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CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Abdusalom Giyosov

The National Research University Higher School of Economics

The Faculty of World Economy and World Politics

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In the current context of the formation of a multi-polar global system and the redistribution of power in favor of the Asia-Pacific region, tensions are increasing in various parts of the world. The South China Sea stands out as one of the most disputed areas due to overlapping interests of various nations. If we talk about China's actions in the South China Sea and in general about the essence of this problem, we must first of all focus on why this area is of such importance at all, attracts such forces, why the parties involved in the disputes around the South China Sea are ready to go to a rather harsh political confrontation over this area. The conflict is primarily strategic and is not driven by any significant resource competition, even though the South China Sea possesses considerable oil and gas reserves. Approximately 25% of global trade transits through the South China Sea, along with the same proportion of all seaborne oil transport and one-third of the liquefied natural gas trade carried out by sea.¹ Any disruption of navigation in this artery leads to huge consequences in the global economy. For East Asian economies, this dependence is even more serious, it is 65% of China's foreign

¹ China Power Team. (2017). How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea? China Power Team <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>



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trade², Japan receives 90% of all energy imports through this area.³ If you are able to control shipping in the South China Sea, you are able to economically strangle any foreign country during a crisis period. Based on this, the entire Chinese security strategy is largely determined. At the ASEAN-US summit in November 2017, President Donald Trump emphasized America's dedication to fostering a genuinely open and free Indo-Pacific domain, where nations can flourish with strength, autonomy, and prosperity, making it highly significant for international navigation and trade.⁴ Disputes over the Paracel and Spratly islands are particularly significant for the United States, China and other regional players. The relevance of this topic lies in the escalating tensions between China and other stakeholders in the region. The dispute over the South China Sea not only threatens the territorial integrity of smaller countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, but also challenges the principles of international law and the current global order. The involvement of the United States as a counterbalancing force further complicates the dynamics, as it seeks to ensure freedom of navigation and support its regional allies.

What measures is China taking to strengthen its influence in the South China Sea what role does the United States play in shaping the geopolitical landscape?

The aim of this research is to examine the implications of China's growing influence in the South China Sea and the role of the United States in shaping regional stability.

² Aankit, P. (2017). How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea? The Diplomat. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

³ Shumei, L. (2024). GT investigates: Japan acts as US Indo-Pacific strategy "assistant", risks intensifying tensions in the South China Sea. Global Times. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202408/1317568.shtml>

⁴ Hirschfeld-Davis, J. and Landler, M. (2017). The New York, Times Trump Pitches "America First" Trade Policy at Asia-Pacific Gathering. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/world/asia/trump-apec-asia-trade.html>



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To achieve this aim, the essay addresses the following tasks:

1. Examine the motivations behind China's actions in the South China Sea, including territorial claims, resource security, and military strategy.
2. Analyze the response of regional actors to China's growing influence, focusing on their economic and security concerns.
3. Assess the broader implications of U.S.-China competition in the South China Sea for regional and global stability.

In recent years, China has taken concrete steps to solidify its position, notably by expanding its "nine-dash line" claim in 2013 and constructing artificial islands for military purposes between 2013 and 2016. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration based in The Hague determined that China's historical assertions regarding resources within the nine-dash line were not supported by legal evidence.⁵ Despite this verdict, China has chosen to ignore it and persists in upholding its claims to the territory. The Chinese are most concerned about the possibility of a blockade of the Strait of Malacca. This is a problem infected at the highest level. The Strait is located far enough away, and it is impossible to ensure a permanent military presence. The second significant issue stems from the crucial role that the ocean plays in the deployment of military forces within the area, which is particularly vital for the United States. If the United States needs to move its fleet from the Middle East to the Western Pacific, the way lies through this sea. As a result, other countries in East and Southeast Asia are faced with the question of how to continue to exist and develop? There are two options: there is a current model, this is balancing between the PRC and the United States,

⁵ Cherhat, T. (2022). China: The Story of a Missed Opportunity. How China Managed to Disregard the South China Sea Ruling. *Conflict Studies Quarterly Issue 41*, pp. 44–59. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364397912>



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there is another option – to return to the traditional method of arranging affairs in East Asia, when there is China and a community of other countries included in the Tributary system (within this system, all countries are completely independent, but recognize to varying degrees China's right to establish for all the rules of the game).⁶ In the absence of a power balance capable of countering China, alternative options are limited, particularly given China's willingness to offer relatively flexible terms for engaging in such relationships, along with the inherent advantages of Chinese proposals.

Ultimately, the issue of which regions of water or which specific islands will be under control is, in reality, a secondary consideration. The primary question is whether you will be able to occupy key positions on these islands, whether you will be able to deploy sufficient forces there, whether you will be able to ensure effective military control and what will be the regime of military and commercial shipping in the South China Sea. Various understandings exist regarding the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. China, along with several other nations, holds the view that any military operations conducted by foreign nations within an exclusive economic zone can only occur with the consent of the zone's sovereign owner. China, controlling the Paracel Islands, is engaged in their expansion, development, and creation of infrastructure there. Starting from the end of 2013 The Chinese are building bulk islands and have built artificial islands that surpass all natural islands in their area, on which they have built military infrastructure, airfields, military depots, medical facilities, and radio stations. All this has

⁶ Perdue, P. (2015). The Tenacious Tributary System. *Journal of Contemporary China*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1030949>



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dramatically changed the balance of power.⁷ With the creation of these artificial islands, an important legal issue has arisen. Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, only natural islands are entitled to territorial waters and an exclusive economic zone. In this context, what China constructed does not qualify as islands; however, from the Chinese perspective, they view these as natural islands that they have legally claimed and developed, thereby extending their territorial economic zone. Other countries have concerned that China will try to introduce a full-fledged 12-mile regime of territorial waters around these islands, where no one has the right to enter without permission. Thus, by 2016, China had developed 3,200 hectares of land on top of the Spratly reefs partially under water. The Chinese army has installed large-scale naval, anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems, deep-sea military ports, military hangars and airfields on 7 islands.⁸ The People's Republic of China has announced a revised military strategy for 2019, which firmly establishes the Diaoyu Islands and other territories in the South China Sea as integral parts of its territory. This strategy underscores China's determination to assert its sovereignty over these areas, including not only the landmasses themselves but also their surrounding waters. The aim is to develop infrastructure and strengthen defensive capabilities in this strategically significant region.⁹ In order to maintain a presence in this important area, China is committed to conducting patrolling operations. Any potential disputes will be resolved through diplomatic channels, based on historical evidence and in strict adherence

⁷Singh, S. and Yamamoto, L. (2015). Specter of China's artificial islands. *Indian Strategic Studies*. p. 1-2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281638022_Spectre_of_China's_artificial_islands

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/13/pentagon-report-china-reclaimed-3200-acres-south-china-sea>

⁹ Vasiliev, D.V. and Shavlay, E.P. (2020). South China Sea in confrontation between China and the USA in Asia. *Asia and Africa today*. p. 61-65. https://mgimo.ru/upload/iblock/7c1/Azia-07-2020_61-66-min.pdf



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to international law. China engages with all relevant parties directly in this process. At the same time, China adheres to the fundamental principle of unimpeded access to its waters and airspace for all nations, which is ensured through strict adherence to international regulations. Furthermore, China actively endeavors to safeguard the security of critical maritime communication routes.

It is essential to acknowledge that China's aggressive expansionist policies have caused concern among the nations in the Asia-Pacific region. These nations are looking for support from the United States to safeguard their interests in the area. In an effort to strengthen its presence in Asia, the US is using this situation to exert pressure on China. Under the Trump administration, several significant measures have been taken, including promoting the concept of the "Indo-Pacific". This concept includes countries that seek to challenge China's political and economic domination. This region forms a semicircular barrier against China's dominant influence in the Pacific, including the People's Republic of China. The US refuses to recognize China's claims to certain territories in the South China Sea, regarding it as an international waterway.¹⁰

The South China Sea holds immense significance in China's diplomatic strategy, serving as a vital geostrategic area for the nation. Actions taken by local nations or outside entities are approached with skepticism, as they may be interpreted as potentially threatening. China asserts that its undertakings in this region are not aggressive and contends that the areas in question rightly belong to its sovereignty. Additionally, China has imposed restrictions on the movements of vessels from other countries under the premise that the South China Sea forms an

¹⁰ Fly, J. (2018). Trump's Asia Policy and the Concept of the "Indo-Pacific", Research Division Asia. p. 3-4 https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/projekt_papiere/Fly_BCAS_2018_Indo-Pacific_10.pdf



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"inland sea" within Chinese jurisdiction. However, Beijing has been cautious in its approach towards the United States, aiming to avoid direct conflict with the dominant power. China's actions have been limited, often involving diplomatic protests in response to US initiatives. The US is aware of the potential consequences of openly challenging China and continues to exert pressure through diplomatic channels. Washington emphasizes the illegality of China's activities in the South China Sea and guarantees unimpeded access for other countries' vessels. Given these circumstances, the South China Sea is likely to remain a potential source of conflict between the US and China in the near future.

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