

# GEOSTRATEGIC TENSION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: THE CASE OF POWER DYNAMICS AND MARITIME SECURITY

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## Abstract:

The geostrategic tensions in the vast expanse of the South China sea show the power dynamics and the maritime issues that shape the politics of the area. The paper takes a look at the crux of the complexities thereby delving into the intricate details of the region. There are territorial claims and strategic play within the region that are the point of contention among the stakeholders in the South China Sea. The study examines the multidimensional analysis of the political, economic as well as historical factors of the dispute, whereby the state actions, interests and alliances will be gauged. The naval strategies along with diplomatic ties develop influence and control at the South China sea which also establishes the geostrategic gameboard. Understanding the politics of the South China sea in context with its history and economic factors is a challenge for policymakers worldwide. The fault lines are deepening when it comes to the power dynamics within the South China sea that is simmering tension and rift among the neighbors. The paper finds out the interconnectedness of regional stability in terms of security while the maritime norms have also been sufficiently discussed. The implications of the research are such that it looks at the regional tension under the law of abiding the international law and moving towards a more sustainable world.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, Territorial claims, Geostrategic tensions, Naval strategies, Power dynamics, Maritime norms

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## INTRODUCTION

The South China sea has been under attention for a very long time. The attention is mostly being given to South China sea due to the strategic importance and the regional as well as global actors involved in it. The expansive and exploitative nature of the global and regional actors has led to an amalgamation of economic and geopolitical power games (Kim, 2015). The continents of Asia and Oceania have been connecting the oceans thus giving a breeding ground for geopolitics to persist within the region. The rich mineral resources within the South China sea as well as the natural trade routes that have been established as a result of the South China Sea. This has led to political and geostrategic tensions within the region especially when it comes to power dynamics and maritime security (Kim, 2015). The paper will examine the complex geostrategic issues that persist within the South China sea when it comes to the factors of maritime security and geopolitics. The historical and territorial analysis would allow one to focus on international trade, politics, and the tension within the area (Kim, 2015).

When looking through the historical lens the country China Sea has been under the radar since the 20th century. During the 1930s when France took over the territory by claiming areas of Paracel and the Spratly archipelagos, a new set of global powers ended up emerging. However, in the beginning, Japan showed its power by attaining and claiming land near the Sea (Kim, 2015). But the war opened new horizons for the world, wherein more power centers vied their eyes on the territory of the Sea. Then the major global events ended up shaping the power spheres within the South China Sea, where the us involved themselves in patrolling the strategic strait of Malacca (Storey and Lin, 2016). This patrolling activity by the US Navy ended up surging the need to take over the land near the Sea by other political forces such as the Soviet Union. Yet, the inclusion of China into the dynamic further complicated maritime security as there became a potential for Chinese hegemony in the region. The changing power dynamics of the region ended up bringing the South China sea to global attention (Storey and Lin, 2016). Within this paper, there is a multidimensional analysis including a historical breakdown and the current political regimes that manage the politics within the South China sea (Storey and Lin, 2016). The interplay of geopolitics and the significance of the maritime center has curated a complicated equation within Southeast Asia wherein the excruciating power of China, is being juxtaposed by the Western countries along with the newly emerging power of India (Biscosi, 2021). Examining the theoretical underpinning and the practical applications of the framework would allow us to further explore this political fluctuation and the future implications with context to the economic and civic relations that persist within the region.

## METHODOLOGY

The research in this paper has been conducted based on adopting a qualitative approach wherein the complex geostrategic issues with relations to the South China sea are focused on in terms of maritime security as well as geopolitics. There is a use of different methods adopted to be able to understand the politics of the region. The first method is the historical analysis of the South China sea and the power dynamics that persist within the region that impact the maritime policies. Additionally, a geopolitical assessment is conducted to attain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The research was mainly conducted with the aid of secondary data (Biscosi, 2021). The secondary data is gathered from academic literature as well as think tank publications that have played a major role in analysing the issue of the South China sea and the persistent politics of the region. To further understand the type of data collected and utilized the research looks at the historical analysis of the South China Sea. The historical data is collected and analysed that take a look at the evolution of territorial disputes that have resulted in a power dynamic within the region (Rubiolo, 2020). The geopolitical assessment has a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical reasons for the massive dispute within the region. The alliance and rivalries that are built in this maritime region can only be viewed once the geopolitical advantages of the Sea are examined along with the ongoing chessboard politics. Additionally, the analysis also looks at the various stakeholders that are present when it comes to the policies and the overall action within the South China sea (Rubiolo, 2020). The geopolitics and international relations of the area are well dissected with the aid of the geopolitical assessment. After which the qualitative data has been drawn upon and analysed using comprehensive analysis (Rubiolo, 2020).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Morton's (2016) article on exploring expansion of China within the South China sea shows the regional and global security impacts of such acts. China has been taking over the region rampantly especially with its projects in South Asia (Javaid, 2016). Thus, the writer explains how the country's actions could end up broadening the transformation of the maritime order. There is however a problem of maritime nationalism where the maritime hegemony is impacting the security as well as the decision-making of China. Maritime hegemony essentially means that the influence of a single nation on the politics of the region ends up impacting the overall activities that are taking place within the region. The control could be through different forms such as military, economic and political control (Kaplan, 2011). The maritime hegemony is highly important in devising a world power, which attains absolute advantage from overpowering other countries within the region. The first aspect of the maritime hegemony discussed within the article is naval strength (Kaplan, 2011). This is through the types and quality of submarines, aircraft carriers as well as other naval assets that the country has. In this context, China seems to be overpowering other countries due to the potent assets that the country possesses along with the strategic bases that the country holds. The army known as PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) has grown significantly within the area due to the modernization that has been implemented by the Chinese government (Kaplan, 2011). Along with this (ASBMs) which are missiles that do not require ships have also shown credibility in light of allowing China to attain power within the region. China has been successful in attaining power within the region through such actions (Javaid, 2015). The stealth technology is attached to electronic warfare capabilities that have allowed China to rule the region. Not only this but the strategic bases are important missiles and being able to securitize the area. The Sea which is filled with artificial islands has been completely taken into surveillance by China when it comes to installing radar systems as well as airstrips. Overseas bases like Djibouti allow China to have control over other strategic points as well (Kim, 2016). Another key factor which is discussed in the article is in context to the economic hegemony that China has. The Belt and Road initiative by China has provided the country with the opportunity to expand the infrastructure in the area through the construction of ports which define the maritime trade routes. The trade routes are certainly under the control of the Chinese government which increases their influence within the region (Javaid and Javaid, 2016). The country also exercises territorial claims wherein via the "Nine-Dash Line" which is not recognized by international law, yet China ends up showing its power over the area (Kim, 2016). Through this influence, China also manoeuvres control over the rules and regulations imposed within the region which makes it difficult for other countries to expand their control within the region. Moron within her article states that China is in fact in a very comfortable position when it comes to the powerful agents within the region. The writer provides a nuanced understanding of China's legitimacy when it comes to maritime order within the South China sea (Kim, 2016).

The article by Patalano (2013) explains territorial waters as well as the role of Sea power when it comes to East Asia. The main goal of this article is to determine the maritime hegemony that has been extended via the country controlling the South China Sea, and how that is beneficial for their economic growth. The article delves into the centrality of the maritime realm which looks at the economic and political matters of the area. The focus is mainly on how the maritime forces end up playing an important role in developing competition within the region as well as causing a rise in security issues. This shows that maritime hegemony is the goal that many regional and non-regional powers wish to achieve within the South China Sea. The South China sea has a lot of economic significance as the maritime routes in East Asia are the busiest in the world and thus most of the global trade takes place through that area. The countries in the region are said to use the routes almost daily and thus a maritime

hegemony of the area can directly benefit the country that will be exercising their power and control within the region. Political significance is to be considered in the sense that the maritime domain would certainly allow for a country to have a political influence as well. The political dimension ends up making the maritime realm a highly critical battleground that most powers wish to dominate. To now be specific the maritime forces which are also known as the instruments of competition and security according to Patalano are the main source of competition. The competition in maritime hegemony is in the sense that nations in East Asia are actively using their naval capabilities to showcase their dominance within the region this is also being done to protect their respective interests. Additionally, security management is key for instilling competition within the region. The naval forces ended up being quite essential for safeguarding the water on the territories as well as protecting maritime trade routes that ended up responding to the crisis that might breed within the South China Sea. Security management is integral for a region like the South China sea but it is also one of the underlying reasons for the competition present within the region. The writer states that the naval forces end up playing a crucial role in maintaining safety in the South China Sea, and most of these naval forces are under the control of the Chinese government thus allowing for one country to dominate maritime security.

Cheng-Chewee (2017)) examines the contradictions that exist within the South China sea policy. These could go from assertive maritime claims to highly diplomatic talks around the notion of establishing peace within the region. The writer explains that the contradiction exists as a structured driver that looks at the perceived opportunity along with the financial crisis which were hit globally ends up driving the strategic Sea policy by the Chinese. The Chinese policies are also dependent on the USA's stance within the region. If the US's strategy is based on rebalancing Asia and attaining heavy control within the region, then the Chinese often enter and control the place based on strict South China sea policies. Thus, strategic Sea is not only dependent upon internal affairs but also on the external processes that might persist within the region and thereby impact the policies.

When conducting a comparative analysis of the literature provided, one can view that Morton's (2016) focus is mainly only on the legitimacy challenges that confuse the basic understanding of attaining hegemony within the region. For him maritime hegemony and security are not only based on the idea of military dominance but also on the notion of gaining legitimacy within the region. This legitimacy is often bred through nationalistic sentiments as well as adherence towards international laws. These allow for a country like China to thrive within the region. Additionally, Cheng-Chewee (2017) explains how the contradictory policies by China are due to the variable pressures both on the inside and outside which persist within the region. They are either assertive or highly diplomatic with their strategies within the South China Sea. A potent performance at the South China sea and the need for domination also stem from the nationalistic policies of the Chinese government. The need to stay in power, causes the Chinese government to build nationalistic sentiments around the South China sea and this materializes their domination within the region. The collective insights from three articles show that the South China sea and its politics are based on building legitimacy, attaining maritime hegemony as well as maintaining diplomatic ties within the region. It is an interplay of elements that end up making the environment highly complicated and thus make the maritime region a highly significant one to be discussed in the emerging geopolitics of the world.

### **Strategic location**

The South China sea has geostrategic tensions due to several factors. One of the first factors that must be accounted for is its strategic location. The South China sea is located at the crossroads of major global trade routes and thus has become vital for the maritime trade corridor. Most countries are dependent upon the South China sea in terms of trade (Scobell, 2018). The movement of goods between Asia as well as Europe and the middle east all takes place from the South China sea and thus the global shipping that takes place in that region sums up \$3 trillion annually. Not only this but the strategic sea has natural resources which can be utilized by the countries surrounding. The US energy administration states that the South China sea contains nearly 12 bn barrels of oil (Scobell, 2018). Along with reserves of oil and gas the area also has fisheries which are crucial sources of food for millions of people living within Southeast Asia. The Sea nearly has 10 per cent of the entire fish caught in the world. the area is highly geopolitically significant in terms of the Nine Dash Line as well as the exclusive economic zones which have been built in the area. Additionally, military and security considerations have become major issues with the South China sea (Scobell, 2018). The South China sea is heavily militarized in the sense that China has been successful in order to build artificial islands and thus took over the Sea through those artificial islands (Scobell, 2018). These developments allow China to be able to introduce projects within the region through enough security and thus be able to utilize the area for their economic and political benefit. To counter this the US is a proponent of (FONOPs) which is a body for navigational freedom so China does not end up using excessive power in the region (Scobell, 2018). Lastly, the economic importance of the South China sea in terms of the coastal states, the trade routes, and the availability of natural resources has made the South China sea highly important and has caused geostrategic tension within the region.

### **Maritime Hegemony**

When it comes to understanding the maritime hegemony as well as naval strength in the South China sea there were different perspectives which came out in the finding. The first one was about Morton's 2016 perspective which emphasized mainly the growing power of China within the naval forces. This was mainly through the impact of the Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) which allowed the country to have more power within the region. The impact of this is such that China can build its naval hegemony in the Sea. The modernization of

China's naval forces including the development of submarines goes to show how through effective forces and resources the country can attain power within the Sea. China has been able to attain aircraft carriers and anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) allow for military strength in the strategic Sea (Crikemans, 2017). According to Morton the advancements that are being taken by China are strategic in their move as through these strategic moves they can establish their control over the region. Another perspective on the sea and the political game being played in the region is explained through Patalano's view wherein the importance of naval strength is reiterated (Crikemans, 2017). According to Patalano, naval capabilities are not only about military power but also the major tools for competition and security. This view indicates that naval arms in East Asia are mainly driven by China's dominance. However, this dominance by China has led to excessive tensions within the region. The implication is that the maritime hegemony is a dynamic and contested space which is constantly being challenged by China's dominance through potent naval power. According to the comparative power analysis of the region, the naval strength is to be focused on. Mainly because it is the cornerstone of maritime hegemony along with which the legitimacy and strategic implications of China's military presence have allowed for its dominance in the region. However, Patalano states that broader regional competition is far more important than the dominance attained through the naval forces (Crikemans, 2017). This view, however, underscores the overall power that a country attains through the multifaceted role of naval power.

### **Economic Hegemony**

The economic hegemony that is a key component of geostrategic tension in the South China sea is also to be evaluated to understand the dominating factors involved within the region. There were two views on the economic hegemony and the Belt and Road initiative. (BRI) is a project or a rather global development strategy which was initiated by China in 2013 (Sutter and Huang, 2016). This mainly aims at enhancing the overall regional connectivity as well as attaining a larger economic advantage from the given zone. This initiative has two main components the first one is the solid road economic let which links China to Europe going through central Asia (Sutter and Huang, 2016). The other component Silk Road which connects China to almost most of the continents. This connectivity would highly aid China in becoming a world power and would dominate world politics. Thus, the economic view talks about the BRI's status and how that would impact the South Sea (Sutter and Huang, 2016). Through the expansion of infrastructure, China would greatly benefit from the South China sea allowing it to connect to different continents. The construction of ports and maritime trade routes would add to China's economic success. China has been able to take control of the region in such a way that it has been able to take over the economic lifelines within the region (Fravel, 2011).

By gaining economic control through the routes, the country is also exerting its dominance over the rules and regulations imposed within the region which automatically limits the intervention from other countries. Additionally, the strategic Sea's routes are one of the busiest in the world which makes it the focal point within the region for which many regional powers are fighting. Thus, China's ability to dominate in the region, especially through economic initiatives such as the BRI has led to its economic strength and so has been able to attain political strength in the region as other nations are dependent on China when it comes to the routes. A similar view is the political take on the maritime hegemony in the South China sea (Fravel, 2011). The political dynamics as well as the legitimacy of power have been the key players within the geostrategic politics of the region. According to Morton's view the challenges of legitimacy that which chain faced had a lot to do with the quest for maritime hegemony. In the sense that it has military as well as economic strength, yet the country lacks the international recognition required to take over the area. This completes their efforts to assert control in the region (Fravel, 2011). China's nationalism with regard to its military power is rather being conducted to attain legitimacy of its control over the region. However, Cheng-Chewee brings forward a few contradictions that muddle up the issue of the South China Sea. The oscillation between the territorial claims and the diplomatic effort has made the region a rather complicated political entity. He says that a response to internal pressures coming from the nationalistic sentiments while external pressure of building diplomatic ties has made China's position in the Sea rather confusing. Thus, China is trying to balance out the nationalistic sentiments along with diplomatic ties with other countries through various economic projects. However, in doing so the country has murky relationships with a country like the US which is viewing China as a threat within the region due to its growing power and the potential to assert control (Macaraig and Fenton, 2021).

### **Diplomatic Tensions and External Influences**

Diplomatic tensions and external influences are being discussed as key topics when it comes to examining geostrategic tensions within the South China sea (Macaraig and Fenton, 2021). The South China sea policy according to China is based on the external influences and factors such as those directed by the world power United States. According to Cheng-Chewee's analysis, China's approach toward the South China sea is reactive which means it shifts from being diplomatic to assertive due to the external factors at hand. The reaction generally reduces the vulnerability of China's position. when in reality China as a country faces huge threats from other global powers such as the US and India (Macaraig and Fenton, 2021). This, rather than reducing China's stance towards the South China sea as a nationalistic and assertive policy one must view it through a deeper Lense and through other perspectives which are equally important to recognize.

There are multiple stakeholders when it comes to the South China Sea. The first stakeholder is the Southeast Asian nations the first such nation is Vietnam which vocally challenges China's claims within the Sea. The country has overlapping claims when it comes to two islands one is Paracel island and the other one is Spratly Island which is



why they have been opposing expansion of China in the region for a long time (Mirski, 2015). Philippines is another state that has conflicting territorial claims with China wherein the two countries have been at war over the Scarborough shoal and a few parts of the Spratly islands. The country has even brought a case against China when it comes to the land which was considered under the court of permanent arbitration in the year 2016, where the Philippines ended up winning. Additionally, two other Southeast Asian countries include Malaysia and Brunei (Mirski, 2015). When it comes to analyzing the country again has claimed over Spratly Islands and has conducted oil and gas exploration within that region. This brought further geostrategic tension within the Southsea and thus has been under fire for the claims each country is making case of Brunei that country also has its claims over the southern part of the Spratly Islands, but due to its limited geostrategic importance and military power, the country has been weak in attaining those claims from China. Not only this but other nations that are also global powers have provided an equal footing within a region such as the South China sea (Mirski, 2015). The United States is a leading example of a country that has been trying to develop its force within the South China sea to attain the benefits from the water routes. The US does not have any territorial claims within the South China sea however it is still a significant stakeholder as it has interests in maintaining navigational freedom as well as overflight in the region. The US has been successful in conducting the “navigational freedom operations” which looks at challenging China's claim over the excessive land takeover (Nguyen, 2015). Thus, rather than having a direct claim over South China sea USA is a useful stakeholder within the region which balances out the diplomatic factors for China. Oftentimes times China is unable to assert itself within the region due to the US's involvement in the police prevailing in the South China Sea. There are multiple political, social and economic reasons as to why the USA wishes to play a key role in maritime hegemony (Nguyen, 2015). The US also supports other countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam over their claims of land against China thus providing China with a significant amount of competition.

Some other regions and countries hold equal significance in the geostrategic development of the South China Sea. One such country is Japan. The main concern for Japan is China's growing power as well as influence within the region (Nguyen, 2015). This means that the Japanese shipping routes and the energy supplies will remain at risk if China continues to assert its control over the region. Thus, to counter this Japan has been able to provide significant opposition to China when it comes to asserting its control/ Japan provides other Southeast Asian countries with enough capacity so that they can oppose China's claims over the Sea. Additionally, Japan has also been able to develop a thorough capacity-building initiative within these countries so that it remains an integral part of the military exercises in the region. Australia poses an equal threat to a country taking over the Sea routes (Hong, 2013). Australia moves against China in such a way that it is another external stakeholder that supports the freedom of navigation in the South China sea and thus has conducted several joined military exercises with the US in that particular region. Not only this but Australia is a major propagator of providing justice to all the countries surrounding the sea that have limited resources to protect and fight against China's excessive power in the South China sea (Hong, 2013). India too has its eyes on the South China sea as the country has been a rival to China since its first war against China over land in 1962. Along with this India has a strategic interest in the South China sea particularly concerning the safety of its shipping routes which are often dismantled by the Chinese authorities. The country has conducted several exercises with regards to the navy in the region to showcase its power over the Sea and be able to build sufficient allies to combat China's rule over the South China sea (Hong, 2013). Taiwan which is officially under the Republic of China (ROC) has also been overlapping in terms of land and authority in the region against the people's Republic of China (PRC). Country like the US have been using this to their advantage wherein they are taking control of major parts of the island such as those surrounding Itu aba. After which a major stakeholder is the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) which is a major organization playing an integral role when it comes to the politics prevailing In the South China Sea. This association is highly significant as it poses as a platform for dialogue between the southeast Asian countries and China over the issue of the South China sea (Raine, 2017). The ASEAN can take a unified stance within the region and thus protect the interests of several countries at the same time while also protecting the political landscape from escalating negatively. The European Union has a pro-US stance over the South China sea project while Russia has mainly been a supporter of China as it sees the USA as a major political as well as economic rival (Raine, 2017). International organizations such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is a critical framework that has developed a legal discourse for South China sea in terms of establishing the maritime rights and figure out the overall disputes taking place in the region. The 2016 arbitration case was brought by the Philippines through one such discourse and was able to rule in favor of Philippines (Raine, 2017). Lastly, the Permanent Court of arbitration (PCA) as mentioned earlier is one such arbitration where action was taken against China over its excessive control over the region and the unofficial land claims within the region.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, South China sea presents the critical geopolitical point wherein most nations are interested in developing their military, security, economic, and political strength within the region. The significance of the South China sea is such that it contains viable resources that must be attained by most countries while the security takeover of the region would aid the country as most global trade ties place through that Sea (Raine, 2017). The overlapping territorial claims and the presence of vast natural resources is one of the reasons why South China

sea is seeing political and geostrategic tension (Raine, 2017). The militarization of the area along with the challenges that are posed to international law due to excessive assertion by China has led to countries such as the US to provide opposition. Thus, this region remains a crucial test of international diplomacy along with legal discussions. The area's significance is based on the abundance of resources and the key route it provides for the world to trade on. The militarization of the sea and the takeover by China in terms of economic and political dominance has escalated the problem, causing geostrategic tensions for the stakeholders at the South China Sea.

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