

The US-China Rivalry in the Maritime Domain: The Case of South China Sea

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Abstract

The US-China rivalry apart from being at the global sphere is also prevalent in the maritime domain in the South China Sea (SCS). SCS is important for the global trade and commerce that is marred by the unresolved maritime disputes between China and the Southeast Asian states, mainly Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. In the last couple of years, there has been increasing naval presence as China is asserting its position and ignoring that of other claimant states that has led to the US intervention. For the US, China's growing naval presence poses challenge for the global trade by hampering the freedom of navigation, creates security predicaments to its allies in the region and challenges its preeminent maritime power in the Western Pacific. The paper examines the US-China rivalry in SCS that has implication on the region and aggravates the conflict.

Keywords: South China Sea, China, The US, Maritime Disputes, Maritime Power

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Introduction

The US and China the two dominant global powers, the former the dominant power and the latter the rise power largely considered as a challenger in the international politics have defining impact on the global politics. Apart from their competition for increasing influence and rivalry in the international system their rivalry is seen at the regional level in the maritime domain in the South China Sea (SCS). China is mainly a land power but its growing military and economic power has compelled it to expand its naval power and emerge as a dominant maritime power. In the maritime domain, the US sees China's assertive behavior has challenging the established "rules-based maritime order." Though the US has no direct threat to its territory from China but the latter's South China Sea dispute with the former's regional allies has intensified their issue differences which has potential to escalate the conflict in the near future.

The steady rise of China has not only facilitated the presence and expansion of its naval power in the maritime domain in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea but also challenges the US in the Western Pacific. Since the US is also a key player in the region which plays an important role to maintain the regional order, therefore any attempt on China's part to disturb the existing status quo would compel the former to involve in the regional conflict and intensity the rivalry.

The focus of the paper is mainly on the US and China rivalry in the maritime domain in the South China Sea. The first section introduces the paper as to why the US and China are involved in the rivalry in South China Sea. The article next section gives an outline of maritime dispute in the South China Sea dispute. The subsequent section deals with the importance of South China Sea and the US concerns. The fifth section deals with the growing rivalry between China and the US over the dispute. The last section summarises the article.

The South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea consists of several small islands, rocks and reefs. The dispute is among the states of the region between China and other claimant states, especially on two major islands of Spratly and Paracel. The Paracels are administered by China but also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam. China is controlling the Paracel Islands since 1974 after the clash with Vietnam. The Spratly Islands that consist of small islands, islets, and coral reefs are claimed by China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. China claims almost eighty percent of the disputed South China Sea based on the 'dotted line' also known as 'nine-dash line' on the 1947 Chinese map published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of China (Beukel 2010; McDevitt 2014). Based on this China asserts it "historical rights" uses this to lay its claims in the South China Sea that encompasses vast maritime territory that overlap with the maritime and territorial rights of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2017).

In the 1990s, the dispute escalated when the National People's Congress promulgated a law on 'Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone' under which it laid claims over many islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters. China in the 1995 occupied the Mischief Reef in the Spratly island that is also claimed by the Philippines and Vietnam. This showed China's expansionist agenda to expand its territory. China has forcibly gained control over the Scarborough Shoal in an armed confrontation with the Philippine maritime vessels in

2012. Over the years, China has been gradually occupying the territories in these islands and expanding its maritime boundaries. In 2002, though China and the Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) agreed on 'the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea' (DOC) but they failed to adhere its provisions. Chinese expansion in South China Sea was also challenged by the Philippines in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague where its ruling of 2016 went against China. Despite of this, China has not been adhering to it and continued with its claims based on its historical rights and has carried on various developmental and military activities in the Islands.

The disputed states of Southeast Asia and China are involved in military buildup and making their presence felt in the disputed area. The Philippines and Vietnam were also involved in activities in the disputed territories violating the Declaration on the Conduct (DoC) of Parties in the South China Sea. In 1999, the Philippines naval ship was present in the disputed Ren'ai Reef (Second Thomas Shoal) stating that it has trouble with the ship and would be moved once repaired but did not do so (Shulong 2014: 15). The Chinese ships appeared in the area of James Shoal. In response to it, Malaysia has announced a new naval base in Sarawak near James Shoal. Vietnam has been exploiting oil and gas resources from the disputed areas with China for 20 years (Shulong 2014: 18). China too has placed oil drill in the contested waters near Vietnam. The states involved in activities in South China Sea—China, Vietnam and the Philippines—have accused each other for violating the DoC.

When the Philippines started to challenge China's expansion in the Hague in 2013 the latter started building artificial islands in the disputed waters. Beijing's growing interest in the South China Sea is facilitated by its expanding presence and involvement in the construction of artificial islands which compromised other states security in the disputed region. Though other stakeholders are also engaged in beefing up their security facilities in islands, but the scale and magnitude by which China is involved has no comparison with the competing state (Dutton 2016). It has constructed seven artificial islands on the top of submerged reef in the Spratly Islands by expanding the existing Cuarteron, Fiery Cross, Gaven, Hughes, Johnson South, Mischief and Subi reefs into islands along with the expansion of the Woody Island (Military Balance 2016: 211). The artificial islands have facilities of military airstrips, radar equipments and boarding for soldiers. China has also build three-kilometre long runway for air operation on the Fiery Cross Reef, another on the Johnson South Reef with the possibility of one more being built on the Subi Reef (Military Balance 2016). The airstrip in Fiery Cross Reef is long enough to accommodate the Chinese military aircraft and provide China greater reach into the heart of maritime Southeast Asia (*ABC News* 2015). These could be gradually converted into a full-fledge military bases which might give rise to tension and risky military activities among the disputants. Through these artificial islands, China is altering the existent regional power balance and showing its dominance to the claimant states.

With China's growing power capabilities and increasing military presence in the disputed waters it often comes in the way of other claimant states interrupting their fishing vessels and their military. These various activities along with the military buildup in the artificially build islands has aggravated the crises.

Importance of South China Sea

South China Sea is rich in hydrocarbons, potential sources of oil and gas reserves, and has crucial sea lanes that are importance for global trade. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates there to be approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190

trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the South China Sea (U. S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) (2013). It is difficult to exactly determine the oil and natural gas reserves in the region because of under exploitation and the overlapping claims by the states. Apart from this, it may have additional hydrocarbons in underexplored areas according to the EIA.

China needs energy resources to support its growing economic growth as it has emerged as a second largest oil consumer next to the US. This has led Beijing to involve in oil exploration by setting up off-shore oil fields which has witnessed increasing conflict with other claimant states over the issue of exploiting energy resources in the disputed waters. China has placed oil drill in the contested waters near Vietnam. Apart from China, Vietnam and the Philippines are involved in oil production to enhance their own domestic energy needs. Vietnam's Petro Vietnam is involved in oil exploration in three fields along with its involvement with various foreign oil companies on oil and gas exploration (Hong 2013). China has strongly opposed Vietnamese exploration agreement with foreign nations. The Philippines has an intension to offer 15 exploration contracts for offshore exploration off Palawan Island that is also claimed by China (Hong 2013). The other major issue for dispute is over fishing as the fishing vessels moving in the disputed overlapping claim zones often come in conflict. China and Vietnam have often witnessed clashes between their fishing vessels or boats were their fishermen have been detained.

South China Sea has some of the world's most important shipping lanes for markets for Asia, Europe, Africa and America. The major concern for the US in the South China Sea is the freedom of navigation as billions of dollars of commerce flow through this region nearing about 50 percent of global maritime commerce passes through it every year that makes it a key artery for sustaining global economy (Dutton 2016: 11). The region is important to the US given its location where to the south, the Strait of Malacca connects the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean; to the north, the Taiwan Strait connects it to the Pacific Ocean (Beukel 2010: 9). The security of sea lanes is important for the US economic growth which has trade with the Asia-Pacific states. In case of any conflict between China and the regional states can disrupt the free flow of goods thus hampering the global trade that can have immense impact on the global economy. During the East Asian Summit at Kuala Lumpur, the US Secretary of State John Kerry had accused China of not allowing freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. The US being a dominant global power is concerned about the freedom of navigation as it has a major role in maintaining rule-based order at sea (Dutton 2016).

In recent years, China and the US are involved in contestation for power and influence in the maritime domain. The sea power is often considered as important aspect for states in their power projection and economic development. In the past, Britain became a powerful state because of its maritime supremacy that helped it to maintain its colonial empire in the world. Keeping the importance of naval supremacy China is involved in the naval modernisation. As a rising power, China in order to overpower the US in the global power hierarchy has to strengthen its naval power and become a maritime power. The US is a maritime power and wants to maintain the status quo in the maritime domain. South China Sea is becoming important in their contestation in the maritime domain. The US has a major presence in the Western Pacific but China's increasing presence and expansion in the South China Sea that is nearing the Western Pacific can challenge the US hegemon in near future. Though China is not posing a challenge to its global maritime power but it is posing a challenge in the nearby waters. China had recently developed anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities that threaten to restrict US forces and power projection in the Asian region. Through the A2/AD

strategy China “could allow it to obstruct the arrival of additional military units and limit the effectiveness of forward deployed forces, specifically by targeting the theatre bases; aircraft carrier strike groups; and command, control, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems that underpin U.S. power projection” (Montgomery 2014: 117). The US strategists view the A2/AD capabilities are to undermine its maritime power and drive the US out of Western Pacific (Steinberg and O’Hanlon 2014).

Given their geographical location in two different regions, China is not posing a direct threat to the US territory but it had indirect threats in Asia because of the involvement of the conflictual issues between China and the US allies and other strategic partners in the region. The US has maintained an alliance system in the region since the Cold War. Within Southeast Asia, the Philippines is the formal ally of the US since 1951, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia are US comprehensive partners and Singapore is the strategic partner. The US is an important power for these states as a security provider that would minimise tensions and deter conflicts in the region (Christensen 2003). China has strengthening its position on South China Sea disputes with building up of artificial islands and increasing its presence that has weakened the position of other disputed states. Washington is concerned about the security of its allies and partners which is threatened due to the rise of China and its growing aggressive behaviour. With its growing assertiveness and activities China has shown that it is willing to use force. In this case any awkward situation will create regional maritime instability and increase the risk of military clashes between China and the Southeast Asian states that would likely involve the US in the conflict. The US has an obligation to defend its allies against the use of force from China. The Philippines Aquino administration had invoked the importance of the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty in case of any conflict in Spratly islands (Hong 2013). In 2014, the Philippines and the United States had signed the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) during President Obama’s visit to Manila in April that has enhanced the defence cooperation with the eye on the US intervention and protection against the China’s growing assertiveness in the region. The US too wants to counter China as it is posing a challenge to its global dominant power and with its increasing naval modernisation and expanding sea power is challenging its dominant maritime presence. Apart from the Philippines, the US allies that are outside the region but closer to the region like Japan and Australia have concerns on China’s aggressive behaviour and the militarisation of the artificial islands. If the US does not defend its allies then its role as the Asian security provider will be questioned not only by its allies but as well as from emerging partners.

The US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea

The US position for long was not to take any position or involve in the territorial disputes between China and the Southeast Asian states. It had often taken a neutral stand and called all the states party to the dispute to resolve the tensions according to the international law. Over the last few years, the US has been blaming China for its actions in South China Sea. The US criticised China for launching the oil rig drilling near its Zhongjian or Triton Island, 150 nautical miles away from Vietnam’s coast. During the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in November 2015, the US President had urged China to stop military activities in South China Sea and endorsed a process of arbitration to settle the issue (Shear 2015). The regional states are helping the US to counter Chinese assertive behaviour where Singapore had allowed the US to deploy spy planes to patrol the South China Sea from its bases (Hernandez and Whaley 2016). The recent approval by the Philippines highest court to allow US troops in its land would complicate the dispute where the US troops would be few miles from the islands build by China. In 2020, the US has formally rejected the Chinese

claims to South China Sea and clearly stated that ‘Beijing’s claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful....’ (Pompeo 2020).

With China building artificial islands in the disputed waters and involvement of potential military facilities the US has been involved in freedom of navigation operations since 2015 to contest the excessive claims made by most of the claimants on South China Sea. The freedom of navigation operations “are means to ensure that U.S. naval, coast guard, and civilian ships, and by extension those of all nations, maintain unrestricted access to their rights at sea” (Glaser, Green and Poling 2015). The US has carried a few numbers of freedom of navigation operations in South China Sea starting in October 2015 where USS *Lassen* passed within 12 nautical miles of Subi and Mischief reefs. In the year 2016, USS *Curtis Wilbur* passed within 12 nautical miles of Triton Island in the Paracel Islands chain in January, USS *William Lawrence* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands in May, and USS *Decatur* conducted a freedom of navigation operation near the Paracel Islands in October. In year 2017, USS *Dewey* passed near Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands and conducted man overboard drill in May and USS *Stethem* passed by Triton Island in the Paracel Islands in July. In January 2018, USS *Hopper*, a U.S. Navy Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer carried a freedom of navigation operation within 12 nautical miles of Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea (Panda 2018).

The freedom of navigation operations has emerged as a contentious issue in the recent years between the US and China over the former’s right of its military vessels to operate in China’s two-hundred-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Glaser 2012). Regarding the military activities the US argues that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) or state practice does not negate nations from conducting military activities in EEZs without coastal state consent. But China insists that these activities should be conducted with the prior permission of the coastal state and not doing so violates China’s domestic law and international law (Glaser 2012). China is not convinced of the US motivation where its surveillance activities are seen to gather intelligence on China’s defence and threatening its national security (McDevitt 2014; You 2016: 647). The Chinese usually protest these operations by the US and ask them to leave and cite the violation of its sovereignty. To retaliate the increasing US presence in South China Sea, China had its civilian planes landed in the airstrips in the Spratly islands (Hernandez and Whaley 2016). These military operations by the US is likely to involve in armed conflict in future. In the past there were two major incidents between the US and China that was occurred during the surveillance activities: there was a mid-air collision between a U.S. Navy surveillance aircraft (EP-3) and an intercepting Chinese navy fighter in 2001 and the second was were the Chinese fishermen and paramilitary ships harassed USS *Impeccable* in 2009 while conducting undersea surveillance. In near future incidents like these can occur that could likely lead to armed conflict. According to Ian Storey, a senior fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, “If China chooses to challenge these operations, tensions will rise. If China merely protests then I don’t think [the two sides] will significantly up the ante” (cited in Zhen 2016). Zhu Feng, the executive director of the China Centre for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea at Nanjing University is of the opinion that “the South China Sea will be more crowded, and the risk for a military conflict will continue to rise” (cited in Hernandez and Whaley 2016).

The US is showing its willingness to commit to the regional allies and partners that are challenged by growing Chinese maritime activities in the waters. In light of China’s militarisation of its artificial islands the US is defending its allies against China’s coercion in

the disputed waters. The US has assured its support to its allies where recently the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that “American stands with our South-east Asian allies and partners in protecting their sovereign rights to offshore resources, consistent with their rights and obligations under international law” (Pompeo 2020). The US has strengthened its defence partnership with its allies especially with Philippines. Manila has promised to provide Washington military access to four new locations to be used by the US troops, out of which one is near to South China Sea. In April 2023, the US and the Philippines held the largest ever joint military drill in South China Sea called as Balikatan operation where they blow up a mock targeted warship in the waters (Ng and Guinto 2023).

China wants the South China Sea issue to be solved among the effected states where the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stated through “direct bilateral negotiation” with the parties involved which mean there is no scope for the interference from outside powers (cited in Tang 2012: 594). The US has raised concerns regard the recent development in the South China Sea. The US Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter, has urged China to stop building artificial island and other states to stop activities in the disputed areas that would destabilise the region. General Fan Changlong, vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission, linked the South China Sea issue to “Chinese sovereignty ... strongly committed to safeguarding the country’s sovereignty and defending territorial integrity” and warning that “no foreign country should intervene in the land reclamation” around islands (cited in Chansoria 2015). China would not give up on its maritime disputes which it has shown in its response to arbitrary court’s judgment in 2016.

Conclusion

South China Sea has emerged an important issue in the international politics as it has major waterways and transit route for world trade and an important source of oil and energy resources. The importance of the disputes has increase in recent years with the growing activities in the region. It is not only China but other states like Vietnam and the Philippines are involved actively in the disputes area. The US is no doubt a major player, though for most of time in the past it had maintained a neutral stand and supported the dispute to be resolved in an amicable manner in the light of international law but in recent years its interest and stakes have increased in the South China Sea. With China’s growing power which is a major challenger to its dominant status in global politics, China’s increasing presence and expansion in the South China Sea has an implication for its maritime power project that has an impact on the overall global power position.

China’s actions in the South China Sea undermine the US presence and challenge its interest for regional stability and security of its allies and partners in the region. The US is not directly involved in the conflict but the dispute has affected its allies with whom Washington has security and defence agreement. Chinese growing assertiveness and increasing clashes between China and other claimant states is encouraging the involvement of other great power the US in the region which the regional states believe can counter China’s assertive behaviour and act as a security provider. China’s recent activities and actions in recent years like the land reclamation, construction activities and militarisation of the artificial islands is likely to get into conflict between China and disputed states where the US would be drawn into the conflict as it would be obligated under the bilateral security treaties with its allies. Moreover, the US freedom of navigation operations are going against China’s South China Sea indeed has emerged as a major conflictual flashpoint between the US and China that would likely be involved in major conflict. There is provocation from both the sides where the US is involved

in freedom of navigation operation that goes against the Chinese claim of violating its sovereignty and domestic and international law. The US rebalancing and countering China strategy is making the US to involve more in the dispute and support its allies that makes China to prepare itself by involving in military activities in the artificial build islands.

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