



## Strategic comparison of China and USA in the South China Sea

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### ABSTRACT

*South China Sea is one of the most significant maritime regions in the world known for the territorial disputes amongst its multiple regional claimants. The past decade has seen the rise of the North American involvement in this region which has made this region much more vulnerable. This study sheds light over the significance of this complex maritime dispute, highlights the trends that contributed to shaping of the dispute into its current state, and analyzes the involvement of USA and comparatively, the strategies of USA and China in the South China sea dispute.*

**Keywords:** Maritime disputes, South China Sea, China, USA, Strategy

## Introduction

Territorial disputes are the disagreements or conflicts over the ownership and control of a territory. These can be between either two or more parts of one country or between two or more countries. Such disputes are usually related to the control of resource like water bodies, productive lands or sites with minerals and oil resources. These disputes are usually motivated by cultural or ethnic differences or by national and economic interests of states. In the contemporary international politics, there are multiple territorial disputes that substantially impact its course. The East Asian region in general and Southeast Asia in particular are known for the maritime and territorial disputes. The most significant amongst these is the South China Sea dispute. It is one of the most complicated disputes in the world and this complexity results from the presence of multiple claimant states that are engaged in a competition to have control over the disputed waters and islands.

South China Sea is an enclosed sea in the Pacific Ocean that covers an area of over 3 million squares from the strait of Malacca to the strait of Taiwan. It is located in the South of China, the North of the Indonesia, the East of Vietnam and the West of Philippines. This aquatic figure holds immense geo-strategic significance as approximately one third of the world's total shipping has its passage through the South China Sea carrying trade worth trillions every year and the seabed carries massive reserves of oil and gas under it. This geo-strategic importance, coupled with the expected availability of massive resource reserves has elevated the South China Sea region's significance and has attracted multiple regional actors to claim their authority here.

In addition to that, the presence of several uninhabited islands in this area provides a conducive environment for states to compete over claims. The claimants in the South China Sea include Brunei, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> All stakeholders involved here have prescribed their own names to the disputed islands which is yet another interesting contribution to the complexity of the dispute.

## UNCLOS on the conduct of maritime affairs

The UNCLOS is a body of international law that provides a framework on the conduct of maritime activity in the oceans. After years of attempts to bring about a comprehensive code of conduct, UNCLOS was formed in 1982 and enforced officially in 1994. This convention regulates the law of sea, navigation, overflight, fishing and the utilization of natural resources for generation of energy in the form of hydrocarbons.

In the South China Sea region, the countries of China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines are all signatories and have ratified the UNCLOS with the exception of Taiwan (Republic of China) which is not recognized as a sovereign state by the United Nations. But

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Preventive Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Global Conflict Tracker, n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea#:~:text=China>.

despite that, Taiwan's domestic legislation on the subject is in compliance with the UNCLOS.

## The Course of Claims

The sea is divided in political boundaries of the surrounding coastal states. Seven countries have maritime claims in the South China sea overlapping each other's claims but the most dominant regional actor in the sea is China that is not just in conflict with the states over the control of waters but also appears to be attempting at maintaining a regional hegemony in the process.

## The Chinese Claims

China's claims in the South China Sea are based on an ambiguous map from 1940s known as the "Nine Dash Line", a U-shaped demarcating line extending to 2000 km from mainland China, that covers almost the entirety of the South China Sea. Due to this controversial map, a situation of China vs the other regional states have been formed as it has put the neighboring states in disagreement with China. This is mainly because China is the only state that is infringing the rights of every stakeholder in the South China Sea.

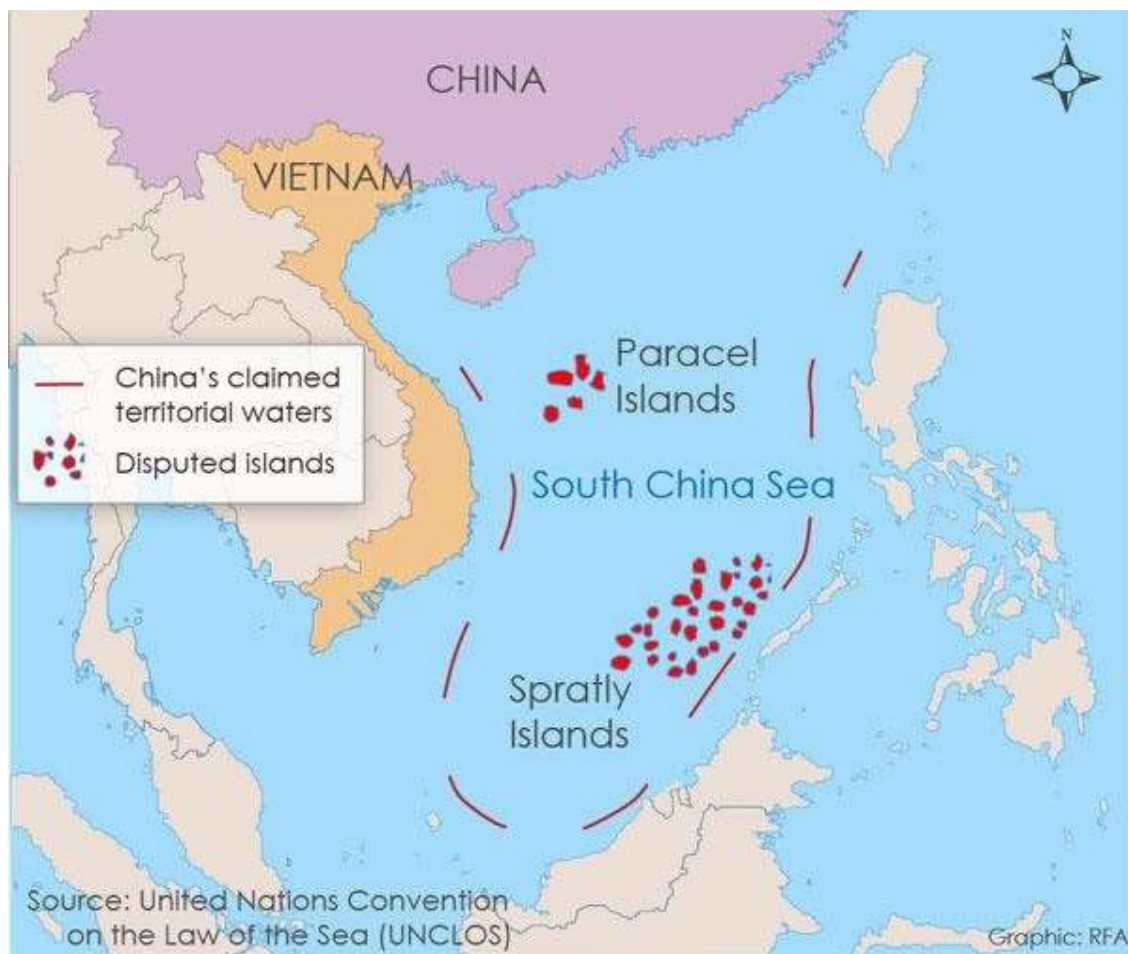


Figure 1: Representation of China's claim in the South China Sea according to the historic nine-dash-line map<sup>2</sup>

## China and the Spratly islands

The dispute was mostly academic, until 2013 when China launched a largescale reclamation program at seven locations in the Spratly islands which happens to be the most conflicted area in the sea since the claimants of the islands also include Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan whose claims are similar to that of China.

China's interests in the Spratly islands are on account of the rich fishing grounds, the substantial quantities of hydrocarbon reserves and the massive reserves of crude oil and natural gas that would help the industries in China to flourish and sustain for decades to come. And taking aim at this, China, by 2016, had already claimed around 3000 acres of land at the top of the seven reefs in the Spratly islands that were partly plummeted.<sup>3</sup>

## Military deployment

This act by China escalated the political atmosphere of the region raised an alarm in United States. The latter then intervened in the region as an attempt of preventing the region from falling into chaos. This eventually led to negotiations between China and USA resulting in the lapse of the reclamation program. But that was not the end of it. Rather, a beginning of something even dangerous, that was the military deployment. After this, China has begun to place military facilities on the previously reclaimed territories.

Over the years, the military forces of China employed extended naval, aerial and missile system on the seven islands. It is supposed that the island of Fiery Cross, Mischief and Subi hold defensive aerial defense system along with the barracks, helipads, runways, and hangars capable of supporting war planes. Moreover, the island of Fiery Cross has a deep water port where large vessels can dock and harbors are underway construction in Subi and Fiery Cross.

As for the smaller islands, each of them holds radar facilities, bunkers, and supply platforms. Taken together, the islands act as aircraft carriers projecting power across the periphery to further affix its claims to the area. China's coast guard and maritime forces use non-naval vessels such as containers, fishing vessels and ships to pester foreign ships under the mantle of feasible deniability. It's a creed that makes the other states consider the course of entering the waters claimed by China but the policy doesn't go as far as mushrooming into an armed conflict.

## Japan as a significant actor

China's enlarging present impacts the peripheral powers to including India, Japan and Australia which seem driven to secure their access to and from the South China sea. Japan, specifically, has genuine concerns in the region being an island nation with limited

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<sup>2</sup> Wei Pu, "How the Eleven-Dash Line Became a Nine-Dash Line, and Other Stories," Radio Free Asia, 2015, <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/line-07162015121333.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Katie Hunt, "Showdown in the South China Sea: How Did We Get Here?," CNN, October 28, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/28/asia/china-south-china-sea-disputes-explainer>.

availability of natural resources. Its passage is dependent on the South China sea. So, it is very likely that Japan would emerge on a geopolitical surface and uphold itself in South East Asia. For China, this could be a serious concern because unlike the United States, Japan might only focus wholly on China as a rival about 300km South East of Hainan Island as a chain of reefs known as the Paracel (or Hoang Sa and Xisha), the group of islands, reefs and banks in the Sea.

### **Dispute in the Paracel**

The Paracel Islands are at an equal distance from the coastline of China and Vietnam and a small part of it extends from central Vietnam to Philippines. From 1949-1974, the Paracel islands was under the control of initially Franco-Vietnam forces and then Vietnam in a military engagement between the naval forces of China took place in 1974 which later became known as “Battle of the Paracel Islands”. It was an attempt by Vietnamese navy to evacuate Chinese navy forces from there but the battle ended with Chinese control over the islands. This is a major cause of dispute between China and Vietnam as Vietnam considers the islands to be an inseparable part of it. Another claimant of the Paracel islands is Taiwan who was in charge of the Islands from during the 1940s after the Japanese empire made the Paracel and Spratly islands a part of Taiwan.

### **Why are the Paracel islands important?**

This is important to China because Hainan Island, which serves as center for its nuclear submarines’ fleet, is protected by the islands. The most important factor is that whomever is in possession of Hainan and Paracel may easily hit Vietnam at its close range, which might divide the nation. If China has Paracel, it can vanquish Hanoi and it’s clearly a win-win.

### **Continued Chinese military expansion**

With a sizable military installation on Woody Island, at which a military presence of roughly 1400 people operates radar installations and airfields, China is present on eight Paracel Islands. Moreover, Woody Island serves as China’s center and political hub of action and the central operating hub for all disputed island chains in the sea.

China has already been attempting to normalize its position on the Woody Island since 2016 by conducting commercial flights there, entertaining tourists, and even arranging weddings to bring some civility to the island. This civil effort aims to establish an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) all around island and give it the appearance of having its own economic future.

### **China, Philippines and the Scarborough Shoal**

Another island is the Scarborough shoal, a triangular chain of reefs and rocks which due to its juxtaposition was under Philippian control until China’s gain of control in 2012. Since the impasse, Scarborough has been the major bone of contention between China and Philippines.

Philippines looked up to United States to defend it against China as a requirement by the Mutual Defense treaty signed between USA and Philippines that both nations would

support or defend each other in case of external attack but instead of confronting China over its occupation, only verbally disagreed causing a rift between itself and Philippines. Philippines then turned to China for an agreement and it was decided that China would have the rights to the fishing, resource extraction and in return it signed agreements promising infrastructural investment in Philippines. China doesn't have military forces employed in the Shoal anymore because offending Philippines and for it to turn back to United States might not be in the interest of China.

### **The role of PCA in the China-Philippines dispute**

From Japan to Indonesia, there is a network of tiny islands around the eastern shore of South China Sea. For China, the first island is significant. The nine-dash line, which is modeled on the original chain of islands and illustrates the historically important ramifications, is another feature. As China utilizes its position on the Scarborough shoal to influence the conduct of the Philippines and ensure access to the Pacific, it is the one country along the chain of Islands that is not adequate to be subdued or forced into political deal.

To counter this, the government of Philippines took China to The Permanent Court of Arbitration, at Hague in 2013. During the proceedings the court referred to the UNCLOS for the definition of Island: "A landmass permanently above water that can sustain human habitation or economic life on its own. It is entitled to a territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone, and continental shelf rights."<sup>4</sup>

Even though China had set civilian activities on the island, the convention ruled that Scarborough are rocks and cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own without external aid and therefore there wouldn't be an EEZ or continental shelf. Due to this distinction in rock and island, China couldn't fill the legal requirements. However, it rejected the court's decision and continued sending warships in Scarborough.

### **United States' involvement in the South China Sea**

#### **Freedom of Navigation**

The Freedom of Navigation in the sea is linked tightly with the with USA's ability to project power. 40% of China's trade has passage through the sea<sup>5</sup> which USA can disturb by enforcing any terms on the sail of Chinese vessels. But Chinese deterioration of economy won't be in any favor of USA as any threat to Chinese economy would mean a direct threat to the global economy. Also withholding the fact that USA itself trades economically with China so to avoid that, this policy of Deterrence would remain functional provided the freedom to navigation is intact.

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Mirasola, "What Makes an Island? Land Reclamation and the South China Sea Arbitration," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, July 15, 2015, <https://amti.csis.org/what-makes-an-island-land-reclamation-and-the-south-china-sea-arbitration/#:~:text=Island%3A%20A%20landmass%20permanently%20above>.

<sup>5</sup> "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?," ChinaPower Project, August 2, 2017, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/#:~:text=Nearly%2040%20percent%20of%20China>.

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Without the navigation freedom, USA would be required to recraft the geopolitical equilibrium with China. USA keeps hold of its interests with the Freedom of Navigation operations. These attempts have set lawful precedents and reinforce maritime claims.

## **Innocent Passage**

UNCLOS has defined innocent passage as “transit of warship from one country through territorial waters of another with the condition that the transit vessel refrains from military research, surveillance and survey activities.” The vessel according to UNCLOS is also obliged to move expeditiously. While USA has been trailing its vessels in the sea in a zigzag manner through Spratly and doesn’t acknowledge the water around it.

## **China on USA’s presence in the South China Sea**

China’s demand is that American vessel leave the EEZ of China and set precincts of their own. While this game has been ongoing for years, it also depicts the irony of major powers for instance how USA despite not being a signatory of UNCLOS forces the provisions of it on everyone while China being a ratified signatory violates it.

## **China’s Goals and Strategy in the South China Sea**

It is crucial to get a clear picture of Chinese goals in the South China Sea and its strategy to attain them. This will help in grasping the backdrop that fuels Chinese activities in the contested waters.

## **The Deferment or Delay strategy**

China has used the strategy of deferment in its response to foreign impetus. The policy is usually implemented in the execution of the concluding choices. The motive of China with this deferment can be reflected in how it mantles the country’s intent to avoid surge in decisions and puts emphasis on sustaining a policy of cooperation with the world. The benefit China gets from this is that it gets to make use of economic resources to its advantage and affluence and development.

## **Declaration, claims and counter claims**

South China Sea is one of the most hotly conflicted regions of the world. Most states in this region are claimants in the sea and it seems to be a never-ending cycle where one states makes a claim and another reacts to it with a counter claim. However, in this strategy of claiming and declaring, China seems to be the dominant exerciser of it. It can be depicted through the patterns of declaring the areas in the sea and claiming islands.

China has claimed almost all of the sea as its own using tools like nine dash line map to support its claims in the sea. It is currently the biggest claimant and the most prominent player in the South China Sea conflict despite other countries in the region and even external powers like USA being involved in the sea.

## **Removing the major players from the regional politics**

Even though it is not possible to just remove a country from the web of political entanglement, this doesn’t stop the states from trying to bring each other down. In the South

China Sea, the major powers than China is faced by are the United States and Japan, despite the fact that neither of the two is a claimant in the sea but involved rather differently and it is no secret that China wants the countries to be isolated from the region. By removing United States from the sea, it would negatively impact the credibility of USA in the East Asian region and a reliance-deficit might be created between USA and the countries.

Secondly, it hopes to overpower Japan on the account of it being an ally of USA and the second largest and developed country in the region. Here China has adopted two different techniques: first it keeps reminding the world of the Japanese hostilities in the second World War. Secondly, using a more practical approach, China gives away more economic aid as compared to Japan and gives it without applying the conditions of good governance and anti-corruption. Even though, the later approach is practical and might benefit China according to its goals but in doing so, China is undermining values like liberal governance.

### **Economic potent**

While China is in territorial disputes with many states on one hand, on another it is also very visibly using the strategy of economic persuasion by trading, offering aids and investing in projects in many different states making as many countries dependent on itself as it can. There are many countries in the world currently indebted heavily to China. No matter which government comes, which stays or which goes, China has ensured that its linkages with the country remain intact. This is the reason that China is the largest economic trader in the world in 21st century. This pattern has been repeatedly observed in the case of Philippines.

### **Regional integration and resistance to ASEAN**

China is known to show a resistance towards ASEAN and seems uncertain about its acknowledgment of ASEAN as the perfect model needed to achieve regional integration which appears to be one of the biggest goals of China regarding the region. China through regional integration aims at removing the influence of non-regional powers from the affairs of the region, USA for instance, which would leave China as the primary force in the region

### **The Salami tactics**

The Salami tactics strategy functions on the divide and conquer phenomenon. In the South China Sea region, a pattern can be observed in China's approach towards claiming the sea. It doesn't conquer the areas in a couple or two huge parts but rather bit and bit and as the strategy would go, slice by slice claiming the parts one by one and in doing so it has already laid claim on 90% of the sea. And the parts that it has claimed, it has set administrative structures there.<sup>6</sup>

### **Military means**

Even though the nature of wars in since the 20th century have changed a lot and the scope of wars is not limited to battlefields, still military means constitute a major part in the

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<sup>6</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "China's Salami-Slice Strategy," The Japan Times, July 25, 2013, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2013/07/25/commentary/world-commentary/chinas-salami-slice-strategy/#.Xu84jpozbiU>.



resources of a country and their value cannot be denied. In the case of China be observed that China has used military forces in the region to install them in the claimed areas.

### **USA's goals and strategy in the South China Sea**

The Strategy of USA in the South China Sea consists of the following factors; the official outlook or perspective on the dispute, a narrative on the legal status of the nine-dash line claim, the Freedom of Navigation in the sea, and supporting Philippines in the legal verdict on the Arbitration case.

### **Silent observation and persuasion of other regional states**

From the case of USA's reluctance in openly confronting China on the occupation of Scarborough and only verbal protest showed that it was reluctant in confronting China by itself despite acknowledging it. And then later in the case of Arbitration against China, USA had supported Philippines in the case and has persuaded other regional states (Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei) to do the same. By doing so, USA is making its stance clear that it doesn't want to sit down on the matter but also doesn't want to be the player in it rather letting the regional states do the part by voicing their support for Philippines on the verdict. This would also play some role in demeaning the credit on the nine-dash line which is the most significant factor in China's favor in the disputed region.

### **Manipulation of UNCLOS**

Even though United States itself is not a signatory to the UNCLOS, it is always persuading other countries into abiding and complying by the laws. It shows that even though USA itself is not a follower or obliged to follow the provisions of the convention, but it does use them as a tool for manipulating other countries into following them where it favors USA's interests.

### **The policy shift to Asia**

In 2011, USA put forward what it called a diverse policy towards the Southeast Asia that focused on the areas of bilateral security alliances, inclusion of international organizations, expansion of trade, granting military assistance, promotion of democratic and humanitarian values. But in the pretext of the narrative of President Obama in his view that Asia has becoming the focal point of attention and that more active role could be played there along with the use war on terrorism to enter the region and to providing security against any potential threat. In the process, USA also signed many military agreements with countries like Japan and Taiwan and used the regional hostilities of the countries and vulnerabilities under the cloak of security to demean China's control and influence in the region.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," Brookings (Brookings, December 21, 2011), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

## **Air-Sea Battle Strategy**

America has adopted the ASB strategy.<sup>8</sup> The motivation this strategy was driven by was the restoration of the ability to grant security to the regional allies and the international order inclusive of the freedom of navigation and be able to act as the most powerful state. With this strategy, when faced in a conflict with China, USA could attack China and affix an area denial weapon system which would mushroom into a total war.

However, this strategy could not be seen as success in any way. That is to say, that if USA ever used so direct attacks towards China then it would not mean its domination but rather one nuclear country attacking another and any mis-observation or miscalculation could result badly for both countries which is why a diplomatic strategy as compared to this force strategy would be a far better option.

## **Conclusion**

Where China is using soft power everywhere in new world, USA has adopted the smart power as it uses diplomacy and both force while China is focused mainly on expansion and economic trade. However, the behavior of China in the South China Region is often viewed as aggressive, accounting to the fact that its relationships with regional neighbors are hanging merely by the thread of trade and this is where USA has an advantage over China where it attacks at its vulnerability, meaning that it allies itself with the countries using their grievances against China. With China's claim extended to the entirety of the South China Sea in the form of the nine-dash line. Even though, China's behavior in the region impacts other states, however, its motives cannot be deemed so out-worldly as compared to the other countries. Tension has risen and the political temperature of the region is high. Controlling either China or USA in the region cannot be an easy target to achieve and with the threat of external involvement which China clearly views as offensive and interference, here are some of the possible solutions that maybe help in cooling the tension down a bit.

Cooperation between the two states might seem like a difficult target to achieve but if the engagement between the two countries take place in form of a dialogue, they might come to some form of agreement to avoid further escalation of the conflict in the region if not end it or slow it down.

While the global narrative views USA and China's strategies in two different dynamics, they can actually structure a narrative for China to be casted equally in international politics. And lastly while China and the regional countries need to strengthen good relations, USA in this scenario can tone down its use and persuasion of the regional countries a little if more disagreement and escalation of the conflict is to avoided.

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<sup>8</sup> "AIR-SEA BATTLE," 2013, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf>.

<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf>