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# The South China Sea in the Broader Context of the Global Geostrategic Challenge

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## Abstract

The South China Sea (SCS) is a critical juncture for global trade with \$3.37 trillion of seaborne trade transiting the body of water (China Power, 2017). Its status as a significant geostrategic and geopolitical flashpoint in the Asia Pacific is also widely acknowledged, with China conducting a belligerent militarisation and territorial expansion that is in contravention with international law. However, the SCS ought not to be regarded as the 'be all and end all' when understanding the rise of China and its strategic objectives in the region. Commonly, Western media commentary equates escalation in the SCS with the climaxing of bilateral US-China tensions, drawing parallels between Chinese actions in the region and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) expansionist ambitions, and moreover sensationalises the area's importance for maritime trade and the global economy. Instead, Chinese actions in the SCS should be examined side-to-side with its actual military capabilities, capacities and wider geostrategic objectives. Further, to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the strategic challenge posed by the SCS and Chinese objectives in the region, the multitude of internal disputes and tensions within the CCP. Additionally, other points of confrontation between the West and China such as in Eurasia and the East China Sea should be considered.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, geostrategy, Eurasia, East China Sea, military affairs

## The Legality of China's actions in the South China Sea

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which came into force in 1994, established a legal framework to balance the economic and security interests of littoral states with those of seafaring nations. In 2016, the International Court of Justice ruled that under UNCLOS, the closer states in the SCS were entitled to 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs); by extension, it concluded that China's claims to historic entitlements to resources within a "nine-dash-line" and EEZs were invalid (Permanent Court of Arbitration,

2016). Since the EEZs also guaranteed wide-ranging passage rights for naval vessels and military aircraft, China's security intensification was also ruled legally unsound.



Source: *International institute for Law of the Sea Studies 2021*

On the contrary to the international ruling, China put forth an alternate interpretation of UNCLOS to legitimise its maritime claims. In reply to the UNCLOS ruling, the Chinese Society of International Law published a "critical study" (Guilfoyle, 2018) on the SCS arbitration case and attempted to advance the argument that China was seeking to claim maritime zones from groups of features in the SCS rather than from individual features (Chinese Society of International Law, 2018). In other words, Beijing argues that even if not entitled to historic claims within the "nine-dash-line", it is entitled to resources in a wide expanse of sea based on EEZs generated from outlying archipelagos such as the Spratly and Paracel island groups. Under this interpretation, the Chinese Foreign Ministry in 2015 held that China's construction in the South China Sea is within China's sovereign rights and its activities are lawful, reasonable, and justified (Kang, 2015).

### **The South China Sea**

While the geostrategic importance of the SCS cannot be understated, it certainly can be overstated as being central to international trade and as the hotbed for the next Great Power conflict. For the issue to be appropriately appraised, the nature of potential conflict must be explored in parallel with how the issue is positioned amongst other international geostrategic points of confrontation between the West and China.

Firstly, the CCP will not actuate sea denial through prohibiting any naval or merchant shipping from entering or transiting the passage. This is a prospect that perpetuates fears over the cessation of sea-borne trade and its subsequent economic repercussions. However, assertions that China would 'close' the SCS are not credible. The sea is critical to the Chinese economy and its trading apparatus, accounting for \$874 billion of Chinese exports and 26 per cent of all global trade through the sea (China Power, 2017). Similarly, there are issues around enforceability. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), though large and increasing in size, does not have the capability to institute a naval blockade in the SCS without leaving itself

vulnerable to the north. When considering a blockade of the SCS, the PLA must continue to meet its requirement to counter the forces of the US, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, all of which routinely operate around China's North-Eastern approaches. Additionally, the SCS is not a chokepoint in the same way as the Malacca Strait or the Strait of Hormuz. There are ways around the SCS through the Java Sea and the Celebes Sea, which while adding a small cost due to greater time and distance travelled, mean that an interruption to sea freight can be circumnavigated.

Secondly, the extent to which China's militarisation of the SCS poses a threat to regional security and gives China a strategic edge during conflict must be explored. Certainly, China's militarism and expansion into the Spratly and Paracel Island groups accounts for a blatant encroachment of the territorial sovereignty of SCS rim states. However, the construction of artificially dredged island military bases such as Fiery Cross Reef are vulnerable defence assets. These bases being constructed on low-lying and fragile reefs are susceptible to airstrike attack which could render airstrips and other military capabilities inoperable (Axe, 2021). These island bases bear little comparison to the strategic strength of foreign US bases in Guam, South Korea, Japan, Wake Island, the Philippines, Singapore and Okinawa. While China's artificial island bases are often designated as 'unsinkable aircraft carriers' (O'Hanlon, 2015), they could be more accurately described as 'unmovable aircraft carriers' (Westcott, Browne and Cohen, 2018) that cannot evade airstrikes. On top of this, these islands are located in typhoon-prone areas (Cao, Yi & Feng, 2018) and subjected to high-risk weather conditions which render them both geographically and strategically vulnerable. Additionally, they possess few aircraft. Fiery Cross Reef maintains the capability to shelter 28 aircraft (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2017), whereas a US Navy (USN) *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier typically carries 64 aircraft but can accommodate up to 130 aircraft equivalent to the size of the F/A 18 Hornet (United States General Accounting Office, 1998, p.23).

As such, fears of a collapse in global seaborne trade are not credible nor realistic. Similarly, while Chinese militarism in the SCS is problematic and unlawful, the threat to US-led interests in South Asia is commonly exaggerated and atomistic.

### **Chinese Factionalism**

Beyond multilateral rivalry in the region and on the world stage, China's intensified militarisation in the SCS ought to be examined within the context of its internal dynamics.

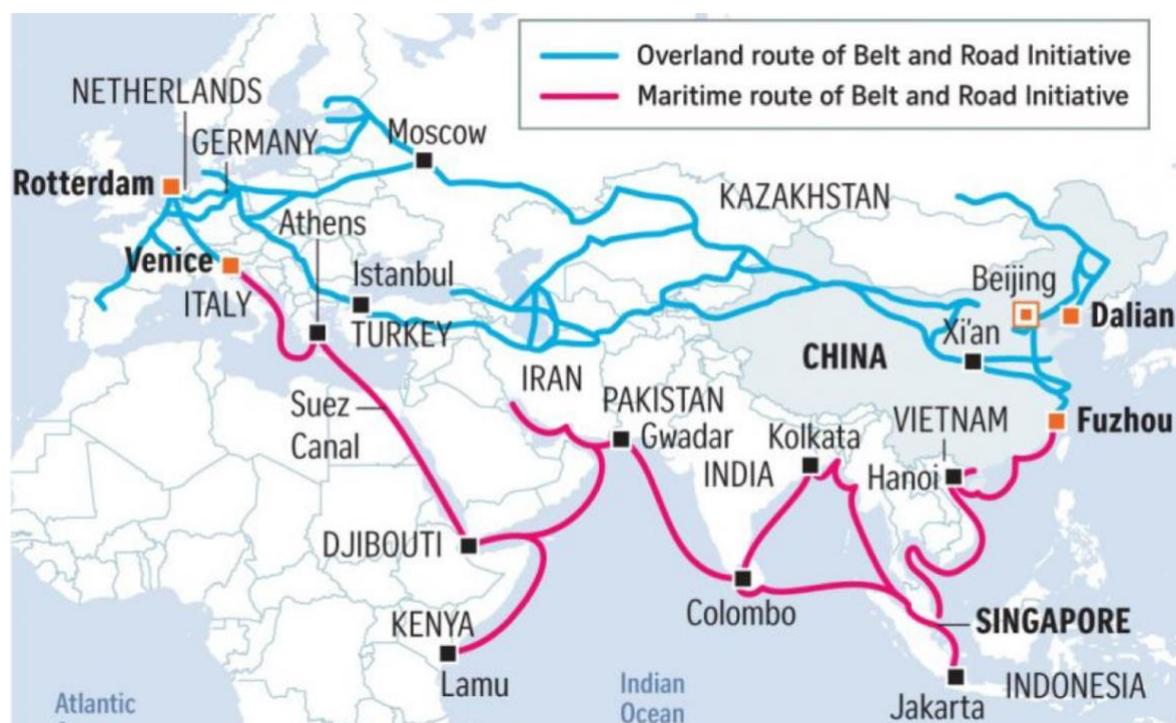
Despite presenting a homogenous front, the central leadership of the CCP is facing significant domestic stresses between competing interests and agendas. This is exemplified by President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign in which a significant number of cadres at all echelons of the Party hierarchy and military were held accountable through judicial, extrajudicial, and quasi-judicial means. As history has demonstrated in authoritarian states, intensifying factionalism and internal stress often result in a specialised development of top-down nationalism which is commonly manifest through assertive foreign policy (Hughes, 2006; Shirk, 2008; Amir, 2014). This was observed in the Soviet Union, which suffered significant internal strife due to the economic stagnation during the late-1970s partially causing its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

While Chinese sovereignty claims in the SCS are supposedly justified from legal and historical foundations, a neoclassical realist perspective would instead suggest they are largely motivated by the necessity to amplify nationalistic sentiment as a response to domestic pressure. As such, China's maritime belligerence may be interpreted as one of many stabilising tactics for the "proliferation of nationalistic expression" (Shen, 2007) that is necessitated by internal strife. Furthermore, given China's unique relationship with its citizenry

(Tsang, 2019), it cannot afford to lose favour with its domestic base, especially in areas of both national pride and perceived international ranking. Hence, the need to preserve domestic support has likely contributed to the more assertive foreign policy shift since Xi's ascent to power, with Chinese aggression in the SCS being one of many manifestations of tensions within the state and the party.

### Control of Eurasia

A geopolitical flashpoint that deserves greater attention is the Eurasian region. Control of Eurasia, the largest landmass in the world and the region that connects trade between Europe and Asia perhaps delivers greater strategic power than that of the SCS. All global trade transits through or near Eurasia and many of the world's major strategic chokepoints including the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Gibraltar, Suez Canal, and Strait of Malacca are in the immediate vicinity of the region.



Source: Asia Green Real Estate 2017

US policymakers following the Second World War (WWII) developed a recognition of the importance of buffer states and forward defence in pursuing their national security. This is exemplified in the US developing friendly ties with states along the Pacific coast of Asia and the Atlantic coast of Europe. Underpinning that belief was the effort to ensure that no single power had hegemony over the entirety of the Eurasian landmass. This occurrence would provide that state significant power over the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, which covers most of the Northern hemisphere, and in turn directly threaten US territory and its strategic interests. As highlighted, Eurasia is the region that connects trade between Asia and Europe. It is a goal of the CCP's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to gain influence in Central Asia and expedite trade between the East and the West through the construction of single-gauge railways, highways, and overland trading systems. Additionally, the landmass is a region rich in natural resources. It holds many rare-earth metals that are key to producing modern technology. The emergence of the BRI in Chinese foreign and trade policy is a strong indication that the CCP is attempting to alleviate its strategic vulnerability in the SCS. In seeking these alternative overland trade routes to complement the traditional maritime trade

routes shown above, China gains strategic depth. The aim to cultivate influence in Central Asia, by implementing major infrastructure projects, secures Chinese critical trading lines of communication. In the event of a major conflict along existing maritime trade routes, alternate overland routes will be in place to secure key resources.

The US strategy of developing buffer states, which was applied in the post-WWII order, is one which is commonly observed throughout history. This is the strategy which Beijing pursues today. Whilst the semi-autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet already fulfil a 'pseudo-buffer state' role (theGeopolity, 2018), they are within China's national boundaries. It is favourable for a great power to gain influence in its border countries, in order for the buffer state strategy to be successful. Else, any encroachment by a foreign power into buffer regions would, in fact, be a direct occupation of their own domestic territory. A key region where this contest is at play is in Central Asia, along the route of the BRI. When the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable, Moscow drew borders for the Central Asian republics that would deliberately divide key resources and ethnic groups. This strategy kept those republics unstable, and well within Moscow's sphere of influence for the following decades. This was achieved despite those nations having technically attained their independence from Russia. However, as China continues to rise and develop its Western frontiers, it seeks to project greater power into Central Asia. This is epitomised by the BRI, which is an ideal development project to attain greater influence in Central Asia (Standish, 2019). This investment is not one of benevolence, but one of strategic necessity. It is wholly unacceptable for any great power, in their own eyes, to be bordered by a group of states which are well within the strategic orbit of a major rival. Therefore, a greater contest will be seen between China and Russia in the Central Asian theatre. China will seek to expand its strategic depth in Central Asia, and Russia will fight to not lose its position as the hegemon of the region.

China is becoming the dominant power in the Eurasian region, due to the CCP's friendly ties with Eurasian states embodied in its leadership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, growing regional hegemony, and BRI debt traps. As China continues its inexorable rise, in particular in Central Asia, it will certainly draw the attention of Russia. In the face of waning influence on the global stage, Russia has sought to sow chaos in Central Africa, Eastern Ukraine, and the Middle East. When confronted with the might of the emerging superpower, Russia will be backed into a geostrategic corner. This will force Russia to adopt a more aggressive Central Asian posture to counter growing Chinese influence, which may very well lead to significant conflict. This may manifest as the application of grey-zone tactics between the two nations, or the waging of proxy wars between the various regional political groups across the Central Asian republics. It is in the examination of the broader geostrategic landscape, beyond simply the SCS, that these results of China's rise and their effects on existing global power structures can be appreciated.

### **The East China Sea**

While the strategic importance of the SCS is, at times, catastrophised, an issue that has genuine tactical significance is the East China Sea (ECS), and it warrants more analysis and commentary. Chinese activity in the SCS mainly concerns the safeguarding of Chinese sovereignty and security interests close to its homeland. Conversely, in the ECS, the PLAN actions of the PLAN are more threatening to the US-led security interests in the Western Pacific. This is because the PRC aims to break through the Japanese and US controlled First Island Chain to project power into the Pacific Ocean. Unlike the SCS, the geostrategic flashpoint in the ECS implicates US military outposts in and around Japan and South Korea, in turn challenging the strategy of the USN for its defence of the Pacific during wartime.

In relation to the conduct of the PRC in the ECS, the CCP has tasked the Chinese Coast Guard to conduct more patrols in the sea. China's maritime presence adjacent to Japanese controlled islands has increased from twice a month to twice a week (Wong, 2021). Additionally, East Sea Fleet (ESF) unilateral (Zhen, 2020) and bilateral naval exercises with the Russian Navy (The World is One News, 2021) are more frequent in the ECS to project its military power towards the neighbouring Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force and USN (what does this add to the paragraph). Importantly, the CCP has enacted a new law in January 2021 that enables its coast guard to "use all necessary measures" to prevent other warships from illegally occupying jurisdictional waters (Erikson, 2021).



Source: Sebastian, T. 2021

This is of concern as the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are a group of eight uninhabited islands constituting a territorial dispute between the PRC and Japan (US Energy Information Administration, 2014). The CCP makes a similar territorial claim to them as it does in the SCS, which is based on historical significance. China may be placing a large emphasis on claiming these islands as it aims to project power into the Pacific Ocean but is hindered by its absence of control of any island military outpost beyond the SCS and ECS. Additionally, due to Japanese control of most islands from Southern Japan to the Northeast of Taiwan, PLAN warships transiting from Shanghai or Ningbo to the Pacific cannot evade Japanese detection or obstruction.



Source: Editorial Board and Shimbun, T. S. 2020

The First Island Chain currently constitutes a significant strategic advantage for US allies along the ECS periphery. However, the posturing of the PRC around the Senkaku Islands risks damaging the integrity of this wartime strategy. During conflict, the geostrategic importance of the First Island Chain is enhanced. Many of these islands house large runways and airstrips and at its centre is Okinawa, a major military lynchpin with 29,000 US troops, and the enormous Kadena Air Base (Mochizuki & O’Hanlon, 1996). Regarding the disputed Senkaku Islands, should China be able to exert control over them, there is the precedent for their conversion into military establishments and air bases as observed in the SCS. This enables the PLA to almost entirely encircle Taiwan, project power toward the US at Okinawa, and threaten the stability of the First Island Chain strategy. This feat enables the use of these islands as ‘strategic steppingstones’ that may put PLA in a position to threaten the Second Island Chain, based around Guam, and the US homeland, which is the main security interest of the US Pacific Fleet. Incidentally, this is the precise strategy which the US applied in the defeat of Imperial Japan during the closing years of WWII.

When considering the power of the PRC in the ECS, the entire combined arms picture must be included in the conversation. As has been alluded to throughout this piece, the Western media establishment often fails to fully appreciate the wider context of issues regarding the security situation along China’s periphery. This is quite evident in discussions of the expansion of the PLAN to match and exceed the capability of the USN in Asia, as the PLAN currently possesses more naval vessels than that of the USN (Mizokami, 2019). What is often missing from this conversation is the acknowledgement that modern warfare is waged across all domains. It is not informative to simply quantify the comparative firepower of each navy. Rather, the capabilities of the PLA across all branches must also be considered.

The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) can patrol the ECS by taking advantage of aerial refuelling capability, which has the capacity to threaten Taiwan, Okinawa and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. These are the features that form the First Island Chain, which is considered by China as a barrier to its ambition of projecting power into the Western Pacific (Huang, 2017). Additionally, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) maintains a large stockpile of short-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, which are more than capable of being used against US, Japanese and Taiwanese forces within the ECS and along the First Island Chain.

It is necessary and incumbent upon commentators to acknowledge the significant rise of the PLAN relative to the USN. However, this must not occur at the cost of failing to consider the full depth of the increasing military capability of the PLA in the region. Relative to the PLAN, the PLAAF and PLARF perhaps have an even more significant role in the region. After all, it is preferable to wage a military campaign that risks as few lives as possible. Air operations only risk a limited few who are in the aircraft themselves, and missile strikes risk none, since they are uncrewed. On the contrary, modern warships often carry 200 or more personnel. Additional forces also contribute to a growing Chinese capability in the region, including the maritime militia and the Chinese Coast Guard. Whilst it is often of interest to scrutinise each individual advance of the PLAN, these other military apparatuses must also be taken into consideration.

As such, the activity of the ESF in the ECS is a significant cause for concern because it more significantly threatens US strategic imperatives in the Pacific. Whereas the South Sea Fleet in the SCS is largely concerned with pursuing its perceived sovereignty and security interests close to its homeland. The potentially more significant international ramifications of disputes in the ECS mean that the media establishment needs to recognise its importance to the global strategic outlook surrounding the PRC.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the geostrategic challenges associated with the SCS should be examined considering international flashpoints perpetuated by great power competition between China and the US-led global power structure. Further, China's domestic geopolitical environment with regards to both strategic interests in the SCS and nationalistic imperatives are also necessary considerations in this investigation. When considering geostrategic issues and challenges, it is not enough to simply fixate on one subset of the issues at play, such as the SCS. Rather, it is imperative to consider the broader landscape over which strategic issues are at play. Growing Chinese influence in Central Asia, high intensity military exercises in the ECS, and the broader capability of the PLA beyond simply their naval power are all necessary factors in the strategic debate. Too frequently do reductionist Western accounts of the SCS sensationalise the region as the catalyst for a climactic armed conflict between the US and China. In these accounts, they fail to recognise China's influence across the entire global geopolitical landscape, which underlies the emerging superpowers' motives and strategies across the Eurasian and Pacific regions.

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