



RESEARCH PAPER

China's Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea: Implications for Regional Security

Usman Ghani¹ Ashfaq Ahmed² Dr. Muhammad Muzaffar³

1. Lecturer, Department of Political Science & International Relations University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of Politics & International Relations (DPIR) University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department Political Science and International Relations, Govt. College, University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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Corresponding

Author:

Danalyst@hotmail.com

The South China Sea is among the world's busiest waterways. China has a claim to almost eighty percent of the South China Sea. Vietnam has claimed the entire territory of the South China Sea and its islands; while the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei have claimed the adjacent areas of these islands. Objective of this paper is to probe Chinese maritime strategy in South China Sea. It highlights littoral states competing interest in the region which results in competition. Conflict of interest results in territorial disputes. Qualitative approach was adopted by the author for completion of this study. It concludes that the South China Sea is contested for territory and untapped natural resources. Littoral states view the dispute from a nationalist perspective. Enormous benefits present in the region have barred the six countries concerned from granting concessions to other states

Introduction

The South China Sea is among the world's busiest waterways. China has a claim to almost eighty percent of the South China Sea. Vietnam has claimed the entire territory of the South China Sea and its islands; while the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei have claimed the adjacent areas of these islands. These territorial claims have been governed by two principles. The first governing principle is the notion of Effective Occupation, a standard established in April 1928, by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the context of the case regarding the Island of Palmas (Valencia, Dyke, & Ludwig, 1997). The principle of Effective occupation relates to the intention and capacity by the claimant to effectively establish a constant and uninterrupted authority, which differentiates it from that of the power of conquest. Although China

has already taken control of the Paracel Islands, which is a large group of around 30 islands, residing at almost equal distance from the coastal borders of China and Vietnam. The governing principle of effective occupation rules against China in the Spratly Islands a chain of islands near the coastal areas of Malaysia and Philippines where, apart from the nine islands China occupied during 1988-1992, all the remaining islands are controlled and inhabited by other claimant states (Trost H. , 1990).

The second governing principle is the United Nations Convention on Law of Sea (UNCLOS), which outlines the rules and regulations to settle claims on resources on the basis of the continental shelves and the idea of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). The outlay of UNCLOS refuses to accept claims beyond the pre-established continental shelves or the borders of EEZs, nonetheless, the claims of China cross boundaries of its EEZ and thus are overlapping with that of the claims made by the other states involved.



Source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/all-you-need-to-know-about-the-south-china-sea-dispute/19877>

The claims of China are based on historical perspectives and find little support in the context of international law. This has been termed by China as a source of antipathy and disgrace to the ancestral legacy of China. According to the Chinese perspective, the territorial claim was made before the existence of UNCLOS (it was contracted in 1982 and became effective in 1994 after its approval by the 60th state) and adjustments should be made in the law in order to honor the historical or ancestral rights of a state. In order to emphasize these territorial claims, the Chinese government has been constantly putting up diplomatic pressures either to get the

international law revised or to bargain an exception to be arranged exclusively to recognize the historical legacy of China globally (Buszynski, 2012).

Motorists of the Conflict

The presence of oil and natural gas reserves in the South China Sea has further complicated the conflict. With the increasing demand for energy resources globally, the chief consumers like China are looking for fresh sources to suffice the needs of its growing economy. In a statistical report issued in 2009, it was claimed that China's consumption of oil is the second largest in the world. China is expected to double its consumption by 2030, making itself the largest consumer of oil in the world (2017). During 2010, China imported more than fifty percent of its oil from the countries of the Middle East, while oil imports from Angola and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia together mounted to sixty six percent.

China has been looking for alternate resources of energy supplies to minimize its dependence on oil imports and has been seeking ways to maximize offshore production across the South China Sea and around the basin of the Pearl River (2011). China has been complaining that the other claimants have interfered with its waters and that China has the right to take action against them. For example, on May 26, 2011, two of the marine surveillance vessels of China disconnected the exploration cables of a survey ship of Vietnam which was looking for reserves of oil and gas within the border of EEZs of Vietnam almost 120 kilometers away from the southern coast of Vietnam. The Foreign Ministry of Vietnam presented videos of a surveillance vessel of China cutting off the cable leading to the Vietnamese survey vessel (Watts, 2011). On the other hand, the Chinese Foreign office proclaimed that the operation conducted by the Chinese surveillance vessel had been completely legal to enforce the marine boundaries of China and nothing was done beyond the jurisdiction of China.

The Philippines has also been facing problems to avoid conflicts with China. Philippine intends to offer contracts to offshore companies to explore oil reserves across Palawan Islands, claimed by China as its territory (2011). In addition to the energy resources, new disputes arose in the South China Sea regarding the competitive rivalries to claim the fishing zones and other natural resources of the open sea, making the situation worse. In the past decades, the fishing boats were allowed to pass through the claimed zones but a few recent incidents raised concerns for all the claimants.

According to the claims made by Vietnam, since 2005, approximately 63 fishing vessels along-with almost 725 members of the crew have been captured by the marines of China in the territorial zones of the South China Sea. The captured men were then asked to pay large amounts of cash to get released (Mydans, 2010). In 2010, in one similar happening which got much attention by the media and press in Vietnam, a Chinese patrolling ship captured a fishing boat of Vietnam and all of its crew members near the Paracel Islands (Clem, 2010). This was not the first incident or

the only incident that China got involved in, and also it was not the first protest enthusiastically put forth by the Foreign Office of Vietnam.

China has also introduced a no fishing zone in the South China Sea on an annual basis, which has been described as a protective cover for the benefit of its own fishing boats. The fishing ban was first declared by Beijing in 1999 for one month on an annual basis, but in 2009 this one month period was almost doubled on an annual basis. The territory covered by this annual fishing ban was not clearly defined but still, it covered most of the area in proximity with the Paracels Islands but not so much close to the Spratly Islands (2010).

Territorial Disputes: An Opportunity or Cause of Conflict for China

A lot of academic progress has been achieved in the past few years to understand the mechanism behind the peaceful or nonviolent settlement of the territorial conflicts, but still, several important questions remain unanswered. Territorial conflicts have a significant relationship with the economic, social, political and geographical aspects of a state. Policy makers within national and international communities have tried to emphasize the significance of economic interdependence to promote the idea of peace through the commercial adjustments in the foreign policies of countries involved in territorial conflicts.

Territorial disputes that involve the interest of the states, most specifically the economic interest, get involved in less militarized conflicts despite having significant disagreements (Chan & Kuo, 2005).

Democratic states involved in territorial disagreements tackle these issues cleverly through foreign policy and economic agreements. But states involved in militarized territorial conflicts escalate the chances of war and ignore peaceful agreements. States embroiled in territorial conflicts either go for militarizing the conflict or design peaceful policies or sometimes take no actions and let the things be.

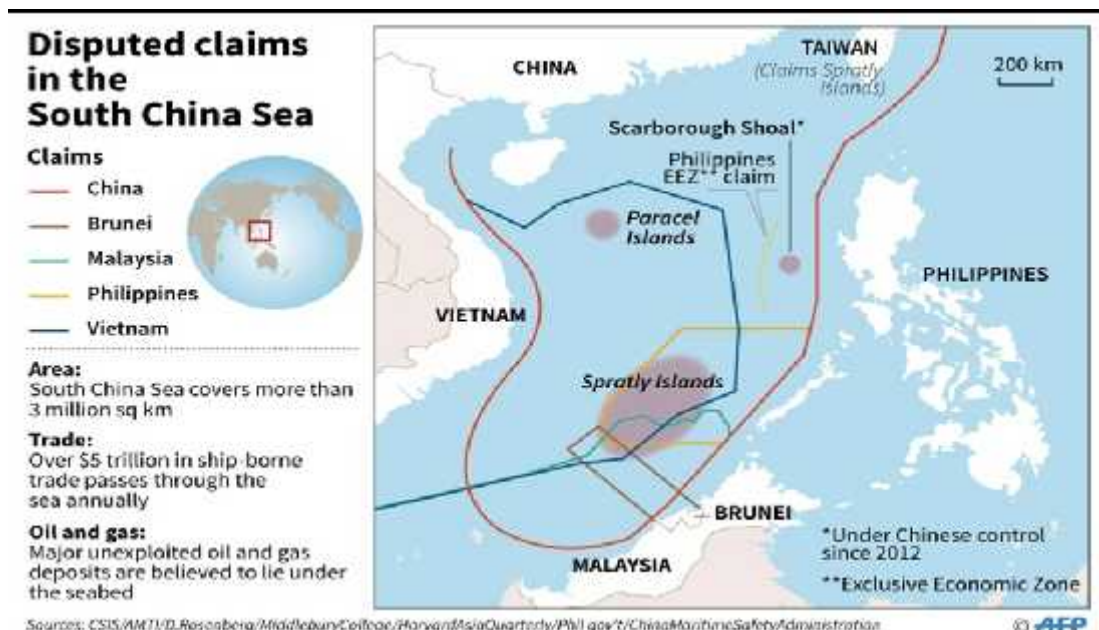
These three options are not mutually exclusive as some states simultaneously use weapons and diplomatic talks to solve interstate issues. But the countries that trade with each other tend to avoid militarized solutions and prefer diplomatic talks to resolve the issues. Increased economic interdependence between conflicting states brings them to settle claims peacefully. The idea of states to disrupt trade and start a war often makes states to do the cost and benefit analysis and devise diplomatic policies accordingly (Huth & Allee, 2003).

In addition to states, private businesses if feel that their benefits are at stake, pressurize governments to find peaceful solutions rather than escalating the tensions. Economic interdependence makes states know about each other's capabilities and market credibility which makes the decision-making clearer. It is widely believed that democratic states are more likely to take an interest in peaceful resolutions of disputes.

Two-thirds of the states involved in territorial disputes are non-democratic (Fazal, 2004.). Even though authoritarian states are not popular in negotiating the conflicts as compared to democratic states, history tells a different story of the majority of attempts made by authoritarian states to peacefully settle the disputes. Unlike democratic leaders, the authoritarian leaders have to face fewer pressures from inside the country, rather they are free to choose either escalating the dispute or beginning cooperation with rival state (Huth & Allee, 2003).

Another assumption presented by scholars regarding the peaceful settlement of disputes put forth the idea that sometimes the internal disputes of a state creates a situation for negotiation and cooperation, to produce a peaceful situation to evade conflict or an escalation. Besieged leaders, however, get reluctant to cooperate with conflicting states in order to gain their assistance to counter the domestic enemies or elements of insecurity. Leaders compromise more willingly when the security of a regime is facing conflicting situations like legitimate crises or rebellions (Levy, 1989). When a state faces internal threats like rebellion movements, the leaders of the state negotiate concessions with neighboring states to assist them in warding off rebels and offer them to increase avenues for bilateral trade.

According to some scholars, one of the many reasons behind China's policy to compromise in most of its territorial disputes is the threat to the internal security of the regime control. A number of territorial disputes of China belong to its distant lands near the border regions where the country's legitimate authority has been considered weak (Fravel, 2005). History shows that China has tended to avoid sparking its territorial disputes. Communist Party leaders have resolved 17 of the 23 disputes in China since 1949 and on occasion received less than 50 percent of the territory in question.



China's Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea

If the biggest miracle of international politics in the 21st century is the development of the Chinese economy, it is likely that the second most significant story is the transformation and development of the Chinese military. Previously, the Chinese army was known as a large and poorly armed force. It was known to employ human wave attacks and lacked doctrinal expertise or technological potential. Today, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is becoming a truly modern military force with progressively improved weapons and equipment, levels of training, education, logistics, and general administrative skill. For some time now, China has followed a systematic, well-funded and determined program to modernize its conservative and strategic forces. More recently, the pace of the Chinese forces' modernization program appears to have increased considerably and its direction has improved, largely in response to continued strong national economic growth and due to specific concerns about the increased projection of the US and its allies in the territorial issues in the eastern and southern seas of China (Ikenberry, 2008). Over the years, Taiwan, in particular, has created a situation of structuring and alignment of forces for the PLA. Recently, however, China's transformation efforts have begun to focus more on acquiring more decisive capacity design capabilities outside of Taiwan to include neighboring regions. This process of military transformation has created significant security concerns in the United States, Japan, and many other Asian countries.

Since 2010, the South China Sea has been linked with a number of wide ranging strategic and geopolitical issues related to the naval strategy of China and the presence of the US in the forward areas of the regions. All this has made the dispute quite dangerous and an area of growing concern, mainly because the US has reestablished its strategic interest in the Asia Pacific region and has been strengthening its defense ties with the regional states claiming the rights to the resources in the South China Sea (Buszynski L. , 2012).

The naval strategy of China shifted from defending the coastal or across the shores to a strategy of defense near the seas covering an area including the first chain of islands. This territory begins from Japan and extends to the Ryukyu Islands up to the Philippines and leading ultimately into the South China Sea; while another chain of islands is beyond the Pacific and covers the territory from Japan to incorporate the area of Guam (Cole, 2010). Since the formulation of this modernized naval strategy, almost two decades have past; the concept of chains of islands keeps on reshaping the maritime approach of China to identify new ways of distinguishing or recognizing regions of interest for China.

The first chain of islands has kept Taiwan as a focal position and all the open sea space around this zone, which would allow China to announce a blockade by its submarine if Taiwan declares independence from the Chinese regime. It may also give access to a sea territory adequate to plan regular surveillance and to deploy naval assets accurately in the ocean (Stokes & Blumenthal, 2011). According to the opinion of the naval command of the US Pacific, the combination of Chinese

submarines with missiles poses an engaging threat to the US naval forces and may result in neutralizing the capability of the US to project power in the South China Sea (2006).

The US Department of Defense also claimed that with effective tracking of geo-location of targets, these missiles may prove to be a risk for US naval boats within a range of almost 2,000 kilometers (Landler & Chan, 2013). In association with the above-mentioned ideas of zonal defense strategies, China has been expecting the US to recognize distinct areas of manipulation in the Western region of the Pacific while placing the South China Sea and Taiwan securely within the regions with Chinese influence. From the viewpoint of China, the presence of the US navy in the territory of the Western Pacific strongly prohibits the reunion of Taiwan with its mainland and also raises the significance of other states claiming the territories in the South China Sea and opposing the claims of China.

China's Development of Island in the South China Sea

China is vigorously constructing man-made islands in the South China Sea, transforming them into military and logistics stations. Beijing already has at least seven of these stations, equipped with access channels, heliports, radar structures, locations of weapons and missiles, batteries, military installations and other objects of strategic importance (2016).

The Chinese government had begun efforts to recover land and build on the reefs in early 2014. China is taking such measures for a reason to safeguard its sea trade routes and keep an eye on the US in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. American strategists are alarmed by the rise of Chinese naval forces and Chinese expansion in the Pacific Ocean. In particular, the US intends to avoid a situation in which China could influence particular areas of maritime communications against other states. The strategic objective of the US is to limit the PLA's army in the South China Sea and limit its freedom of operational movement (Khattak, 2016).

China pursues many objectives in the construction of reefs in the South China Sea, which include ensuring the safety of navigation routes, extending maritime protection to its regional waters and developing capabilities to conduct security operations outside of the region. The PLA has adequate self-defense capabilities, but it lacks interregional operations and projection of force capabilities when compared to the US, Beijing is trying to change that (Laipson, 2009).

US and Regional Concerns about China

In the post-World War II years, pivotal US security objective in the Asia-Pacific expanse was establishing and maintaining political and military power in the region. The US has followed this interest by improving its capability to project naval, air and land forces in the Asia-Pacific region. These skills, along with the development of close political and diplomatic relations and bilateral security

associations with key states such as Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and South Korea, have supported a wide range of fundamental US interests, including:

- Stopping the appearance of an antagonistic power in the region that could bound or prevent US access.
- Averting the rise or strengthening of regional arguments or competitions that could disturb overall peace and economic development.
- Safeguarding liberty of commerce, market access, and sea lines of communication throughout the region.
- Defending and inspiring democratic states and procedures and discouraging the growth of nondemocratic movements or regimes antagonistic to the US.
- Avoid the spread of dangerous weapons, technologies, and knowledge in Asia and address non-traditional security threats, in particular, global and regional terrorism, epidemics and environmental degradation (Coresman, 2015).

Japan has played a vital role in supporting many of these American security goals in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition to providing the foundation and monetary support to the US military. Tokyo has gradually learned and expanded the ability to protect its adjacent territories and provide critical forms of command, control, communication, IT assistance, intelligence, research and exploration (C4ISR) to US forces operating in neighboring regions. It also increased its participation with the United States in the growth of major weapon systems, such as ballistic missile defense, and the purchase of many US military systems due to possible security pressure from two neighboring countries: North Korea and China (Chanlett-Avery & Rinehart, 2016).

The Japanese are concerned about their security environment, especially in light of China's growing power projection and enhanced capabilities and China's growing affirmation of maritime territorial issues such as the Senkaku / Diaoyu Islands dispute and nuclear weapons development by North Korea. Although many Japanese are now more motivated to view China as a security threat, they also remain reluctant, especially at a time of slow growth, to spend a larger share of their gross national product (GNP) in national defense and continue to support mutually beneficial economic relations with Beijing. Certainly, many Japanese see Beijing as an essential partner for maintaining Japan's internal prosperity and stability, given the country's combined economic needs relative to China. Japanese society in general, as well as many of its American counterparts, have no doubts that China's growing military capability is changing the security environment facing Japan, and could change the American-Japanese alliance (Baker, 2012).

The United States and regional states have been concerned in particular with the development of the so-called "anti-access and area refusal" (A2/AD) capabilities

of the Chinese military, as well as their ability to project power well beyond their territory. In general, these A2 / AD capabilities, combined with the power projection operations of China in the wider regions near Japan, could allow the PLA to fulfill its mission without directly approaching the military capabilities of the US. The U.S. military, in particular, is concerned about these emerging capabilities, particularly in the case of Taiwan.

As early as 1995, Air Force Chief of Staff General Ronald Fogleman noted that "saturation ballistic missile attacks against littoral forces, ports, airfields, storage facilities, and staging areas could make it extremely costly to project forces into a disputed theater, much less carry out operations to defeat a well-armed aggressor. Simply the threat of such enemy missile attacks might deter the [U.S. and] coalition [partners] from responding to aggression in the first instance." The threat was more theoretic than real, as forecasters were simply investigative all-inclusive trends (Roberts, 2004). Today, though, the threat is afar being imaginary.

In its 2008 report on China's military might, the US Ministry of Defense informed Congress that the PLA appears to be engaged in an ongoing effort to develop the ability to intercept or attack long-range military forces, mainly air or sea forces in the Western Pacific. Gradually, the anti-access forces of the Chinese would be able to provide several layers of offensive systems, using the sea, air, space, and cyberspace. Although China has long focused on Taiwan, according to the United States Department of Defense, "China continues to invest in military programs intended to improve extended-range power projection.

Present trends in China's military capabilities are a major factor in altering East Asian military balances, and could provide China with a force accomplished of leading a range of military operations in Asia well beyond Taiwan," (2015). In addition, Chinese defense analysts have said that in order to protect their national interests and add strategic depth to their homeland, China wants to obtain the so-called offshore defense skills that demonstrate the ability to perform multidimensional precision attacks well beyond the first chain of islands. Pentagon supporters say that China needs large and medium-sized warships, on-board aviation, improved C4ISR to achieve this goal (Swaine, Mochizuki, Brown, & Giarra, 2013).

To support its military transformation program, China has followed a double-digit increase in defense spending over the past decade, currently equivalent to around 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) of what is now the second largest economy in the world and may be the largest economy by 2035, if not earlier. Due to the disparity, the Japanese defense budget has fallen to less than 1% of GDP and continues to fall. Although the two countries have started with very different levels of knowledge and disposition of force, it is gradually becoming clear that China is overtaking Japan in several key military areas and that Japan is becoming increasingly dependent on the US for its resistance to China.

The United States is deploying large forces in Guam and expanding its global military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. This is partly due to China's growing military capabilities and presence in the region. In recent decades, Beijing has temporarily organized its best diplomatic resources to convey a conciliatory image to the Japanese public. This effort, combined with China's growing economic interdependence with Japan has prevented the development of a clear and strong consensus in Japan against a "Chinese threat" (Bitzinger, 2015). Furthermore, any clear or conclusive decision by Japan on this issue is further heightened by the current insecurities and uncertainties in Japan's internal political process and the general focus on internal reforms.

In addition to this, the US has reached defense budget levels that will be difficult to increase, if necessary, between growing deficits and conflicting social priorities. The F-22, for example, would have been a force multiplier, replacing the aging F-15 and F-4EJ from Japan against Chinese third and fourth generation fighters, as well as a possible substitute for all American combat forces at the forefront of the West Pacific, but the US put an end to production of this aircraft earlier than expected. In addition, Japan does not have sufficient missile defenses (in number and refinement) to protect its population, infrastructure, and defense equipment against the growing PLA capacity in terms of intermediate-range ballistic missiles (Simpson, 2016). These weapons, as well as the growing number of progressive Chinese fighters with long range offshore capabilities, also threaten American bases on Japanese territory. As a result, the possible compromises between the US and Japanese budgets, which are essential to meet China's growing capacity, are becoming increasingly difficult by the year.

Few decision makers in Washington and Tokyo are ready to face this combination of global and far reaching forces developed by China. For Japan, this could lead to painful decisions about defense spending and the country's strategic position, which could change decades of minimalist politics. For the US, this would likely result in difficult political decisions regarding defense budgets, weapons systems, alliances and alliance expectations in the Asia Pacific, as well as a very difficult balance between cooperation and conflict in relations with China (2016).

Conclusion

The South China Sea can be viewed as a stalemated conflict, without the urgent need for any claimant to resolve the dispute. Being an important region both politically and economically, the South China Sea is not only contested for territory but is also related to the untapped natural resources. Enormous benefits present in the region have barred the six countries concerned from granting concessions to other states.

Consequently, the controversy does not concern the South China Sea, but the characteristics of the territory, the two main archipelagos: the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. China, one of the main candidates in the region, uses a historical perspective based on a nine-dash map, while Vietnam also bases its appeal on the

historical basis of the Franco-Chinese treaty of 1887. Whereas, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei adopt a more legal approach of the exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles of UNCLOS.

Each state sees the dispute from a nationalist point of view, which raises the main problem of who should be the rightful owner and how natural assets are distributed. Based on moral standards and international law, claims based on the geographical proximity of the EEZ have a stronger moral basis than historical ones. All the countries concerned, with the exception of the US, have approved UNCLOS. International law is based on the moral standard of natural law, which makes all claims based on UNCLOS more legitimate.

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