and few states possessed the will or the capacity to alter existing territorial arrangements through military force.

Yet, even as the prospects for conflict over disputed land boundaries seem to have dwindled, the risk of conflict over contested maritime boundaries is growing. From the East China Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean, from the South China Sea to the South Atlantic, littoral powers are displaying fresh resolve to retain control over contested offshore territories.

The most recent expression of this phenomenon, and one of the most dangerous, is the clash between China and Japan over a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea that are claimed by both. Friction over the islands—known as the Diaoyu in China and the Senkaku in Japan—has persisted for years, but it reached an especially high level of intensity in the summer of 2012 after Japanese authorities arrested 14

Chinese citizens who attempted to land on one of the islands to press China's claims, provoking widespread anti-Japanese protests across China and a series of naval show-of-force operations in nearby waters.

Senior Chinese and Japanese officials have met privately in an attempt to reduce tensions, but no solution to the dispute has yet been announced, and both sides continue to deploy armed vessels in the area—often in close proximity to one another. Although the Barack Obama administration would like to see a negotiated outcome to the dispute, China views Washington as too close to Japan, so Beijing has rebuffed US mediation efforts.

Risk of conflict has also arisen in another disputed maritime area, the South China Sea, where China is again one of the major offshore claimants. As in the East China Sea, the dispute centers on a collection of (largely) uninhabited islands: the Paracels in the northwest, the Spratlys in the southeast, and Macclesfield Bank in the northeast (known in China as the Xisha, Nansha, and Zhongsha islands, respectively). China and Taiwan claim all of the islands, while Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam claim some among them, notably those lying closest to their shorelines.

Friction over these contested claims led to a series of nasty naval encounters in 2012, some involving China and Vietnam, and some China and the Philippines. In one such incident, armed Chinese marine surveillance ships blocked efforts by a Philippine Navy warship to inspect Chinese fishing boats believed to be engaged in illegal fishing activities, leading to a tense standoff that lasted weeks. Chinese officials announced recently that, beginning January 1, their patrol ships will be empowered to stop, search, and repel foreign ships that enter the 12-nautical-mile zone surrounding the South China Sea islands claimed by Beijing, setting the stage for further confrontations.

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Maritime disputes of this sort, also involving the use or threatened use of military force, have surfaced in other parts of the world, including the Sea of Japan, the Celebes Sea, the South Atlantic, and the Eastern Mediterranean. In these and other such cases, adjacent states have announced claims to large swaths of ocean (and the seabed below) that are also claimed in whole or in part by other nearby countries. The countries involved cite various provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to justify their claims—provisions that in some cases seem to contradict one another.

Because the legal machinery for adjudicating offshore boundary disputes remains underdeveloped, and because many states are reluctant to cede authority over these matters to as-yet untested international courts and agencies, most disputants have refused to abandon any of their claims. This makes resolution of the quarrels especially difficult.

What makes these disputes so dangerous, however, is the apparent willingness of many claimants to employ military means in demarking their offshore territories and demonstrating their resolve to keep them. This is evident, for example, in both the East and South China Seas, where China has repeatedly deployed its naval vessels in an aggressive fashion to assert its claims to the contested islands and chase off ships from all the other claimants. In response, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines have also employed their navies in a muscular manner, clearly aiming to show that they will not be intimidated by Beijing. Although shots have rarely been fired in these encounters, the ships often sail very close to each other and engage in menacing maneuvers of one sort or another, compounding the risk of accidental escalation.

What accounts for this growing emphasis on offshore disputes at a time when few states appear willing to fight over more traditional causes of war?

For some governments, offshore disputes may be seen as a sort of release valve for nationalistic impulses that might prove more dangerous if applied to other issues, or as a distraction from domestic woes. China's conflict with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, for example, has provoked strong nationalistic passions in both coun-

tries—passions that leaders on each side no doubt would prefer to keep separate from the more important realm of economic relations. Likewise, Argentina's renewed focus on the Falklands/Malvinas is widely considered to be a deliberate response to political and economic difficulties at home. But these considerations are only part of the picture; far more important, in most cases, is a desire to exploit the oil and natural gas potential of the disputed areas.

THE LURE OF OIL AND GAS

The world needs more oil and gas than ever before, and an ever-increasing share of this energy is likely to be derived from offshore reservoirs. According to the Energy Information Administration (EIA) of the US Department of Energy, global petroleum use will rise by 31 percent over the next quarter-century, climbing from 85 million to 115 million barrels per day. Consumption of natural gas will grow by an even faster rate, jumping from 111 trillion to 169 trillion cubic feet per year. Older industrialized nations, led by the United States

and European countries, are expected to generate some of this growth in consumption. But most of it is projected to come from the newer industrial powers, including China, India, Brazil, and South Korea. These four nations

alone, predicts the EIA, will account for 57 percent of the total global increase in energy demand between now and 2035.

Until now, the world's ever-increasing thirst for oil has been satisfied with supplies obtained from fields on land or shallow coastal areas that can be exploited without specialized drilling rigs. But many of the world's major onshore fields have been producing oil for a long time, and are now yielding diminishing levels of output; likewise, production in shallow areas of the Gulf of Mexico and the North Sea has long since fallen from peak levels. Some of the loss from existing reservoirs will be offset through the accelerated extraction of petroleum from shale rock, made possible by new technologies like hydraulic fracturing. But any significant increase in global oil production will require the accelerated exploitation of offshore—especially deep-offshore—reserves.

According to analysts at Douglas-Westwood, a United Kingdom-based energy consultancy, the share of world oil production supplied by off-

Major energy consumers will become increasingly reliant on oil and gas supplies derived offshore.

shore fields will rise from 25 percent in 1990 to 34 percent in 2020. More important, the share of world oil provided by deep wells (over 1,000 feet in depth) and ultra-deep wells (over one mile) will grow from zero in 1990 to a projected 13 percent in 2020. Douglas-Westwood further projects that onshore and shallow-water fields will yield no additional production increases after 2015, so all additional growth subsequently will have to come from deep and ultra-deep reserves. Meanwhile, the world's reliance on natural gas is likely to exhibit a similar trajectory: Whereas in 2000 approximately 27 percent of the world's gas supply came from offshore fields, by the year 2020 that share is projected to reach 41 percent.

Driving this shift toward greater reliance on offshore oil and gas is not only the depletion of onshore fields but also advances in drilling technology. Until recently, it was considered impossible to extract oil or gas from reserves located in waters over a mile deep. Now drilling at such depths is becoming almost routine, and extraction at even greater depths—up to two miles—is about to commence. Specialized rigs have also been developed for operations in the Arctic Ocean, and in areas that pose unusual climatic and environmental challenges, such as the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk, off Russia's Sakhalin Island. In the future, technology may allow the extraction of natural gas from so-called methane hydrates—dense nodules of frozen gas that are trapped in ice crystals lying at the bottom of some northerly oceans.

It follows from all this that the world's major energy consumers—led by China, the United States, Japan, and the European Union countries—will become increasingly reliant on oil and gas supplies derived offshore. Some of this energy can be acquired from fields in areas with no outstanding territorial disputes, such as the North Sea and the Gulf of Mexico. Other large reservoirs, such as Brazil's "pre-salt" fields in the deep Atlantic, lie far enough from other coastal states to eliminate the potential for boundary conflict. But many promising fields are located in bodies of water where maritime boundaries remain undefined. And, as the perceived value of these resources grows, the potential for discord to take a military form will increase as well. This risk is greatest in areas thought to harbor large reserves of oil and gas,

where the contending parties have repeatedly rebuffed efforts to adopt precise, mutually acceptable offshore boundaries, and where one or more of the claimants have employed (or threatened the use of) military means.

CONTESTED SEAS

The risk is especially great in the East and South China Seas. Both regions are thought to sit atop substantial reserves of oil and gas, both lack mutually accepted offshore boundaries, and both have witnessed repeated military encounters. The East China Sea, bounded by China to the west, Taiwan to the south, Japan to the east, and Korea to the north, harbors several large natural gas fields in areas claimed by China, Japan, and Taiwan. The South China Sea, bounded by China and Taiwan to the north, Vietnam to the west, the island of Borneo (divided among Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia) to the south, and the Philippines to the east, is believed to possess both oil and gas deposits; China and Taiwan claim the entire region, while Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines claim large portions of it. All of these countries have engaged in negotiations aimed at resolving the various overlapping claims—without achieving notable success—and all have taken military steps of one sort or another to defend their offshore interests.

Considerable debate persists among industry professionals as to exactly how much oil and gas is buried beneath the East and South China Seas. Because limited drilling has been conducted in these areas (except on the margins), analysts possess little detailed information from which to derive estimates of recoverable reserves. Nevertheless, Chinese experts regularly offer highly optimistic assessments of the seas' potential. The East China Sea, they claim, contains between 175 trillion and 210 trillion cubic feet of natural gas—approximately equivalent to the proven reserves of Venezuela, the world's seventh largest gas power. Chinese estimates of the oil and gas lying beneath the South China Sea are even more exalted: These place the region's ultimate oil potential at over 213 billion barrels (an amount exceeded only by the proven reserves of Saudi Arabia and Venezuela), and that of gas at 900 trillion cubic feet (exceeded only by Russia and Iran). Western analysts, such as those employed by the EIA, are reluctant to em-

Pursuit of oil and gas in disputed offshore territories entails significant potential for friction.

brace such lofty estimates in the absence of actual drilling results, but acknowledge the two areas' great potential.

Whatever the precise scale of the East and South China Seas' hydrocarbon reserves, the various littoral states clearly see them as promising sources of energy. China, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have awarded contracts to different combinations of private and state-owned firms to exploit oil and gas reserves in the areas they claim, and more such awards are being announced all the time. The Chinese have been particularly active, drilling for natural gas in the East China Sea and for oil in the South China Sea. Their efforts took a big step forward in May 2012, when the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) deployed the country's first Chinese-made deep-sea drilling platform in the South China Sea, at a point some 200 miles southeast of Hong Kong.

The Vietnamese have long extracted oil and gas from their coastal waters, and are now seeking to operate in deeper waters of the South China Sea. Across the sea to the east, the Philippines' Philex Petroleum Corporation has been exploring a major natural gas find off Reed Bank—another uninhabited islet claimed by China as well as the Philippines and a site of recent clashes between Chinese and Filipino vessels. Although Chinese leaders say they want to promote cooperative development of the East and South China Seas, Beijing has often taken steps to deter efforts by its neighbors to explore for oil and gas in these areas. In May 2011, for example, Chinese patrol boats repeatedly harassed exploration ships operated by state-owned PetroVietnam in the South China Sea, in two instances slicing cables attached to underwater survey equipment.

Despite the high expectations for oil and gas extraction in the two seas, therefore, any significant progress will have to await the resolution of outstanding territorial disputes or some agreement allowing drilling to proceed without risk of interference. Yet none of the parties to these disputes appears willing to retreat from long-established positions or eschew the use of force. Efforts to seek negotiated outcomes have been frustrated, moreover, by contending historical narratives and a lack of clarity in international law regarding the demarcation of offshore boundaries.

LEGAL CONFUSION

In the East China Sea, both China and Japan draw on competing provisions of UNCLOS (which

both have signed) to justify their maritime claims. Each set of provisions defines a state's outer maritime boundary in a different way: One set allows coastal states to establish an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extending up to 200 nautical miles offshore, in which they possess the sole right to exploit marine life and undersea resources, such as oil and gas; the other allows coastal states to exert such control over the "natural prolongation" of their outer continental shelf, even if it exceeds 200 nautical miles.

China, citing the latter provision, says that its maritime boundary in the East China Sea is defined by its continental shelf, an underwater feature that extends nearly to the Japanese islands. Japan, citing the former provision, insists that the boundary should be drawn along a median line equidistant between the two countries, since the distance separating them is less than 400 nautical miles.

Lying between these two hypothetical boundary lines is a contested area of approximately 81,000 square miles (nearly the size of Kansas) that is thought to harbor large volumes of natural gas—a resource that each side claims is its alone to exploit. The contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands lie at the southern edge of this area, and so neither side is willing to relinquish control over them, each fearing that doing so would jeopardize its claim to the adjacent seabed. Negotiations to resolve the impasse have produced talk of joint development efforts in the contested area, but no willingness to compromise on the basic issues.

The dispute in the South China Sea is even more complex. Drawing on ancient maps and historical accounts, the Chinese and Taiwanese insist that the sea's two island chains, the Spratlys and the Paracels, were long occupied by Chinese fisherfolk, and so the entire region belongs to them. The Vietnamese also assert historical ties to the two chains based on long-term fishing activities, while the other littoral states each claim a 200-nautical mile EEZ stretching into the heart of the sea. When combined, these various claims produce multiple overlaps, in some instances with three or more states involved—but always including China and Taiwan as claimants. Efforts to devise a formula to resolve the disputes through negotiations sponsored by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have so far met with failure: While China has offered to negotiate one-on-one with individual states but not in a roundtable with all claimants, the other countries—mindful of China's greater wealth and power—prefer to negotiate en masse.

Again, the various claimants in these conflicts have, on a regular basis, employed military force to demonstrate their determination to retain control over the territories they have claimed and to deter economic activities in these areas by competing countries. Few such actions have resulted in bloodshed—one major exception was a 1988 clash between Chinese and Vietnamese warships near Johnson Reef in the Spratly Islands that resulted in the loss of more than 70 lives—but many have prompted countermoves by other countries, posing a significant risk of escalation. In September 2005, for example, Chinese warships patrolling along the median line claimed by Japan in the East China Sea aimed their guns at a Japanese Navy surveillance plane, nearly leading to a serious incident.

More such engagements have occurred in the South China Sea, where there are a larger number of claimants and greater uncertainty over the location of boundaries. In one such incident Vietnamese troops fired on a Philippine air force plane on a reconnaissance mission in the Spratlys; in another, Malaysian and Filipino aircraft came close to firing on each other while flying over a Malaysian-occupied reef in the Spratlys.

Recognizing the potential for escalation, leaders of the countries involved in such encounters have taken some steps to avert a serious clash. Chinese and Japanese officials have met on several occasions to discuss the boundary dispute in the East China Sea, pledging to avoid the use of force. Likewise, China and the 10 members of ASEAN signed a Joint Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in 2002, pledging to resolve their territorial disputes in the South China Sea by peaceful means. However, these measures have not prevented the major parties from continuing to employ military means to reinforce their bargaining positions. Worried that such activities could lead to more serious conflict, endangering vital US interests, the Obama administration has offered to act as a mediator—only to provoke a hostile response from Beijing, which sees this as an unwelcome form of American meddling in its backyard.

GIRDING FOR CONFLICT

If the East and South China Seas represent the most conspicuous cases of offshore territorial conflicts driven in large part by the competitive pur-

suit of energy resources, they are by no means the only ones with a potential to spark violence. Others that exhibit many of the same characteristics include quarrels over the Falklands/Malvinas, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Caribbean near Nicaragua and Colombia.

The dispute over the Falklands/Malvinas Islands and their surrounding waters, claimed both by Britain and Argentina, is well known from the 1982 war over the islands, in which the British defeated an invasion by Argentina. At the time, the primary impulses for conflict were thought to be national pride and the political fortunes of the key leaders involved: Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and an unpopular military junta in Argentina. Now, however, a new factor has emerged: competing claims to undersea energy reserves. Large reservoirs of oil are thought to lie beneath areas of the South Atlantic to the north and south of the islands, and both Argentina and Britain say the reserves belong exclusively to them. A number of companies have obtained permits from British and Falkland Islands authorities to sink test wells within a 200 mile EEZ surrounding the islands claimed by London after it ratified UNCLOS in 1997.

Until now, neither side has engaged in provocative military action of the sort seen in the other offshore disputes, but both sides appear to be girding for the possibility. The British have replaced older ships and aircraft in the Falklands with more modern equipment, including Typhoon combat aircraft of the type used during the 2011 Libyan campaign. The Argentines have responded by blocking access to Argentine ports for British cruise ships that first dock in the Falklands—a largely symbolic act, to be sure, but one that hints of stronger actions to come. How this will play out remains to be seen, but neither side has budged on any of the fundamental issues, and the prospect of significant oil production by British firms on what the Argentines consider to be their sovereign territory is bound to increase resentment in the years ahead.

The Eastern Mediterranean, like the Falklands/Malvinas, is also a site of earlier conflict. In addition to the recurring Arab-Israeli wars, there are the ongoing Greek-Turkish dispute over governance of Cyprus—the backdrop for a war in 1974—and a growing schism between Israel and Turkey. But now, again, the discovery of potentially vast ener-

China has repeatedly deployed its naval vessels to assert its claims and chase off ships.

gy reserves is aggravating traditional rivalries. The offshore Levant Basin, stretching from Cyprus in the north to Egypt in the south and bounded by Israel, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip on the east, is thought to hold 120 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and perhaps much more. Production of this gas could prove a boon to the nations involved—few of which have experienced any benefit from the oil boom in neighboring countries.

At this point, the most advanced projects are under way in Israeli-claimed territory. Noble Energy, a Houston-based firm, is developing a number of giant gas fields in waters off the northern port of Haifa. The largest of these, named Leviathan, lies astride the EEZ claimed by the Republic of Cyprus, where Noble has also found substantial gas reservoirs. Although significant hurdles remain, both Israel and Cyprus hope to extract natural gas from these fields by the middle of the decade and to ship considerable volumes to Europe via new pipelines to be installed on the Mediterranean seabed, or in the form of liquefied natural gas.

Seeing the potential for cooperation in exporting gas, Israel and Cyprus have discussed common transportation options and signed a maritime border agreement in December 2011. But both countries face significant challenges from other nations in the region. The Leviathan field and other gas reservoirs being developed by Noble are located at the northern edge of the EEZ staked out by Israel, in waters also claimed by Lebanon. Lebanese authorities, who refuse to negotiate with Israel, have urged the UN to pressure Israel to recognize Lebanon's sovereignty over the area, but to no avail. Far more worrisome are threats by Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite militia based in Lebanon, to attack Israeli drilling rigs in waters claimed by the Lebanese. These threats have prompted Israel's air force to deploy drones over the facilities, allowing for a prompt response to any potential terrorist attack. Meanwhile, Noble's operations in Cypriot-claimed waters have been challenged by Turkey, which does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus or its claim to an EEZ. The Turks have deployed air and naval craft off the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, an ethnic separatist entity that only they recognize, in what is viewed as an implied threat to Noble and other companies operating in the Cypriot EEZ.

In the Western Hemisphere, a dispute has arisen between Colombia and Nicaragua over a swath of the Caribbean claimed by both of them. On November 19, 2012, the International Court of Justice in The Hague awarded control of some 35,000

square miles of the Caribbean—believed to harbor valuable undersea reserves of oil and gas—to Nicaragua. The decision infuriated the Colombians, who rejected the ruling and withdrew from a pact recognizing the court's jurisdiction over its territorial disputes. Leaders of both countries have pledged to seek a peaceful resolution, but the situation remains tense. "Of course no one wants a war," said Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos. "That is a last resort."

OPTIONS FOR RESOLUTION

As should now be evident, the accelerated pursuit of oil and gas reserves in disputed offshore territories entails significant potential for international friction, crisis, and conflict. This is so because such efforts combine unusually high economic stakes with intense nationalism and the absence of clearly defined boundaries. Add to this the lack of clearly defined mechanisms for resolving boundary disputes of this sort, and the magnitude of the problem becomes apparent. Unless a concerted effort is made to resolve these and other such disputes, what is now latent or low-level conflict could erupt into full-scale violence.

The problem is not a lack of viable solutions. In several contested maritime regions, countries that were unable to agree on their offshore boundaries have been able to establish joint development areas (JDAs) in which drilling has proceeded while negotiations continue regarding the demarcation of final borders. The first of these special zones, the Malaysia-Thailand Joint Development Area, was created in 1979 and has been producing gas since 2005; Vietnam has also become a party to an additional slice of the JDA. A similar formula has been adopted by Nigeria and the island state of São Tomé and Príncipe to develop offshore fields in a contested stretch of the Gulf of Guinea. China and Japan once agreed to employ a solution of this sort to develop the contested area claimed by both in the East China Sea, but so far little has come of the effort.

Meanwhile, UNCLOS, as amended, incorporates various measures for resolving disputes over the location of offshore territories. Essentially, it mandates that such disputes be resolved peacefully, through negotiations among the affected parties. UNCLOS also includes provisions for arbitration by third parties and referral of disputes to the International Court of Justice, or to the newly established International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (based in Hamburg). Also, to help determine the validity of a state's claim to offshore territories

based on the natural prolongation of its continental shelf, the UN has established a Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.

However, all of these measures have limitations. For one thing, they do not apply to countries that have failed to ratify UNCLOS, such as Turkey and the United States. They have little effect, moreover, when contending states refuse to negotiate, as is the case with Israel and Lebanon; or eschew arbitration and outside involvement, as China has done in the East and South China Seas. Clearly, something more is needed.

What appears most lacking in all of these situations is a perception by the larger world community that disputes like these pose a significant threat to international peace and stability. Were these disputes occurring on land, one suspects, world leaders would pay much closer attention to the risks involved and take urgent steps to avoid military action and escalation. But because they are taking place at sea, away from population centers and the media, they seem to have attracted less concern.

This is a dangerous misreading of the perils involved: Because the parties to these disputes appear more inclined to employ military force than they might elsewhere, and boundaries are harder to define, the risk of miscalculation is greater, and so is the potential for violent confrontation. The risks can only grow as the world becomes more reliant on offshore energy and coastal states become less willing to surrender maritime claims.

To prevent the outbreak of serious conflict, the international community must acknowledge the seriousness of these disputes and call on all parties involved to solve them through peaceful means, as quickly as possible. This could occur through resolutions by the UN Security Council, or statements by leaders meeting in such forums as the Group of 20 governments. Such declarations need not specify the precise nature of any particular outcome, but rather must articulate a consensus view that a resolution of some sort is essential for the common good. Arbitration by neutral, internationally respected “elders” can be provided as necessary. To facilitate this process, ambiguities in UNCLOS should be resolved and holdouts from the treaty—including the United States—should be encouraged to sign.

AFTER CONSENSUS

Assuming such a consensus can be forged, solutions to the various maritime disputes should be within reach. China and Japan should jointly de-

velop the gas field in the disputed area of the East China Sea until a final boundary is adopted—an option already embraced in principle by the two countries. In the South China Sea, a JDA should be established on the model of the Malaysia-Thailand Joint Authority, consisting of representatives of all littoral states and empowered to award exploration contracts (and allocate revenues) on an equitable basis. A similar authority should oversee drilling in the waters surrounding the Falklands, the Israel-Lebanon offshore area, and the waters around Cyprus. At the same time, negotiations leading to a permanent border settlement in these areas should be undertaken under international auspices.

If the countries involved cannot agree to such measures, they should be pressured to submit their competing claims to an international tribunal with the authority to determine the final demarcation of boundaries, while international energy companies should be required to abide by the outcome of such decisions or face legal action and the possible loss of revenues.

Such measures are important for another reason: to help reduce the risk of environmental damage. As demonstrated by the Deepwater Horizon disaster of April 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico and more recent oil leakages from Brazil’s pre-salt fields, deep offshore drilling poses a significant threat to the environment if not conducted under the most scrupulous production methods. Clearly, maritime areas that lack an accepted regulatory and jurisdictional regime, such as the South China Sea, are more likely to experience spills and other disasters than areas with well-established boundaries and effective supervision.

The establishment of clear maritime boundaries and the promotion of collaborative offshore enterprises rank among the most important tasks facing the international community as the global competition for resources moves from traditional areas of struggle, such as the Middle East, to seas where the rules of engagement are less defined. The exploitation of offshore oil and gas could help compensate for the decline of existing reserves on land, but will result in increased levels of friction and conflict unless accompanied by efforts to resolve maritime boundary disputes. Defining borders at sea may not be as easy as it is on land, where natural features provide obvious reference points, but it will become increasingly critical as more of the world’s vital resources are extracted from the deep oceans. ■