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China's Growing Assertiveness in the South China Sea: A Realist Perspective

Abstract

Once China seized control of Paracel & Spratly islands from Vietnam in 1970s and 80s, it exercised 'restraint' viz à viz its 'calculative strategy' in later decades and ratified UNCLOS and signed the 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (SCS)' to prevent any change of feature of the Sea. In late 2000s, China became relatively assertive in the SCS and declared it its 'core interest', thus began developing the partially submerged reefs into artificial islands and militarizing them. This paper explores the factors responsible for China's assertiveness in this long-standing, multi-party dispute over the SCS employing broader framework of realist lens. Data is mostly collected from primary and secondary sources whereas the data analysis is based on qualitative content analysis with more focus of its theory testing approach manifest analysis. China's ambitions fit into the Hegemonic Transition Theory as it is vociferously challenging the US hegemony in the SCS and aiming at consolidating its 'regional hegemony'. The US has increased its Freedom of Navigation Operations in the Sea, which is a natural hegemonic response. China has justified its actions in the SCS based upon its historical claims on disputed islands and rejected the United States presence based upon its non-resident status. Motivation behind China's actions in the SCS is more security oriented rather than economic, as China aims at consolidating its grip on the SCS routes from where most of the its energy imports pass.

Keywords: Security Dilemma, Freedom of Navigation Operations, Power Politics, UNCLOS, Permanent Court of Arbitration.

China's Growing Assertiveness in the South China Sea: A Realist Perspective

Introduction

The South China Sea is subject to longstanding dispute between China and its South East Asian neighbours backed by the US. China claims sovereignty over approximately 90% of the Sea since its liberation in 1949. It has contending claims of its possession with its neighbouring states like Burundi, Malaysia, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia³. It is widely believed that China claims this territory owing to presence of abundant oil resources that are still untapped and opportunities for fishing.⁴

China became assertive in its claims in 1970s and 1980s when in skirmishes with Vietnam, it got possession of Paracel (Xisha) and Spratly (Nansha) Islands. In 1990s and early decade of 21st century, China showed restraint under its 'calculative strategy' that accounts was developing its economy in a peaceful environment and avoid use or threat to use of force.⁵ It negotiated with the dispute with Association of Southeast Asian Nations and signed 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea' in 2002 aimed at promoting stability and harmony among the regional powers.⁶

In 2010, China declared the SCS as one of its 'core interests' and claimed absolute sovereignty over it⁷. In 2015, China began pilling sand on the Spratly Island and extending its features and finally developed partially submerged coral reefs into colossal cities having runways and ports. Satellite images of the SCS have shown

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³ Ben Westcott, "Pressures increasing on Indonesia and Malaysia in the South China Sea" *CNN*, June 8, 2020, final edition, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/07/asia/china-malaysia-indonesia-south-china-sea-intl-hnk/index.html> (accessed April 20, 2021).

⁴ BBC News, "Why is the South China Sea contentious?" *BBC*, July 12, 2016, final edition, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349> (accessed April 26, 2021).

⁵ Martin Stuart-Fox, *A short history of China and Southeast Asia* (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 220.

⁶ Nguyen Hong Thao, "The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea: A Note," *Ocean Development & International Law*, no. 34 (2003): 279.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00908320390221849?journalCode=uodl20> (accessed April 20, 2021).

⁷ Edward Wong, "China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea Is a 'Core Interest' Worth War" *The New York Times*, (accessed April 26, 2021).

rapid urbanization of these tiny Islands.⁸ Importantly, China started constructing military bases on these artificial islands creating fury in its claimants. Multiple sources confirm that China has extensively militarised various reefs located in the SCS.⁹ China has inhabited 3200 acres new land at Spratly islands since 2013.¹⁰ China placed various fighter jets on these islands subsequently. However, for the first time China landed bomber jets on these disputed islands in 2018 as a signal of show of power that invited criticism from the claimant parties and the United States.¹¹

They term China's actions a violation of the 'United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)' that was agreed upon in 1982 which China has signed as well as ratified it. Chinese actions were denounced by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in its 2016 award. However, China did not consider itself bound by the PCA owing to its historical claims. SCS is rife with conflicts; regional hegemonic designs as well as global hegemonic competition is apparent. The US has increased its operations in the Sea at the behest of its Southeast Asian allies. It is critical of China's actions in the SCS. In 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in an interview discouraged claimants without naming China against 'inhibiting the uninhibited' spots in the SCS and urged parties to withhold ASEAN-China Declaration and UNCLOS. The United States pledged to assist its allies in the region.¹²

Research objectives

To find out China's interest in the South China Sea.

To understand the factors responsible for China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

To explore the impact of great power politics on the South China Sea dispute.

Research Questions

1. What is the primary factor responsible for China's assertiveness in the South China Sea in the light of untapped resources in the Sea on one hand and its coastal (in)security on the other hand?
2. How China's actions in the South China Sea are counterproductive to the United States strategic interests in the region?

Theoretical Framework

According to the nature of research questions, the broader framework of realism is employed as the questions look at the assertiveness of China in the SCS. This study will look at the behaviour of China with regards to its expansion in the Sea and the challenges it poses to the other claimant parties to the dispute. Referent object of classical realism is 'state' as they claim that state is the primary actor and is unitary in its posture. In anarchic international system, states pursue their national interests. They maximize their power to ensure their survival in the international system. It essentially creates security dilemma among the states that encourage them to multiply their power and no state is certain of the intentions of their corresponding state.¹³ Classical realists believe on the military power as the most authentic tool to secure survival. States might seek to ally with other states to ensure their survival thus creating a 'balance of power'.¹⁴

However, in 1980s, realism revived itself absorbing some of the assumptions of behaviouralist revolution in social sciences. Kenneth Waltz was the leading figure who introduced a scientific flavour in realism in 'The Theory of International Politics'. John Mearsheimer further comprehended the idea of structural realism in his book the '*Tragedy of Great Power Politics*' and this idea was popularly known as 'offensive realism'. The idea of Kenneth Waltz was named as

⁸ SpaceKnow, "China's Island Build-Up: The View From Space," *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2018, final edition, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/chinas-island-build-up-the-view-from-space/> (accessed April 25, 2021).

⁹ Frances Mangosing, "EXCLUSIVE: New photos show China is nearly done with its militarization of South China Sea," *INQUIRER.net* February 05, 2018, final edition, <https://www.inquirer.net/specials/exclusive-china-militarization-south-china-sea> (accessed April 25, 2021).

¹⁰ Global Conflict Tracker, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 10, 2020, final edition, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorialdisputes-south-china-sea> (accessed April 25, 2021).

¹¹ "South China Sea dispute: China lands bombers on island," *BBC*, May 19, 2018, final edition, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-44180773> (accessed April 25, 2021).

¹² Mark Landler, "Offering to Aid Talks, U.S. Challenges China on Disputed Islands," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2010, final edition, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/24/world/asia/24diplo.html?mcubz=1> (accessed April 25, 2021).

¹³ Paul Williams, ed., *Security Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17.

¹⁴ Andrew Heywood, *Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 11.

Defensive realism. According to neorealist claims, states tend to maximize their power in order to ensure their survival. According to defensive realist perspective, ultimate goal of states is to protect its interests in which 'survival' is the key ambition by equalizing its power with its rival states. States tend to maintain appropriate balance with the potential contenders. States does not aim for global or regional hegemony. They just pursue 'survival' of their own. They look for deterrence and balance of power.¹⁵ On the other hand, offensive realism claims that states endeavour for 'survival' by maximizing their power relative to other states.¹⁶ Hence, neorealism serves as an all-encompassing theory, as the topic under discussion is purely a topic of high politics with respect to the SCS, the assertiveness of China and the counter-actions by the other parties in the dispute that are supported by the United States.

Research Methodology

In this research, Qualitative Research Methodology with postpositive paradigm will be utilized as it involves the collection of in-depth information but from a relatively small number of cases. Qualitative research is best suitable for answering the 'Hows and Whys' questions. The rationale for utilizing the Qualitative research method is that the topic and Research questions are designed in such a way that they address only the dispute in the South China Sea and the factors responsible for this dispute and excludes all other aspects of the relations between China and the US allies. There are three Qualitative Research Approaches i.e., historical, descriptive and explorative used to find out the answers of the research questions. The study is largely based upon the explorative research approach. Primary and secondary data sources are used intensively to get the real insight of the issue. sources are used during this course of research to collect qualitative data. Primary sources include Official statements of the high officials and departments, Foreign affair briefings, Official reports, security papers and strategies, and secondary sources include journals, books, articles, reports etc.

Discussion

In the contemporary international environment, the SCS has become the theatre for great power politics between China and the United States. China is increasingly asserting itself in SCS recently and taking measures to maximize its power and influence both regionally and globally. The US on the other hand pursues Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy¹⁷. In the post-Cold war era, the US emerged as the sole superpower in the world and it shaped the liberalist international order for which it formed various institutions and regimes. As China is asserting itself, there is a prospect that China might become a future great power and get capability to contest the US position in the current world order. China has two choices here:

- i) Either Accept the existing order framed by the US and resolve the dispute in the light of UNCLOS as the repeated assertion of the US.
- ii) Or prioritise its national interest and continue its endeavours in the South China Sea countering the US hegemony.

The claimants assert that China has defied its 2002 agreement with ASEAN members that calls for preservation of status-quo in the SCS and avoid changing any feature in it. There are frequent military standoffs in the SCS where China often locks horns with its other claimants. In early 2020s, there was more than one-month standoff between China and Malaysia adjacent to Borneo island. As China's coast guards surrounded the area, Malaysia increased its naval vessel in the adjacent waters that were later supported by the US military vessels. China came head-to-head with Indonesia at Natuna islands, the sovereignty of which is contested between Indonesia and China. In April, 2020, China sank second Vietnamese fishing boat in a year near the Paracel Islands inviting strong criticism from Vietnam.¹⁸

The US maintains a strong presence in the region. The Pivot-Asia policy, a brainchild of President Barak Obama, under which the US actively engaged with the states bilaterally and multi-laterally. One of its key aim was containing China.¹⁹ At the state-to-state level, Obama visited several east-ward states like Australia, Honolulu and Indonesia in his first tenure. On the multilateral level, he actively engaged with ASEAN. He

¹⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1979), 26

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 2001), 5.

¹⁷ Lindsey W. Ford, "The Trump administration and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific," *Brookings* May, 2020, final edition, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-trump-administration-and-the-free-and-open-indo-pacific/> (accessed April 25, 2021).

¹⁸ Khanh Vu, "Vietnam protests Beijing's sinking of South China Sea boat," *Reuters* April 04, 2020, final edition, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/vietnamprotests-beijings-sinking-of-south-china-sea-boat-idUSKBN21M072> (accessed April 25, 2021).

¹⁹ Kenneth Guy Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia" *Brookings* December 21, 2011, final edition <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/> (accessed April 25, 2021)

attended the East Asian Summit, 2011, and it was clear from his posture that among his various hegemonic goals in Asia, countering China was the key one.²⁰

China has exhibited an assertive posture in the SCS in response to the US pivot to Asia. By tightening its grip on the SCS, China would get access to the various untapped oil reserves and to exploit the fishing opportunity. China started establishing military naval bases in various artificial islands in 2015 which has resulted in increase in its assertiveness in the region. These artificial islands would able China to get control of various strategic chokepoints and sea routes from where major portion of the oil passes to the US east Asian allies. Hence, it is a two-way i.e., economic and military challenge for the US hegemony.

In the post-Cold War era, the US enforced its global order and set up various institutions, regimes and organizations to maintain its hegemony. In the context of SCS, China is challenging these hegemonic rules, regimes, and the allies of the United States, thus aggressively countering its unipolarity. According to the hegemonic transition theory, competition is the essence in the relations between the hegemonic powers and challenging of international order set up by the hegemon by the other great powers is imminent. According to realists, the defining element in this competition is 'military power'. If we compare the military hardware of both, though Chinese capability, defence budget and military technology lags behind that of the US, yet the gap between the two is rapidly narrowing in the light of China's military modernization and growing naval prowess. With sophisticated weaponry, surveillance system, China is gradually tightening its grip over the SCS. As *2018 Nation Défense Strategy of the United States* indicated erosion of international order and norms and called the militarization of the Islands located in the SCS by China as threat to the United States, terming inter-state competition as the primary contour of the US nation security.²¹

Under the tenants of offensive realism, it can be expected that the US will try to assert its hegemony and turn the balance in its favour. China is very careful and calculated in its approach as for the SCS is concerned. Though it has forcefully asserted itself by capturing the Islands and militarizing them, yet it has avoided direct military confrontation with the US. However, it at some instances, it has projected its strength in the Sea and a warning to the United States in a show of assertiveness. In 2018, China's warships forced a US destroyer to change course in the Sea as it was sailing through the disputed Spratly island.²²

Historically, the US has maintained its neutrality in the SCS, however, in the context of great power rivalry between China and the US, it has adopted a more aggressive approach. It opposed China's actions but never declared them unlawful or illegal. However, now for the first time, the US terms China's activities in the region as unlawful and arbitrary.²³ The US terms its activities in the SCS as 'freedom of navigation' as it has increased its military presence in the region. The US has deployed two aircraft carriers in 2018 in the Sea for joint operations in addition to many navy fighters, patrol aircrafts and bombers.²⁴

Though the US calls for upholding the international law and UNCLOS to the claimants particularly to China in the context of the SCS dispute. However, realists give less regard to the international law, regimes and norms. Changes in the distribution of power in the global system or any part of it creates 'disjuncture' and it leads to the instability in the whole system. It disturbs the established balance of power.²⁵ This instability provides an incentive to the rising powers to assert them self and challenge the international system and bring change in established order. According to Mearsheimer, states look for exploiting the opportunities and weak points in the international system where their benefits are greater than the cost, and expand their relative power. In the light of the neorealist assumption, it is expected from China as a potential rising power that it would attempt to use the situation in its advantage.

China views international system as an instrument of the US hegemony by which it tries to control the contenders.²⁶ In a statement regarding UNCLOS in 2006, China separated itself from following the Article 298 of UNCLOS that provides some disputes and their resolution, thus reject the third-party dispute resolution by

²⁰ Mark Beeson *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 24.

²¹ 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, *Department of Defense* <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

²² "South China Sea: Chinese ship forces US destroyer off course," *BBC*, October 2, 2018, final edition, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45718000> (accessed April 25, 2021).

²³ "South China Sea dispute: China's pursuit of resources 'unlawful', says US," *BBC*, July 14, 2020, final edition, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53397673> (accessed April 25, 2021).

²⁴ "South China Sea: What's China's plan for its 'Great Wall of Sand'?", *BBC*, July 14, 2020, final edition, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53344449> (accessed April 26, 2021).

²⁵ Robert Gilpin, *War and change in world politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 75.

²⁶ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 54.

any court or tribunal.²⁷ Hence, China opts out any third-party arbitration as far as the SCS dispute is concerned and prefers bilateral resolution²⁸. Contenders of this approach term that bilaterally owing to its sheer economic size and huge trade, China can pressurize the other East Asian claimants.

China claims that the US has no right of interference in East Asian matters and South China dispute as it is not a party directly in the dispute. Furthermore, China objects the assertion of the US for respect of the UNCLOS on the basis that the United States itself has not ratified the treaty, hence, it is not in the position to enforce it.²⁹

China declared itself not bound by arbitration in the framework of UNCLOS with regards to the SCS dispute. That is the reason, in 2013 the Philippines resorted to the Permanent Court of Arbitration for the resolution of the dispute and determination of the facts.³⁰ China protested this move by the Philippines referring this unilateral act as a violation of article 281 (UNCLOS) that calls for agreement of both the parties for the settlement of the disputes via arbitration.

The tribunal gave a ruling on some features of the dispute in July, 2016. The decision of the PCA was in large part in the favour of the Philippines. It rejected the Chinese claim of absolute sovereignty over the SCS and adjudicated that China violated that Philippines rights of fishing and exploration in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Since it has no enforcement mechanism, the decision is largely symbolic one. China rejected the decision of the PCA and claimed that it was not bound by any of such unilateral ruling and UNCLOS. China claims that it is no bound by the ruling of the PCA as it is non-binding in nature. Furthermore, China asserts that it has historical claim over the South China Sea that goes to 6000-years back.

China has condemned the building of military bases in SCS by the Philippines, and called for the bilateral resolution of the dispute with the Philippines.³¹ It ruled out any attempt at the part of claimants to jeopardise China's interests in the SCS or enforcing unilateral claim over maritime rights. Construction of artificial islands and setting up of military bases in the region, one can clearly predict that China has long-term goals in the region, and wants to pursue them by maintaining status-quo. It can be concluded from the PCA award that maintains that Chinese war-ships acted unlawfully against the Philippines. Owing to its inward politics, it has never clearly clarified its position on the settlement of the dispute. However, it also justifies its actions in the context of its historical claims over the region.

From neorealists standpoint, China has countered the laws and agreements regarding the SCS that are counterproductive to its interests in the region. From the perspective of hegemonic transition theory, disregarding international laws and norms is the key ingredient of transition. It clearly depicts the assertion of realism that states are rational actors and they follow international laws and cooperate with international organizations as long as they serve their interest. By undermining the claims of other states and using its economic pressure, China has tried to maximise its power relative to the other claimants and the US. China's actions are motivated by the power maximization and pursuit of national interest.

China's Assertive Posture' in the South China Sea

Though there are other claimants as well, but the most affected by this long-standing dispute are Vietnam and Philippines. China claims that the Island that she is inhabiting were possessed by China before the WW-II and they were occupied by Japan. Now, it has the right to regain them. This dispute became violent on two instances, in 1974 when it captured Paracel Island from South Vietnam and in 1988 when it came head-to-head with Vietnam and seized the control of Spratly Island. These two incidents got little world attention, because 1974, South Vietnam was at the brink of its collapse. In the same way, in

²⁷ Oceans and Law of the Sea, "Declarations and statements," *United Nations* February 12, 2020 https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_declarations.htm (accessed April 25, 2021).

²⁸ "China urges U.S. to stop provocative acts in South China Sea," *CGTN*, April 9, 2021, final edition, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-09/China-urges-U-S-to-stop-provocative-acts-in-South-China-Sea-ZjXidJrpOE/index.html> (accessed April 26, 2021).

²⁹ "Remarks by Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy on the Statement of the US Department of State on the South China Sea," *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America* July 12, 2020, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxss/t1797515.htm> (accessed April 25, 2021).

³⁰ Permanent Court of Arbitration, "PCA Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)," *Permanent Court of Arbitration* July 12, 2016 <https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-the-south-china-sea-arbitration-the-republic-of-the-philippines-v-the-peoples-republic-of-china/> (accessed April 25, 2021).

³¹ The State Council, "Full Text: China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea," *The State Council* July 13, 2016 http://english.www.gov.cn/state_council/ministries/2016/07/13/content_281475392503075.htm

1988, communist bloc was still persisting and it was dispute between the two communist states, so the world did not give it much attention. The US also ignored this issue.

The US repeatedly asserted its neutrality and called for the peaceful settlement of this dispute.³² The Philippines protest against China when it discovered a Chinese structure that was being erected on EEZ of the Philippines. A severe international diplomatic reaction followed this development, after which China became quite cautious in its actions. Later, China tried to mend its ties with ASEAN members. It extensively involved in economic activities with these states and the issue of the SCS went into backburner. Relations between the ASEAN and China became friendly in this time period, hence in 2002, both agreed on signing the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS", whereby both parties called for promotion of stability and friendliness in SCS and settlement of outstanding matters in the light of UN Charter and UNCLOS. Both the parties also agreed to exercise restraint in the matter whereby the interests of other states come into question in order to avoid any escalation as well as avoiding inhibiting the unpopulated islands.

Amidst widespread optimism, it was assumed as the resolution of the dispute was very much likely on the multilateral platform of ASEAN. The South East Asian claimants have made multiple efforts at 'internationalizing' the dispute, so that it involves other countries and organizations. However, after the declaration, China repeatedly asserted for the bilateral settlement and negotiations, as in the bilateral discussion, China has upper hand both politically and economically. Some experts named this China strategy as 'ripe fruit' approach.³³ It states that economic engagements of China with its South East Asian neighbours in 1990s and early 2000s were aimed at temporarily diverting the spotlight from SCS dispute. This distraction helped engaged the claimants economically and, in the meantime, China built up its economic and military might in SCS. When China saw that the tilt is in its favour, it tightened its hold on the SCS, leaving little space for the other parties and like a ripe fruit, all the benefits fell for China.

It is claimed that the China has given up its soft power strategy, used the military power and threat of force to pursue its objectives in the SCS, which is very much in agreement with the neorealists assumptions. In 2007 and following years, Chinese approach to the SCS saw a shift. It began connecting the Spratly and Paracel islands to its Hainan province administratively. In 2010, it listed the SCS issue among its core national interests, which clearly signalled that China was ready to use military hardware to defend its position in these Islands.

Thus, practically China abandoned the 'ripe fruit' strategy and indicated its lack of interest in resolving the outstanding dispute via negotiations. In this backdrop, the US gave up its policy of 'non-intervention' and became aggressive on the pleas of the ASEAN members and China's harassment of the US ships in SCS. The US blamed China for harassing its vessel named *Impeccable* by the Chinese navy ships in 2009. The US used this as a justification to more actively involved in SCS affairs.³⁴

China regarded it as an 'unambiguous justification'. This incident determined the pivot-Asia policy of Obama to a large extent due to his concern over increasing China's assertiveness. This counter action of the US fits into the neorealist assumption and can be justified as a component of hegemonic transition, where by the hegemonic attempts at reasserting itself. 'Rising' China's assertiveness and expansion in the SCS has naturally perturbed the existing hegemony i.e., the US and that is the reason it has reacted by increasing its military presence in the region to protect its hegemony and save its allies in the region, as it did in Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam war. In 2018, the US carrier Roosevelt showed force in its operation in the SCS with some Philippine's generals on board. It has deployed destroyers and other sophisticated weaponry that are in contact with other maritime states that it claims is aimed at protecting the US interests in the region and ensure stability and avoidance of any conflict.

With the dawn of 21st century, China has made several attempts to reduce the presence and contain the influence of the US in the East Asian region. It condemns the US navigation operations and military drills in the SCS.³⁵ China asserts that as the United is a non-resident state, and China and

³² Hillary Rodham Clinton, "The South China Sea," *U.S. State Department* July 22, 2011 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168989.htm> (accessed April 25, 2021).

³³ Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives—China and the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review*, 42-67.

³⁵ Ankit Panda, "China Condemns US FONOP Near Mischief Reef in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, March 25, 2018, final edition, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/china-condemns-us-fonopnear-mischief-reef-in-the-south-china-sea/> (accessed April 25, 2021).

other SCS littoral states have the right under international law to resist US presence in its waters³⁶. Another view is that if China leaves some of the space and adopts defensive policy towards the SCS, there are chances that the small countries in the region might become more demanding in their claims. On the other hand, if we look from the neorealist standpoint, in case that China become more assertive, China might invite the US wrath and some other powerful countries.

President Xi's South China Sea policy

If we look at the presidential tenure of Xi Jinping since his assuming power, he has asserted China's position globally. In the same vein, China has asserted itself in the SCS dispute under the current leadership. When PCA announced its award in 2016 regarding the SCS, president Xi signalled pre-emptive steps, which helped China in maintaining its grounds in the SCS. In neorealist terms, China perceives SCS dispute as a power struggle where it aims at maximizing its power. In this zero-sum game, China is asserting for securing its core interests.

Bonnie Glaser a US advisor on East Asia in a presentation observed that China has systematically pursued its South China Sea policy and its actions are intentional and well-thought and the coordination of various Chinese departments in this regard is exemplary. China has successfully utilised coercive diplomacy in this regard. Chinese actions and challenging of the international laws and norms clearly suggest that these decisions were taken up at the highest level. A realist analysis of the dispute suggests that all the claimants are interests in untapped resources that the South China Sea contain.

It was estimated in 2010 that China imports two-thirds of its oil from other states and exploitation of oil reserves that SCS contains can fulfil much of the domestic needs. China has countered multiple attempts by other claimants at surveying the presence of oil fields and termed such actions as counterproductive to its sovereignty. In early 2020, China came head-to-head with Malaysia, when it came across a Malaysian drilling-vessel, the West Capella, looking for resources near Borneo island. 2019 also saw a similar standoff when Vietnam defied China's demand to stop exploring the gas fields in SCS.³⁷

China's standoffs in the region clearly indicate that Beijing has increased its stakes in the region manifolds and is using force and threat of force to coerce other claimants who aim at exploring the resources in the SCS, while itself China is pursuing its exploitation drills actively.

Factors responsible for China's Actions in the South China Sea

The SCS has economic potential in terms of untapped oil and gas fields in addition to abundant opportunities for fishery. It contains approximately 11 billion barrel of oil that is still untapped and almost 190 trillion cubic feet natural gas but none of the parties is in position to exploit these resources.³⁸ It is often suggested that these natural resources are the real bone of contention in the SCS. The US Energy Information Administration suggests that the economic resources in the SCS are not that abundant to complement this heightened confrontation. Furthermore, most of the natural resources are at the uncontested part of the sea. The Spratly island and Paracel island that China seized from Vietnam have no oil, and not more than '100 billion cubic feet of gas'.

From the security perspective, the SCS consists of major shipping routes that account for most of the cargo shipping and maritime traffic of East and South East Asian States. It accounted for passage of \$3.37 trillion trade in 2016. According to the figures of 2017, the South China Sea transited 40% of the global Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). Similarly, most of the Chinese trade passes through SCS; hence a favourable position in SCS is essential for the Chinese interests. According to China's official statements in 2011, China's actions in SCS were defensive in nature as they were trying to revive their historical territories and the military capabilities were aimed at defending those territories. However, if we look at those action from the standpoint of

³⁶ Bobby Naderi, "Making chaos in the South China Sea does no good to China-U.S. ties," *CGTN*, October 22, 2020, final edition, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-22/Making-chaos-in-the-South-China-Sea-does-no-good-to-China-U-S-ties-UN5KZu3fYk/index.html> (accessed April 25, 2021).

³⁷ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Chinese Survey Ship Escalates Threeway Standoff," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, May 18, 2020, final edition, <https://amti.csis.org/chinese-survey-ship-escalates-three-way-standoff/> (accessed April 25, 2021).

³⁸ Brian Spegele, "South China Sea Tensions Leave Oil Potential Untapped," *The Wall Street Journal* July 12, 2016, final edition, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-china-sea-tensions-leave-oil-potential-untapped-1468387010#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Energy%20Information%20Administration,demands%20continue%20to%20grow%20quickly.> (accessed April 21, 2021).

international law, they are clearly assertive. Its South East Asian neighbours term these actions as aggressive and expansionist.

Highly sophisticated and modernized weaponry, runways, radars and airstrips deployed at the disputed islands clearly depict assertive designs of China. China started naval and air sophistication after Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in order to protect its shores.³⁹ China termed that standoff as an aggressive action of the global hegemon i.e., the US having capability to deploy latest weaponry in case of any crisis. It resulted in security dilemma, when China entered in arm race to balance its power with the US. On the other hand, the key claimants in this dispute like Vietnam and Philippines lack much of the sophisticated weaponry and are militarily far behind. Philippines is primarily dependent upon the US weaponry.

If we look the China's policy towards the SCS, it is mainly focused on keeping the United States away from its territories as compared to outmatching its military capabilities and technological sophistication. China cannot afford a full-scale war with it owing to its export-based economy and trade; however, it can go to any extent with its neighbours in securing its interests in the SCS.

In the shadow of security dilemma, China's neighbours are also compelled to increase their armament and increase their defence spending and ensure their survival, justified by the neorealism approach. If we look at the history of China it is more prone to security dilemma. In 19th and 20th century, it was consistently invaded by the overseas powers, it is a key reason why China is still concerned about the protection of its coasts. Hence China is responding to that vulnerability and ensuring its survival by power maximization and regional dominance.

Hence, one can conclude that erection of military hardware and militarization of the sea purely for security purposes. China thorough power maximizing is aspiring to balance the US naval dominance. Historical claim, intentional law or exploitation of oil or fishing resources cannot justify China's actions. Despite the presence of opportunities for fisheries and possibility of untapped oil reserves in the Sea, real aim of China is to consolidate its control on the territory in the light of its historical assertions.

Conclusion

China is undermining the US hegemony as it is threatening its South East Asian allies in the SCS at the one hand and hegemonic laws, norms and institutions patronized by the United States on the other hand, under the auspicious of the hegemonic transition theory and offensive realism. It defied from UNCLOS when it withdrew from its certain provisions binding it to settle the sea-related disputes through third-party tribunal or court, violating its neighbours' rights guaranteed under international law. Award of PCA brought by Philippines against China further strengthens these accusations implicating China. The US though claims neutrality in the dispute, has repeatedly called for freedom of navigation (FON) in SCS. The US conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) in the Sea and these operations have become more frequent recently. If the US ignores the plight of its East Asian allies and gives in to China, it can lose influence over them. In that case, these developing countries can fall in the orbit of China. It is expected that China will continue its aggressive ambitions in the SCS in order to secure its 'vital interests' and will never agree upon any multilateral formula to settle this dispute. Instead, China has at several times called for bilateral resolution of the disputes, but there is apprehension that China has plenty of political and economic leverage in bilateral negotiation to pressurize the opponents. If we look at the factors responsible for China's actions in the SCS, economy does not provide a reasonable justification, as most of the resources are found in non-contested regions. However, China's militarization of the South Sea with sophisticated weaponry and building of China's military bases on the artificial islands signal that these actions are motivated by the security dilemma posed by the United States. China wants to minimize the US presence in the South China Sea and wants to block the US from jumping in case of any military confrontation with South East Asian neighbours.

Assumption of power by the president Xi Jinping has increase China's assertiveness in the region. Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) also buys the argument of 'security dilemma' and is receptive of the idea of pre-emptive actions to secure Chinese coasts. As disparity of military power and technological sophistication between China and other claimants is increasing and that between China and the US is decreasing, it provides a unique opportunity to China to further its designs in the SCS. China has played successfully up till now, and smartly undermined the US-formulated international system.

³⁹ Michael J. Cole, "The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis: The Forgotten Showdown Between China and America," *National Interest* March, 2017, final edition, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-third-taiwan-strait-crisis-the-forgotten-showdown-19742> (accessed April 25, 2021).