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Assessing the Power Politics in South China Sea

The South China Sea has emerged as an essential geopolitical hotspot, central to global trade, energy security, and regional stability. Building on Robert D. Kaplan's analysis, this paper explores the strategic significance of the region, territorial disputes, and power dynamics among key stakeholders, including China, ASEAN nations, the United States, and India. It examines China's assertive claims, regional responses, and India's strategic interests. The paper brings to the fore the interplay of economic, security, and diplomatic factors, emphasizing the South China Sea's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical landscape.

Introduction:

In his work "Asia's Cauldron" geographer Robert D. Kaplan asserts that the South China Sea represents "the future of conflicts" because of its "strategic location, abundance of natural resources and importance as the shipping lane of the world" (Kaplan, 2014). Kaplan argues that the strategic weight of economy and power passes from inland to the seas in the 21st century and hence, the South China Sea will be in the middle of "a throat of global sea routes", connecting economic powerhouses of East Asia. This paper builds on Kaplan's analysis in order to evaluate the strategic importance, regional implications, and international security concerns in this crucial maritime domain.

The Importance of South China Sea:

The turn of focus from land to sea, with a focus on the South China Sea, can be attributed to several factors. (Altaf, 2022) First of all, the region has been characterised by a robust economic dynamism and a steadily growing trade flows which in turn has made maritime security and connectivity significant. The South China Sea is a strategic route for

global commerce, through which about \$3 trillion worth of cargoes transported annually (ChinaPower, 2021). It is not only an energy corridor but also has a significant energy potential “estimated to be 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of gas (U.S Energy Information Administration, 2024)” The figures of the same, remain underrepresented given the lack of ability to make specific determinations due to the territorial disputes. However, despite this challenge there is no denying the massive energy potential of the region. Moreover, with the continuous growth of Asian economies (Trading Economies, n.d) , it becomes evident that their need for maritime trade also increases along with the demand for energy supplies. Therefore, the South China Sea – a strategic geographical area becomes increasingly vital.

Further, the resource-rich South China Sea, presents massive economic growth potential to countries, such as China, Vietnam, The Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei to name some, who lay territorial claims in the region, not limited to the energy resources. The South China sea is also rich in marine diversity, represents a source of one-third of the world's global marine biodiversity and provides ten percent of the world total value of fish catch. Nevertheless, 40% of the stocks are collapsed or over-exploited, and 70% of coral reefs are heavily depleted as the result of overfishing and destructive practices like dynamite and cyanide fishing (UNEP, 2008). More importantly, fishing disputes are a major factor of conflict in the region (Greer, 2016).

Second, the South China Sea has come to become a site for great power competition and naval rivalry. The rise of China's military power and its growing ambitions in the region have alarmed the neighbouring countries and the US, as the latter tries to exert naval superiority and rely on access to the maritime routes. The South China Sea, resulting in an emerging balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, is thus a hotspot with far-reaching consequences for regional stability and global order (Ratner, 2020).

Third, the South China Sea represents a complicated network of territorial and marine claims where China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei have overlapping claims (Dutton, 2011). These clashes have been more aggressive as involved states look to expand their jurisdiction over islands, reefs and waters in pursuit of nationalism, strategic advantage and access to resources. The evolving feature of power dynamic and increased interests in the marine domain turn the South China Sea into a trigger for possible conflict and a threat to the existing rules-based international order (Hayton, 2014).

The Power Politics in South China Sea:

The Aggressive Claims of China:

China continues to assert more claims in the South China Sea, aided by its growing naval power (Fanell, 2023) and the power of its economy, providing it with the leverage to influence nations in the South China Sea. It lays historical claims in the region using the “Nine-Dash Line”. The nine-dash line is a demarcation line used by China to substantiate its territorial claims over an enormous area of the South China Sea, about 90% of the area (Alenezi, 2020). China's unilateral act of listing its nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea is a key point of friction which has also led to diplomatic tensions among countries of the region. The dash line is an overlapping pattern of nine dashes or line segments that surround an area which extends much beyond the officially claimed territorial waters of China, incorporating various contested islands, reefs, and maritime features also claimed by other countries in the region, such as “Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan (Hayton, 2014).”



Figure 1: China’s Nine Dash Line

Source: Jennings (2017)

China bases the idea of territorial occupation within the ninth-dash line zone on the historical records of the claims from the ancient era. The Chinese government claims that the ancient maps, printed records and navigational activities like fishing and naval expeditions are the tangible evidence of its time-long presence and control in this area. (Hayton, 2018). China, in addition, emphasises on the reference of this line on the maps printed by the Kuomintang government in the middle of the past century as proof to its factual claims.

Nevertheless, the status of nine-dash line has not been accepted under the international law, even by “the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)” which is the basic instrument for the delimitation of maritime zones and boundaries. Under UNCLOS, a coastal state has the right to occupy a “200 nautical miles

exclusive economic zone (EEZ)” from their coast, but if the nine-dash line is accepted, China would have access to these areas that are way beyond these limits (UNCLOS, 1982). The implication is that the neighbouring nations challenge China's claims within the nine-dash line that in turn cause conflicts and skirmishes within the South China Sea.

“The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in line with the 2016 case brought by the Philippines – dismissed China's claim on the nine-dash line. The tribunal found that the assertions of sovereignty by China was with no legal backing at all, as well as the fact that China had violated the right to an exclusive economic zone of the Philippines (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). Nevertheless, China refuses to comply with the decision and maintains its claim supported by the nine-dash line.

There is a high level of uncertainty due to the indefiniteness of the nine-dash line, as well as its noncompliance with international law rules. The Nine-Dash Line is considered indefinite because it lacks a clear, precise legal or geographical basis, and its boundaries are ambiguous. This uncertainty leads to an escalation of tension and can cause conflict in the South China Sea. The disputed territorial claims and the strategic location of the region for trade, oil resources and geopolitical interests have made the South China Sea a hotspot for possible military confrontations between China and the states claiming shares in the region as well as the United States which has challenged the Chinese claims and acted on the freedom of navigation operations in the region.

Chinese Strategies to Lay its Assertions:

China has implemented different mechanisms to safeguard and enlarge its sovereignty and jurisdiction over the South China Sea. This has resulted in the rise of tensions with other regional countries and the international community. The variety in strategies includes salami slicing, cabbage strategy, and artificial islands building.

Salami slicing refers to China's incremental approach to claiming portions of the South China Sea over time, gradually expanding its control at the expense of other claimant states (Raditio, 2018). It is the continuous takeover of parts or partial control of territories, especially in maritime conflicts. It includes dividing a large territory into smaller pieces and then gradually overtaking these slices individually, with a relatively low reaction to be expected from other countries. This method has been used in many cases; for instance, China occupied Paracel Islands from Vietnam in the 1970s, the taking place of Mischief Reef in 1995 (claimed by both the Philippines and Vietnam), the capturing of Scarborough shoal in 2012 (just “120 nautical miles west of the Philippine Island of Luzon”). These measures have brought about fear among the neighbouring nations and made the US more active and intensified the diplomacy efforts with the affected countries (Panda, 2019).

The cabbage strategy is still another strategy of China to make gains over the disputed areas in the South China Sea. This form of strategy implies the blockade of a contested area, e.g., an island or reef, by various units or vessels using it to surround the target and to block the rival claimant (Poling, 2019). The strategy is intended to intimidate and eventually to lead to domination by the same means of increased infrastructure development and expansion. One such measure is embodied in China's behaviours in the South China Sea, especially in the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, which has given rise to regional concerns.

China's artificial island construction is the cornerstone of an approach used to support its annexation and presence in the South China Sea. China constructed, equipped and garrisoned several artificial islands, including the Fiery Cross Reef which is strategically positioned to the northwest of PRC with one of the world's most advanced radar systems to track planes and marine movements, an anti-aircraft missile defence system and a contingent of about 200 Chinese troops. By reclaiming lands in seven different locations of the Spratly Islands, China has increased the total land area by more than three-and-half acres per day,

which is used to build military bases and solidify territorial claims (Beech, 2018). Actions by China in Ayungin Shoal and Mischief Reef are other examples, where Chinese have built structures and military installations as a way of making its presence felt.



Figure 2: The Construction of Artificial Island by China at Gaven Reefs in Spratly Islands. Source: IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly

ASEAN and Regional Players’ Challenge to China:

ASEAN has already taken many actions to solve the territorial problems in the South China Sea, especially with the purpose of preserving the peace and making sure the conflicts are solved peacefully.

Philippines:

The Philippines and ASEAN countries have shown a significant engagement in the resolution of the territorial issues in the South China Sea by utilizing different diplomatic, legal, and security mechanisms. Among the recent developments is the establishment of the National Maritime Council by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. which intends to send a strong signal against China’s provocative tactics in the West Philippine Sea (Reuters, 2024). This

action follows as Asia-Pacific witnesses growing international attention, due to joint naval exercises among Philippines, US, Japan and Australia (Morales, 2024). Such moves, however, raise China's concern significantly, but military confrontation remains a less likely scenario, with both countries using their coast guards instead of the Navy vessels.

The Philippines is among the countries who made a concerted effort to challenge these ambitious territorial claims made by China in the South China Sea. In 2016, the Philippines lodged a complaint against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague (Netherlands) (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2013) arguing that China's claims were inconsistent with theirs. The case was to do with the territorial disputes and marine jurisdiction issues, such as overlapping claims on islands, reefs, and the exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The Philippines appealed for recognition of its rights under international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the significance of protecting the environment in the vicinity. The decision by the tribunal was in favour of the Philippines, but China rejected the verdict and continues to engage in its confrontational actions in that region.

As China has openly defied the judgment of the court and China is still engaged in these activities, the Philippines is contemplating whether to take the issue back to the court most likely concentrating on the damages to the environment caused by China's activities. Despite financial expenses and possible reaction by Beijing which might cause more aggression, some experts think it is a worthy move because it substantially contributes to the challenge of China's behaviour and the maintenance of international pressure. The very former officials who had fought the legal battle in the previous case argued that fighting, even a little, is a demonstration of Filipino rights and the audacity of China's disregard for international law (Kipgen, 2020). Hence, they conclude that the responsibility of holding China responsible for its undertakings in the South China Sea is absolutely essential for the

application of a rules-based international strategy and the minimization of any further escalations in the region.

Vietnam:

As a member of the ASEAN, Vietnam has been an active voice in the South China Sea territorial disputes, especially in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Vietnam has used its long-standing membership within ASEAN to seek support from other member countries and to oppose China's increasingly assertive policies in the region. In 2016, Vietnam pulled off the feat of getting the ASEAN Joint Communiqué to contain a paragraph about the South China Sea dispute despite resistance from Cambodia, which was thought to be more supportive of China (Mogato, Martina & Blanchard, 2016).

However, the principle of consensus decision-making in ASEAN's conception has sometimes limited its performance on resolving the South China Sea issue, as the member states have different levels of business and strategic dealings with China. This has caused the ASEAN to be accused of being overly flexible and doing more to help China's interests and less to support Vietnamese claims of sovereignty.

Code of Conduct:

ASEAN has been heavily involved in settling South China Sea territorial encounters by way of mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). ASEAN has continuously underlined the desire of keeping the South China Sea peaceful and stable and free of restrictions in navigation. ASEAN strongly recommended a peaceful settlement of the South China Sea disputes in accordance with international law, particularly UNCLOS. In addition to this, another important movement in this regard was the agreement of ASEAN members and China on the ASEAN-China Declaration on Conduct of

Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 which was intended to create trust and confidence that may decrease incidents and escalation of tensions.

ASEAN has for a long time struggled to create a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea, which will serve as a more binding instrument that helps manage disputes in this region. The COC talks between ASEAN and China have been ongoing, and negotiations are expected to lead to an agreement being reached. Nevertheless, the progress has been slow, and there is a doubt about China's receptiveness to meaningful negotiations and its compliance with the rules-based world order (Hoang, 2020).

Taiwan:

Taiwan, which is not an ASEAN member, is another claimant in the South China Sea disputes. Taiwan occupies the largest island in the Spratly Islands, Itu Aba (also referred to as Taiping Island), and maintains a military presence there. ASEAN has not directly confronted Taiwan's claims or involved Taiwan in the South China Sea issue by adhering to the principle of 'One China' and bearing in mind the sensitivity of Taiwan in terms of China.

Nevertheless, some ASEAN countries like the Philippines and Vietnam have concerns about the possibility of Taiwan's actions creating difficulties in the already tense battle in the South China Sea. In 2015, Taiwan drew criticism from the Philippines and Vietnam due to the military drills that the country conducted on Itu Aba. The military drills were perceived by many as a blatant provocation that could escalate the tensions (Jennings, 2018).

The Interests of United States of America:

The United States has major interests in the South China Sea region, particularly centered on upholding the free navigation of seas; preserving the rules-based global order, and also supporting its regional allies and partners. The United States has invariably underlined free maritime trade and peaceful settlement of differences using the existing

international laws, especially, The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Pompeo, 2020). It is, however, important to note that the USA has not ratified the UNCLOS Treaty.

One of the United States' most important priorities in the South China Sea is freedom of navigation which is important because the strategic area is an integral part of the global network of shipping lanes, with a third of the world's maritime trade passing through them on a regular basis. For a long time, the U.S. has considered the South China Sea as a global common wherein every country has a right to navigate and fly through these international waters.

However, China's claims in the region and its constant military upgrading around disputed islands in the South China Sea have particularly raised concerns about possible obstructions to freedom of navigation. The United States (U.S.) as a result has been doing Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)- which are regular U.S. naval and aircraft's demonstration of their rights of navigation through international waters.

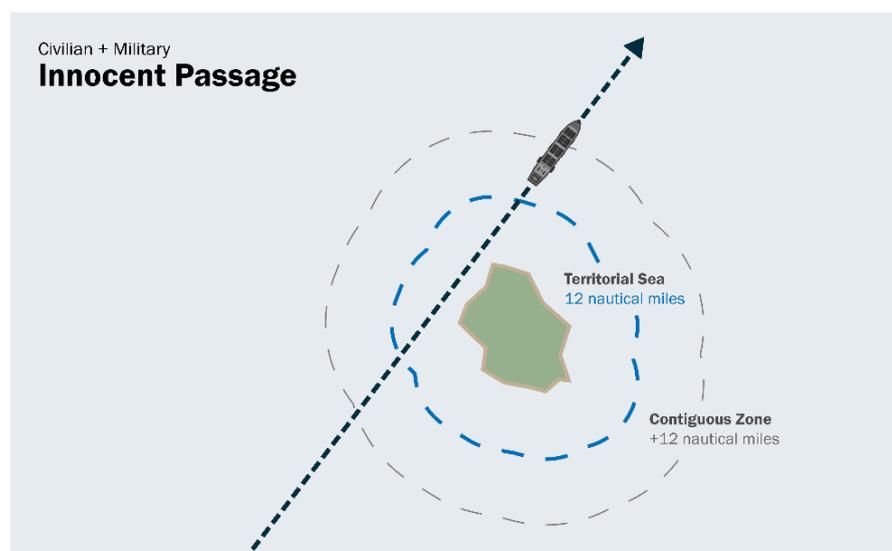


Figure 3: Innocent Passage of Vessels (Military and Civilian). Source: Belfer Center

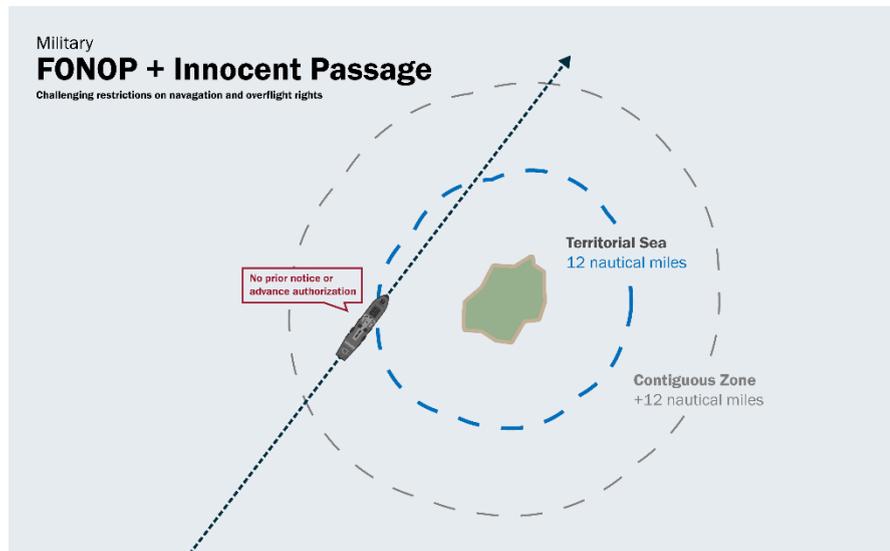


Figure 4: Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOPs) and Innocent Passage of Vessels (Military and Civilian) Source: Belfer Center

FONOPs are employed for the purpose of exerting pressure on unjust claims that are beyond the ambit of UNCLOS. The following is an example of a U.S. response: if a state asserts a 12 nautical mile territorial sea area around a low-tide elevation that does not satisfy the UNCLOS criteria, the U.S. can protest by sailing within the claimed area and performing activities not consistent with innocent passage. Through this action, the USA demonstrates that it does not embrace the frivolous claim while remaining within the framework of international law.

In addition, the USA has also reinforced its security partnerships with regional allies e.g., the Philippines and Japan, and has encouraged ASEAN states to adopt a unified attitude toward the disputes in the South China Sea (Parameswaran, 2020).

Implications and Opportunities for India:

India has very significant strategic and economic priorities in the South China Sea, which are responsible for the fact that India has been progressively engaging and cooperating in this region. India, being a major maritime power and a key player in the Indo-Pacific, makes an effort to balance the relations with China and bolster the partnerships with Southeast Asian countries and other regional actors, the USA, Japan, and Australia.

Among the top priorities of India with regard to the South China Sea is securing its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that are vital to the country's trade and energy security. India has upheld freedom of navigation and overflight in the region and has called for peaceful resolutions of disputes, in accordance with international law and UNCLOS.

As part of its strategic measures, India has relied on a multilateral approach, participating in regional forums like the ASEAN +3 and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting Plus. India has also strengthened its bilateral relationship with Southeast Asian states especially with Vietnam which is becoming a strategic partner in the region. In 2018, India and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation that contained provisions for joint exercises and training (Rajagopalan, 2017).

Additionally, India has been engaging in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as Quad, where the USA, Japan, Australia, and India are involved as informal strategic partners. As part of the Quad, special attention is paid to the promotion of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region with the key themes including maritime security and rule of law. Although the Quad is not exclusively targeted towards the South China Sea, it enables India to work together with other like-minded countries to approach the regional issues including the increasing expansionism from China.

India's involvement in the South China Sea has its own sets of challenges. China perceives India's growing involvement in the region negatively, and it strongly expresses its

position opposing any moves aiming to "internationalize" the issues. Being caught in the middle between China, its largest trading partner, and its strategic interests is not an easy position for India to take.

Notwithstanding above mentioned difficulties, there are some strategies India can adopt to amplify her stake in the South China Sea. First, and foremost, India can broaden its presence within Southeast Asia through maritime cooperation and capacity building. In the second place, India can collaborate with the Quad member states to come up with a principles-based order and also work with other actors in the region like the ASEAN countries. Lastly, India can use its strategic location in the Indian Ocean to strengthen its maritime area awareness and sea power projection capacities, which can play a role in deterring Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea.

Conclusion:

The South China Sea has become the epicentre of many crucial issues, that determine the current and future status of the stability in the security sector for the whole region, as well as the shape of the global trade, and the balance of power on the Indo-Pacific scene. The geo-strategic importance of the South China Sea is determined by its considerable commercial significance, wealth of natural resources and possible power projection capabilities.

The regional balancing of power is mainly determined by China's actions, especially after its more assertive posture, as seen in the nine-dash line claims, the militarization of artificial islands, and the employment of coercive strategies such as salami slicing and the cabbage strategy. In response, regional powers, with the Philippines and Vietnam at the forefront, rolled out a number of strategies to tackle China's actions – legal challenges, diplomatic pressure, and upgraded security cooperation with the external players.

ASEAN has been the primary driver of efforts to restrain tensions and foster negotiations, but the success of that role has been limited by the internal splits, and, as a result, China's power. The United States has also increased its involvement in the region through the conduct of freedom of navigation operations and securing the support of regional allies to maintain the rule of international law.

Within the context of India, the South China Sea poses not only challenges but also opportunities. India, as a rising maritime power with increasing economic and strategic interests in the region, endeavours to maintain its strategic balance toward China and strengthen its interaction with Southeast Asian countries and other key regional players. India's participation in the Quad and its efforts to enhance its naval capabilities and power projection reflect its growing stakes in the region.

At the core of this dispute is the complicated web of geopolitics, international law and great powers' competition as the Indo-Pacific's future is being shaped.

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