

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

**Book Launch: On Dangerous Ground: America's Century  
in the South China Sea**

DATE

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FEATURING

**Bonnie Glaser**

*Director, Asia Program, German Marshall Fund*

**Peter Martin**

*Reporter, Bloomberg*

CSIS EXPERTS

**Gregory B. Poling**

*Senior Fellow and Director, Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency  
Initiative, CSIS*

*Transcript By*

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Gregory B.  
Poling:

Good morning, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us, especially after a long Fourth of July weekend. We really appreciate it.

I'm Greg Poling. I direct the Southeast Asia Program and the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative here at CSIS. And in case you came to the wrong link, this is the book launch of my forthcoming "On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea." I say forthcoming because you can get it on Kindle; it published last Friday. Unfortunately, like everything else amid our current world, publication of the hard copy has been delayed by a couple of weeks, but I promise they are going to ship in about two weeks.

I'm joined today by my very good friends and colleagues, Pete Martin with Bloomberg, who's going to help moderate a discussion with myself and Bonnie Glaser, who heads the Asia Program at the German Marshall Foundation. But first, I'm going to talk about the book, and then I'm going to turn it over to Pete to help guide our discussion.

Now, we do have a small audience in our new hybrid studio here at CSIS and a much larger group online. I would encourage and welcome questions from both of you. Pete is going to be able to take them whether they come in online or good, old-fashioned raising of hands here in the room. And if you miss anything today, it will all be up on YouTube and csis.org for perpetuity, I suppose.

So with that, let me jump right into it. Why write a book about the South China Sea in 2022? It's not as if we don't hear enough about the South China Sea for the last decade. And I suppose the answer to that is that I felt, when I started this project at the end of 2018, that we really didn't have a general history of the South China Sea written from an American perspective for an American audience, nor did we have one that very clearly laid out the history of the other claimants beyond the People's Republic of China. A lot of our historiography about the South China Sea ultimately derives from Chinese sources and Chinese academic writings from the '80s and '90s that have filtered down to the rest of us, and so the picture we have of the history of the South China Sea is skewed.

And then, of course, my job, working at a think tank here in Washington, is to advance the interests of the United States, and fundamentally we had a question: What exactly are the interests of the United States in the South China Sea? There's been a lot of ink spilled over the last decade about whether or not the U.S. is losing the South China Sea or has lost the South China Sea, and the problem is that those terms are not usually defined. What exactly is it about a bunch of disputes over rocks and reefs half a world away that seems so darn important to multiple U.S. administrations? So I set out

with those two missions: Let's tell the story of the South China Sea and let's tell Americans why they should care in the first place.

Now, the disputes over the South China Sea, of course, are really twofold. We have a set of territorial disputes over the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, Pratas reef and Scarborough shoal, and then we have a set of maritime disputes which you can see demarcated on the fancy green screen behind me via China's Nine-Dash Line. These are two different sets of disputes, and they involve different U.S. interests. The territorial disputes at this point are over a century old, and what often gets missed in the history, as we usually tell it, is the U.S. has been there the whole time. U.S. officials have been responding to developments and claims made over the rocks and islands of the South China Sea since the beginning of the 20th century, and that's because the U.S. started its relationship in the South China Sea as a resident power, as a colonial power of The Philippines, and so had a great deal of concern in what I would refer to as the first phase of the disputes, pre-World War II, in the security of its colony and particularly in Japanese advances in the South China Sea.

The maritime disputes over water and seabed, those are newer, and I'll get to those down the line. But one message I want to drive home, without eating too much into the Q&A that I know Pete wants to ask, is, what have the interests been of the United States over that century? Have they changed? Have they evolved? And what I argue in the book, what I came to through my research, is that of course they've evolved as the disputes have changed, but at their core, U.S. interests have remained pretty steady. U.S. involvement in the South China Sea has been reflective of much older abiding U.S. interests, either in alliance commitments or in defense of maritime law overall, the idea of the oceans as a global maritime commons, which is about the oldest dispute or oldest interest you can find in U.S. foreign policy. Ever since the earliest days of the republic as a trading nation, U.S. government officials have stood very firmly on the idea of international maritime law, that the oceans are there for everybody. And so once the South China Sea began threatening each of those interests in turn, the U.S. responded accordingly, and continues to. Those two things continue to be at the base of U.S. interests in South China Sea.

So let's talk very quickly about how we got here. How did this South China Sea dispute, or disputes, come about in the first place? If we look at our map, we have two main island groups: We have the Paracel Islands up in the north and we have the Spratly Islands down in the south. And I'm going to glance over Pratas and Scarborough for now, although I'm happy to talk about those in the Q&A if anybody's interested.

The Paracel Islands dispute dates back to the 1920s in its current form. You had earlier annexations by the Nguyễn dynasty in Vietnam, all the way back

in 1816, and by the Qing dynasty in China in 1909, but it wasn't until the 1920s that the French, the Japanese, and the then Republic of China all started making claims to this island group. Down in the Spratlys we had, somewhat later, a messier race to claim these islands, so nobody before the early 20th century had claimed the Spratly Islands. The Spratly Islands on pretty much every map of the world were just listed as the dangerous ground, a place to be avoided, a bunch of rocks and shoals and reefs that no sane mariner should try to sail through.

Only in the 1930s does that begin to shift. We begin to get Japanese business interests moving into the islands, mining guano and phosphates, and fish processing, and then we get an explicit claim from France. Paris becomes the first country to make what would be considered a modern claim to the Spratly Islands. They do so first in 1930; they draw a box around a big chunk of the islands. They say, everything in here is claimed on behalf of France. They do not claim a whole bunch of what we now think of as the Spratlys. So a huge expanse of these reefs and rocks as we see them today are outside of this original French claim because they're under water or they're very tiny. But they remain part of the dangerous grounds in the thinking of American and other foreign officials. In 1933, pushed by objections from Britain and the U.S., who said you can't just claim a box, you have to tell us what you're claiming, the French come up with seven islands. These are the seven islands that Paris claimed, annexed in 1933, and that largely remained at the heart of the South China Sea dispute for decades after that because they're all the biggest ones. They're the only place that any rational person would think is an island. If you get shipwrecked anywhere else in the Spratlys, you're going to be up to your knees in water, so you better hope that you land on one of these seven.

Up in the Paracels, as World War II approaches, it becomes very clear that Japan is interested in more than just commercial enterprises. The French and the British start getting worried about this, as do the Americans, from time to time, because the U.S. has growing concerns about Japanese involvement in the South China Sea encirclement of the American Philippines. So in 1938, you have this race to occupy some of the islands, which had basically only been occupied to that point by fishermen and a handful of, you know, meteorologists. The Japanese set up their first military bases on Woody Island and in Lincoln Island. The French go out, they try to do the same, they get there a little late, so they post up on Pattle and they also drop their own people on Woody Island. In 1939, Japan annexes both the Paracels and the Spratlys as part of a single island group, which Tokyo calls the Shinnan Gunto, the new southern archipelago. It also sets up military bases down in the Spratlys on Itu Aba. And that's kind of the story of the first round of U.S. interests in the South China Sea.

Throughout all of this, you have U.S. officials voicing increasing concern that Japanese claims to the territories, the Paracels and Spratlys, are being made, in some ways, in contravention of international law at the time but, more importantly, of ways – in ways that threaten direct U.S. interests in the Philippines, and particularly U.S. navigational rights in the dangerous grounds – the waters and reefs just off the Philippines.

The 1930s also marks the first explicit statement of claim – interest and claims by Philippine officials, starting with Senator Elpidio Quirino, who then becomes the interior secretary and will eventually be the president. So, while much of the current historiography tells us that Philippine claims are relatively new – that prior to World War II, it's really only the French by way of Vietnam and the Republic of China making claims to the Spratlys and Paracels – that's just not true. That's a rewriting of the historical narrative. The U.S. at this time looks into these claims that Philippine officials want to make and decides that the U.S. has no claim of its own – that the islands cannot be considered part of the Philippines governed by the United States, but that doesn't mean the Philippines can't claim it for themselves after independence.

Now, all of this, of course, becomes forgotten in World War II. There were much bigger concerns. After the war, we have a race to reoccupy the islands at a time when the U.S. and most others are distracted. You have the Cold War heating up. War in Korea begins in 1950. The Chinese Civil War effectively ends in 1950 with the fall of Hainan. And throughout all of this, the claimants are making moves in the islands largely beyond the canon of the outside powers. It starts in 1946 and 1947. As soon as the war is over, the French and the Republic of China race to be the first to reoccupy the islands. The Republic of China gets there first. It sets up military bases at Woody Island, the biggest of the Paracels here, and down in Itu Aba again, which is the biggest of the Spratlys. But it has to leave those in 1950 as the last of the nationalist forces are evicted from Hainan. They can no longer keep the islands resupplied, so they hightail it out of there.

The French do set up new bases in the Paracels, which are then handed over to the client state of Vietnam and eventually the independent Republic of Vietnam based in Saigon. And they end up occupying all of what we now call the Crescent Group of islands, the half of the Paracels on the southwest. I know the other one looks more like a crescent. I didn't name it, but that one's called the Amphitrite Group.

In 1955, the People's Republic of China quietly moves into the old ROC base on Woody Island, sets up shop. Nobody seems to notice. And that presages the next really 30 years – 20 years of divided occupation of the Paracels; the French and Vietnamese on one half, Chinese on the other.

Down in the Spratlys, things are even more complicated. Again, the ROC had occupied Itu Aba in January 1947, but they leave in 1950 once they get evicted from Hainan. Nobody occupies any of the Spratlys for a number of years, until 1956 when a famous Filipino businessman named Tomás Cloma, perhaps inspired by an infamous American adventurer named Morton Meads – I'd encourage you to read that chapter of the book – go down and they stake a claim to the Spratlys on behalf of the Philippine government. Cloma says that he's claiming the Spratly Islands on behalf of the Philippines as the province of Freedomland. He gets no support from the Philippine government, but this does provoke anger among the other claimants, including the ROC, who comes back and reoccupies Itu Aba in 1956.

That's the only occupation until the early 1970s. 1970-1971, the Philippine government under the Marcos administration finally goes out and sets up shop on six of these islands, formally claiming them for the first time even though they've been talking about doing so for 40 years. And then, in response, the Republic of Vietnam in Saigon sets up shop on Nam Yết Island.

This is key to understanding what I would consider the second phase of the U.S. interest in the South China Sea, right? After the war, the U.S. is largely distracted. It's worried about Korea. It's worried about concluding the San Francisco peace conference, which left the sovereignty of these islands undetermined. It's worried about growing competition with the Soviets. And its number-one priority in the region, other than eventually Vietnam, is maintaining this new alliance network that it's built. And when you look at the map of the Spratlys, you see that all three of the occupants are U.S. treaty allies – or, well, there's a treaty with the Philippines; there's a treaty with the ROC; and the Republic of Vietnam is an informal treaty ally. And so, understandably, the biggest U.S. concern is keeping them from fighting. The U.S. has no interest in seeing these seemingly-unimportant rocks and reefs provoke a conflict among U.S. allies, all of whom should have bigger things to worry about.

And to their credit, the allies largely feel the same. The allies, while they jostle and they, you know, play this game of checkers where they take one island and then another throughout the '60s and '70s, they are very careful to avoid conflict with each other. That only breaks in '75 – or, '74, and this presages the third phase of U.S. interest, a much more dangerous phase for both of the U.S. and its allies.

In 1974, the People's Republic of China decides that they are going to take the Vietnamese-held half of the Paracel Islands, the Crescent Group. And in January, they provoke a fight, which they then win – the Battle of the Paracels; much more about that in the book. But this leaves the PRC in control of all of the Paracel Islands for the first time. The U.S. response is, let's say, found wanting. The U.S. does not believe its ally, the Republic of

Vietnam, at first. It believes that somehow the Vietnamese must have provoked this fight because surely China cares more about its budding normalization of ties with the Nixon government at that time than it would the Paracels – which is exactly what China believed it could convince the U.S., and it worked like a charm.

And really, the only U.S. concern is that an American gets captured in this. A former Green Beret who's a member of the Military Assistance Group in Saigon named Gerald Kosh is taken captive on Pattle Island along with the Vietnamese troops, and the – or, National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and his team spend most of their energy after the battle just trying to get him released. This is a huge blow to U.S. credibility. The bigger blow, of course, comes less than a year later when Saigon falls.

And so in this environment you suddenly have Saigon having fallen and the U.S. proving that it could be played by China up in the Paracels. You have by 1979 the U.S. abrogation of its treaty with the Republic of China, and that's been clearly signaled for years so everybody knows it's coming years in advance. And then you have the Philippines stuck out there as the last ally left in a fight that it's not prepared for in which, by '74, there's real fear that the Chinese might come down to the Spratlys at any moment and by '75, with the taking of Saigon, all of the Vietnamese – the South Vietnamese outposts in the Spratlys are now held by North Vietnamese commandos. The Marcos government in the Philippines has a very real reason to believe that they face imminent attack, including in one case a defector from Vietnam who tells them that he had overheard North Vietnamese commandos saying they were going to invade the Philippine Islands.

So for the next four years, you have a very heated discussion within the halls of government in Manila and Washington about what exactly the U.S.-Philippine alliance means in this new, more dangerous era in which all the other allies are gone and the Philippines stands alone. And by 1979, the two sides come to a conclusion. They decide that the U.S. will extend the mutual defense treaty obligations under Article 5 of the treaty to any unprovoked attack on Filipino vessels, personnel, or planes anywhere in the Pacific, including places like Reed Bank where the Filipinos are now beginning to explore for oil and gas by the late 1970s. It's not clear yet whether or not the islands are actually covered. The U.S. is very cagey about this because it worries that the Philippines might actually be the one to provoke a fight over the islands. But waters and airspace, that's covered.

And that remains the U.S. position, effectively, until 2019, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo goes out to Manila and says, oh, the islands are also included. So from 1979 until 2019, we're in this very clear phase where the U.S. is committed quietly to defending Philippine interests, Philippine lives in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. And that becomes the primary U.S. interest in the disputes for years afterwards.

The next phase of the disputes kind of breaks open in 1988. So this is when those fears about Chinese encroachment in the Spratlys finally come true. Much as they did in 1974, Chinese officials conclude that if they play their cards right and only pick on the Vietnamese, who are by that point still pariahs, they can get away with moving into the Spratlys, occupying these islands without provoking an international backlash. And they do, for the most part. China goes down and build its first outpost in the Spratlys in January 1988 at Fiery Cross Reef, and this begins a race with the Vietnamese down there, who try to take every island that's left before China can get there first.

They go one for one for several months until, in April 1988, they both get to a certain reef at the same time. The Vietnamese land on Johnson Reef just a couple hours before Chinese forces get there. A clash ensues in which the better-armed Chinese navy sinks all the Vietnamese boats on the scene and then turns their deck guns on the defenseless Vietnamese soldiers. That is the Battle of Johnson Reef.

After that, China has a free hand to occupy the rest of what it wanted. It ends up with six islands by the end of 1988, having now shown twice that it's willing to use unprovoked force to take territory in the South China Sea. And the U.S., as China predicted, does nothing. The U.S. again believes the Vietnamese must have picked the fight and nobody's going to defend Vietnam in 1988. Vietnam is without a friend in the world, other than the by that point already in turmoil Soviet Union.

The same hubris and modernization that drove China to finally occupy the Spratly Islands in 1988 also leads China to begin to change the very nature of its claim. And that's what brings us into the current state of the claims. Way back in the 1930s, Chinese cartographers had come up with this Nine-Dash Line – just like it sounds, a bunch of dashes on some old maps, mostly British sailing charts, within which China said we claim everything up there, all the territory, all the islands. And that's because no Chinese official had ever set foot on them, so they didn't know what they were claiming. They just drew a line around it and said any rocks or islands you can find anywhere in this line belongs to China. And that is the basis of China's claims from the 1930s until at least the early 1990s.

By the early 1990s, a new debate is taking place. It starts in Taipei, across the strait, and it eventually comes to Beijing about whether or not China should change the Nine-Dash Line to not just be a claim to islands, but also a claim to all the water and seabed and airspace within it. This eventually leads to China's claims of historic rights throughout the entire South China Sea. By 1992, China is claiming oil and gas rights at places like Wan'an Bay down at Vanguard Bank – 800-plus miles from the Chinese coast, way beyond any

legal claim from any of the islands. It's subsidizing fishing all the way down on the Sunda Shelf off Indonesia. By 1996, it draws baselines around the Paracel Islands and says everything inside the Paracels is now Chinese internal waters, no other foreign vessel or plane can pass through those baselines. All of this is clearly illegal, in contravention of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea – which China helped negotiate – which was signed in 1982 and finally took effect in 1994.

This provokes the U.S. State Department to, in a sense, expand the nature of its interest in the South China Sea. Up to that point, the U.S. had only seen the South China Sea as a territorial dispute over rocks and islands that didn't directly affect U.S. interests as long as nobody attacked the Philippines. It was a matter of alliance credibility. But now, suddenly, China is making these claims that directly infringe on the rights of U.S. ships, U.S. planes, U.S. citizens, and that threaten to undermine the whole regime of international maritime law – which the U.S., as I said at the top, was deeply invested in.

So, in 1995, you get a statement from the U.S. State Department. When asked about Chinese occupation of an underwater reef, Mischief Reef, they say, quote, "Maintaining freedom of navigation is a fundamental interest of the United States. Unhindered navigation by all ships and aircraft in the South China Sea is essential for the peace and prosperity of the entire Asia-Pacific region, including the United States. The United States takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims of sovereignty over the various islands, reefs, atolls, and cays in the South China Sea. The United States would, however, view with serious concern any maritime claim or restriction on maritime activity in the South China Sea that was not consistent with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." That is the first official statement from a U.S. government agency that the South China Sea is not just about rocks and reefs anymore. For the U.S., it's about freedom of navigation, freedom of the seas, the rules-based order itself. And that has been consistent now for almost 30 years. The U.S. continues to care very much about defending its allies, but just as much about defending the rules itself.

Now, all of this remained largely on the backburner throughout the '90s and 2000s until, in 2009, China submitted the Nine-Dash Line to the U.N. for the first time as a formal demarcation of its claims, kicking off what's now been more than a decade of steady escalation, increasing violence and coercion: the seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012; the start of island-building in 2013, which led China to create three air and naval bases in the Spratlys where there had been none before; and now the steady tightening of the noose around all rights of all Southeast Asian claimants, as well as external vessels and planes from the U.S., Australia, Canada, India, and so on everywhere in the South China Sea rapidly approaching a point at which the South China Sea will become a Chinese lake in peacetime. And

with it, it's hard to see how, when international law says this is the extent of the claims – tiny bubbles around rocks and that's it – how can international law itself survive if China gets to claim a thousand miles of water anyway, a thousand miles of seabed anyway, just because it has bigger guns and bigger boats and is willing to use them?

And I think I'm going to wrap up there rather than talking about what we are going to do about it because I want to turn it over to Pete and actually have a conversation. Thank you.

Peter Martin: Well, fantastic. Yeah, thanks, Greg. That was a really vivid description of what can be a pretty perplexing and complex set of issues.

Before we open it up to audience questions, I think I would be remiss if I didn't take the chance to pepper you both with a few questions of my own. But for those watching at home, it would be great if you could submit questions as we go along, and I'll do my best to get to as many as possible.

So to both of you, Greg and Bonnie, before we get into the specifics of the book, I thought it would be good just to delve in for a second and, you know, answer the question, why do we care about the South China Sea? Why does it matter to the U.S.? Why does it matter to Americans?

Bonnie Glaser: Do you want me to start or you want Greg to start?

Mr. Martin: Why don't you go ahead, Greg.

Mr. Poling: OK, yeah. I didn't do enough talking. (Laughter.)

So, as I said, you know, the U.S. has been pretty consistent what its interests are. Now, how important those interests have been and how much the South China Sea has been central to those interests has, obviously, changed over the decades. The South China Sea went from being a strategic backwater in U.S. thinking to a major concern by the Obama administration, and that started in the '90s where today I think it's now really bound up in these larger questions about wither the international order, right? Do we live in a world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which rules apply to all and we have these institutions and laws that govern the behavior of states, or do we live in a world – as China seems to want – in which, at least in Asia, there's a massive carveout, the rules are whatever China says they are, the rules don't apply to China at all? Neither international law, as the U.S. knows it and has defended it for two-and-a-half centuries, nor the oldest U.S. alliance in Asia – that to the Republic of the Philippines – could survive in that world. So everything else being equal, I don't see how any of the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy and its interests survive if the South China Sea is, in a sense, lost to Beijing.

Mr. Martin: Great.

Bonnie, do you have any thoughts on that question to supplement?

Ms. Glaser: Well, I'd start by agreeing with Greg and telling all of our viewers what a terrific book this is. Everybody should read it.

In addition to what Greg has said about really underscoring the importance of the rules-based international order, it's the elements of that order that provide the rights of access to resources of the maritime countries in Southeast Asia. And the United States, of course, has always emphasized, as you said, freedom of navigation for military vessels, and we continue to conduct freedom of navigation operations – FONOPS – around the region.

But what's important is not only the freedom of navigation for military vessels, but the rights to oil and to fish of the countries that reside there. And China is, in fact, intimidating countries, harassing them, preventing them from accessing those resources.

I think commercial shipping is always an important thing to cite, as well. When I was here at CSIS and was director of the China Power Project, we did a deep dive into the value of commercial shipping. I think that was about six, seven years ago, if I'm not mistaken. And we determined that it was \$3.4 trillion in shipping a year. Probably hasn't changed enormously since then. Now, of course, other straits could be used if China actually blocked commercial shipping just through one or two of the straits, but if they actually tried to cut off access to the shipping in the entire area then that would be, I think, really threatening.

And I guess I'd say, finally, that, as Greg has talked so eloquently about, it's an issue involving U.S. credibility; that at times we have not been a reliable and credible ally. And for small countries in the region, if they feel that they have other countries – the United States being the most important, but I think also other outside powers – that are willing to stand up for international law, that are willing to push back on China's threats to the rules-based international order, then that means that they themselves are willing, perhaps, to stand up more for their own rights. And if they do not, then we will see greater accommodation to Chinese interests over time, and that will probably embolden China to push forward even further.

And we know that there are discussions in China about the possibility of drawing baselines in the Spratlys, which as Greg said they drew around the Paracels in 1996, and that would be a huge, I think, provocation that would really increase tensions in the region. And the U.S. has an interest in preventing that from happening.

Mr. Martin: Great. Well, I'm going to get you to speak a little bit more, if that's OK, Bonnie.

Ms. Glaser: (Laughs.)

Mr. Martin: You've worked for decades on Chinese foreign policy and on Asian security, both here CSIS and now at the German Marshall Fund, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on Greg's book. What's new here? What's important? What should people pay attention to?

Ms. Glaser: Well, there are lots of things that are important, some of them new, not all of them new, but definitely underscored and put in, I think, a broader context.

And I think that the first – my first takeaway is that China really has tested other countries, some of the claimants. We see China, of course, testing Vietnam repeatedly, but also testing the United States. And when these countries are tested, their responses then provide lessons for China. So we saw, for example, in May of 2014 when China put an oil rig inside of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone, and there was quite a pushback from Vietnam with fishing boats, various vessels, and that that led China, we believe, to withdraw that oil rig early. And I think that was an example of unsuccessful coercion by China.

And then, of course, there's the broader response of the United States as China began dredging, building these islands, and then militarizing them. And that, of course, began in December of 2013 on a very small scale, but the United States did not respond. And the lack of that response, I think, led China to believe it was pushing on an open door, and of course then ended up dredging three very large islands and building those out into military bases. And the lesson there, of course, is if China sees that it can get away with militarizing the South China Sea, even though Xi Jinping stood alongside President Obama in the Rose Garden and said that he had no intent to militarize the South China Sea, that it will do so. And we saw – I forget exactly what the date was; Greg will remember – but the head of China's – then head of China's navy, Wu Shengli, basically told his counterpart: We expected a stronger response, but it didn't happen so, you know, we continued. And so I think that's really an important lesson.

Secondly, I think, you know, Greg has talked a great deal about the importance of our alliance with the Philippines, and that is a theme throughout the book. And it really is a great case study in the dynamics of alliances, a fear of entrapment and a fear of abandonment, where the United States was afraid it would get dragged into a conflict and the Philippines has been fearful that it would be abandoned, and how the U.S. position has evolved over time. And it is only, as Greg said, in the Trump administration that we have said that the issue of whether or not the disputed islands in the

South China Sea was actually covered by the Mutual Defense Treaty. And that statement now, I think, is really an important deterrent to China.

And we see just even today what is taking place on Second Thomas Shoal – which Greg provides great details in the book – where the Philippines beached an old, rusted-out U.S. Navy ship years ago – remains I think one of the major flash points, and it is the importance of the alliance and the credibility of U.S. commitments that I hope will prevent that from becoming an area where we could see China's use of force.

And then finally – so a really important takeaway, I think, is that Greg emphasizes the limits of using military tools alone and, again, FONOPS – necessary, essentially, but just not sufficient, and how we really need to combine the economic tools, the diplomatic tools along with military tools. We have to integrate them more successfully in order to strengthen our relationships in the regions and to bolster deterrence.

Mr. Martin: Terrific.

A question for both of you. Greg, in the book, you talk about the ways in which Beijing tried to test the Obama administration in the early years of President Obama's presidency. Do you see a similar pattern playing out now in the Biden administration? How would you characterize Beijing's behavior, and how has the administration's policy held up?

Mr. Poling: So I actually am a bit on the fence about this narrative that Beijing tends to intentionally provoke crises at the start of every new administration and test a new administration. But I think perhaps a better way to think about this is that Beijing also operates as a roulette player, putting down small bets across the board and sees which ones pay off, and so a new administration almost inevitably walks into a crisis sooner or later with China because that's the way China has set up the board. I think that we're certainly seeing that now with the Biden administration and, you know, whether it's on economics, or Taiwan, or the Indian border, or harassment of Second Thomas Shoal where the Chinese have blockaded resupplies – Filipino troops now, I think twice in just the last year.

The other thing that comes into play here is – as President Obama had to deal with in the second term – Xi Jinping is a much more risk-tolerant leader than his predecessors have been, at least since Deng Xiaoping's elevation. And so the willingness to reach for coercion rather than other tools is much higher from China. And I do think that the sentiment, at least in Zhongnanhai in the, you know, president's offices in Beijing, remains that the U.S. and the Western terminal decline and that China's rise is inevitable, and therefore China should keep pushing because eventually the U.S. will not push back.

Mr. Martin: Terrific. Bonnie, do you have any thoughts on that before we move on?

Ms. Glaser: Let's go on to another question.

Mr. Martin: All right, well, just finally for me before we open things up more broadly, Greg, you begin and end the book with this fascinating question of whether the U.S. has lost the South China Sea. And, you know, you lay out three scenarios for the way forward. I wonder if you could elaborate on your thoughts on that question a little bit and, you know, come back to this central problem of whether it's lost the South China Sea.

Mr. Poling: Right. So I'm – while the book is basically history, I'm not a paid historian, right? (Laughs.) I'm a think-tanker; my job is to provide advice, hopefully for U.S. policymakers, whether or not they want to take it. So the fundamentally question bookending the book is: What do we care about here? And how do we achieve those ends?

If – as I argue in the book – the U.S.'s most abiding interests remain defense of the alliance with the Philippines and defense of freedom of the seas – a rules-based order – then, clearly, we are losing, although I don't think we've lost. Since the completion of its island bases – the artificial island bases in the Spratlys, China now has considerable overmatch with the U.S. locally. It dominates the air, the sea, the electromagnetic spectrum. Its coercion has made it all but impossible for U.S. allies and partners to undertake any peaceful activity – whether it's fishing, oil and gas exploration, law enforcement patrols, et cetera.

So we're getting dangerously close to the point at which freedom of navigation no longer exists in the South China Sea, at least for anybody except the U.S. Navy, and if the U.S. Navy is the only one that can sail the South China Sea, then we've already lost. So how do we – well, that's the glide path we're on, that's future one – a steady diminution of rights and rules until eventually the U.S.-Philippines alliance breaks and UNCLOS breaks, at least as applied to the South China Sea. And that's not a very good future for U.S. interests or those of our allies and partners. Option two would be that, in trying to confront that, the U.S. and China end up in a conflict which neither wants and which would cost far more than it gained to either side.

And so option three – the one we want – is, as Bonnie indicated, a combination of the U.S. military deterrence, shoring up the alliance with the Philippines to deter China from military force while buying time for a long-term, international coalition to impose diplomatic and economic costs; convince Beijing that its behavior in the region undermines its global goals of leadership, and perhaps China will reach for compromise instead of coercion.

Mr. Martin: I kind of do want to know the answer to whether you think the U.S. has lost the South China Sea, Bonnie.

Ms. Glaser: I'm happy to tell you. (Laughter.)

Well, we certainly cannot restore the status quo ante to sort of the pre-2014 and before China really started dredging, building the islands, and militarizing the South China Sea. I'm less pessimistic, I think, than Greg is because we can tick off the many countries that cruise through the South China Sea, conducting their own ways of enforcing their freedom of navigation. There's France, the U.K., we had a German ship out there last year – a frigate – and then of course, in addition to that, there's Japan and Australia, Canada, I think India – I'm not sure if I've left off some – but all of those certainly in addition to the United States.

And even when faced with very dangerous harassment by China, we saw just a few weeks ago an episode in which a Chinese fighter jet intercepted an Australian P-3 surveillance plane in a very dangerous way, flying in front of it very close and then releasing, apparently, flares and chaff that went into the engine. I think you will not find that Australia is going to decide to stop conducting its operations there – so flying aircraft as well as, of course, sailing navy ships. We have a number of countries that will continue to do that. So I don't think we're really at risk of sort of losing freedom of navigation at this point. I'm more worried about smaller countries in the region deciding that it's pointless to keep standing up to China, and eventually they concede some rights.

There was some discussion over the last few years about the possibility of joint development between China and the Philippines. That has only recently been declared by the government in Manila at the end of those discussions or negotiations, but now we have a new government in Manila under Marcos, so we will have to see whether that comes up again. But I think that – I'm concerned about countries basically thinking that if they compromise with China, maybe they will be able to get something that they cannot do today, which is maybe, you know, drill for oil, or drill for gas in these areas that are disputed.

So I think what we can do is be a better partner, a better ally; provide maritime capacity, building – as we already are – but also provide economic support. And this is the area where I think that the Biden administration hasn't done the best job. And when the Trump administration pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, it really didn't do anything to provide an alternative. The Biden administration has now provided the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. We will have to see – I mean, the jury is still out as to whether or not that will be a really significant kind of mechanism. But of

course countries in the region really want the U.S. to be more involved economically and provide more development assistance. As you know, the Chinese, through their Belt and Road Initiative, still are seen as probably the top provider and most reliable provider of aid.

So the very last comment that I'd like to make – which is actually going to be a question for Greg, if that's OK – is one thing that you don't state in the book is what might be the utility of having Taiwan – the government in Taipei – make public the origins of the Nine-Dash Line because, after all, they created it as the 11-Dash Line, and Greg made the point earlier that, essentially, it was – I think you made this early but you made it in the book about how it was, essentially, a claim to the land features, not the water. And this has now evolved through the role played by some Taiwanese scholar who – (laughs) – went to mainland China and, ultimately, I think, convinced the government there to evolve this position of historic rights.

So as the creator would it make a difference if Taiwan were to actually release all of its archives? They've released some of them, but they have, apparently, held some back. This discussion took place between the U.S. and Taiwan during the Ma Ying-jeou administration.

But, of course, now, the increase in tensions across the Strait, I think, has led the United States to believe this is not an issue we should address now. We should just put it on the shelf.

So is this something that you think, if we set aside the issue of the friction between the two sides of the Strait, would it make a difference? How would China respond?

Mr. Poling:

So you're right. In particular, the last chapter I don't kind of provide a roadmap for what Taiwan's role is here. I talk about what everybody else's role is.

You know, the Ma government – the Ma Ying-jeou government – as previous KMT governments had done, really, pushed the South China Sea as kind of a political – domestic political cudgel, right, that they were the ones who were tough and standing up for sovereignty and the fact that their claims happen to, therefore, be supporting China's claims was, you know, fine.

And, you know, the Ma government flew me out once to Itu Aba in order to try to use me, along with a few other foreigners, as kind of props to talk about how Itu Aba is a real island and deserves full entitlement in all this, which I – when I told them I wouldn't do the press conference afterward they said, OK, you don't have to do any interviews at all then.

But since then, the Tsai government's been quite quiet. And so I think it would help on the margins, right. It would help shore up international support if it's used right. If you're able to kind of counter this false PRC historiography that's really taken over the debate for the last 30 years it would help counter disinformation in the Philippines and Malaysia and Indonesia where you often hear local scholars, basically, repeating Chinese talking points, you know, doing China's work for them because all the sources they have access to are, ultimately, derived from China.

I don't think it'll actually change anything in Beijing because I don't think Beijing cares what any of us have to say about its claims. I don't think that China cares whether or not the Nine-Dash Line actually means what it says it means, right. This is what it means now, and history for the Chinese government is plastic and can be changed and molded as necessary, as any good Communist Party knows.

Mr. Martin:

All right. Well, on that note, I'm going to open it up to audience Q&A. We have a hybrid audience here today, so a few people here in the room and then we already have some great questions coming in from online.

In the interests of getting through as many as possible, I'm going to ask panelists and those asking questions to keep them as short as we can, and I'll give the opportunity now for anyone in the room who wants to ask a question. Please raise your hand and identify yourself before you do so. Otherwise, I can go into some of the online questions we have.

All right. They're feeling shy in the room so I'm going to go into a question from Angie Chen at the Central News Agency and she asks whether the U.S.' strategy to deal with relations with the Philippines is going to change in the South China Sea and, you know, will the U.S.-Philippine relationship change in the light of the inauguration of the Marcos administration.

Mr. Poling:

I think that we're going to see a continuation of the deepening of the alliance that's occurred over the last year.

So the alliance went through some rough times under the Duterte and Trump governments, and since Secretary Austin went to Manila last year and then Secretary Lorenzana, his counterpart, came to Washington last summer, we've had remarkable progress. The visiting forces agreement, which allows U.S. troops a rotation in the Philippines, has been maintained, deepened.

We've announced that we're going to be finally implementing the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which was negotiated in 2014, to allow U.S. troops to build up Philippine military facilities, rotate through them, and

then eventually hand them over to the Philippines, and we've done a bunch of other things – new defense guidelines, new maritime security dialogue.

You know, all of this represents the maturing of the alliance in a way that's long overdue. All other U.S. alliances, be it NATO, Japan, the ROK, the Australia alliance, have all evolved since their birth in the Cold War to, you know, become ready fit for the 21st century and the Philippine alliance has really been stuck where we left it at the end of the Cold War.

So this is all necessary. I think the Marcos administration, at least from what we can tell from public remarks, remains committed to that process and they're going let the Philippine bureaucracy and military do what they want to do, which is deepen the alliance with the Americans.

Mr. Martin: Bonnie, do you have any thoughts on that before we move on?

Ms. Glazer: I would just add that I would hope that the Marcos administration has learned some lessons from the last five years of the Duterte administration regarding their strategy of putting the ruling on the shelf and trying to work closely with China.

I think that strategy, really, didn't deliver. It did not really serve the Philippines' interests. I think the Chinese did not provide, perhaps, what they had promised, and if the Marcos administration learned some lessons from that, in addition to building on what all of these developments that Greg has laid out, then I think that the prospects look, really, quite good for the U.S.-Philippines relationship. And we'll have to see whether the Chinese – how they play their cards. You know, are they going to use which carrots, which sticks?

But I think that some of what has transpired has really run its course in how, for example, the China-ASEAN discussion on the code of conduct, which I think probably most, if not all, of at least the claimants would probably say that that has not produced anything and is not likely to, although I think few would want to completely abandon it.

So I think from the Philippines' perspective the best way forward to protect its interest is in a closer relationship with the United States.

Mr. Martin: Great.

Well, we have a really interesting question here from Sausham at Voice of America, who says that: The Maritime Counterinsurgency Project just started this month and its project director argues that the U.S. should recognize China's contest as an insurgency against the rules-based order.

What do you think that a U.S. maritime counterinsurgency strategy in the South China Sea would look like?

And I guess I'll just tack on myself there, if that's not the right framing what is and, you know, is it a military first strategy or is it something broader than that that's applicable?

Mr. Poling:

So the Counterinsurgency Project that's being referenced is a new program at the U.S. Naval War College, which is being run by Hunter Stires, a friend, who will also be speaking later this month at the annual CSIS South China Sea Conference.

I don't want to speak on behalf of Hunter or his team. We try to, you know, interpret their analysis and their strategy. And while they launched a bunch of articles in their initial tranche last week, I haven't gotten to read all of them.

So what I will say is – so I mentioned that the future strategy for the U.S. really has to focus on combining short-term military deterrence with a long-term diplomatic and economic strategy.

I don't believe that there are military solutions to the South China Sea. No – you know, any military conflict would, clearly, not be worth it and not be in the interest of any of the parties.

However, we have a dangerous gap right now between say and do. We have – you know, Mike Pompeo stood on a tarmac in 2019 and pledged that the U.S. would defend any Philippine troops, vessels, or aircraft that are attacked and are in the South China Sea.

And yet, as I said, China controls the air and the sea and the electromagnetic spectrum of the South China Sea, and the closest U.S. military bases of any capability are in Okinawa and Guam at distances of 13 (nautical miles) and 1,500 nautical miles. The only thing the U.S. is going to do is help with search and rescue operations if China decides to rip Philippine troops off of the Second Thomas Shoal or something.

So getting EDCA – the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement – implemented, getting U.S. forces rotating through Philippine bases, getting them training with their Filipino counterparts and, in particular, getting them using land-based fires, giving up on the idea that we're ever going to be able to contest Chinese control at sea within the South China Sea, and recognizing that our only advantage is that we have an alliance network that is better positioned than China's, that the Philippines is closer to all these disputed areas than China is, Japan is closer to the Senkakus and so on.

And, you know, the U.S. Marines get it. That's why their concepts around stand-in forces and the expeditionary advanced basing operations are all about getting forces within China's range rings, you know, and with land-based fires and the like in advance. The Japanese get it and the Philippines is beginning to get it.

That's the only way I see to change this pretty brutal math in which China has made all the right investments and we've made all the wrong ones for 20 years.

Mr. Martin: Bonnie, you have anything to add there on tools/approaches?

Ms. Glaser: I think that there is a risk in defining the U.S. strategy and goals in the South China Sea as – in exclusively anti-China ways. I think that that frame has a tendency, at least in some capitals in the region and even beyond, as being seen as putting them in the awkward position as, you know, the Southeast Asians like to say, being forced to choose between the United States and China.

So they want to see U.S. push back, absolutely. But I think they don't want U.S. strategy to be framed that way publicly, and so I think putting out positive visions for the region, generally, is more effective in building coalitions.

So we want to build more coalitions but not call them, certainly, anti-China coalitions. The Quad is not an anti-China coalition. AUKUS is not an anti-China coalition. But both of those are being framed in more positive ways and I think that's one of the reasons why – although, initially, for example, many of the members of ASEAN were concerned about the Quad. I think they're less concerned today because of what the Quad has done, its actions, and the way that it defines its purpose.

So, to me, counterinsurgency is something that we have to do but I'm not sure we should frame our strategy around that specific goal.

Mr. Martin: Terrific.

Well, we have a question here from James Dennis, who is a maritime – a marine policy analyst, and he asks: Why has the U.S. Senate not ratified UNCLOS? And I guess I would tack on to that what are the prospects for that actually happening?

Mr. Poling: Plenty of this in the book. You know, the U.S. was there. The U.S. gave as good as it got. UNCLOS is as much a product of U.S. negotiation as anybody.

Then the U.S., under the Reagan administration, walked away, largely, because the Reagan administration decided that the revenue-sharing

schemes on the deep seabed mining chapters, which were the hardest part to negotiate, that they smacked of socialism, right. It was purely ideological opposition.

Ironically, we then spent 10 years negotiating an addendum. We had an implementing agreement signed in 1994 by the Clinton administration that is, effectively, a, you know, important series of amendments to UNCLOS, even though we don't call them that because the treaty was supposed to be take it or leave it.

So we got our way. You know, we took our ball and we went home until they gave us what we wanted, and then we still didn't ratify the thing. The last time there was any real effort – I mean, it failed to get to the floor when the George Bush administration tried to bring it. John Kerry, when he was head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, organized a series of hearings, bipartisan, in which, basically, everyone under the sun came before the Senate – admirals, members of Greenpeace and Chevron sitting side by side – everybody arguing that ratification was, clearly, in the U.S. national interest. They could only find one – the Republican opposition could only find one person to testify against it and it was a – I'd call him ideological opponent, over at Heritage. But then it fell victim to election year politicking in 2012 and they lost just enough Republicans they couldn't get it done.

Today – I mean, I've run the math. A little bit of it's in the book, although I don't really name any names. But the fact is that of all the Republicans who were going to support it in 2012 only three of them are left. All the others have lost their seats or retired and they were replaced by more ideological replacements.

So I don't see any future. You would need a significant Democratic supermajority to ratify anything with the word United Nations on it, given the current state of the Republican Party.

Mr. Martin: Bonnie, is your assessment the same?

Ms. Glaser: I'm not optimistic. I think that there was this moment when President Obama said – I think it was in his speech at the National Defense University – that this would be a priority. The U.S. would seek to ratify UNCLOS.

But then, you know, it, really, wasn't followed up with the necessary action and, you know, we were doing health care. Obamacare was the top priority for the president, and understandably so. But they ran out of time. There's only so much that any administration can achieve even when it has its own party in the majority.

So if they had the votes then that would have been an opportunity and is, looking back, certainly, a missed opportunity.

One other point that I'd like to make that Greg discusses very clearly in the book is it's not only the United States that was deeply involved in these negotiations but China was, too. So there may be parts of the international order when China says it was negotiated but we were not part of it.

But when it comes to UNCLOS, China was, you know, almost from the beginning, and certainly in the phase of the negotiations that were really consequential, was very deeply engaged. And China's views were considered, taken into account, and, in some ways, factored in.

And so that, actually, I mean, should really make it easier. I think it should have been ratified not, of course, just by China but by the United States. So what we face today is that China is a signatory of UNCLOS and it does not abide by it. The United States abides by the Convention on the Law of the Sea and is not a signatory, and that is not an American interest.

Mr. Martin: Well, on that paradoxical note, we've run out of time. But I'd like to close by thanking Greg and thanking Bonnie, everyone here today and watching online, for their participation. It's been a great discussion, very enriching.

And have a wonderful day.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Pete.

Ms. Glazer: Thank you, Pete.

Mr. Martin: Thanks.