

# **GEOPOLITICS OF THE SPRATLY ISLANDS: OF SECRET SEA-LANES AND SUBMARINES**

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# INTRODUCTION

- Generally, literature on Spratly Islands focuses on natural resources (oil, gas, fishing) as the main factors of the dispute .
- However, one forgotten factor is the control of secret sea-lanes **inside** the Spratly Islands.
- These sea-lanes can be used by traditional and nuclear submarines with potential threat at the regional level.

# SECRET HYDROGRAPHIC RESEARCH

- The Spratly Islands, called also in the past “Dangerous Ground” are an area described as of shallow sea, extremely dangerous for navigation and to be avoided at all cost.
- For example, former Rear Admiral Arthur H. McCollum (1898-1976), Director of Allied Naval intelligence in Southwest Pacific and Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence Seventh Fleet during the Pacific war
- Interview with John T. Mason in 1970-1971, for the book “The Pacific war remembered: an oral history collection” published by the Naval Institute Press, 1986

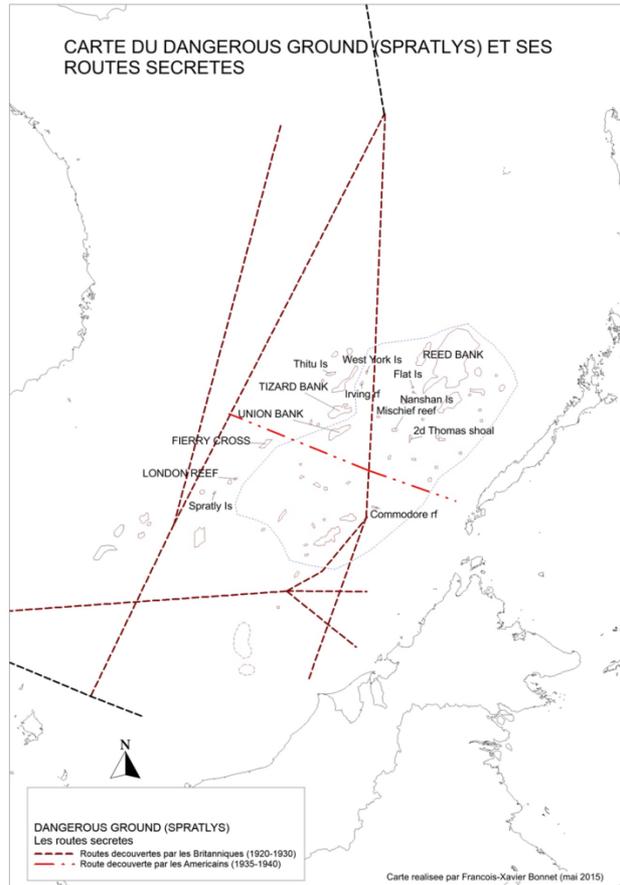
- “The Palawan Passage has to the left of it a rather large area that is known as Dangerous Ground, about fifty miles or so in diameter. It is **uncharted**, full of reefs. Our people said the Japanese knew all about it. They did not. They avoided it just as we did. They routed their commercial traffic and their naval traffic up from Singapore along the north coast of Borneo. They would refuel at places like Brunei Bay or Miri on the north coast. Then they would swing up through the Palawan Passage, which is narrow, only twenty to twenty five miles wide. The Japanese did not go into the so-called Dangerous Ground any more than we did. All this bushwa about how the Japanese had better charts is sheer nonsense. They did not. Our charts were as good or better than theirs. We compared them” p147-148

- However, as David Hancox and Victor Prescott have shown in 1999 (In "*Secret Hydrographic Surveys in the Spratly Islands*", London), the colonial powers around made secret surveys of this area before WWII.
- British Admiralty and Japanese Navy started their surveys starting 1925 up to 1938. They discovered a secret sea-lanes crossing the "Dangerous Ground" from South to North
- The US Navy started its secret surveys in 1935 and was interested by mapping the bathymetry of this area for its submarines. It discovered a sea-lane with east-west direction

- The results of these surveys are summarized by the Japanese Navy Commandant Unosuke Kokura on May 1939 :
- “(...) A remarkable fact is that the whole of the Spratly islands can be considered as a kind of fortified area, because it is known as a dangerous area on all the maps of the world... But because of a laborious work of our Imperial Navy, this area is not a dangerous area at all for us. Our warships and commercial ships can sail freely through these groups of islands and take shelter behind the reefs (...)”

- The US State Department itself, protested secretly the Japanese annexation of the Spratlys in 1939. This protest was deeply influenced by a confidential memorandum of the US Navy (April 5 1939) which explicitly used its secret surveys in the eastern part of the Dangerous Ground as an argument to protest
- “(...) In fact, because of the **secret surveys** (emphasis supplied) and the proximity of the Philippines, the claim of the United States on the Dangerous Ground is not inferior to that of Japan (...)”

### CARTE DU DANGEROUS GROUND (SPRATLYS) ET SES ROUTES SECRETES



- The first US submarine to have patrolled the Spratlys was the USS Sculpin, from June 15 to July 3 1942. It discovered that there was no human life on Spratly island proper.
- During the WWII, US submarines continued their secret research, particularly bathymetry and density layers for protection against Japanese detection with their sonars
- After the war these surveys probably continued at least enough for another Sculpin, this time a nuclear submarine, to cross the Dangerous Ground, in April 1972

# USS SCULPIN

- Description of the nuclear submarine USS Sculpin mission, directed by Captain Harry Mathis, from Admiral Charles R. Larson, "*The Sculpin's lost mission: A nuclear submarine in the Vietnam war*", Naval History Magazine, February 2008, Vol 22 n°1
- Official mission: tracking and neutralizing the fishing boats carrying weapons and ammunitions for the Viet Minh. These fishing boats were leaving Hainan, passing through the Spratlys and then reaching some areas in coastal Vietnam.
- The journey of the Sculpin in the Spratlys was described in this manner :

- “(...) One more challenge was that the trawler was heading south, right through the "dangerous ground.". On charts of the South China Sea, an area about 180 nautical miles wide and 300 miles long is simply labeled dangerous ground. **Our charts had one track of soundings through that area-taken in 1885.** We assessed that the terrain was fairly level, but the depth was 200 feet or less in most of this area. So we were in a position of running up to 20 knots in 200 feet of water, with between 30 to 80 feet under the keel at that high speed (...).
- (...) As the trawler headed south, she vectored a little to the east and went into an area in the dangerous ground where we couldn't go. Up to then, although we were in the dangerous area, we felt secure in knowing the bottom was fairly level. But now she went into an area that was littered with rocks, shoals, and shipwrecks (...)”

- it is difficult to accept that the crew had only a chart with one track soundings taken in 1885 ... If we believe the writer, the crew of the nuclear submarine would have been much less equipped than the crews of submarines during the second World-War !
- It shows how sensitive this question of charts is as the text has been published in 2007 but the description looks like the one of Rear Admiral McCollum in 1970, or navigators of the 19<sup>th</sup> century !
- Our hypothesis is that the USS Sculpin was either testing the results of the previous surveys or/and making its own researches with the help of an airplane P-3 Orion.

- The sensitivity of the questions of charts, bathymetry in the Spratlys is very well expressed by the Philippines government in a 1982 document, titled *The Kalayaan islands*, series one monograph n<sup>o</sup>4, Prepared by the Ministry of Defense, Secretariat to the Cabinet Committee on the Law of the Sea Treaty
- It read in part : “(...) The area **has never been adequately surveyed or mapped** but it is known to contain many islands, banks and reefs, shoals and cays separated by **deep passages**. If a hostile nation can map the area to a degree which will enable navigation of **submerged ballistic missile submarines** without danger of running aground, that particular nation can station Polaris type submarines in the island group and be able to control or threaten an area within a radius of 4000 km, containing a 1/3 of the world’s population, including the whole ASEAN. **The area’s bathymetry makes submarine detection, hence counteraction, virtually impossible.** (...)”

# Controlling the sea-lanes of the Spratly Islands

- The secret surveys have shown that the Spratly Islands are structured by two main axis or sea-lanes : South-North and East-West
- The military occupation followed this spatial structuration:
- 1956 Taiwan takes the control of the main island of Itu Aba. The Philippines took control of the Northern entrance of the South-North sea-lane in 1968. Vietnam, in the 1960s installed its garrisons at the entrance of the East-West sea-lane
- China arrived last in the area and had no choice but to take control of the reefs. In 1988, by expelling the Vietnamese troops from Fierry Cross, the Chinese forces could control the movements at the western part of the East-West sea-lane. Then, in 1995, they took control of the Mischief Reef, allowing them to monitor and interfere with the Filipinos along the South-North sea-lane
- The new Chinese reclamation works, from 2012 to 2016, in the context of the arbitration by the International Tribunal in La Hague, allow the reinforcement of the Chinese presence along the North-South sea-lane (Tizard Bank and Union Bank) and East-West sea-lane (London Reef).

# CONCLUSION

- Since April 2012, the situation in the South China Sea has deteriorated deeply. Arguably the Philippines' request for international arbitration had the unintended consequence of accelerating China's programs of island-building. These Chinese activities highlighted the importance of controlling the internal maritime sea-lanes of the Spratlys. These internal sea-lanes have long been kept secret although they are of crucial strategic importance. Their control would allow a maritime power to directly threaten an important part of the world.
- It is necessary to neutralize this maritime space, by guaranteeing the rights of freedom of navigation and signing a denuclearization treaty for the Dangerous Ground (as a first step before extending it to the whole South China Sea). The whole history of the Spratlys, since the 20th century, has always been to avoid that only one power could control this archipelago. ASEAN, among other institutions, should make sure that this principle is respected.

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH**