

China's Policy towards South China Sea and its Geo-Political Impact (2009-2020)

Khadeeja Ahmad

M.Phil. Scholar at the Department of Political Science, Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan.

Sadia Rafique

Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan.

Khalid Manzoor Butt

Director, Centre of Excellence China Studies, Chairperson, Department of Political Science and Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan.

Email: khadeejaahmad24@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

China's policy of strategic ambiguity towards the territorial dispute in South China Sea has altered the geopolitical architecture. China's use of delaying tactics to appease ASEAN states and methods of distraction in its bilateral relations with competing states has improved the security in the region. However, the Chinese leadership is simultaneously conducting domineering activities in the disputed waters of South China. In this context, the study explores China's policies in the South China Sea. Additionally, there is a general understanding of the external motives and domestic sources being behind China's policy towards South China Sea, however, these factors are often analyzed and studied in isolation. This research article examines both the factors simultaneously and draws conclusions on the potential of armed conflict in the region, especially with respect to the claimant littoral states and the American pivot.

Key Words: Strategic Ambiguity, South China Sea, China's Policy, Delaying Tactics, ASEAN, United States, Domestic Sources, Confucianism, PLA, EEZ

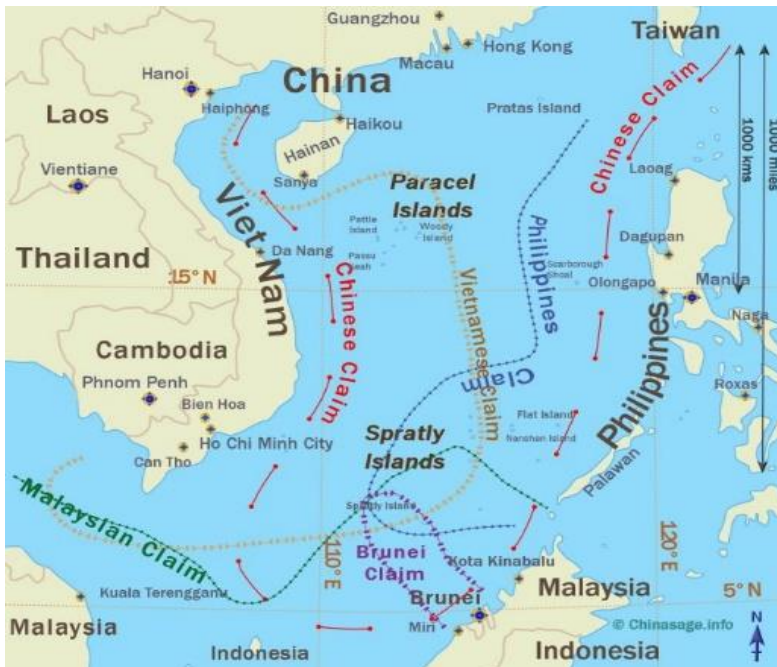
Introduction

China is a rising global power, with economic strength second only to the United States. To its south lies the South China Sea (SCS) in the Western Pacific, which is of paramount geopolitical and geo-economic significance yet a disputed territory. While the dispute dates back to the Twentieth century, China's policy towards the SCS after 2009, has seen modifications which many neo-realists believe, is China's attempt at imposing regional dominance. The SCS has one of the most important maritime passages, surrounded by nations with strong economic activity such as People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Brunei. Close to it is another regional power i.e. India, which has had significant influence in the Malacca strait of SCS in the past. These dynamics add to the SCS strategic value. Meanwhile, it also serves as an incentive for China to consolidate its regional power. China's interest in the region is underpinned by economic motives as well.

The Chinese dream which revitalized under the administration of president Xi Jinping, seems to have triggered China into adopting aggressive political and economic policies. Belt and Road initiative (BRI) is one of them. Its shift in policy towards South China Sea is another and perhaps the most potent in gaining control, in the wake of multi-polarity re-emerging on the global front.

South China Sea at present is a geo-political flashpoint, which is attracting concerns from major global powers. Due to its regional placement, it sits at the top Asia's security agenda. China claims almost 90% of the South China Sea, which spreads across 3.5 million of square kilometers and includes its two main archipelagoes, Spratly and Paracel (Idus, 2020). It is also a trade route, from which one third of the total global trade which is 80% of trade in volume transits annually. The geo-economic significance of South China Sea, and its consequent political implications have made claimant states uneasy about China's aggressive land reclamation in the region. Through building artificial islands in the reefs of SCS and the hyper militarization of the maritime zone within and surrounding the China's nine dash line, china has also given America an impetus for its pivot to Asia scheme. Consequently, a Sino-American cold war similar to that between the US and Soviet Union in the twentieth century, seems to be manifesting in the east Asian region, which could have grave security implications for the regional states.

Figure 1: Map of South China Sea showing the disputed regions.



Source: <https://www.chinasage.info/south-china-sea.htm>

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Objectives

- To understand strategic goals in pursuance of which China reprioritized SCS in its policy agenda.
- To evaluate the influence of various external and internal factors in china's policy towards South China Sea since 2009
- To examine the impact of China's foreign policy on the political alignment of competing regional states.

Rationale of the Study

Some scholars used the mainstream International Relations theories to justify China's role in the SCS dispute. The second image of Kenneth Waltz's Structural realism, which focuses on state level analysis, was an especially popular tool for interpreting logic behind the role China plays and its behaviour in the SCS. To the researcher of this study, such literature felt limited in its understanding of the driving forces behind China's policies in the SCS and its urge for regional dominance. While it is in some part inspired by its power based position in the International Order and security centric offensive realism, there are other contributing factors involved in shaping the decisions China makes in regards to the SCS. In this study, light will be shed on the versatile, often ignored, domestic influences as well, which have shaped China's policy towards the South China Sea dispute. By identifying both external and internal influences to China's behavior in the SCS, its actual intentions towards its neighboring states and regional security can be assessed. The researchers in their review of China's policy towards SCS often overestimate the reactions of neighboring states and the potential of regional conflict. This study's rationale is built around its role in adding depth to the present interpretation of China's foreign policy in regards to the conflict and gauging if the geopolitical implications of china's policies could have a significant negative impact of either China or the regional stability.

Historical Background

For this study, the literature reviewed to understand the policy of People's Republic of China towards South China Sea was quite diverse, based on both Eastern and Western authors. Depending on the country sponsoring the article or case study, the lens around the South China Sea conflict the legitimacy of China's claims of the SCS was adjusted. Most literature available, focused heavily on history and evolution of South China Sea conflict, legality of China's territorial claims in SCS, its geopolitical impact and the role played by the US in containing China's advances.

According to Petallides (2016), China policy towards SCS in historic context. It notes that China's claim to territorial sovereignty date back to the Zhou and Shang's dynasties, evidence of which is found in the trade documents of that era

The policy of China towards the islands in SCS can thus be traced back to 770 BC when Chinese explorers discovered and occupied the islands. But the first direct policy action China towards South China Sea was in 1883, when it protested against Germany for surveying the Spratly archipelago (Wortzel, 1999). Later in 1947, a Chinese geographer, during President Chiang Kai-Shek's regime, published the South China Sea Islands on a map with a U shaped line, also known as the nine dash line with which China officially laid territorial claims on Paracel and Spratly islands among others in the SCS. People's Republic of China also claims autonomy over Taiwan, which was the first country to physically dominate a portion of SCS via occupation at Itu Aba in Spratly Islands (Park, 2000).

Wong (2016) dissects China's policy towards SCS and divides them into three eras. The period between 1950 and 1999 was of multiple disputes in the region mushroomed, where China with its moderate level naval capacity, abstained from any substantial regional engagement. There was no set pattern to its policy, and in the absence of ASEAN till 1990's it majorly altered its policy with each state, based on bilateral communications. From 2000 to 2009, China accelerated its efforts to enhance its naval prowess. Meanwhile it heavily engaged in diplomatic relations and negotiations with the competing states as well as the world, especially through its affiliation with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and ASEAN. A norm was also formed in the regional policy of China through expanding economic interdependence with disputing states, and overall this era in China's policy with respect to SCS is dubbed as "China's Charm Offensive". The current era of 2009 to present is an age of renewed political tensions in the region, with China's military installations in the islands, and aggressive reclamation campaign.

Fangyin (2016) notes that china's current policy towards SCS and the littoral states exists in a fragile balance between self-restraint and strategic assertiveness. It is China's assertive policy in the region, which not only threatens the already fragile geostrategic balance in the region but it is also paving way for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states to enable US involvement in the region (Storey 1999).

The new maritime order, which China seeks to establish through its ambitious activity in SCS, has provoked multifaceted reactions from regional disputing states and concerned organizations. Among other regional states, Philippines legally tried to bring to notice the violations China has committed through its military activities in the region. The decision which the international arbitration tribunal issued in 2016, favoured Republic of Philippines in its claims, recognizing China's absolute claims of sovereignty in the region as illegitimate under the 1982's Law of the Sea Convention. Beckman (2013) however, justifies China's actions in the SRC, with respect to its maritime claims and notes that in its 2011 *note verbale*, it sourced the legitimacy of its sovereignty in the region through both, ancient claims as well as articles of United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS). The continued assertions of China in the SCS have provoked reactions from Vietnam

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(which is increasingly aligning with the US) Philippines and Japan. The quadrilateral alliance between India, Australia, US and Japan, is also reemerging with its policy based intentions to single out and contain China's growing power in the region (Grossman 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Through an already present theory, clarity can be brought to the concept being studied. The application of a theoretical framework "Regional Security Complex Theory" in this particular study will bring greater understanding of China's approach towards the SCS. Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex theory postulates that there exist pattern of behaviors within a regional complex. It also posits that the state behaviour is motivated and guided primarily by circumstances of its regional security. The theory thus, delves into the concept of balance of power and interdependence on a regional level.

Within the scope of this study, the Regional Security dynamic of South East Asia can be analyzed from the perspective of China. It goes without saying, China is a regional hegemon with India following close behind. This creates a bipolar power complex within the endogenous circle. Meanwhile the rise of ASEAN is a buffer which keeps the balance between rising China and the surrounding states within the region. In this sense, ASEAN can be viewed as the "insulator" in the theory of Regional Complex, having properties of protecting states interest and their sovereignty from the each other. Meanwhile, the American factor and the stability-instability paradox it generates within the region, can be understood as external pressure, trying to contain and isolate the belligerent state (presumably China) within the regional complex and reduce its threat on a global state.

Another theory applied to understand China's foreign policy decisions towards SCS is the "Simple Learning Theory". Throughout the history of People's Republic of China, its policy towards SCS has fluctuated in nature many times however, the claims have always remained fixed. This nature of China can be understood within the scope of simple learning theory. Simple learning theory can be applied, to understand China's policy towards SCS in contrast to its strategic goals. Xi Jinping's initial response to the dispute was an aggressive forward policy approach, reflected through its hyper reclamation policy in the region. He also took a hard stance against both Vietnam and the Philippines in the region. But with growing tensions, Xi's regime shifted gears and began incorporating soft policy diplomatic tactics in pursuing their regional goals. The use of delaying tactics and distraction policy towards competing states, enabled China to avoid direct armed conflict. Though Xi altered his approach towards SCS from a hard policy to that of strategic ambiguity, the end goal of his policies remained the same i.e. asserting over the regions included in China's claim to the SCS.

Research Methodology

The study employs analytical approach to critically evaluate China's approach towards the SCS. This analysis allows researcher to maximize the utility of the available data (Tate et al., 2018). Since most of the secondary data available was biased reports of historic incidents which took place in the past, through qualitative study of data available, diverse perspective was selected and analyzed.

Inductive approach method was used to infer China's role in the security complex of South China Sea. It allows researchers to generalize a decision maker's trajectory of decisions by evaluating his or her past decisions at certain point in time. A time limit was also imposed in the study of China's policy towards the SCS territorial issue, because each era of dispute as mentioned in the background, has a norm and a recurring pattern of its own. For the purpose of relevance of the study, the author opted for the most recent time frame with similar normative pattern, which is the period between 2009 and 2020.

Emergence of the China Threat (A Policy Shift)

In 2009, the joint submission filed by Malaysia and Vietnam to the UN Commission for extension of their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) beyond the standard 200 nautical miles in the disputed SCS, marked the end of China's "Charm Offensive" policy and the birth of the "China Threat" in the East Asia. There have always been periodic tensions between claimant states in the region over their maritime autonomy but it their alignment with campaign of the UN to internationalize the SCS which reintroduced friction in the region. While the impetus for China's reprioritization of its strategic goals in the SCS did come from this political reorientation in the region. It was Obama's policy of involvement in the South East region and its "pivot to Asia", which caused China to boldly re-assert its regional claims (Sinaga, 2016). China finally decided to not compromise its territorial claims for the stability of the region.

China's Policy of 'Strategic Ambiguity'

To consolidate its maritime power in the SCS without offending the global hegemon or its allies in the region, China is operating through a policy of strategic ambiguity. Within this strategy, a combination of assertive reclamation policies is balanced out with the soft policy approach towards the neighboring counties, to secure a regional balance. China exhibits a policy of "Strategic Ambiguity", especially in response to the accusations from competing states on legality of China's territorial claims in SCS. Where it drives legitimacy of its claims from both historic perspective as well as the UNCLOS, making for a vague legal stance on its policy.

China's strategic ambiguity in the SCS is harmonized by its simultaneous self-restraint and assertive measures in the region (Fangyin, 2016). It has employed

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varying diplomatic, militaristic and administrative tactics, in soft and hard approaches to strengthen its maritime claims in the SCS and to deter competing states from expanding in the region. However, China's soft policy approach seems highly overshadowed by its hard tactics in dealing with the mounting tensions in the region.

Diplomatic Tactics

With the escalating tensions in the SCS from 2009 onwards, China did not abruptly end its soft policy approach. China continued to project on international front its willingness to negotiate and reach an agreement with the neighboring states on the dispute of SCS, as depicted by its agreement with ASEAN in 2011 to work on the guidelines decided of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) (Fravel, 2011). Chinese envoy's visit to Philippines in 2011 and the subsequent mention of violation of ASEAN-China DOC agreement by China leads to a diplomatic break off between the two states however, China does not opt for a direct military approach in dealing with the standoff between the two that took place in the Scarborough shoal in 2012. It also opted for delaying tactics as part of its diplomatic strategy when indulging in negotiations with the regional states and organizations on the resolution of dispute (Fravel, 2011). Meanwhile, it continues to put pressure on Vietnam and Philippines through its protests against their private corporations (including Exxon Mobil) setting plants on some of the islands. China's frequent naval exercises in response to growing presence of US fleets near the SCS, is another diplomatic tactic China is employing to send out warning signals to competing states. "Peoples Liberation Army's (PLA) dramatic incursions may also be part of Beijing's attempts to force the Biden administration into high-level talks"(Feng, 2021).

China policy also employed distraction tactic to improve its relations with regional states. China significantly benefited from the Corona Virus pandemic and has redeemed its image to a certain degree as a concerned regional power, focused on joint development and collective progress. China's shuttle diplomacy through which it formed quick alliances to supply massive aid and vaccine to neighboring state has allowed it back in the good books of several states, such as Philippines, hit devastatingly by Covid-19. This approach is China has been dubbed as the Vaccine diplomacy, which some analysts are viewing dubiously, in the wake of numerous conspiracy theories surrounding the outbreak.

Administrative Approach

Chinese Administration has opted to not to pursue occupation of the regions which are already under the control of other littoral states rather reclaim and build on regions which directly benefit China's strategic goals in the region and aids in expanding its regional control (Panda, 2021). This approach is in line with China's policy of need based self-restraint to prevent any further escalations in the dispute.

The dilemma of this approach however is, that the more territorial claim China's makes in the region, the more threatened other states are bound to feel, which inherently makes the tensions in the region spike.

Militaristic Component

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) since 2009, has worked on increasing its military capabilities and operational capacity. The purchase of 4 Zubr Class Landing Craft from Ukraine and Greece in 2009 marked the beginning of China's supposed assertive policy towards SCS. The naval capacity being built by China through commissioning of modern naval technology, frequent naval exercises in the South China Sea, installations of military camps in various islands of Paracel and Spratly, are constantly shaking the balance of power in the region.

The deployment of antiballistic missiles and China's famous DF-21 and YJ-62 from mainland china to Spratly archipelagoes was another major military step in China's South China Sea policy (Panda, 2021). In the wake of America's carrier vessels transporting USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71), spotted in the SCS on 15th January, 2021, China has launched a new series of live-fire exercises in the region (Feng, 2021). The heavy militarization of the South China waters is part of China's firm geo-strategic policy of dominance in the region.

Legal Approach

Perhaps China utilizes its policy of ambiguity the most in regards to its legal outlook towards the SCS. China, having ratified United Nation's 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China should traditionally abide by the international limit to of 12 nautical miles' territorial sea and 200 nautical miles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and consequently allow freedom of navigation in most of the South China Sea region. China's legal policy is vague where it asserts claim to most of the SCS on grounds of historic occupation (Rowan, 2005). Based on its need to defend its claim in the SCS, it adopts the complimentary legal approach. For instance, the artificial islands built by China in the Southern Sea do not fall under China's jurisdiction according to the UNCLOS. Meanwhile, they are not natural islands and therefore according to article 60 of UNCLOS do not have a territorial sea of their own. But China continues to impose claims to both, regardless of the provisions of the international law. Meanwhile, it continues to assert its own claim to the territorial sea and the EEZ in the region in accordance to the clauses of the UNCLOS. This reflects further on its policy of strategic ambiguity, where it has only partially adhered to the international laws. The Chinese policies are compliant to the UNCLOS when it comes to exercising its own rights in its EEZ, but non-compliant when it comes to the duty of acknowledging the legal status of the other littoral states' EEZ in the SCS.

China's Interests in South China Sea

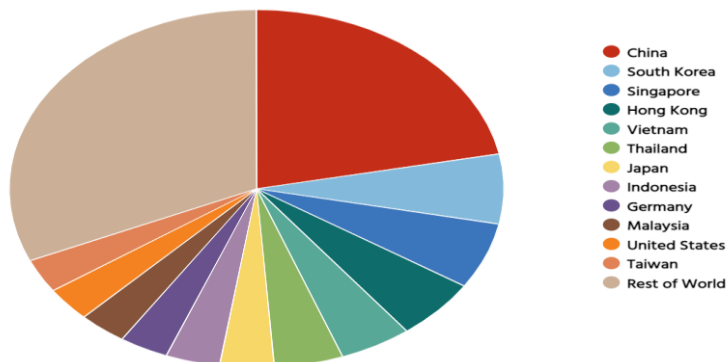
Despite variations in its approach towards realizing its strategic goals in the region and on national front, China's policy has always been consistent in its claims of territorial sovereignty over the South China Sea. However, China's policy post 2009, has been shaped significantly by the altering global political landscape. With the US losing its unipolar attributes in the form of resurging Russia and rising China, the desire to pursue its strategic goals in the region reignited. Prior to exploring the Chinese Policy and its domestic drivers, it is crucial to understand the external goals which Chinese policy wishes to obtain and so far has to a certain degree, through its policy.

Economic Interests

Experts estimate around 105 billion barrel deposits of hydrocarbon exist around the Spratly archipelagos. Such massive hydrocarbon reserves would be useful to China's expanding energy needs and consequently, will facilitate its exponential economic growth. From the waters of South China Sea, a substantial amount of China's annual catch in fish also comes (Fravel, 2011).

In addition to the resource output, economic security was another major and perhaps the most decisive factor in China's reevaluation of its policy with respect to SCS. Being the second largest economy, China is the largest exporter and importer in the region. It was noted that in 2016, 64% of China's maritime trade volume passed through the South China Sea. From the total global trade volume which passes through the South China Sea, a solid 26% belongs China. With having such high economic stakes in the region, China's rigorous policy to attain absolute sovereignty over the SCS waters becomes a much more justified. To secure its economic prosperity and ensure its sustainability, China's reclamation attempts in the region had to be made.

Figure 2: Pie Chart showing the Percentage Share of Trade Bulk of States in the SCS (2016).



Source: <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

Geopolitical Dominance

Within the sphere of China's claims to Spratly and Paracels' territorial sovereignty and naval rights, falls its ambition to dominate the regional maritime order and trade through control of the transit route and become a "Haiyang Daguo" (Morton, 2016). This was even discussed in the 18th congress report of CCP. The ambition for political dominance in the region could be viewed through two perspectives. One is China's "expansionist inclination", reflected in China's history of authoritarian behavior, which aims at dominating and maintaining absolute political control in the region, as reflected through its policy in the case of Hong Kong, Tibet and Taiwan (Fangyin, 2016). It's disregard for the 2011 agreement regarding the DOC with the other claimant states of Spratly Islands and building artificial islands, can be seen as an extension of its expansionist policy as well. In both cases which China has been stern about political interference from regional or global powers?

Regional Stability

China's policy is centered towards anchoring its geopolitical hegemony in the region through safeguarding control over a major waterway in the South China Sea. Especially with the increasing US role in the region and its growing quadrilateral alliance with India, Australia and Japan, the need to dominate the SCS waterways has become all the more potent (Grossman, 2020). Post Malacca Dilemma of 2003, when tensions with India rose to a point, where analysts recognized the threat of India blocking the Malacca strait, the significance of establishing regional dominance was realized all the more. The other perspective deals on theoretical front, understanding the power politics between China and the US, which has plunged the two states towards a Thucydidian trap. This would explain their tug of war in the SCS, with hopes of dominating it. The increasing rivalry between China and the US is forming another cold war scenario. So in order to block US out from the region and contain its allies, a full fledge assertive policy in regards to the SCS would be arguably the most plausible option.

Domestic Interests

Political, Legal and Economic matters are mostly administered by the state leader of China and therefore, do not influence the foreign policy of China directly. But they do hold a significant place in the leader's consideration of Foreign Policy. From the three approaches of domestic influence (Political Leadership, Economic Factors and Social pressure groups), the first and the last are most relevant to Chinese maritime strategy in the South.

Leadership's Policy Inclinations

In China, a significant amount of decisions is dependent on the leader's preferences. For instance, there was a shift seen in 2013, in the foreign policy of China regarding SCS, as compared to its policy since 2009. China's changed behaviour in the SCS can be attributed to the switch in the Chinese leadership. Since president Xi became a member of its Politburo, China's foreign policy became much more economically ambitious, looping in regional states in its multibillion projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the same time, the promotion of authoritarian model in the populist context, became much more relevant to China's politics. President Xi became the heroic figure bringing back the "Chinese dream" (Shullman, 2019). Previously, under Hu Jintao's regime, the focus was on "Collective Leadership" format. Moreover, Hu Jintao's regime adopted strategic restraint and negotiation as diplomatic tools to dealing with neighboring claimant states. Xi Jinping, after securing the office of presidency however, retained the policy of strategic restraint to a certain degree but with his slogan of "Chinese Dream" adopted a series of aggressive reclamation policies in the SCS, which included hyper naval surveillance in the region and installation of military bases in the SCS archipelagos (Sinaga, 2016). The extent of influence which the leadership has on the decision making of process in China is apparent through these shifts in political stances and policy options.

Nuclear Deterrence

Contrary to popular belief, China's Yulin Naval base expansion strategy was based less on its offensive realist ideation and more on its defensive insecurities. The US factor having increasingly become relevant in the region was tipping the balance of threat in its favour. So, according to Funaiolo et al. (2021), it was important for China to consolidate its nuclear deterrence in the region by implanting the "fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), commonly known as 'boomers' on Hainan Island in China's southernmost part. By becoming a base for growing submarine fleet it was also meant to contain any potential conflict in case of Taiwan's rebellion. Though this development was highly influenced by domestic need for security, the long shadows it casted over the United States and the sense of insecurity it injected in the neighboring countries translated into their interpretation of China's intentions towards South China Sea dispute as erratic and detrimental to the regional stability.

Political Stability

Since the 1950's China's claim towards South China Sea has remained consistent. Most of the Chinese rulers have gained political popularity through their stance on the legality of China's claim in the SCS waters. With the nationalistic wave returning globally with populism rising in Europe, the wave has also reached

China. Emmerson (2016) believes that the nationalistic sentiments are spreading across the Chinese people. With Nationalistic sentiments running high, the political elites feel pressured to work actively in strengthening their claim in the SCS.

With tensions spiking in Hong Kong and Taiwan, local dissatisfaction towards the Chinese government was increasing. The domestic pressure was also building, with local population demanding the state rulers to deliver on their initial assurances of possession of SCS. Moreover, the US factor has heightened the patriotic sentiments in the Chinese Society who feel uneasy with the growing US presence in the region (Feng, 2020). Meanwhile, the failure of China in pushing back the seventh fleet of US towards if not beyond Guam, as resulted in protests from populist-patriotic factions of China, who believe the government is just not doing enough.

The threat of political instability due to variant factors, inclusive of the ones mentioned, is hanging above Chinese government like a Damocles sword. Through its aggressive policy towards the SCS dispute, China might be trying to distract Chinese people from its dealings in the Hong Kong on one end, and appease the neo realist patriots unsatisfied with china's diplomatic approach towards the regional dispute, on other.

Business Lobbies in China

There exists a clash of interest between the business owners China. On one end, energy producers and fish industry is lobbying for a neo realist stance in the maritime policy of SCS. The massive hydrocarbon reserves beneath the claimed territorial waters has invited a significant amount of attention and interest from local as well as international oil companies. The National Oil Company of China (NOC) began its business venture in the SCS in 2012, through the HYSY981 rig's deployment from mainland China to the disputed waters. This was an attempt at establishing China's defacto rule on the claimed waters (Long, 2016). The private businesses with manufacturing units in neighboring units are lobbying against the assertive momentum which Chinese leadership has picked up towards the SCS. Because if the tensions in the region were to inflate any more, like they did after the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 where Filipino's burned down Chinese businesses in the country, these owners will suffer a significant damage. So the contrasting pressures from business community exist in China, which also have stake in the policy making process of the government.

Social Pressures (Confucianism vs Jingoism)

China's policy in SCS is also dictated by people's expectations and socio-cultural norms. Historically, Confucianism has been core to Chinese Civilization and its morals support peace and harmony. The Confucian principle supports negotiation as the optimum mode of conflict resolution. Following this cultural norm, Hu

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Jintao approached the conflict of South China Sea. People of China however, were not satisfied and a growing nationalistic sentiment brought support for Xi's Chinese Dream. The Chinese dream oversteps Confucian principle of righteousness, justice and peace when it comes to the policies related to SCS dispute. The will of the people thus, despite the nature of regime, did influence China's policy towards SCS. According to Emmerson (2016), Xi's timely shift in China's approach towards the regional dispute in 2013, was crucial in subsiding extremist nationalistic sentiments which could have evolved into a rebellion.

Geopolitical Implications of China's Policy towards South China Sea

The Chinese geostrategic policy of ambiguity have created ripples in the geopolitical landscape of the East Asian region. But the direction of impact and the extent of implications seems to be much less drastic than initially assumed.

Security Dynamic

China's unprecedented expansion in the SCS has shaken the regional security complex from its previous anchor. Unlike the past, when South China Dispute was not a priority in the Chinese Policy, other than few regional skirmishes, the tensions had reasonably subsided. Especially during the era of China's "charm's offensive". Political involvement of external forces was minimum which granted China freedom to exercise a certain degree of control in the region (Sjah, 2016). But with Xi's aggressive military campaign in the South China Sea, ASEAN states have become increasingly threatened.

The agreement on DOC guidelines between ASEAN and China, developed a hope for joint development in the region. It also liberated the trust of ASEAN states in China to a certain degree, despite its history of belligerent policies in the region (Fravel, 2011). However, with the shift in China's foreign policy and massive reclamation campaign, the trust deficit between the littoral states and China has returned (Romaniuk and Burgers, 2019). According to a research, the average trust Filipino had in China was negative 33 where as it was positive 66 towards the US. This has given the US room to increase its involvement in the region. The political and economic threat insulation which under the "Regional Security Complex Theory" was enjoyed by the East Asian region seems to have crumbled as a result of growing hostilities in the region.

Policies of Competing States

Recently, the two main competitors of China in the SCS, Philippines and Vietnam both have fortified their naval bases in the SCS (Heydarian, 2021). But this is a rare reaction to China's advances in the SCS. Initially China's policy Shift did trigger reactionary policies from claimant states. Philippines officially renaming South China Sea to "West Philippine Sea" was is one example. Despite knowing

American intentions of rebalancing the Asia Pacific region, its renewed military pact with the US in 2014, which allowed more US presence in the region, can also be seen as heavily influenced by its efforts to limit China's inflating presence in the SCS. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese offence strategy to prevent China from planting oil rigs in disputed waters near the Paracel archipelago in 2014 was also a bold move. From Malaysia, reactionary policy came only after a regime change. With Mahathir Mohamad becoming the Prime Minister in 2018, a foreign Policy shift occurred towards China based on its activities in SCS, from strategic cooperation to policy of non-alignment (Uy and Espena, 2020). These policy alterations towards China by the states were hardly significant and mostly temporary. Compared to China's active expansion in the disputed region, these policies could only be considered weak protests.

Strategic Rebalancing

China's realist stance in the SCS, sparked a response from the threatened global superpower. Like in the Cold War period, where the US shifted its pivot to Asia in hopes of containing Russia, it adopted a similar policy during Obama's regime towards the East Asian region. Heightened Chinese naval activity in the region intimidates a considerable portion of US's trade volume which transits through the SCS. But America's interest in the region gravitates more around political agendas. The end goal is to prevent the rising China from becoming a threat to the global hegemony of the US. To balance out China, US has not only strategically placed its naval fleets in the region, but also continues to ignore China's warnings in its frequent expeditions in the disputed waters of SCS. These excursions hold a political motive of intimidating China while also seeking international recognition of the US's stance on the SCS; which emphasizes freedom of navigation among other clauses of the UNCLOS. America continues to uphold its alliance with Japan, Philippine, Vietnam and India as part of its containment policy towards China in the SCS.

Speculations of China's Regional Isolation

China has always been considered a black sheep in the region. But it still is the biggest power among neighboring littoral states, and has an important role as a regional hegemon, that is in setting norms and facilitating collective interests of the states. It is the top trade partner of Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, and fourth largest of the Philippines, whereas most of the imports of Brunei come from China. The Philippines, one of the main claimant state, entered a period of "Golden Age" with China in 2018, with strong economic and political benefits and its back foot. Meanwhile, China's focus on establishing strong bilateral ties with other regional states has prevented any strategies to isolate China in the region from manifesting. China's active aid to neighboring states during the Corona pandemic, has also healed the cracks which had begun to appear in its relations

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with some of the regional states and has worked to solidify its position as the regional hegemon.

Role of ASEAN's Leadership

Association of South East Asian Nations, as a regional organization has taken a forefront role in conflict management in the South China Sea dispute. The Sino-US rivalry in the SCS has further bolstered significance of ASEAN's strategic imperative. It has become a crucial body for communicating the demands and reservations of the relatively weaker regional states, to both China and the US. Meanwhile, ASEAN is also enabling the four member states (Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Philippines) which are major claimant in the SCS dispute to adopt a greater united front in its diplomatic dealings with China.

ASEAN's role as a mediator in the dispute has also emerged to prominence. It has actively hosted summits and meetings in non-claimant member states of Thailand and Singapore in the past. It holds capacity to find middle ground among member states, as reflected through the joint decision during ASEAN's annual summit in Manilla, where the 10 members decided to practice and promote self-restraint and non-militarization policy in the region. However, this capacity is not being fully utilized as of yet (Soomro, 2017). Despite ASEAN-China's agreement on Code of Conduct (COC) in 2018, China's continues to push through the SCS with its assertive strategies.

ASEAN has also gain meaningful role in the region for its cushioning effect to any negative repercussions the major states may have to bear for their protest against China's domineering policies in the SCS. The joint statement conveyed by ASEAN leaders expressing "serious concerns over recent and ongoing developments" which it believed to "have eroded trust and confidence" in the states, could have a resulted in a bigger reaction from China had it come through an individual state (Cheeppensook, 2020). But, according to Mollman (2016), in response to ASEAN leaders' statement to media, China's actions could not go beyond a mere show of disapproval. So far however, little success is seen in the "ASEAN way" of dealing with the actual conflict. However, it has become of cornerstone importance for its role as a buffer and for inspiring states to reach a common ground.

Conclusion

It has been found that China's regional unipolarity in the East Asia is a less stable security dynamic as compared to that of America's policy of containment in the SCS, and that of ASEAN's diplomatic approach. It is further found that the American factor to be the force containing China's policy of strategic ambition from transforming into a policy of strategic escalation. Though America is currently a global hegemon, cracks in its monopoly are forecasted via the resurging Russia and the rising China. Therefore, the American apprehensions that

China will grow in its political and economic prowess, equal if not superior to America, through acquiring the sea power, keeps it hooked to the East Asian political dynamic.

While America engages with China through trade war and 5G technology on the global stage, such close proximity to China's surroundings and a blatant show of power in its claimed territory, displayed through the exercises conducted by American naval fleets in the SCS under the guise of Freedom of Navigation, has triggered a stability instability paradox in the region. This paradox occurs when two nuclear states are in a headlock with each other and are employing alternative deterrence methods, such as stockpiling of nuclear arms or show of power through nuclear testing, to deter the enemy (Tate and Happ, 2018). A similar paradox occurred between the Soviet Union and the US during the cold war era. But it is generally observed that when hostilities between two nuclear states rise, a balance of threat occurs due to the fear of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). This balancing effect between Sino-American relations has kept China's reclamation scheme in the SCS relatively restricted. The American foreign policy has been considered coercive whereas the Chinese foreign policy is a relatively peaceful one, focused mainly on economic expansionism. Both however, have the tendency to create a balancing clash. China's installation of military bases in the region and deployment of ballistic missiles is a constant source of threat in the region, however, in the absence of the American factor, the activities of China in the region will go unchecked. Similarly, the BRI heightened its political influence in the Pacific as well as Indian ocean. The initiative also made China a major stakeholder in the geopolitical landscape. To counterbalance this growing Chinese influence, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) was found with the purpose of containing China's growing influence in the Indo pacific region and in order to limit its sea power. Such balancing enables the ASEAN states along with other south Asian states to have a greater sense of economic security and political alternatives.

ASEAN leadership is also playing out a significant role in stabilizing the region's security threat. China's policies in the SCS region are heavily motivated by its strategic goals and domestic politics. Part of China's strategic goals is its ambition for economic expansion. China is the biggest trade partner of almost all neighboring states. While individually, the states do not account for much percentage in China's net balance. But the entire ASEAN bloc is responsible for 14.7% of China's net trade volume (Harada, 2020). So through a joint collective, ASEAN can prove to be strong balancing force in the region, compelling China to engage in dialogue over the territorial dispute and make concessions.

Perhaps the Regional Security Complex theory seems apt in understanding ASEAN's role in the region. The economic interdependence between ASEAN+3 (Korea, Japan and China) has been key to stability in the region. In the year 2020 alone, Sino-ASEAN trade percentage rose by 6.6%. Meanwhile, the regional states have major cultural and social interdependence as well which adds to the security

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complex constructively, provided that China's foreign policy has domestic drivers too in the form of pressure groups. This growing realization in China of its regional interdependence has pushed its policy towards Joint regional progress in the last few months. The role it has played in the Covid-19 situation of donating vaccines and funding the neighboring states has enhanced its image in the region and restored to a certain degree of inter-state trust. Though it is true that China's activities in the SCS disputed territory, continue to be assertive, but they are now focused more on consolidating the reclaimed land more than occupying new territories.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made keeping in view the situation of the SCS region and for the purpose of a stable and peaceful south Asia.

ASEAN states have a symbiotic relationship with China being the status quo regional power. This prevents them from putting greater pressure on Chinese government. It needs to alter its mix of trade partners to reduce dependency on China, which will allow them room to make firm demands and enter into meaningful negotiations with China.

The Philippines, despite being a major competing state has established good bilateral relations with China post 2018. While it benefits the region by alleviating the tensions on short term basis, it does not resolve the SCS dispute. In fact, the Philippines along with other states are only adding to the Chinese policy of delay. The regional states need to streamline their own foreign policies towards the SCS, in order to bring precision and clarity in their approach towards China.

The US commitment level in East Asia is highly constricted due to the "hegemonic duties" a greater control would posit. The halfhearted US attempts though have created a balance of threat in the region, prolong dispute however will be burdening on the US economy. Meanwhile, China will be able to increase its regional hold with time. Therefore, US needs to make swift decision on the extent to which it's willing to involve in the region and the consequences it will impose.

Finally, it is recommended that all the stakeholders of the South China Sea should restrain from hot pursuits and should work closely and collectively for peace and stability of the region. Indeed, it would enhance economic opportunities and make the region prosperous.

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