

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF SOUTH CHINA SEA TO INTERNATIONAL GEOPOLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea, at first glance, seems like any other part of an ocean enclosed by a cluster of Islands and straits and covering a certain area. However, the geostrategic and economic importance associated with the ocean is tremendous and manifold. From busiest maritime trade ways to sea beds full of unlimited resources, this piece of Pacific Ocean is the power beaming with unlimited potential of geostrategic and economic supremacy for anyone having the power to dominate it. It is upon such background that this paper carefully evaluates the strategic importance of the South China Sea. The paper look at the brief history of the South Sea, Natural Resources endowed in the Sea, Territorial Claims among the countries, and the political, economic and military/Defence strategic importance of the Sea. The paper concluded that, the present of natural Resources and the high volume of trade in goods and services transported across the Sea make it an important and most busiest water way in the world, therefore, conflict over it among Asian countries and the world super powers is inevitable. This is because, whoever control the sea, will automatically have a significant influence and control over the world politically, economically andmilitarily.

KEYWORDS: *Geopolitics, Territorial, tremendous, geostrategic, supremacy, endowed.*

INTRODUCTION

South China Sea is known as one of the most significant and dangerous cluster of Islands in the contemporary world. With China's unflinching militarization, six countries laying claims to the maritime territory and most significantly, Japan's and United States' aggressive confrontational attitude towards China in the area this part of the world has captured world attention as a

dangerous nuclear flashpoints of the world. In the contemporary scenario, the South China Sea debacle has gained even more prominence owing to the active engagement of the two global super powers in the region. United States of America and the People's Republic of China are at loggers head in terms of tackling the crisis and with every passing day, the confrontational undertone is becoming even more apparent. Today, China is pursuing an active militarization of the artificial islands that the country created itself. On the other hand, United States of America has been engaged in undertaking a hedging strategy in order to counter the Chinese military might as well as balance the power equilibrium in the region.

The South China Sea, at first glance, seems like any other part of an ocean enclosed by a cluster of Islands and straits and covering a certain area of the sea. However, the geostrategic and economic importance associated with the ocean is tremendous and manifold. From busiest maritime trade ways to sea beds full of unlimited resources, this piece of Pacific Ocean is beaming with unlimited potential of geo-strategic and economic supremacy for anyone having the power to dominate it. It is upon such background that this paper carefully evaluates the strategic importance of the South China Sea. The paper looks at the conceptual clarification, the brief history of the South China Sea, natural resources deposit in the sea, territorial claims among the countries, and the political, economic and military strategic importance of the sea.

Conceptual Clarification

Geopolitics

Geopolitics is the study of the effects of Earth's geography (human and physical) on politics and international relations. While geopolitics usually refers to countries and relations between them, it may also focus on two other kinds of states: *de facto* independent states with limited international recognition and relations between sub-national geopolitical entities, such as the federated states that make up a federation, confederation, or a quasi-federal system.¹

The struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage. Geopolitics is a framework that we can use to understand the complex world around us. Global politics, or “getting what you want in the world” involves thinking and acting geographically. But what does that mean? Geopolitics explains how countries, businesses, terrorist groups, etc. try to reach their political goals by controlling geographic features of the world. We call these features geographical entities.²

Geographical entities are the places, regions, territories, scales, and networks that make up the world. Geopolitics looks at a particular use of power: how countries and other groups compete to control these entities within the international community. Controlling these entities is seen to help countries and groups reach their goals. Geopolitics is always looked at with an international and global dimension, meaning that the issues being looked at are connected to the global scale.³

Conflict

A conflict is a struggle and a clash of interest, opinion, or even principles. Conflict will always be found in society; as the basis of conflict may vary to be personal, racial, class, caste, political and international. Conflict may also be emotional, intellectual, and theoretical, in which case academic recognition may, or may not be, a significant motive. Intellectual conflict is a subclass

of cultural conflict, a conflict that tends to grow over time due to different cultural values and beliefs.⁴

Conflict in a group often follows a specific course. Routine group interaction is first disrupted by an initial conflict within the group, often caused by internal differences of opinion, disagreements between its members, or scarcity of resources available to the group. At this point, the group is no longer united, and may split into coalitions. This period of conflict escalation in some cases gives way to a conflict resolution stage, after which the group can eventually return to routine group interaction or split.⁵

History of South China

The South China Sea is a marginal sea of western Pacific Ocean. It covers an area of about 3,500,000 km², and is bordered in the north by the coast of South China (hence the name), in the west by the Indochinese Peninsula, in the east by Taiwan's islands and the northwestern Philippines (primarily Luzon, Mindoro, and Palawan), and in the south by Borneo, eastern Sumatra, and the Bangka Belitung Islands (1,400,000 sq mi). It communicates via Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, the Philippine Sea, the Sulu Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Singapore Strait, the Karimata and Bangka Straits, and the Java Sea, it is connected to the Pacific Ocean. The South China Sea also includes the Gulf of Thailand and the Gulf of Tonkin. The Natuna Sea is another name for the shallow waters south of the Riau Islands.⁶

Around 45 million years ago, the "Dangerous Ground" rifted away from southern China, creating the South China Sea. Around 30 million years ago, extension culminated in seafloor spreading, which expanded to the southwest and created the V-shaped basin we see today. Around 17 million years ago, the extension came to an end. The significance of tectonic extrusion in creating the basin has been the subject of ongoing debate.⁷ Scholars like [Paul Tapponnier](#) among others have argued that as India collides with Asia it pushes [Indochina](#) to the South East. The relative shear between Indochina and China caused the South China Sea to open.⁸ Those who do not believe Indochina has migrated far from mainland Asia disagree with this assertion. The Red River Fault was active and generating basin formation in the NW South China Sea at least by 37 million years ago, according to marine geophysical research in the Gulf of Tonkin by Peter Clift, which is consistent with extrusion playing a role in the formation of the sea. Since its opening, the South China Sea has served as a storage area for significant sediment deliveries from the Mekong, Red, and Pearl rivers. There are rich oil and gas resources in a number of these deltas.⁹

Geographically and economically, the South China Sea is quite significant. Over US\$3 trillion in annual trade is transported through it by one-third of all maritime ships in the world. Large oil and gas reserves are thought to lurk under the seafloor. It also has productive fisheries, which are essential for the safety of food for many people in Southeast Asia. Multiple nations have competing claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands, which are a collective term for several archipelago clusters of primarily small uninhabited islands, islets (cays and shoals), reefs/atolls, and seamounts numbering in the hundreds. The various names given to the sea and islands reflect these claims as well. These claims are also reflected in the variety of names used for the islands and the sea as can be seen in the Map below.¹⁰

Fig1: Map of South China Sea

Source: Google Map Data, 2022.

Natural Resources

With an estimated total of 4.5 km³ (28 billion barrels), the area has proven oil reserves of about 1.2 km³ (7.7 billion barrels). An estimated 7,500 km³ of natural gas reserves are available (266 trillion cubic feet). The entire estimated oil reserves were revised upward to 11 billion barrels in a 2013 assessment by the U.S. Energy Information Administration. China started drilling for oil in waters that it disputes with Vietnam in 2014. Officials from Vietnam assert that the Vanguard Bank region is a part of their nation's 200-mile exclusive economic zone. China, however, contests this assertion.¹¹

According to research done by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in the Philippines, this body of water is particularly significant to the ecosystem because it is home to one-third of the world's marine biodiversity. However, the region's fish stocks are in decline, and nations are using fishing bans to bolster their claims to sovereignty. Vietnamese and Philippine fishing fleets violated Indonesian territorial waters, and as a result, Indonesian officials seized and sank the offending ships. When China collected methane from hydrates in the South China Sea, it stated in May 2017 that it had made a breakthrough in the mining of methane clathrates.¹²

Territorial Claims

Over the South China Sea, a number of nations have staked rival territorial claims. These disputes have been identified as Asia's most dangerous potential flashpoint for conflict. The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC, also known as Taiwan), each claiming nearly the entire body as their own, draw the line between their claims along what is known as the "nine-dash line," which overlaps with nearly all other nations in the area. Competing claims include:

- Indonesia, Vietnam,¹³ China, and Taiwan over waters NE of the Natuna Islands

- The Philippines, China, and Taiwan over Scarborough Shoal.
- Vietnam, China, and Taiwan over waters west of the Spratly Islands. Some or all of the islands themselves are also disputed between Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines.
- The Paracel Islands are disputed between China, Taiwan and Vietnam.
- Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam over areas in the Gulf of Thailand.
- Singapore and Malaysia along the Strait of Johore and the Strait of Singapore.

Both China and Vietnam have vigorously defended their claims. Before 1974, South Vietnam and China (under successive regimes) each had a portion of the Paracel Islands under their sovereignty. After a brief war in 1974 that claimed the lives of 18 Chinese and 53 Vietnamese, China has been in charge of Paracel ever since. In March 1988, just south of Chigua Reef, the Spratly Islands were the scene of a naval battle in which nearly 70 Vietnamese sailors perished. Conflicts between naval vessels are often reported by disputing claimants.¹⁴ China expressed its stance in following words:

Chinese activities in the South China Sea date back over 2000 years ago with China being the first country to discover, name, explores and exploit the resources of the South China Sea islands and the first to continuously exercise sovereign powers over them.¹⁵

It has been a priority for Malaysia and ASEAN in general to prevent armed conflict from breaking out over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In order to cooperatively develop the territory and equitably divide the revenues without resolving the problem of sovereignty over the area, joint development authorities have been established in areas of overlapping claims. Particularly in the Gulf of Thailand, this is true. In general, China has favored bilateral negotiations to settle conflicting claims,¹⁶ while some ASEAN nations favor multilateral negotiations, they feel they are at a disadvantage in bilateral discussions with the much larger China and that since so many nations have territorial claims, only multilateral negotiations can successfully settle the conflicting claims.¹⁷

The International Court of Justice resolved the conflicting claims that Singapore and Malaysia had to Pedra Branca or Pulau Batu Putih, including the adjacent Middle Rocks, in 2008 by granting Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Puteh to Singapore and the Middle Rocks to Malaysia. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged China to settle the territorial issue in July 2010. China's response was to demand that the US not become involved. This happened at a time when the two nations were conducting naval drills as a show of force to the opposing side, raising tensions in the area.

On August 18, the US Department of Defense issued a statement opposing the use of force to settle the conflict and criticizing China's provocative behavior. On July 22, 2011, the Chinese Navy allegedly made contact with one of India's amphibious assault ships, the INS Airavat, which was on a friendly visit to Vietnam at the time, on an open radio channel 45 nautical miles (83 km) from the Vietnamese coast in the disputed South China Sea and claimed the ship was entering Chinese waters. According to the Indian Navy spokeswoman, INS Airavat continued on her intended course because no ships or aircraft could be seen from the ship. The Indian Navy went on to say that "the INS Airavat was not involved in any conflict. India supports the right of passage and freedom of navigation in international waterways, including the South China Sea, in

conformity with established norms of international law. All people should adhere to these values."¹⁸

India's state-run explorer, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), announced in September 2011 that its overseas investment arm, ONGC Videsh Limited, had signed a three-year agreement with Petro-Vietnam for developing long-term cooperation in the oil sector and that it had accepted Vietnam's offer of exploration in certain specified blocks in the South China Sea. This was shortly after China and Vietnam had signed an agreement seeking to contain a dispute over the South China Sea. Jiang Yu, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, protested in response. "The Chinese have reservations, but we are going by what the Vietnamese authorities have told us and have conveyed this to the Chinese," the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India's spokesperson said in response." The Indo-Vietnamese deal was also denounced by the Chinese state-run newspaper *Global Times*.¹⁹

Under the Lee Teng-hui administration, Taiwan declared all of the South China Sea islands to be its own in 1999. Taiwan asserts its claim to the whole seabed, land, and waterways of the Paracels and Spratlys. Vietnam and Taiwan had a falling out over Taiwan's anti-Vietnamese military drills in 2012 and 2013. China built an oil rig close to the Paracel Islands in May 2014, which resulted in many collisions between Vietnamese and Chinese ships. Retired Chinese admiral Luo Yuan suggested in December 2018 that sinking one or two US Navy aircraft carriers to lower US morale could ease tensions with the US in the South China Sea. Dai Xu, a senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army Air Force and a Chinese pundit, stated that China's navy might crash US Navy ships in the South China Sea in December 2018.²⁰

The US has maintained its view that American Navy boats have consistently and would continue to sail through the South China Sea without interference, despite the fact that it is not a signatory to UNCLOS. Sometimes US warships have approached Chinese-controlled islands (such the Paracel Islands) within the 12 nautical mile limit, angering China. When the US Chief of Naval Operations visited China in the beginning of 2019, he and his Chinese counterpart negotiated the terms of engagement for any encounters between Chinese and American warships on the high seas.²¹

The 36th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit took place virtually on June 26, 2020. The Chairman's Statement was made public by Vietnam in its capacity as Summit Chairman. According to the Statement, the 1982 UNCLOS establishes the legal framework within which all activity in the oceans and seas must be conducted. It provides the basis for assessing marine entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction, and legitimate interests over maritime zones.²²

The Strategic Importance of South China Sea to International Geo-politics

Understanding the geopolitical significance of Asia, which has given rise to Chinese preeminence and enabled its ascent to contemporary significant political power on the global arena, is crucial to comprehending the South China Sea dispute and its relevance. The UK and the USA have historically been the two countries that have contributed most to the global economic balance of power; but, in recent years, this balance has shifted east, primarily due to China's and other emerging nations' growing urbanization. This change has led China to seek control over sea lines of communication, assure national prosperity, maintain economic growth,

and maintain its position as a leading nation; the South China Sea plays a significant role in this.²³

The South China Sea consists of over 200 tiny islands, reefs, shoals, atolls and sandbanks grouped in to 3 archipelagos the Spratlys, the Paracels and the Pratas Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal. This has strategic significance mostly because of its physical location, which is one of the busiest and most strategic shipping channels in the entire globe. Over the islands and water-ways of the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, and the Lombok Strait carry almost \$5 trillion worth of global trade. The most essential energy channels for East Asian nations to transit gas and oil from the Persian Gulf are also covered. As a result, the South China Sea is of geopolitical and geostrategic significance to China and other East Asian nations, as well as to the USA, whose \$1.2 trillion in annual trade passes through the region.²⁴

In addition, it has proved oil and gas reserves, so the sovereignty of the disputed islands involves legal rights to exploit its resources. From a strategic perspective, the geographical significance is that whoever has dominance over it, dominates the future of East Asia.²⁵ According to Bill Hayton, a renowned International Relations theorist, states that;

The South China Sea is a crucial link in the 'global commons', connecting the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and Europe. Right now, along with the East China Sea, it is the most contested piece of sea in the world and one of the main reasons for the current anxiety over China's intentions.²⁶

In 2010, in reaction to China's escalating assertiveness, the US proclaimed its freedom of navigation in the South China Sea to be a national interest. In order to strengthen their strategic position in relation to issues in the South China Sea, Vietnam and the Philippines seek to strengthen their alliance and relationship with the US in 2012. As a result, the US has a significant impact on how conflicts are resolved. In their conflict with China in the South China Sea, Vietnam and the Philippines have also tried to establish a "strategic alliance" with Japan.²⁷

China is very likely to keep upsetting local stability in order to widen its own sphere of influence. Through several allies, relationships, and trade, the USA has a direct tie to the region, and this will logically continue. China will continue to create a maritime force in the region as the most dominant player among states due to the strategic importance of the area. With China essentially claiming the majority of the region as its own waters, it remains perfectly conceivable that any Chinese strategy may have as its long-term objective the ability to prevent US or western warships from accessing the South China Sea.²⁸

Economic Significance of South China Sea

The economic benefits and importance linked with the South China Sea has been evident since day one. As discussed earlier, this region contains some of the most significant shipping lanes of the world which are indispensable for the smooth flow of global trade. The main lane of shipping spreading between the Pacific and Indian Ocean ports is carried out through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. During this trading, oil and mineral resources are shipped towards north whereas food and manufactured goods move towards the south. These maritime lanes are the jugular veins of international flow of capital and goods and therefore, the economic significance of the South China Sea is self-evident.²⁹

However, the discussion regarding the economic value of this region is not restricted to its strategic location rather there are other avenues of fiscal significance as well. South China Sea is a source of untamed and unexplored natural resources embedded in its seabed. There is a wide variety of resources that the legitimate sovereign state will have every right to explore and exploit. One of those boundless resources is the abundance of marine life. South China Sea is full of fishery of all sorts and kinds. Major kinds of sea fauna include various species of tuna, mackerel, croaker, anchovy, shrimp as well as shellfish. This collection of sea food is the main source of marine animal protein to the region of Southeast Asia.³⁰

Researches show that the region encompassing South China Sea holds about a total of one third of the entire globe's biodiversity. Moreover, around 10% of world's fishery resource is also present in South China Sea. The local dense population of South East Asia is a thriving market for the marine exports of South China Sea. Along with the abundant marine life, the heavy fished sea also has extensive runoff of nutrient-laden waters. A more prominent source of capital from the South China Sea is the abundance of natural resources. Initial researches suggest large reserves of natural gas as well as oil lying on the seabed of the Sea. At present, areas north of Borneo, east of the Malay Peninsula, and northwest of Palawan are the main locations of these rich sources of hydrocarbon production. According to a research conducted by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, there are about 213 billion barrels of oil reserves estimated to be present in the South China Sea region. This estimated bulk is equivalent to about 80% of the total oil resources present in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, there are a total of 266 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves that are estimated to be available for excavation in the base of the sea. Along with these rare and pricy sources of hydrocarbon production, the sea also contains an abundant amount of Rare Earth Metals. These metals are very useful when it comes to the production of goods like hybrid cars, flat screen TVs, and smart phones.³¹

Significance of South China Sea on Military/Defence

The maritime area of South China Sea is the center of massive militarization as well as military alliance maneuvering campaigns on part of its major stakeholders. The reason behind such high level defense spending on this region by the nations of the world, especially China, is the intention of China to revert the encroachment of USA into its own territorial backyard. US claims the South China Sea, especially it's strategically goldmine Spratly Islands lie within the maritime vicinity of International waters. Moreover, the maritime lanes of South China Sea serve as a significant artery for the military of the nation.³²

This is because the Seventh Fleet of the United States has a constant routine to transit between the Pacific and Indian Oceans at regular intervals. These regular visits require maritime security for the troops to carry on smoothly. Along with this, the region also acts as a strong military base for China in case of a Total War with the enemies. In case there is a direct military confrontation between the United States and China, the significance of South China Sea is undeniable. This fact has been further illustrated with the help of a recent article by Gregory Poling in which the writer explains the various means through which this region can act as a military base for the Chinese government against American onslaught as well as provide strong strategic ground for counter strike. He says:

The islands have considerable military value for Beijing, contrary to some conventional wisdom that has written off the value of these facilities in a conflict.³³

He argues that in a time of peace, these islands provide the United States with much needed coercive leverage. On the other hand, if, unfortunately, war ensues, these strategic points to rescue assist Chinese government in ways more than just being cannon fodder. These islands have a massive role to play in providing firepower, situational awareness, and logistical information to the Chinese government. The location of these islands is ideal for Beijing to install anti-ship and anti-air missiles in order to make sure that the naval fleet of the enemy, either US or any other regional force, can be stopped from entering the region.

Moreover, the location of the South China Sea and its cluster of strategically placed islands have the ability to keep the enemy at bay, for the size of some of the facilities makes firepower assault a very difficult task. Some of these islands like Mischief and Subi Reefs are so enormous that along with very high level long-range conventional precision strike requirements, US Navy would need an unrealistic amount of firepower to undertake a successive assault and complete neutralization of the military bases in the islands. Last but not the least, the renowned Spratly outposts of China in the South China Sea serves as the main frontier of China's rising ballistic missile submarine bastion. Therefore, in perspective of the defense dynamic, the significance of South China Sea also increases manifold.

CONCLUSION

This paper has critically make an in-depth analysis of the geopolitical strategy and importance of the South China Sea. The paper carefully evaluated the history and development of the sea, while identifying the claims and counter claims of the sea among the Asian nations including the USA. This is as a result of the presence of natural resources in the as well as the economic importance to the world through volumes of trade that is been shipped across the sea. The paper equally identified the military and defence importance of the area to the world powers which is very significant to the balance of power of the parties involved. It is clear therefore that the presence of natural resources and the volume of trade and commerce transported by ships across the sea makes it an important and busiest waterway in the world therefore, conflict over it among the world super powers is inevitable, this is because whoever control the sea, will automatically control the world politically and economically.

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