

CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY AND THE CHALLENGES OF MARITIME SECURITY

ÇİN DIŞ POLİTİKASI VE DENİZ GÜVENLİĞİ SORUNLARI

Abstract

The center of gravity of international relations has been shifting from the Atlantic towards Asia mainly due to economic, political and strategic changes in the world. In this context, regional conflicts such as Taiwan problem, the issues between People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan, North Korea's nuclear program will be of importance at global level. Additionally, overlapping claims and disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) involving PRC, Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei are ongoing. The complexity and versatility of the problems arising from the SCS made it necessary to examine the subject in terms of empirical data, international law, and regional and global politics. As a result of the data revealed and the evaluation made, it is argued that it does not seem possible for PRC to take a step back in the SCS due to its assertive and dominant foreign policy with the Jinping administration and will not hesitate to resort to controlled tension. It is believed that Beijing's decisive stance is sourced from both United States of America (USA)'s lack of a long-term strategy for the region and its own growing military capacity when compared to its regional rivals. Within the scope of the study, these problems have been discussed in the context of China's rise and ambitious foreign policy and the containment policy of the USA with its regional allies, and the global and regional effects of the maritime security problems are emphasized. The main argument of this article is that it seems difficult for Beijing to soften its claims regarding the SCS within the framework of its maritime security and foreign policy approach. In fact, regional opponents of Beijing need political and military support from the USA, while lack of its long-term and consistent strategy for the region stands out.

Keywords: China, South China Sea, Foreign Policy, Maritime Security

Özet

Uluslararası ilişkilerin ağırlık merkezi, başta ekonomik gelişmeler olmak üzere siyasi ve stratejik boyutlarıyla da Atlantik'ten Asya'ya doğru kaymaktadır. Bu bağlamda Tayvan sorunu, Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti (ÇHC) ile Japonya arasındaki sorunlar, Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer programı gibi bölgesel çatışmalar küresel düzeyde önem taşıyacaktır. Ek olarak, Güney Çin Denizi'nde (SCS) ÇHC, Filipinler, Vietnam, Tayvan, Malezya ve Brunei'yi içeren örtüşen iddialar ve anlaşmazlıklar devam etmektedir. Bununla birlikte Çin'in yıllar içinde SCS içindeki uluslararası sulara tek taraflı olarak genişlemesi, Hint-Pasifik bölgesindeki stratejik güç dengesini önemli ölçüde değiştirdi. Bu stratejik denge, ÇHC'nin lehine ve ABD'nin güvenliği ve çıkarlarının aleyhine değişti. ÇHC, modern bir donanma inşa etmenin yanı sıra, ABD'ye göre küresel güvenlik için tehdit oluşturan çok çeşitli istikrarı bozucu eylemler de gerçekleştirmiştir. Tehdit edici eylemler arasında, Çin'in açık denizlerdeki eşi görülmemiş ve artan deniz operasyonları ABD tarafından dile getirilmiş ve bu eylemler ÇHC'nin gelecekteki niyet ve eylemlerinin açık ampirik göstergeleri olarak kabul edilmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında bu sorunlar Çin'in yükselişi ve ABD'nin bölgesel müttefikleri ile çevreleme politikası bağlamında tartışılmış ve deniz güvenliği sorunlarının küresel ve bölgesel etkileri üzerinde durulmuştur. Bu makalenin ana önerisi, Pekin'in deniz güvenliği ve dış politika yaklaşımı çerçevesinde SCS ile ilgili iddialarını yumuşatmasının zor görünmesidir. Zira ÇHC'nin bölgesel muhaliflerinin ABD'den siyasi ve askeri desteğe ihtiyacı bulunmaktadır, ancak aynı zamanda ABD'nin bölge için uzun vadeli ve tutarlı stratejisinin eksikliği öne çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çin, Güney Çin Denizi, Dış Politika, Deniz Güvenliği

Introduction

In 1890, American Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan stated that trade is of great importance for the international relations of countries and explained the main reason for large-scale wars between countries as hegemonic struggle over the seas and world trade. As a result, he put forward the thesis that the key to world domination is under the control of sea routes. Mahan also emphasized that every naval project of powerful states should take into account the limits of diplomacy and national resources. States that could not do this faced the risk of advancing on a slippery ground. Because foreign policy and strategy are linked by an indivisible force.¹

The volume of international trade by sea is increasing day by day and it is the main transportation network of trade today. So, maritime security continues to play a decisive role in the foreign policies of states and will continue to do so in the future. Especially, it occupies a strategic position in maritime transport, political, economic, military and energy fields in the Europe, Asia-Pacific region. Within the framework of competition and cooperation-oriented evaluations, it is remarkable that countries have reshaped their security perceptions significantly. This situation created by economic mobility has begun to reflect on military and political power. This reflection has led to new developments that may affect the geopolitical balances and has also reshaped the relations between the world power centers.

Today, global actors realize their economic, political, cultural and military expansions and orientations to a large extent with the seas. In this respect, the seas and sea routes have become an important element of geopolitical competition. To operate, exploit and market hydrocarbon resources with very modern technologies requires the construction of numerous platforms, onshore facilities and pipelines, and these facilities have begun to shape energy supply and demand. As a result of the development of deep-sea exploration and drilling technologies, hydrocarbons under the sea have started to be brought into the economy rapidly. In particular, the emergence of hydrogen as a new energy source has made sea areas even more important and strengthened the competition between states.²

While global actors want to maintain access to and control of the high seas, their rivals pursue asymmetrical strategies to increase the presence of the high seas and restrict other countries' access to regional waters. No matter how we approach the evolving concept of security, the term security should be understood in its broadest sense, i.e. it should include purely technical issues (ship security), low-grade forms of security (pollution, smuggling) and the application of functionality to rights (piracy, terrorism issues). It is also necessary to include high policy issues (strategy / geostrategy) that lead to security issues in any region.

When we examine the literature on PRC-USA relations and SCS-Maritime Security comparisons, we see that the problems are usually examined independently of each other, and sometimes one dimension is overlooked. In the first problem, international political economy (IPE) comes to the fore, while in the second, the pure security dimension acts as a framework. For example, Magnus³ has studied the PRC more at the political level, and underestimated effects of maritime security to the international politics. According to him, arising problems within economy and politics to be the main challenges for PRC in the middle term rather than

¹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land*, 1911, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2010, pp.20-25.

² Lance Turner, "Hydrogen as a Fuel: Is It Really Viable?" *ReNew: Technology for a Sustainable Future*, no. 139, Alternative Technology Association, 2017, pp. 68–71

³ George Magnus, "Xi Jinping's China" In *Red Flags: Why Xi's China Is in Jeopardy*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

securitization processes. However, Kalimuddin and Anderson⁴, examine the issue more from the power-security relationship and attribute a secondary importance to the issue of political economy. From their perspectives, peaceful rising strategy is the main idea of PRC and this vision will be the key factor for the long term stable global relations, although USA and its allies have been aware of the threatening hidden agenda of PRC.

From this point of view, I try to take the above-mentioned differences together in my research. The contribution of the article to the literature will be to link foreign policy issues with IPE and maritime security at the same time. It has been one of my purposes to determine what the strategy of the PRC is for the high seas and to follow up if there is a differentiation in its applications. Subsequently, I have tried to examine IPE pillars and maritime strategies through SCS and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In the other parts of the study, firstly, I have discussed the strategic importance of seas for PRC. Then, PRC's foreign policy indications in the sea and its dilemmas are mentioned. After all these, some evaluations regarding the present and possible reflections in SCS have been mentioned by showing the developments both in maritime security and political economy.

As for the method applied in this study, I have used process analysis to see the interaction between politics and security. Therefore, more emphasis has been placed on analytical evaluations, rather than the traditional incident transfer. Attention has been paid to ensure that scope of the foreign policy analysis is at the PRC scale. With this method, PRC's foreign policy practices and its possible reflections on the seas are examined.

PRC's Evolving Maritime Strategy

The PRC has been in a serious leap forward since 1978, based on commercial and financial indicators. Prior to its 30-year success story, the PRC faced many social and economic dilemmas for years after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949. Apart from the aforementioned dilemmas, it has also faced some restrictions in terms of foreign policy and international relations. However, the PRC has seriously increased its power indicators with the great development moves and has started to invest heavily in military modernization, effective diplomacy, proactive foreign policy, innovation technology and international trade, which it could not allocate resources at the desired level in the past. Today, these invested areas by the PRC causes debates among many global academics and decision/policy makers. Therefore, in this regard of the discussions about the statue of the PRC in the political system, it is necessary to make comprehensive analyzes and to display long-term approaches for the foreign policy of it.⁵

One of the main related discussions is what the grand strategy of PRC in the open seas will be and for what reasons or how it will use its naval power. The basic Chinese logic of the opinion is based on the acceptance that humanity has passed from land domination to sea domination while controlling the geography. The justification of this view is explained by the ways in which human beings improved their lives via gained production and prosperity after the Industrial Revolution. Accordingly, the economic transformation of the states has developed by moving beyond national borders. Especially in this period, it was observed that global resources were interconnected with global markets through interdependence. The principle of interdependence is known to be the easiest way to connect the states with easy and direct routes, through sea supply. Therefore, according to this view, it is clear that the safest

⁴ Mikail Kalimuddin and David A. Anderson, "Soft Power in China's Security Strategy", *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3, 2018

⁵ Ishikawa Yoshihiro and Joshua A. Fogel. "Toward the Formation of the Chinese Communist Party." *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party*, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 151–226.

and most useful way to connect the world would be the oceans. In this age of globalization of capital, whoever has a strong and large maritime power and controls the sea lines effectively, will have an advantageous position in the division of global resources and gains.⁶

Problems regarding the control of the seas are of a global nature, therefore, what happens in the PRC's environment is also closely related to beyond its borders. For example, 60 percent of the PRC's energy resources are supplied from the Middle East, and moreover, a large part of the PRC's trade with the world is linked to overseas markets. In this respect, the PRC must have a competent naval power and related marine elements in order to ensure the security of energy supply and the safety of foreign trade. Moreover, the PRC has to build a strong maritime power in order to adapt to economic globalization and to preserve the environmental conditions that facilitate its rise.⁷

Despite this approach, there are also opposing views claiming that maritime power played an important role in history, but this activity does not mean that it completely determined the historical process, so the naval power should not be overestimated. Additionally, it is a necessity to build a competent naval power as a land based and dominant country within the peaceful development discourse of the PRC. This approach has brought a new understanding of land power focusing on geography, peoples, development especially in Eurasia through building strategic partnerships with European countries, Russian Federation (RF) and India and establishing good neighborly relations.⁸

The concentration and attention of Chinese decision makers on navy and maritime issues has gradually increased for the years. In the national defense document published by the CCP in 2005, the need for the PRC to establish a modern navy to protect its interests at sea was emphasized. Then, as head of state, Hu Jintao stated in 2008 that the PRC should evolve from land power to naval power. In 2011, when the 12th Five-Year Plan for the economic development goals of the PRC was published, it was seen that the naval power was included in the development plans of the PRC. A documentary titled "Towards the Sea" was again published by China Central Television (CCTV) in December 2011 and the interests of the PRC in the seas were highlighted in the relevant documentary.⁹

At the 18th CCP Party Congress in 2012, the goal of transforming the PRC into a naval country was openly raised.¹⁰ This new approach has brought development, usage, conservation, management and administration issues in relation to the seas for the PRC. The CCP stated this situation as it is imperative to increase the capacity to use marine resources, to develop the maritime economy, to protect the marine ecological environment and to steadfastly protect the sea sovereignty, rights and interests of the PRC, and ultimately transform the PRC into a maritime power.¹¹

⁶ Zhang Wei and Shazeda Ahmed, "A General Review of History of China's Sea-Power Theory Development", *Naval War College Review*, Vol 68, No 4, 2015, p. 90-93.

⁷ Mikail Kalimuddin and David A. Anderson, "Soft Power in China's Security Strategy", *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3, 2018, p. 136-138.

⁸ Hoo Tiang Boon, "The Origins of China's Great-Power Identity." In *China's Global Identity: Considering the Responsibilities of Great Power*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018, p. 25-28.

⁹ Zhihai Xie, "China's Rising Maritime Strategy: Implications for Its Territorial Disputes", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, Vol 3, No 2, 2014, p. 121-124.

¹⁰ Hu Jintao, Report of Hu Jintao to the 18th CPC National Congress, 2012, http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t992917.htm (Retrieved 03.11.2020).

¹¹ Wu Xiaoyan, "China's Sea Power Nation Strategy", Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2014, p. 6, <https://isdp.eu/publication/chinas-sea-power-nation-strategy/> (Retrieved 11.11.2020).

In the documents published under the name of "White Pages" in 2013¹² and 2015¹³, the issue of seas and navy kept its place on the agenda of PRC. Since then, the PRC Navy (PLAN) has shifted its focus from the defense of the near seas to the defense of the high seas. In addition, the PRC shifted its new strategy to build a navy capable of performing effective operations in distant waters and demonstrating power there. Unlike the USA, the PRC does not yet have an adequate naval network and capacity, but it needs, like never before, a stronger navy to protect its interests, citizens and assets beyond its borders. In addition, the rights and border disputes in the near seas and "Pivot to Asia" approach of the USA make the needs of the PRC more urgent.¹⁴ This revised policy was expressed by the new PRC President Xi Jinping as follows: "We must advance our interest in the seas and oceans, in understanding and managing them, to ensure new successes in transforming the PRC into a naval power."¹⁵

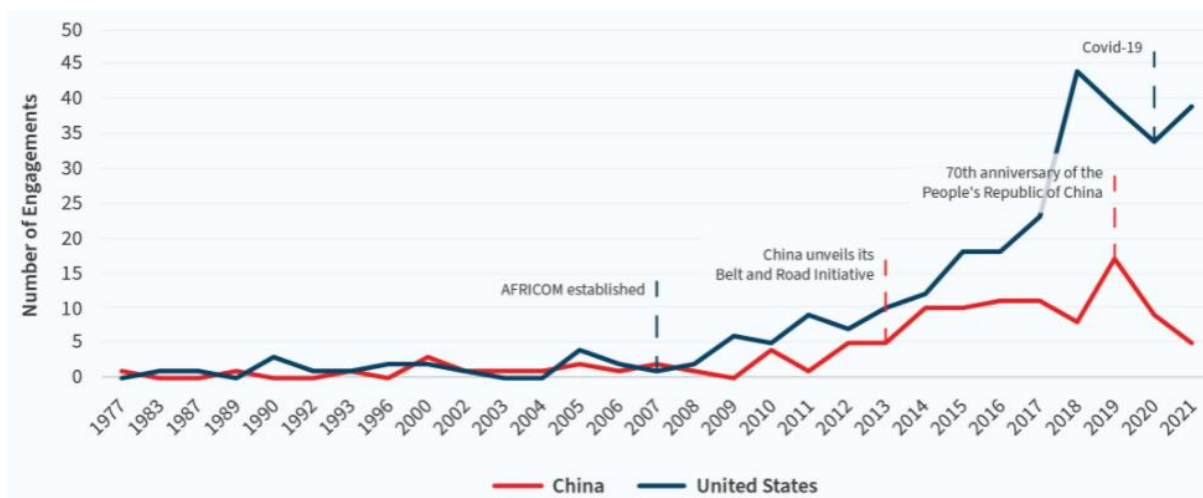


Figure 1: Chinese and US Engagements Over Time¹⁶

At this point, it is necessary to express that the term "being maritime power" indicates certain meanings and principles. The connotation of this concept is expressed as increasing use of marine resources by the PRC, promoting the maritime economy, protecting the marine ecology and environment, realizing national maritime sovereignty, rights and interests, and possessing strong maritime elements. According to this new understanding, it is a necessity to ensure that national maritime sovereignty, rights and interests are not violated or threatened at the point of maritime security, and that the sea lines of communication (SLOC) related to maritime transport to be operated safely and smoothly. Therefore, the PRC administration,

¹² China State Council Information Office, The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces, 2013, <http://en.people.cn/90786/8209362.html> (Retrieved 14.11.2020).

¹³ China State Council Information Office, China's Military Strategy, 2015, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm (Retrieved 01.11.2020).

¹⁴ Richard Ghiasy, Fei Su and Lora Saalman, "The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – Security Implications and Ways Forward for the European Union" SIPRI, 2018, p. 4. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2018/other-publications/21st-century-maritime-silk-road-security-implications-and-ways-forward-european-union> (Retrieved 04.11.2020).

¹⁵ Xi Jinping, "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China", Local Governments And Friendly Organizations in the United States, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpdmgjxgswbcxlhgcl70znlffh/t1305429.shtml (Retrieved 12.11.2020).

¹⁶ CSIS, Measuring Chinese and U.S. Engagement with African Security Chiefs. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/personal-ties-measuring-chinese-and-us-engagement-african-security-chiefs> (Retrieved 10.11.2021)

when it comes to maritime security, is based on relying on a strong naval force and it is essential to build a strong and modern navy that is compatible with the international status of the PRC and can protect its long-term sovereignty, rights, and interests.¹⁷

In fact, this new strategic approach of the PRC brings along a major shift. This is because it differs from the traditional land-based development approach, which foresees the complete neglect of the development model fed by the sea. For the first time, the government of the PRC has tried to put forward a large and comprehensive policy for the operation and use of the seas.¹⁸

Chinese Foreign Policy and Maritime Security Strategy

Regarding measures to be taken for the issues, the first thing that can be mentioned for the PRC is to be in a position that controlling the disputes, so this necessitates the escalation or suppression of unstable factors. Confronting conflict, experiencing conflict or hot war would lead an actor to a possible political disaster while conflict resolution requires patience, deep knowledge, and great effort. Besides, mutual trust between interested parties, engaging in dialogue and joint use of natural resources are the required steps in controlling and preventing the escalation of a conflict. This is also a way for the determination of common use and interests before border designation agreements and for the field disputes between neighboring countries.¹⁹ According to the strategic plans of the PRC, expanded maritime cooperation after the aforementioned de-escalation methods, is seen as one of the most important auxiliary factors to pave the way for long-term regional security and stability.²⁰

When the being maritime power country approach is evaluated, the main element that stands out is the insistence on peaceful development. Therefore, PRC needs a calm environment to achieve its development goals and at the same time promote global and regional peace. If the disagreements on the high seas prevent international trade and communication, all parties could face with major troubles which are not acceptable in the age of globalization. This is a point where opposing schools converge on theoretical debates on maritime power within PRC.²¹

So, it could be easy to mention that PRC cannot adopt the Mahan's sea power²² understanding altogether. First of all, in the period when Mahan's sea power theory emerged, capitalism led to imperialism and imperialism meant war. Therefore, this understanding is fed by an atmosphere in which states use their military power to control the oceans, to spread global capitalism and to monopolize their efforts. However, today, in a period of increasing interdependence, countries are not as eager and able to use force against each other in the seas in a way that disrupts global flows of goods, capital and services.²³

Secondly, the technological foundations, where naval power is a means of great superiority, have changed a lot as of today. Navies; in the past, they have achieved a certain

¹⁷ Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, "Probing China's Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI): An Examination of MSRI Narratives", *Geopolitics*, Vol 22, No 2, p. 256.

¹⁸ Malcolm Cook, "Australia's South China Sea Challenges." *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 2021, pp.1-25.

¹⁹ David Scott, "Conflict Irresolution in the South China Sea." *Asian Survey* 52, no. 6, 2012, p. 1039-1042.

²⁰ Weixing Hu, "The United States, China, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Rise and Return of Strategic Competition." *China Review* 20, no. 3, 2020, p. 137-139.

²¹ Anna Kireeva, "Great Powers and Power Dynamics in East Asia", *International Trends*, 2 (3), 2016, p. 116.

²² Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1890, p. 36-42.

²³ Christopher Cramer, "War, Peace and Capitalism: Is Capitalism the Harbinger of Peace or the Greatest Threat to World Peace?" *Anti-Capitalism: A Marxist Introduction*, edited by Alfredo Saad-Filho, Pluto Press, 2003, pp. 152-63

advantage due to their great contribution in land, air and sub water activities. However, today, competition in space and electromagnetic (EM) issues comes to the fore and it is more important to be able to control information and the EM energy. Therefore, today, naval and maritime power is not the absolute and only determinant factor in interstate power parameters.²⁴

Thirdly, the hegemonic and offensive understanding that Mahan derives from his sea power theory is not compatible with the new image and cultural infrastructure that PRC is trying to build in regional and global politics. The understanding of the PRC, which emphasizes the issues such as harmony, peaceful development, dialogue, and not pursuing hegemony, could be compromised if it adopts a Mahanist²⁵ approach that legitimizes expansionism through the given doubts and inconsistencies in theory and practice.

Although PRC has placed the discourse of peaceful development at the center of its international policy strategy for many years some changes has been made in this approach during the Xi Jinping period either. The enormous increase in the power indicators of today's PRC allows it to be more decisive and coercive to its national sensitivities and external conflicts. In this respect, Xi Jinping emphasized that in order for the PRC to continue its peaceful development, other countries should pay sufficient attention to the sensitivity of the PRC and should not take provocative initiatives.²⁶

With this transformation, the PRC, which avoided being part of consensual agreements and did not show an assertive attitude, today has become an actor that draws the boundaries and expresses that it will not back down in regard of certain vital issues. It is anticipated that the issues that PRC will be involved in the high seas will be evaluated in the context of core interests and they will be handled with an uncompromising and offensive approach with compelling means. When we look at secondary issues, the PRC can be expected to be relatively compromising with a strategic understanding suitable for peaceful development.²⁷

The PRC administration has serious conflicts in the SCS with countries in the region such as Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. While the PRC claims rights in an area corresponding to approximately 90 percent of the region, other riparian states with the relevant EEZ rights oppose this situation. In the face of this dispute, the PRC is trying to create artificial islands in the region and to build structures that will allow ships and aircraft flights on these islands. As a result, USA has increased its presence and movement with the countries of the region and the PRC has not taken a step back. While the administration always emphasizes permanent stability and peace in the region, the initiatives of the PLAN raise doubts about the peaceful intentions of this country.²⁸

Regional Disputes, Global Challenges and Counter Practices

In the East China Sea, the archipelago, which consists of 5 islands and 3 rocks, has long been controversial between Japan, Taiwan and the PRC. Japan accuses the PRC of violating its territorial waters and claims about the archipelago is located in Chinese territorial waters.

²⁴ Yasmin Tadjdeh, "Navy's Electromagnetic Railgun Project Progressing." National Defense, vol. 102, no. 764, National Defense Industrial Association, 2017, pp. 33–34.

²⁵ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land*, 1911, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, p. 24-27.

²⁶ John Garrick and Yan Chang Bennett, "Xi Jinping Thought: Realisation of the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation?" China Perspectives, no. 1-2 (113), 2018, p. 105-106.

²⁷ Zhang Jian, "China's New Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping: Towards Peaceful Rise 2.0?", Global Change, Peace & Security, Vol 27, No 1, 2015, p. 15-19.

²⁸ Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "China's Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism", Strategic Studies 39, no. 1, 2019, p. 51-55.

The PRC does not accept such accusations and the armed forces of the two countries confront each other hundreds of times in the region. Therefore, the PRC does not tolerate compromising methods and means other than military actions here, which it sees as vital.²⁹

In addition to the fact that the PRC and Japan provide approximately 80% of their energy needs from SCS through imports, 1/3 of the world maritime trade is also realized from here. It is predicted that 50 billion tons of crude oil and 20 trillion cubic meters of natural gas are located under the seabed. In addition to these basic data, it should be reminded that SCS is an important biodiversity area that includes hundreds of islands, islets and reefs and offers rich fishing opportunities. While these listed data whet the appetite of the actors mentioned, the existence of political and strategic factors that increase the importance of the SCS is also an important factor.³⁰

There are two main archipelagos in the SCS; Paracel Islands, which consist of 130 islands and reefs, is 250 miles away from mainland China and 150 miles from Vietnam coasts. On the other hand, Spratly Islands is 600 miles from the Chinese coast and only 50 miles away from the Philippines coast. PRC, Vietnam and Taiwan have intersecting claims on the Paracel Islands while, again PRC, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei claim rights on the Spratly Islands. As China and Vietnam claim sovereignty over all of the Spratly, the Philippines seeks domination only in a limited part such as the Kalayaan archipelago, the Scarborough reef. Today, Taiwan controls the Itu Aba (Taiping) island in the Spratly region and there is an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claim for this island. Malaysia claims rights on the south of Spratly while Brunei claims only on Louisa Coral.³¹

It has been witnessed that the above-mentioned intersecting claims regarding sovereignty and the demand to use the economic resources of the sea created hot conflict. The Vietnam-PRC naval war that took place in 1974 has been the most important armed conflict of SCS until today. Before 1974, some of the Paracel islands were controlled by Vietnam, some by the PRC, and both actors claimed rights over all of these islands. In January 1974, a hot conflict broke out between the South Vietnamese naval forces and the PLAN, ultimately PRC quickly established control over the regional islands previously controlled by Vietnam. South Vietnam, namely the Saigon government, claimed rights over Paracel Islands until 1975 but during this period, the government of North Vietnam, namely Hanoi, did not deal with the issue. However, after unification there was no development in the short term to take on the issue either, but now Vietnam is holding commemorative events for the loss of war.³²

The invasion of the Mischief Reef by the PLAN is another example of conflict. The period after 1994 is seen as the period when the PRC started to prove itself concretely in terms of economic and military capacity. It has been observed that the will to use power in order to achieve geopolitical goals has begun to take hold. In January 1995, a Filipino fishing boat reported to its authorities that it was detained for one week around the Mischief Reef, located in the Spratly region, 180 miles away from the Philippines coast and thus in its EEZ. Upon this,

²⁹ Andrew I. Yeo, "China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Cooperation: Is It for Real?", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 2, 2017, p. 69-73.

³⁰ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "Review of Maritime Transport", 2016, https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/rmt2016_en.pdf (Retrieved 22.11.2020).

³¹ Ronald O'Rourke, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in the South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress", Congressional Research Service, Report for Congress, 2020, p. 7.

³² Clive Schofield and Ian Storey, "The South China Sea Dispute: Increasing Stakes and Rising Tensions", The Jamestown Foundation, 2009, p. 8-10.

a Filipino warship was sent to the region and also Beijing was protested with a declaration, determining that the PRC had invaded the reef in violation of international law.³³

With Xi Jinping being the General Secretary of the Communist Party (October 2012) and the head of state (March 2013), it is observed that a more dominant foreign policy has been implemented in the PRC. Since then, military bases have been established on the islands since 2013, including the Mischief Reef, and the reefs and rocks that are not suitable for bases are turned into artificial islands and subjected to the same process. It is recorded that 3200 new islands with 13 million km² have been built in the Spratly region.³⁴

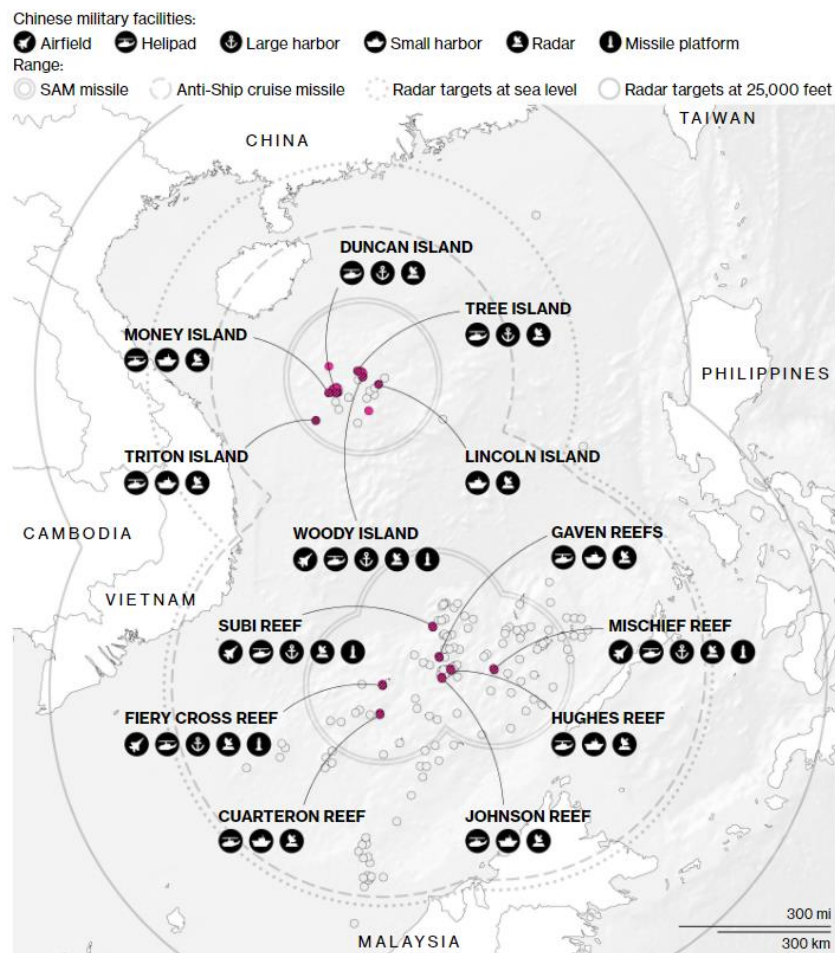


Figure 2: Military Facilities at SCS Sites Occupied by China³⁵

In this context, the comments of Beijing that it carries out a determined and harsh foreign policy in the region are frequently encountered. It is known that the patrols of the naval forces are tightened and even the PLAN performs military activities in the form of a fishing boat. On the other hand, PLAN pressured international oil companies not to operate in the

³³ Peter Kreuzer, *Facing China: Crises or Peaceful Coexistence in the South China Sea*. Report. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2015, p. 17-20.

³⁴ Herbert Aclan Loja, "Legal Status of the Airspace over an Indeterminate Territory: The Case of the Spratly Islands." *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 4, no. 2, 2017, p. 27-31.

³⁵ Karen Leigh, Peter Martin and Adrian Leung, "Troubled Waters: Where the U.S. and China Could Clash in the South China Sea," <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-south-china-sea-miscalculation/> (Retrieved: 10.11.2021)

region without its knowledge, prevented other states from fishing, and established administrative units in Paracel and Spratly regions.³⁶

PRC is still drilling oil in Vanguard Bank, which is in the Vietnam EEZ, accompanied by coastal guard ships. It is known that among the actors that can achieve strategic goals by using force, the PRC takes the first place and Vietnam the second. Nevertheless, the Hanoi administration, despite USA support, seems unable to deal with the PRC in the long run.³⁷

However, the PRC's approach to high or distant seas is not like as in neighboring seas. The national interests of the PRC have expanded further and the security problems regarding the energy resources on the shore, strategic SLOCs, foreign legal entities have increased significantly.³⁸ In the new century; convoy missions, civil evacuation operations, humanitarian aid and other types of cross-border missions constitute an important pillar of protecting these national interests and fulfilling international responsibilities. In this respect, it has been deemed necessary to participate in a modern navy and international naval operations in order to provide strategic support to the overseas interests of the PRC. As such, the PLAN has been deployed in distant seas continuously since 2008. Between 2003 and 2017, the PRC warships made a total of 290 port visits in 5 continents. These visits took place within the scope of international combat against piracy and maritime diplomacy.³⁹

The PLAN have also paid visits European waters many times since 2012 which conducted its first exercise in the Mediterranean with RF in 2015 and carried out an anti-submarine warfare and air defense exercise with the Russian Baltic Fleet off the coast of Kaliningrad in 2017. This was a friendly response to RF's exercise with the PRC in the SCS in 2016. The same Chinese task force also visited NATO member states that criticized RF the most, such as Latvia and Britain and it was considered as an indication of Beijing's intention to remain neutral. However, with this initiative, the PRC is thought to respond to the French and British warships crossing the South China Sea publicly. The PRC has taken similar approaches while visiting India, one of its biggest rivals, with touching at Pakistan and at the same balance in the Middle East, it made equal visits to the ports of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Israel, which are in hostility to each other.⁴⁰

Accompanying task forces in the Gulf of Aden is an important step forward in the PRC navy's new role in protecting trade routes. Through this task, the importance of cooperation with other navies to ensure the security of trade routes becomes evident. The PRC still carries out activities such as protecting other actors participating in anti-piracy patrols and acting in coordination with other navies, provided that it is not under the authority of another country. The joint mission of the PRC navy once a year with the European navies accompanying the World Food Program's aid to Somalia is a good example in this sense. With such missions, the PRC has succeeded in keeping military naval elements in distant seas and legitimized it to some extent.⁴¹ The establishment of the Chinese base in Djibouti in 2015 can be evaluated in this

³⁶ Roncevert Almond, "Trade, War and The South China Sea", <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/trade-war-and-the-south-china-sea/> (Retrieved 15.11.2020)

³⁷ Nguyen The Phuong, "Vietnam's 2019 Defense White Paper: Preparing For A Fragile Future", CSIS, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/vietnams-2019-defense-white-paper-preparing-for-a-fragile-future/> (Retrieved 18.11.2020)

³⁸ Keith Johnson, "Why is China Buying up Europe's Ports?", Foreign Policy, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/02/why-is-china-buying-up-europes-ports/> (Retrieved 05.11.2020).

³⁹ Mathieu Duchatel and Alexandre Sheldon Duplaix, "Blue China: Navigating the Maritime Silk Road to Europe", European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018, p. 29-30.

⁴⁰ Frans Paul van der Putten, "Infrastructure and Geopolitics: China's Emerging Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean", Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, Vol 18, No 4, 2016, p. 338.

⁴¹ Xinhua, "PLA Base in Djibouti to Help China Better Perform Int'l Obligations", 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/12/c_136438611.htm (Retrieved 22.11.2020).

respect that will allow the PRC to fulfill its international obligations in three different ways: anti-piracy missions, creating transit routes for peacekeeping missions and humanitarian aid. Therefore, for the PRC, this base has a character that justifies keeping its military elements.⁴²

Rising China and Chinese Dream versus Pivot to Asia

Xi Jinping proposed creation of a “Land Silk Road” during a visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013 and establishment of a Maritime Silk Road project while visiting Indonesia in October of the same year.⁴³ These projects are called the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road and Silk Road Economic Belt”. Besides from Xi Jinping's speeches in Southeast and Central Asia, during the China-ASEAN EXPO in the same year, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang mentioned the construction of the Maritime Silk Road project for ASEAN and the necessity of shipment for the construction of hinterland infrastructure for this project.⁴⁴ This initiative, namely BRI, is thought to cover more than 60 countries. China has presented the BRI as an open organization to which all countries can participate, but an official list of participating countries is not yet available.⁴⁵

This statement of China shows itself like a country that open for a cooperation and create a win-win situation for participants like in neo-liberalist theory. As a main theory liberalism seeks cooperation for establish peace and harmony between states. But beyond this freedom speeches, it can be also mentioned here that PRC seeks power with dependency relations as like explained in dependency theories.⁴⁶

In 2014, China formed a foundation for this project, a “40 billion dollar” fund to finance the “Belt Road Initiative Project”.⁴⁷ It is also stated that the cost of the BRI Project is between 4 – 8 trillion dollars.⁴⁸ Infrastructure projects such as airports, railway lines, and oil and gas pipelines have been completed and are still ongoing to improve the BRI for increasing the connection within Asia, Europe, and Africa such as high-speed train project between Jakarta – Bandung.⁴⁹

So, what is the reason behind China spends so much money on this project? The BRI Project provides China to opportunity to seize institutions such as mines and ports by debt, a strategy known as Debt-Trap Diplomacy. An example of this is that Sri Lanka could not afford the project cost and handed over the Hambantota port to China for 99 years. Sri Lanka, along with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, and Montenegro, owe China over half of their

⁴² Olivia Shen, "China's Base in Djibouti: Who's Got The Power?" In *Power*, edited by Golley Jane, Jaivin Linda, Farrelly Paul J., and Strange Sharon, Acton ACT, Australia: ANU Press, 2019, p. 210.

⁴³ T. Jinchun, “One Belt and One Road: Connecting China and the World”, Global Infrastructure Initiative, 2016. <https://www.globalinfrastructureinitiative.com/article/one-belt-and-one-road-connecting-china-and-world> (Retrieved: 11.04.2020)

⁴⁴ The State Council of the People's Republic of China, Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative. http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm (Retrieved: 21.04.2020)

⁴⁵ The World Bank, Belt and Road Initiative. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative> (Retrieved: 23.04.2020)

⁴⁶ Robert C. North, “War, Peace, Survival: Global Politics and Conceptual Synthesis”, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990, p. 220.

⁴⁷ Belt and Road Initiative. <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/> (Retrieved: 19.04.2020)

⁴⁸ The Guardian, What is China's Belt and Road Initiative? <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer> (Retrieved: 18.04.2020)

⁴⁹ Y. Damuri, Perkasa, V., Atje, R., & Hirawan, F. Perceptions and Readiness of Indonesia towards The Belt And Road Initiative: Understanding Local Perspectives, Capacity and Governance. Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2019, p. 215.

international debt.⁵⁰ In this regard, Chinese debt trap policy has been ongoing on the same approach as like as explained in dependency theories.

Currently, PRC wants to be seen a peace-loving plus strong maritime power and implies that not seeking hegemony and any interference in the internal affairs of other countries unlike the Western powers. The peaceful missions it performs in international waters offer an opportunity to try out its equipment, while at the same time strengthening and fostering its peaceful discourse that includes the security of international waters. In addition, the PRC, contrary to what the Soviets did during the Cold War, has not been tending to confront the navies of other countries on the high seas. However, the Taiwan issue and the discussion of sovereignty claims in the SCS and the East China Sea are exceptions. The PRC clearly desires to weaken the American presence in these areas and to become the leading actor. It can even be said that the PRC does not refrain from demonstrating open military power and increasing its presence in the region by offensive means for these priorities.⁵¹

It is possible to talk about three main points regarding the current sea strategy of PRC. The first point is that Beijing does not limit its activities in the near seas but adopts a global understanding in distant seas. Secondly, the PRC has taken active use of the seas to achieve national development goals among its basic strategies. Carrying out most of its international and regional trade from seas, the PRC considers it a necessity to be more active in international waters in order to reduce costs, increase trade volume and expand import-export markets. Third, and lastly, the PRC is currently making an important effort to build a more advanced navy.⁵²

While trying to fulfill its international obligations in terms of the securing the SLOCs, Beijing believes that it should have an advanced navy to better protect its national interests in the immediate environment and beyond the borders. Hence, the PRC is stuck between economic prosperity, which requires more peaceful and conciliatory approaches, and applying military / coercive tools and methods. However, PRC has already highlighted that it has the rights to show the hard power when it is necessary for the national security.⁵³

The “Rising China” refers to the systematic transformation and economic breakthrough of the PRC since the 1980s. The PRC, which has become the world's second largest economy since 2010, still has the potential to dethrone the USA as the largest economy. It should be noted that the rising PRC needs economically increasing volume of raw materials, the leading of which are raw materials such as oil and natural gas. The intention to swift its economic breakthrough to the military field is carried out under the rhetoric of "Peaceful Rise". Although the PRC emphasizes that the development process will contribute to world peace and its military growth is defensive, regional actors and the USA do not share the same opinion. Regional actors feel insecure in the face of the rise of the PRC, and the USA assesses that it may be a challenge to its hegemonic position.⁵⁴

Defining the rising China as a threat to itself, USA carries out a policy of containment with its regional allies such as Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Australia. Among the main

⁵⁰ P. Cai, “Understanding China’s Belt and Road Initiative”, Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2017, p. 2-26.

⁵¹ Ronald H. Linden, “The New Sea People: China in The Mediterranean”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2018.

⁵² James E. Fanell, "China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure: Pathway to Hegemony." *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 1, 2019, p. 15.

⁵³ Nalanda Roy, "The Dragon's Charm Diplomacy in the South China Sea." *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2, 2017, p. 18.

⁵⁴ Wu Shicun, “US-China Competition Will Heat up the South China Sea”, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/us-china-competition-will-heat-up-the-south-china-sea> (Retrieved: 11.11.2020).

motives of the containment policy are to resist the rising PRC and to continue the struggle for hegemony, to continue the smooth flow of world trade in SCS, and to enable freedom of navigation in international waters. For this reason, with the Obama administration, a perspective has begun to be built that the Middle East, which is at the center of the USA foreign policy, should give its weight to Asia. There is a consciousness that the rise of the PRC will have regional and global effects and the USA will take its share from these effects. With this awareness, Strategic Pivot (Pivot to Asia) policy has been put forward as a counter strategy that aims to make the USA feel its power in Asia and lead the region with the Trans-Pacific Partnership mechanism.⁵⁵

Freedom of navigation, which will ensure the free flow of trade, is one of the main USA interests in Asia Pacific. Asia has the largest share in USA imports, on the other hand, the SCS will act as a corridor for a sudden deployment between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Another point that should be underlined is that the contraction envisaged in the American defense structure in the recent period does not include the Asian program and naval forces.⁵⁶

Another issue that significantly affects the regional security equation is military exercises. The USA conducts "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (FONOPs) within the framework of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which also includes the South China Sea. These are unilateral operations and are carried out without the participation of other actors. It has been noted that the scale of military activities increased after the Trump administration took office, the Pentagon assigned 2 new destroyers to the Spratly and Paracel islands. As part of its containment policy, USA also sends a message to Beijing with aircraft carriers and visits to Vietnamese ports.⁵⁷

At the 1986 summit of ASEAN, which consists of Southeast Asian countries other than the PRC, a decision was made that its members would be responsible for their own security. In this framework, ASEAN is not against the USA guarantorship for regional security. However, the neediness rather than the non-opposition is considered to be more appropriate to the reality. But the joint defense agreements between the USA and the countries of the region seem far from offering an absolute security climate to Beijing's rivals.⁵⁸

The USA also has a general strategic goal - in the context of the Indo-Pacific Strategy implemented with Obama plus Trump's management and possibly will be ongoing during Biden period - to counteract the increasing influence of the PRC at sea. The USA has bilateral alliances with regional actors such as India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines (despite the abstention of the Duterte administration) to achieve this strategic goal - within the framework of the containment policy.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ O'rouke, op.cit., p. 5.

⁵⁶ Chung Kuyoun, "The Outlook for US-China Relationship after the Anchorage High-Level Meeting: A Focus on the US Perspective." Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2021, pp. 1-6.

⁵⁷ Ian Bowers, "Escalation at Sea: Stability and Instability in Maritime East Asia." *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 4, 2018, p. 46.

⁵⁸ Stanley E. Meyer, "Incident at Mischief Reef: Implications for the Philippines, China, and the United States", Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 1996, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Aileen Baviera, "President Duterte's Foreign Policy Challenges." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2, 2016, pp. 202-208.

Date	Location in SCS	U.S. Navy Ship	Notes
February 5, 2021	Paracel Islands	<i>USS John S. McCain (DDG-56)</i>	The operation was directed against excessive maritime claims by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam.
February 17, 2021	Spratly Islands	<i>USS Russell (DDG-59)</i>	This operation was directed against unlawful restrictions on innocent passage imposed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam.
May 20, 2021	Paracel Islands	<i>USS Curtis Wilbur (DDG-54)</i>	
July 12, 2021	Paracel Islands	<i>USS Benfold (DDG-65)</i>	
September 8, 2021	Mischief Reef in Spratly Islands	<i>USS Benfold (DDG-65)</i>	

Figure 3: Reported FON Operations in SCS During Biden Administration⁶⁰

There are criticisms of the lack of concrete tools and solutions regarding Indo-Pacific Strategy, which was introduced with the slogan of "Free Indo-Pacific". It can be stated that the PRC aims to compete with the USA thanks to the BRI, but one of the reasons for the development and implementation of the BRI is the SCS conflict. Although Beijing is expanding in the region, it is aware of the risk dimension of the containment activity against it.⁶¹

The real dimension of threat perception at the regional level is the increasing military capacity of the PRC. Although the PRC underlines that the expansion in its military capacity is peaceful and defensive, actors in the region perceive a real and imminent threat, especially in the post-Jinping period. The listed interests of the USA and the perception of threat have combined with the threat perception of regional actors and an alliance against the PRC has been formed. However, it is not possible to talk about an alliance in all aspects. The stability of the neighboring PRC, which has a giant economy, is also in the interest of regional actors. In terms of interdependence, compared to non-regional actors, it seems difficult for regional actors to risk burning ships with the PRC.⁶²

If a spark grows that may be caused by its side or the counter bloc, PRC will be among the actors who will suffer the most from the hot conflict. A conflict on the sea route, which carries one third of world trade, will suppress trade and production; in this case, intermediate goods and consumption with supply problems to be valid for the rest of the world might lead to an upward movement in commodity prices. Considering perceiving this risk in a timely manner, Beijing has prepared an alternative and comprehensive road-oriented project to the sea route. With the project, the PRC envisages integration with Africa, the Middle East and Europe through alternative routes.⁶³

Conclusion

PRC and USA are the main powers those have been computing in this region. With developments and investments in this region, India, Japan, and Australia also have become part of the important actors. PRC, which controls the security environment in Indo-Pacific, recreates its security strategies due to the rising power and shifting policies of the USA and Japan's cooperation. On the contrary, The US foreign and defense policies in the Indian and Pacific

⁶⁰ Congressional Research Service, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress" <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R42784.pdf> (Retrieved 10.11.2021)

⁶¹ Brian Harding, "The Trump Administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Approach" Southeast Asian Affairs, 2019, pp. 61–68.

⁶² George Magnus, "Xi Jinping's China" In Red Flags: Why Xi's China Is in Jeopardy, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2018, p. 196.

⁶³ Sayantan Haldar, "Mapping Substance in India's Counter-Strategies to China's Emergent Belt and Road Initiative: Narratives and Counter-Narratives." Indian Journal of Asian Affairs, vol. 31, no. 1/2, Manju Jain, 2018, pp. 75–90

Oceans have evolved over the years. This is at least partly a response to PRC's advance in the region, as well as a possible perception that the US can no longer leave security in the region to Australia and New Zealand.

Additionally, the PRC tries not to take a step back in the SCS problem, which includes risks that may interrupt the process that it describes as promotion and development - except for short-term tactical actions. BRI is one of the leading foreign policy tools of the actor to rebuild the global political economy, despite the fact that some of the participating actors have started to have a conflict with Beijing and the pausing effect of the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus.

The artificial island construction and military activities of the PRC in SCS is still ongoing despite the decision of The Permanent Court of Arbitration that found these activities against international law. So, continuance of its activities after this decision justified the determinations that it has been carrying out an assertive or dominant foreign policy. As a result, other actors approach the peaceful rise and similar discourses with suspicion.

Despite the Covid-19 process, the ongoing containment activities of the USA, within the scope of global competition with the other actors, also have an effect on Beijing's maintaining its dominant character in the region. It is observed that with the Strategic Pivot policy, the USA has speeded up armament. However, for the two actors, entering into a conflict with each other in the region is incompatible with their national interests. The indicated value of the region in economic and commercial terms leads us to this conclusion. SCS is just one of the topics in the global struggle of the two actors. It is foreseen that the economic dimension of this struggle for the USA is dominant, therefore the SCS problem will not be at the forefront for decision makers regarding the military solutions. The capacity gap between the PRC and other regional actors, the arising difficulties within the other actors for coordinating their power with regional alliances such as ASEAN, and the ambiguous elements of the US 'support to these actors are also the factors that strengthen the PRC's hand.

The main risk at this point is that the military activities of the two actors may cause an involuntary spark. On the other hand, in terms of security, it is thought that absolute domination will not be possible in maritime areas that are not easy to protect with respect to land. In this regard, it can be stated that the SCS competition will be long lasting among the aforementioned actors and this situation should point to the continuity of SCS as a potential source of conflict.

Maritime security cooperation is affected by structural, normative and economic changes in the regional system. There are several factors that can lead to greater cooperative engagement in the region: decreased sovereignty sensitivities, potential involvement of non-regional players, strengthening cooperation norms, developing necessary government resources, recognizing the importance of maritime security and protecting maritime areas.

Collaborative solutions should be supported at the operational level, especially where legal instruments are not available or are insufficiently supported. Multilateral agreements established cross-border cooperation and less formal forms of cooperation, can be pursued as ways to reduce problems. Sharing ideas and building understanding through multilateral forums will not hinder the transformation of differences between states into meaningful cooperation and strengthen partnerships in SCS and Indo-Pacific region.

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