

Troubled Waters: Military Tensions in South China Sea and The Regional Players

Anvita Plawat¹, Dr. Anna Nath Ganguly²

¹Student, Amity Institute of Social Sciences, Amity University, Noida

²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Social Sciences, Amity University, Noida

ABSTRACT

When considering the tensions in the South China Sea (SCS), many spectators assume the history of this issue to be recent, often post-Cold War. This mistake undermines the long-standing relevance and importance of this geographical space, which has been contested for as long as the war of trade and resources has ever been waged. This study delves into the multifaceted dynamics surrounding this very dispute, aiming to dissect the underlying causes and motivations behind China's pushy behavior in the region. Beyond the bilateral tensions between China and the United States, this geopolitical quagmire involves a web of historical, economic, and strategic factors contributing to regional instability. Heavy militarisation and the global laws of the waters have come to clash as this region becomes a pool of regional tensions. It also underscores the rise of military presence in this region over the years, the wide-ranging interests, and the strategies players use to defend their claims. The study outlines a much-needed requirement for an international response, arguing that addressing the issue extends beyond the direct stakeholders and demands a collaborative effort from the global community. It calls for an understanding that these waters go beyond military tensions, with their trade and economic implications. Ultimately, it advocates for diplomatic dialogue, adherence to international law, and a more internationalist approach to mitigate the naval tensions and ensure the peaceful coexistence of nations in this critical maritime region which today faces the threat of an all-out war.

Keywords - South China Sea, China, UNCLOS, United States of America, ASEAN, Military, Regional Players

1. A GLIMPSE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL

The South China Sea, a marine space situated at the crossroads of Southeast Asia, has emerged as a tension spot of global geopolitical intervention. Its strategic importance can be understood by the number of nations competing in and around its radius, namely China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan. A nexus of resource and strategic ambitions, the South China Sea is where historical disputes intersect with contemporary economic and security concerns.

Tensions in this space have been escalating regarding the militarization of islands, claims of fishing rights, and conflicting interpretations of international maritime law, mainly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The region is a case study of a delicate balance between cooperation and competition, with various stakeholders, both regional and non-regional, engaging in diplomatic posturing, military exercises, and multilateral maneuvers. This sensitive play of powers with a growing sense of forging national interest, has put a lot of countries in a direct range of realpolitik. Understanding the

historical context, evolving disputes over time and the strategies employed by the plethora of players is crucial for understanding the complexities surrounding this vital maritime area.

1.1. NATURAL RESOURCES: AN ECONOMIC VITALITY

Located in the West Pacific Ocean, the South China Sea is one of the most highly contested regions of the world. ASEAN's Chief, East Asia's top diplomat has called this space 'Palestine of Asia' ¹. One might ponder over how this part of the global waters holds a higher competition and space in geopolitical relevance, and the answer lies in what resides in the depths of the South China Sea, its mighty bank of resources and trade potential.

There are no firmly put statistics but with some sources suggesting 7.7 billion barrels and others asserting 213 billion barrels, we can understand that there isn't enough consensus on the numbers of oil reserves.² A CIA report also suggests that there are no reliable studies done to square down the Oil reserve potential of the South China Sea³. Some estimates may also optimistically claim that these waters hold oil as much as 80% of Saudi Arabia's reserves.

In terms of natural gas, an assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of Southeast Asia claims 266 trillion cubic feet worth of the same. That accounts for around 70% of the region's hydrocarbons. Most EEZs (Exclusive Economic Zones) of Brunei, Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia pocket, not Oil, but Natural Gas. ⁴

The South China Sea also has 3300 species of fish species, making it home to a pool of fishing activities. Despite hydrocarbons, fishing emerges as the main cause of dispute, often also becoming a power move by various countries to occupy the waters, informally using it as a method of extending their territorial claims and marking territory.

1.2. GEOPOLITICS OF THE TRADE CONTROL

Waters carry the global economy on their currents. For a world to be closely knitted in its economic interdependence, those who control the waters become the controllers of the world economy. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in its 2015 review, estimated numbers for the global trade that passes through this maritime expanse. 80 percent of global trade by volume and 70 percent by volume flows through the oceans and the seas, of which 60 percent will run in Asia alone.⁵ With East and Southeast Asia becoming top global markets and producers, growing in their economic dynamics, and emerging as important economic case studies, it isn't a surprise that 1/3rd of this global trade will be dictated by the South China Sea.

This explains why economies like Korea, Taiwan, China, Japan, and ASEAN nations, for whom the strait of Malacca is the chokepoint of all trade that they bring forth, are constantly at the helm of conversations of the South China Sea. This strait is the gateway to the Indian and Pacific oceans, and hence becomes vital for all countries that look forward to economic growth, and sometimes economic hegemony. This is where one can start noticing the context of the USA and China's relentless and omnipresent efforts in and around this area.

¹ Bland, B. (n.d.). *Asean Chief: South China Sea risks becoming 'Asia's Palestine'*. CNN.

² Paterno R. (2012, April 26). *Focus: Marine riches of South China Sea*. Rappler.

³ CIA. (n.d.). *The World Factbook*.

⁴ *Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of Southeast Asia*. (2010). USGS Publications Warehouse.

⁵ Hoffmann, J., & Juan, W. (2014, June 12). *Review of Maritime Transport*. UNCTAD.

To better understand the relevance of the Strait of Malacca, one must look closely at a map of southeast Asia and find out that if ever the strait was compromised, the other two alternatives would be the Lombok and Sunda straits. A detour would cost vessels hefty losses. A reading by the *Centre for Strategic and International Studies: China Power* puts up a number to what could look like a huge toll of an economic drain.⁶

2. TRACING THE HISTORY OF THE MARITIME CLAIMS

The South China Sea is crowded by a big platter of contestants. The historical claims in the South China Sea are important, from the view of forging fishing waters, trade routes, and geostrategic spaces. Nations have signed and ratified various treaties and made many claims to back their waters; from using high-end military might to international institutions, trying to establish a global rule of law. The South China Sea has witnessed everything ranging from its first armed clash in 1974 to the 2021 standoffs between China and the Philippines. Only through a discourse of these, can we register the root of what makes the SCS prone to crisis today.

2.1. THE CHINESE AGENDA: A HISTORY-BACKED SAGA

The entire SCS issue often boils down to one U-shaped line, the one that emboldens China's claim that they own 90% of the regional waters. This line that has become a personification of Chinese aggression, a tool for reflecting China's claim, is called the nine-dash-line. According to the Chinese, this dates back to 15th century China. After the Japanese departure from Southeast Asia, post-WW-II, China encompassed islands under the vacuum it left. It was previously an 11-dash-line that predated the 9-dash-line. After Kuomintang forces escaped to Taiwan, the PRC inherited everything a legitimate China would, including the SCS claims and an imaginary line.⁷

What makes this even more interesting is how China is a participating country in the UNCLOS⁸, an official signatory in what draws the limit to EEZs (Exclusive Economic Zones). Nevertheless, China continues to push its nine-dash line agenda, while keeping it ambiguous enough not to have a concrete legal claim. By keeping the legality and context of the nine-dash line blurry, China ensures an un-explicit marking of what rights and resources fall under the nine-dash line. The lack of explicitness in the Chinese maritime claims leads to enough confusion for China to benefit from.

2.2. UN CONVENTION ON LAWS OF THE SEA: AN ATTEMPT AT UNIFORMITY

Marine resources and trade routes have historically been an issue of overlapping interests. Wars have been inevitable. With them more and more global powers gave into the idea of using international law and bodies to fix a set of norms that could curb confusion and prevent wars. To avoid any contentions based on historical claims or geopolitical opportunism, the formation of the UNCLOS agreement in 1982 became a key milestone in sovereignty standards of waters.

UNCLOS is the golden rule for maritime ownership of resources. Set in 1982, Article V of the UNCLOS talks about EEZ or Exclusive Economic Zones. These are the waters directly under the control of a country,

⁶ *How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?* (n.d.). China Power Project.

⁷ Ihsan Ullah. (n.d.). *THE SOUTH CHINA SEA'S NINE DASH LINE: KEY DISPUTES AND CHINA'S HISTORICAL RIGHTS CLAIMS*. research gate.

⁸ UNCLOS stands for the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea. It is an international agreement establishing guidelines for using the oceans and seas.

its extension of sovereignty, intrusion of which will be counted as a threat to that nation's territory. It defines this zone as 200 nautical miles from the territorial land's breath. A country can freely use this EEZ to exploit resources, perform fishing, research, or station its military.⁹

UNCLOS is nothing but explicit in describing EEZs, all countries including China in the region have signed the same. Here is where the dispute takes a more vivid shape. UNCLOS has been used by the Philippines to take China into a legal battle. China stood by its 'historical' claims of the nine-dash line while the Philippines cited the UNCLOS clauses. In the 2016 PCA (Permanent Court of Arbitration)¹⁰ case of *The Republic of the Philippines vs. The People's Republic of China*¹¹, both sides came with their set of justifications, as China sought its 'historic' rights and the Philippines pressed upon its EEZ the same under UNCLOS. Even though the Philippines had a stronger legal backing in this PCA battle, it would be important to note that UNCLOS simply marks the EEZ, but cannot in itself decide whether a historic claim to a marine space can supersede the UNCLOS.

Nevertheless, the tribunal did end up rejecting the claims of the nine-dash line because China, 'historically' had only used the islands in the South China Sea, and in no way had ever been in 'exclusive ownership' of the same. With this angle being cemented and firmly declared, UNCLOS' authority was revived in the South China Sea, over any superficial past claims. The panel of five judges undertook seven of the fifteen grievances the Philippines made and ruled heavily in favor of Manila.

China refused to adhere to this judgment, disqualified it, and claimed for it to be illegal. Beijing was absent from these proceedings and asserted that it would continue to do so in any cases put forth unilaterally by the Philippines. For this, the PCA claims that under Annex VII, one party's absence does not make the judgment any less firm. PCA was firm on how the Philippines was wronged and what China did was indeed an interference in Filipino sovereignty.

It is important to note that China is a highly ambitious country, most of its initiatives like the String of Pearls, need maritime control. Sadly for China, being a huge nation in terms of the area does not mean access to more maritime sovereignty. China might have access to four important seas; the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Red Sea, and the Bohai Sea, but all these waters are also enclosed and located in the radius of island states, which means that China has to compromise these strategic seas with its neighbors. Beijing does not wish to share its 'backyard' with anyone, especially with neighbors who would not give in to the Chinese demands.

3. USA IN SOUTH CHINA SEA: INTERESTS AND INTERVENTIONS

Chinese actions in the South China Sea have been excessive, to say the least, in recent years. It has often become a cause of worry for liberal institutionalists and global leaders. The concerns for the future of this region can lead to the possibility of the disruption of the world order. There could be a possibility for more and more nations to take China as a justification for going rogue and not abiding by global laws.

It is not a truth hidden that the USA thinks of itself as a sustainer of the global order, an international leader, and a sort of established leader. For the longest time, Russia has been a thorn to the West with its 'historical' claims in East Europe, specifically Ukraine. What the USA sees, is a catastrophic domino

⁹ *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. (n.d.). the United Nations.

¹⁰ The Permanent Court of Arbitration is a non-UN intergovernmental organization located in The Hague, Netherlands.

¹¹ *Hague Announces Decision on South China Sea*. (2016, July 12). The New York Times.

effect of more and more nations seizing the opportunity to use the past as a tool of sabotaging a global future, and in the process, undermining the American authority.

The USA holds the most capacity to make or break the current SCS situation. Americans have been loitering in this region since the 1940s, when Filipinos had recently gained independence, out of the need to prevent any encroachment of the USSR. With the Philippines, Washington has a mutual defense treaty, PACS (1951), and placed its military bases on its south-east asian ally's territory in 1947.¹²

The Philippines has been one of the closest allies of the USA in the SCS region. Washington has stressed over how any attack on Manila, including in the South China Sea will be considered an attack on the Defense Treaty between the two nations. Even in tough situations, America has stressed how Manila is a very close ally and they will not lose it so easily. The USA has effectively maintained the balance of relevance and neutrality in the region.

Of course, for the USA this concern is as much about their now challenged hegemony than any 'global peace'. But America can comfortably use an internationalist veil to hide its obnoxious fears of the Chinese dragon. As done in the past, the USA has a high chance of making China look like a global antagonist while in reality, it might just boil down to the US feeling uncomfortable about Chinese growth against them.

These bases allow the USA to forward-deploy significant military forces thousands of miles from the homeland, deterring aggression and quickly responding to regional security challenges. The USA has developed its relations in black and white with other regional players like Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Australia, along with some semi-formal ties with Thailand and South Vietnam (now Vietnam).¹³ The USA was aware that credibility could be built only when it ensured that it was backing all its allies, and for that, it had to remain neutral and encourage them to stay calm and docile with each other.

The US-Filipino relationship isn't a smooth cakewalk. It is dynamic, with its own set of hiccups. It has everything ranging from cultural interchange, economic relations, and strategic alliance, but also faces the troubles of unhealthy power imbalance, and political interference. Neither of the two sides wishes to leave the other but also fears turmoil that will leave them both stranded. Manila can barely pitch for itself without the USA's backing and USA military needs an ally in the region. If the USA abandons Manila, it would affect the USA's legitimacy and dominance as a leader globally. It will be handicapped if it loses its Filipino bases, but would also wish for the SCS crisis to only exist in ripples and not tsunamis.

Washington's concerns aren't just about China overlooking a single tribunal case, but in the process, stepping over a multitude of treaties and conventions. China looks at international laws in the light of how it looks at its domestic laws, i.e., it does not mind undermining them in case the law fails to help China pursue power. Anything that isn't a tool of power is worthy of being shifted to the sides, subtly, or aggressively.

Till now, America has been occupied by a lot of other issues elsewhere, prioritizing as and when a crisis develops across the globe, but unsurprisingly, America's next big concern is the Indo-Pacific. The USA wouldn't want to go head to head with China and till-date prefers to suggest the players solve the dispute

¹² *The United States-Philippines Relationship - United States Department of State.* (2022, August 5). State Department.

¹³ *Overview of South China Sea Disputes and U.S. Policy - USNI News.* (2021, February 3). US Naval Institute.

‘amicably’ and with consensus. But alongside, it continues to fuel QUAD¹⁴, its regional allies, and its very own Naval forces to assert that it still owns the world order.¹⁵

With all eyes on this region, the USA would want to emerge as a hero against all odds, reclaiming its lost glory. The maintenance and control over this space will help both the USA and its allies achieve freedom of seas. Interests change, and so do the dynamics, but the region remains caught in a circle of crisis, looking like a sea of opportunities for two of the largest economies on the planet right now.

Facing this challenge from a peer competitor—the first in decades—the United States must hold to a realistic assessment of its interests.

4. THE CHINESE STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: CONTAINMENT AND COERCION:

4.1. BUILDING ARTIFICIAL ISLANDS

When the Asia Maritime Initiative released the suspicious appearance of new man-made islands in 2014¹⁶, the world looked anxiously. The sudden appearance of six artificial islands, on coral reefs was unprecedented and they don't appear on most world maps. These are the Chinese artificial islands in the SCS. These islands have become the hotspot of China's strategy in the SCS, and its assertiveness to achieve its interest. These islands are mega projects, undertaken by the Chinese leadership as one of their most radical step into the conflict. The picture shows that China has been building them on top of reefs since 2014. They have used the sand from the seabed to surface these islands, spanning up to 3200 acres of artificial lands (acc. to Asia Maritime Initiative).¹⁷

What is now China's fresh military camps, weren't even considered ‘territory’ under global recognition. What is more concerning is how rampantly China has used and equipped these islands with naval stations and other military necessities. Aerial pictures show tight-fitted militaristic facilities across the islands that will support missile systems, radars, runways, etc.¹⁸

China's humungous unforeseen step has given it a lot of strength in the SCS. One must understand that the militaristic expansion of China is not just concerned with the SCS but also Taiwan. With these reefs now becoming well-developed islands, china is pushing through spaces to bring its SCS domination dream to life. But a military base can be used in more than one way, this is when regional and non-regional contestants should keep their guards up.

John C Aquilino, a top-ranking admiral in the USA Navy has claimed that China had ‘fully militarised’ a few islands in the South China Sea.¹⁹ Such actions can be more aggressive than one could register. Admiral claims were different from when Xi Jinping claimed they weren't involved or interested in turning these islands into bases²⁰. The naval officer feels that by doing this china is flexing its powers in the SCS.

¹⁴ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), commonly known as the QUAD, is a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

¹⁵ Price, N. (2021, November 19). *On the Situation in the South China Sea - United States Department of State*. US State Department.

¹⁶ *Island Tracker Archive | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. (n.d.). Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

¹⁷ *Fiery Cross Reef*. (n.d.). Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

¹⁸ *LIS-143 - China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*. (2014, December 5).

¹⁹ *China has fully militarized three islands in South China Sea, US admiral says*. (2022, March 21). The Guardian.

²⁰ *China denies report it is developing reefs and cays in the South China Sea*. (2022, December 21). Radio Free Asia.

4.2 CABBAGE STRATEGY: A LAYERED CONTROL

China's most creative step to defend these artificial islands has been the 'salami-slicing strategy'²¹. Here, Beijing covers the contested islands with multiple layers of fishing boats, surveillance ships, and military vessels. This idea is to cover its islands with 'slices' of security, which is also called the cabbage strategy. With these layers intact, it can cut the neighbors off and deny them any access to these spaces. China has a long history of using this low yet effective method to protect its claims.

Rear Admiral Zhang Zhauzhong coined the cabbage strategy for the PLAN (People Liberation Army Navy). These successive layers would help capture and control spaces that need to be removed from worldly support or sight. This is also named as the Small- Stick diplomacy. What makes this interesting is how it is not based on naval warships but uses fishermen's boats and fishing administrative ships as the first layer of the 'cabbage', making it look like it isn't a completely militaristic step.

This overwhelms and brings China's desired island under its mercy. Development of the island, or any target at all will cut any other naval force to connect to bring in help, effectively isolating the territory. This strategy was used in 2012 and 2013 for Scarborough and Ayungin (in the Spratly Islands), against the Phillipines. Very recently, this was also used in Pagasa islands in 2019.

4.3 CONTAINING FISHERMEN: ANTI-TRESPASSING FACEOFFS

The most recent and dangerous faceoffs in the SCS have been the confrontations between the Chinese Coast Guard and the Filipino vessels. In the most recent flashpoint, four hours-long tension rose when the Chinese coast guard shoed water cannons on Phillipino motorboats.²² These boats were on their way to deliver supplies (food and other necessities). They were encircled by a bunch of Chinese ships, on the outpost of the disputed Thomas Shoal, which claimed to be under both Beijing and Manila. These interactions have become more common in the SCS, driving non-regional players closer to the crisis. These fragile tensions can lead to paranoia of a bigger breakout of war. In these situations, the USA deploys its warships to build a balance create deterrence, and support its ally. But another understanding of this is how one of these monthly confrontations might blow up into a full-blown USA vs. China conflict. All parties in these local tension claim that they have no intention to lead these faceoffs into ignition, but would also not back off when it comes to their sovereign waters, which leaves space for one to anticipate the future. Manila continues to have fishermen in their overlapping regions with China and deploy their coast guard to 'block dangerous maneuvers' against their territory. They aim to protect their fishing community against harassment, against the 'reckless' Chinese vessels that have no respect for international law.

China's strategy to arrest or repel 'trespassers' is one of its most radical and obnoxious methods to defend its islands, probably the one with the highest chances of turning sour. China justifies all of its actions against so-called trespassers by continuously affirming that it is their legal waters that they are protecting against infringement.

4.4 POSSIBLE AIR IDENTIFICATION ZONE

Another strategy that China might follow up with, for its claims is the declaration of an air identification zone. As tensions in the regions, along with the involvement of extra, non-regional players, china has

²¹ Toshi Yoshihara. (2017, October). *China Annexes the South China Sea with the Cabbage Strategy*.

²² (2023, November 13). Dozens of Chinese ships chase Philippine vessels as U.S. renews warning | The Asahi Shimbun

developed a greater protectiveness for what it claims are its sovereign waters.

The South China Morning Post wrote that China has been planning for the same since 2010 and that it will be announced at the 'right time'.²³ This ADIZ (Air Defence Identification Zone)²⁴ will cover all of the disputed territories, the Spratly, Paracel, and Pratas Islands. This claim instills thought-provoking fears of the extent to which China is ready to take its war of protecting the nine-dash line claims.

ADIZ is a space where aircraft are tracked and identified before they enter the airspace. This does not necessarily mean that no planes are allowed, it just means a tighter identification and restriction on military aircraft. Civilian planes are usually not interfered with but may be intercepted if and when China wants. There is no one rule or norm for ADIZ, and there is no limit to what ADIZ covers or to what extent a nation can make others comply with it. This ambiguity, again gives China enough vacuum to turn the tides in its favour and defend its claims.

5. REGIONAL AND NON-REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

A generalized perception about the South China Sea is that China is at the center of this conflict, which can be justifiably true to some extent but it veritable ignores how multiplayer the issue is. through the intense analysis of what this expanse of a sea offers, it is nothing but natural for the South China Sea to have more than just a handful of players, ready to claim, protect, and benefit from it. Amidst these players, exists the complex web of claims, interests, and actions, both militaristic and diplomatic along with the geographical radius extending way beyond the region. Each stakeholder pushes through a length of means to foster their interests and make a mark on these troubled waters.

5.1 ASEAN AND THE REGION FOR A GREATER INTERACTION

The first circle of concern can be found around the smaller radius of the South China Sea. This region is the face of some of the world's fastest-growing economies, top global markets, and trade epicenters. Registering how the first-in-line contestants are all very ambitious, exemplary economies with an equally strong set of claims and will to defend them is important.

Regionally, the three main claimants are China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, asserting extensive and territorial claims within the South China Sea, driven by historical narratives, strategic imperatives, and economic considerations. In most headlines, we locate China and it's aggression, as it asserts it's territorial claims, ignoring international calls, tribunal judgments, and regional stability. In 2009, China presented it's Nine-Dash Line claims against the legally driven case put forth by Vietnam and the Philippines; here was when the Chinese side made their submission of the argument to justify their claims over the islands. Alongside, we have two other competitive candidates, Vietnam and the Philippines, asserting their share of claims, backed by their own set of legal and historical justifications. It isn't a truth hidden that China often emerges as a much more powerful contestant to its claims on this marine expanse. Nevertheless, one must also not ignore the steadfastness and sturdy efforts of the other players who have defended and stood by their ground via diplomatic, legal, and internationalist maneuvers. Sino-Vietnamese relations have witnessed a history of sour interaction and while one may feel secure about their land issues being arbitrated as of now, the naval buildup of tensions stands towering above the region. In the case of the

²³ *Beijing's plans for South China Sea air defence identification zone cover Pratas, Paracel and Spratly islands, PLA source says.* (2020, May 31). South China Morning Post.

²⁴ An air defense identification zone (ADIZ) is a region of airspace in which a country tries to identify, locate, and control aircraft in the interest of national security.

Filipinos, one notices a similar overlap of interests. But a common methodology the two nations have taken against the Chinese dragon is internalizing the issue with ASEAN and alliance building with greater powers like the USA and India, especially in the case of the Philippines.

None of the regional powers, make claims beyond their EEZs like China does. Most of them, including Brunei and Malaysia, simply wish to hold onto their sovereign waters, often avoiding direct conflicts or standoffs in terms of taking stands and preserving the UNCLOS.

A case of a successful regional organization in itself, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also plays a crucial role in promoting stability and managing disputes in the South China Sea.²⁵ ASEAN-China Declaration along with the COC (Code of Conduct) for the South China Sea has become a key initiative of the organization toward maintaining regional stability. An issue could be building consensus within ASEAN towards their clear plan of action towards China. ASEAN members have divergent methodologies, and the South China Sea as an issue might be more pressing to one than to another. Reconciliation and coming together could be a challenge ASEAN nations might have to deal with to make more concrete strategies, considering they are not on the same page for it as of now.

5.2 NON-REGIONAL CLAIMANTS AND SYNERGY

The South China Sea standoff has been a space of involvement for powers beyond the regions. China; growing assertiveness has become a concern for nations across the globe, which makes perceive the South China Sea as a fundamental representation of the same. Non-regional players claim that free waters are a necessity for a free-flowing global setting and Chinese claims are nothing but antagonistic. The post-modern world is marked by globalized economies and free-flowing capital in the waters, under the notion of the South China Sea becoming a contention beyond it's regional space. The internationalist view of oceanic spaces to open and legally accessible to all without one nation pushing through them for tier own national demands. A lot of non-regional claimants look at the South China Sea not from a regional lens but the lens of standing up against the unacceptable unruliness of China²⁶. For them South China Sea is one of the many places China refuses to adhere to international legal standards and letting it be will only encourage the dragon to continue further beyond its allotted space.

Diplomatic statements, calling Chinese actions impermissible are the most common steps taken by most national governments, but some powers have acted beyond that.

AUKUS, a military alliance between Australia, the UK, and the USA is something that could concern the Chinese endeavors, as this trilateral synergy of the top global militaries could slow down the nine-dash line claims. With such huge militaries involved, one could smell the possibility of a nuclear armageddon or a future new-age version of the arms race. In the surge to build a balance of power against China, the West could also be building up grounds for what the world braces itself from. The Chinese have accused Canada of an aircraft allegedly lingering around the Chinese borders, as recently as November 2023 and called it a breach of their sovereignty. China condemns the West for their continuous action in the Chinese 'backwaters' and blames them for any further rise of tensions in the future. Chinese find the presence of Washington DC and its allies, especially in support of Manila, as an obvious threat. The USA justifies this with a 1951 mutual defense treaty that it signed with the Philippines, and backs its actions with the flag of 'regional stability'

²⁵ Hazmi, A. (2020, January 21). *What is "ASEAN Way" ?* Seasia.co.

²⁶ Ma, T., & Wills, M. (2016, January 20). *Raising the Stakes: The Interests of Non-claimant States in the South China Sea Disputes*. National Bureau of Asian Research.

Japanese presence as a non-claimant isn't very militaristic in parallel to the nature of the USA but appears to be more of a negotiation initiative taker. Its approach has been that of a capacity builder and fosterer of marine capabilities in the southeastern nations. China has very obviously also raised questions about these steps: viewing them as a sign of invading regional peace.

5.3 INDIAN POINT OF INTEREST IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA:

India's presence in the South China Sea has seen heightened gravity in the last decade. For New Delhi, this isn't just about the resources and exploits of this marine expanse but comes off as a much wider and multi-layered strategy against the Chinese dragon. India has been consciously pushing to make its surrounding waters more dispute-free and looks at its northern neighbor as a potential issue in the Indian Ocean. Chinese naval presence is most definitely a concern to ponder for India.²⁷

This goal of India to keep the trade and waters inclusive, open, and legally protected, isn't exclusive to just India but is also shared by many ASEAN nations like the Philippines and Singapore.²⁸ India emerges as a more global power, watching its becoming' after the COVID-19 era, and being a case study of economic and national growth; it cannot avoid the South China Sea scene. India understands the importance of showing its presence, but at the same time, it wouldn't go on a full-blown drill against China. New Delhi avoids engaging in more direct action against China in enhancing ties and forging relations. A more pragmatic approach would be to not meddle in the south Southeast Asia's complex geopolitical scene but also not refrain from polishing new partnerships under the Act East Policy of 2014. Indian contribution doesn't necessarily have to be all-militaristic but could be a more people-to-people approach.

The 2018 bilateral meeting between PM Modi and President Duterte which resulted in 5 MOUs, was a milestone between Indian and Filipino relations. The relations between the two countries expanded from defense to agro-cooperation and from MSMEs to cultural ties.

Very recently in 2023 June, India also welcomed Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo where defense deals joint exercises, security cooperation, and naval asset transfers were the highlights.²⁹ These meetings and discussions could be read as a signal to Beijing about the involvement and healthy presence of India in the situation of the South China Sea.

QUAD could also be another approach a more long time one to the South China Sea issue. India could monitor and involve itself in the safety and peace of this region in collaboration with its QUAD partners. It can also serve as a platform to display a shift from fossil fuels to green energy, addressing the environmental concerns in the region. The exploits of the South China Sea have brought up critical ecological questions that may not get as much space as other defense-related concerns. Energy prospects can help nations come closer in this conflict-torn area. This geostrategic area could be an example of turning brutish conflict zones into lands of collaborative opportunities.

In a time when China's actions are unprecedented and at an all-time dominant high, the Indian presence could serve as a balancer. Indian naval exercises with Singapore (SIMBEX), unilateral and bilateral, and friendly ports in nations like Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam are a show of India's naval presence in Southeast Asia. Campbell Bay (INS Baaz) in the Andaman and Nicobar command has been functional in Indian surveillance in the South China Sea, along with the deployment of MiG-29K

²⁷ Scott, D. (2013, may). *India's Role in the South China Sea: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics in Play*.

²⁸ *Scope for joint sales, patrols through maritime cooperation between India and Philippines*. (2023, june). The Hindu.

²⁹ Sajith, S. (2024, January 6). *India's Quiet Support of the Philippines in the South China Sea*. The Diplomat.

and Dornier 228. Joint Exercises with the Philippines, Japan, and the USA, have been symbolic steps taken by the Indian navy to surge its presence into the SCS.³⁰

One cannot, amidst this, overlook that Indian naval power lags behind the Chinese. strengthened military assets, lack of synergy between civilian and military leadership, and reformed conditioning of the forces is a need for the hour. Indian global leadership will push it into more space like the SCS where it will have to actively take part in peacekeeping and peacebuilding, needing a much more robust naval power.

This visible presence of so many multitudes of players in the South China Sea might not have been something China was expecting in its backyard, but the world understands that the South China Sea is more than this, it is a representation of Chinese aggression, and only when extra-regional powers come together, can they expect the balance of power to tilt away from China.

6. CONCLUSION: A WAY FORWARD TO ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

The South China Sea today represents the global nature of most tension-prone areas. Hegemons balancing each other out, a race to exploit the most out of a resource, collective security formations, showcasing of power, alliance building, and an attempt to ‘talk-talk’ the issue out.

But something that sets this region apart from most conflicts is its potential to erupt into a major war with a domino of all powers being involved. Steve Bannon, the White House’s chief strategist during the Trump regime called the South China Sea the ‘New Middle East’ and pressed upon how the next big war would be fought within a decade in the same region.³¹

Countries like India and the Philippines have already shown progress in adjusting and enhancing their naval powers, making defense purchases, and building indigenous defense production capabilities. enhancing maritime presence is ever important considering the naval supremacy China has over the SCS, which could be tough to match with the current state of affairs in the defense R and D in its neighboring nations.

ASEAN COC (Code of Conduct) could be another driving example of legally binding treaties and legally functioning international contracts that can set down standards and key guidelines which will reduce any further chances of misunderstanding and overestimations by nations. Such treaties will help in trust building, most importantly between nations who don't share historical warmth.

One cannot deny that all nations wish to benefit from the SCS. Instead of driving them away, a combined effort by regional players to explore, develop, and research this marine span will help them come together to reduce tensions. Scientific and ecological capacity building can be another long-term outlook to bring about cooperation.

Setting up hotlines is a very cold-war way which has seen some success in the past. This could reduce tensions between naval forces and coast guards of various players. All regional players have unique dynamics with each other and to bring them all to one equal table for a diplomatic space is a very far-fetched and tough idea to achieve. Nevertheless, if done, we can see some fruitful discourse of talking the way out of a full-fledged conflict where diplomats can place and counter-measure stakes to come to a consensus. Track-II diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and resolutions.

³⁰ *Indian Navy deploys warship in South China Sea after Galwan clash | Indian Navy deploys warship in South China Sea after Galwan clash.* (2020, August 30). Deccan Chronicle.

³¹ Haas, B. (2017, February 1). *Steve Bannon: 'We're going to war in the South China Sea ... no doubt'.* The Guardian.

Diplomatic pressure could be built via the United Nations, ASEAN, European Union, and other forums that China is a part of. Sanctions might not be the best way out, considering how they did not prove to be very assistive in the case of the Russo-Ukraine War. Mobilizing international solidarity and diplomatic protests may be included in the strategy.

Joint Exercises, intelligence sharing, and military capacity-building efforts could be ramped up. Amidst this, it is important to note that capacity building isn't an overnight step but a long-term decision that requires extensive defense policy crafting.

In conclusion, the Chinese aggression in the SCS needs a long-term vision and an amalgamation of diplomatic, legal, and militaristic steps. Wrong measures could result in a deteriorated situation and provoke Chinese aggression to an unprecedented level. An understanding should be made around how the SCS issue isn't just a regional conflict but a space that could result in the domino effect of a global war with an all-out level of destruction. Timely containment and resolution of this space will help extinguish a crisis that the world has to bear the brunt of in the future. Close coordination between the affected parties will reduce the chances of extra-regional interference and help in timely dissolution.

Responding to China's aggression in the South China Sea requires a combination of diplomatic, security, legal, and informational measures aimed at deterring further.

Overall, the solution will have to be comprehensive and inclusive, from the Chinese aggression to the alliance building of the West, all players will need to be studied to craft a solution that leaves no one behind.

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