

Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in the South China Sea: Contextualising Rivalries, Interests, and Strategies

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Abstract

South China Sea, positioned between Karimata and Malacca straits to the Straits of Taiwan, has permanently remained an object of ambitions and rivalries for regional as well as extra-regional states. The politico-maritime order of the region happens to be a complicated web of external and internal dynamics. China's maritime advancements have not just remained the source of attention for US policymakers, but have also created scepticism in the states of the region. Prospects of regional integration, enhancement of economic opportunities, and existence of abundant and often 'untapped' natural resources have further provided extra-regional states to influence the regional security patterns. Focusing upon the development till 2016, the paper contextualise show China and the US have been engaged in tilting the regional balance of power in their favour, resulting in a strategic competition between the great powers.

Key Words: South China Sea, ASEAN, Sea Line of Communication, UNCLOS,

Introduction

The United States remained 'comfortable' with China's economic rise until it was within the parameters of the western economic and geopolitical order. China's maritime advancements and reassertion of its sovereignty claim over some islands in South China Sea created antagonism in Sino-US relations. The first sign of this antagonism was the US strategic shift in its policy towards Southeast Asia during President Barak Obama's first tenure in office. Since then political and strategic dynamics of the region have constantly been affected by Sino-US changing relationship. American apprehensions vis-à-vis China revolve around following political, diplomatic, and economic themes: China can use hard power to assert its territorial claim over the disputed islands; it can increase political and diplomatic pressure on other claimants to vacate their claimed islands; Beijing can directly challenge the United States predominant position in the international waters; it can create problems for regional and extra-regional states' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Following the perceived threats to its national interests in the region, the United States has been working to enhance its economic and security ties with regional states. It has increased frequency of military and non-military activities in the region, such as: its forces participation in military drills,

patrolling by its maritime forces in the disputed waters, and support to the regional powers in improving their maritime capabilities. Resultantly a geostrategic competition is being ensued between the two. Annual international trade amounting to trillions of dollars in the region, expanding arms market, and the existence of natural resources are some other factors that further heightened the Sino-US competition.

Sino-US competition not only impacted their bilateral relations but Washington's interference in the regional sovereignty disputes damaged the goodwill gesture established between the regional member states of the ASEAN forum. The United States' welcoming of the ruling of Permanent Court of Arbitration against China has further complicated the peaceful resolution of the sovereignty disputes under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The US actions created a sense of insecurity among Chinese leadership.¹

Washington's claim that Chinese vessels carried out some dangerous drills to 'harass' its surveillance ships in 2009, verbal exchanges between their naval guards within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of China, Beijing's opposition to the United States' membership for ASEAN, and regional states' support for the US membership in ASEAN demonstrate that China and the US are in an intense geostrategic competition, involving regional states as key actors.²

In 2007, the United States lodged first formal protest with Beijing when it refused to allow a US aircraft carrier to make thanks-giving port call in Hong Kong.³ Things got intense in 2009, when Chinese naval vessels intercepted a US Navy surveillance ship, operating within its EEZ. In 2010, Washington also signalled through a combination of active diplomacy and a larger military engagement with other sovereignty claimants that it gives tremendous importance to a rules-based stability in the South China Sea.

Washington growing ties with the regional states, dispatching of a surveillance aircraft over the Chinese-built islands, and sailing of its warships within 12-nautical miles of disputed Parcel and Spratly islands to emphasize the importance of the freedom of navigation, are some other developments made by Washington as part of its broader foreign policy to balance against Beijing in the region. The complex nature of their relationship has established

¹Tan Chin Tiong, South China Sea Arbitration Response and Implications, *ASEAN Studies Centre*, Special Issue on the South China Sea, July 2016, 2.

²Michael D. Swaine, Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot, *China Leadership Monitor*, 38, no. 5, 2012.

³Bonnie S Glaser, Armed Clash in the South China Sea, *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 2012, Online edition.

a perspective among policymakers and official quarters that the regional sovereignty disputes remained an important challenge as well as opportunity available with the great powers to balance against each other.⁴

The US is accustomed with the fact that security of its national interest in South China Sea is not possible without gaining support of the regional states; and achieving regional actors support is impossible without providing assistance and security protection to them as they feel threatened from Beijing's assertive postures in the region. Therefore, Washington is further strengthening its strategic and political relations with the regional states. For example under its treaty with the Philippines, it is bound to protect Philippines vessels, military aircraft, and naval personnel from external offence. The accord also provides strong underpinning to the US to strengthen its position against China in the region.⁵

However, a great challenge that the US has been facing in the region remains the regional states' aspirations to take advantage from Chinese economic rise – despite having their sovereignty disputes. Beijing readiness to resolve its territorial disputes with other claimants in South China Sea through bilateral negotiations and its efforts to build closer economic ties with the regional states, including Philippines and Vietnam, are some other steps that undermine the US re-balancing strategy in the region.⁶ Thus, role of regional states, particularly other sovereignty claimants, remains crucial in this regard.⁷

According to experts, the US deployment of battleships in the disputed waters around Taiwan to prevent Beijing's potential offence is another step that hints US strong involvement in the region.⁸ The deployment of US naval ships is considered by China as a direct external threat to its security. Taiwan issue has been a great source of conflict between Beijing and Washington since its inception. The US and China had faced each other

⁴Michael McDevitt, The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy, *American Foreign Policy Interests* 37, no. 1, 2 January 2015, p. 26.

⁵Ibid

⁶P5+1 Nations and Iran Reach Historic Nuclear Deal, *Arms Control Association*, 14 July 2015, sec. Online, <https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/press-release/2015-07-14/P5-Plus-1-Nations-and-Iran-Rreach-Historic-Nuclear-Deal>.

⁷Hung Ming-Te and Tony Tai-Ting Liu, Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in Southeast Asia: Chinas Rise and U.S. Foreign Policy Transformation since 9/11 5, no. 3, 2011, p. 1.

⁸Jian Yang, Chinas Security Challenges: Priorities and Policy Implications, in *Chinas Security Challenges: Priorities and Policy Implications*, Online (Asia Pacific Countries Security Outlook and Its Implications for the Defense Sector, 2010), 147, http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/joint_research/series5/pdf/5-10.pdf.

several times in the history, on the issue of Taiwan.⁹ Most importantly, 1995-96 face-off between the US and China in Taiwan Strait forced China to search for second-strike capability. First achieving, and then strengthening this capacity became another important task of China's maritime policy. Beijing is well aware that the strong sea-based second-strike capability would serve as the ultimate deterrent against the US in the case of Taiwan and other crisis in the disputed South China Sea waters.¹⁰

China's Strategic-Economic Compulsions

The South China Sea has tremendous importance for states in the world not only owing to its geographical and geopolitical position but also for its trade routes, as the sea serves as a bottleneck of the Indian and the Western Pacific Oceans.¹¹ For China, however, its importance is manifold. The sea area has been playing an important role, and is expected to enhance this role, in boosting China's trade and commerce and meeting with its energy and livelihood needs.¹² The sea also serves as a main point of interaction for more than half of the global trade, and third of all maritime traffic worldwide.¹³ Chinese observers term the sea area as the "second Persian Gulf."¹⁴ It is the centrality of the islands in this sea that might result in armed clashes between Vietnam, the Philippine, China, and the US.¹⁵

⁹ The United States and China had a face-off against each other in Taiwan Strait in 1995-96, when Chinese government conducted several missile tests in response to increasing US-Taiwanese engagement. The US sent two aircraft carriers to the strait, that further created resentment in China, which started to further enhance its naval capacity to face the United States.

¹⁰ Yoshihara, Toshi, & James Holmes. *Red Star over the Pacific: Chinas rise and the challenge to US maritime strategy*. Naval Institute Press, 2011.

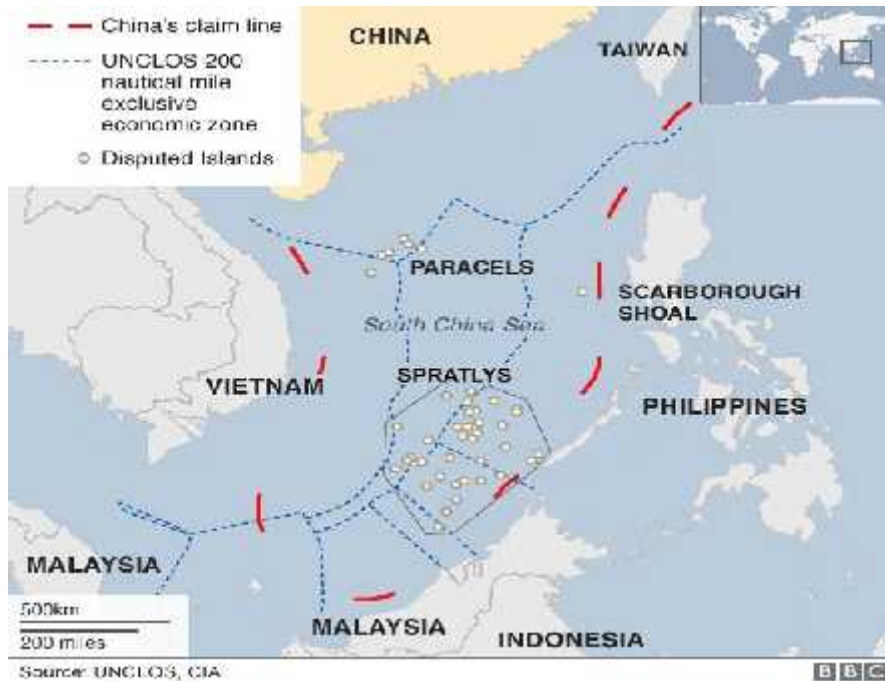
¹¹ Clive Schofield, What's at Stake in the South China Sea? Geographical and Geopolitical Considerations, *Univ Ersity of W Ollo Ngong*, 2013, 16, clives@uow.edu.au.

¹² Hong Thao Nguyen, Vietnam's Position on the Sovereignty over the Paracels & the Spratlys: Its Maritime Claims, 1 July 2012, 167. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2123861>

¹³ Robert D Kaplan, The South China Sea Will Be the Battleground of the Future, *Business Insider*, 6 February 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-the-south-china-sea-is-so-crucial-2015-2>.

¹⁴ Zou Keyuan, Chinas U-Shaped Line in the South China Sea Revisited, *Ocean Development & International Law* 43, no. 1 (10 February 2012): p. 19.

¹⁵ Schofield, What's at Stake in the South China Sea? Geographical and Geopolitical Considerations, 16. For a comprehensive analysis of the possibility of an armed clash in South China Sea, Glaser, *Armed Clash in the South China Sea*.



China's national security is a mixture of a "comprehensive strategy" that includes national defence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, economic development, strategic relations, alliances, and strong diplomacy. David Lampton once said, "Although, there is plenty of evidence of increasing Chinese cooperation and conformity with international norms, there is little evidence that considerations of national interest and *real politik* figure any less prominently in Chinese thinking than they always have." In this context, Beijing's security concerns seem more closely tied to its economic progress. The South China Sea has great value for China's economic development as the country imports and exports a major share of its energy and products through these waters. Thus for Beijing, taking control over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea means securing its Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) as they are situated at the centre of the sea-route trade. Assessment of China's whitepapers shows that Beijing's foreign policy is defensive in nature as most of these papers support the need for peaceful economic development and cooperation at regional and international levels but not at the cost of national security.¹⁶ The 2010 white paper mentioned that Beijing is in search of regional stability. It also emphasised leadership to prepare itself for a more uncertain political, economic, and military environment. The 2013 paper stated that China is working to safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial

¹⁶Anthony H. Cordesman, Steven Colley, & Michael Wang, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2015: A Comparative Analysis*, CSIS, 10 October 2015, 30.

integrity along with supporting the country's peaceful economic development.¹⁷The papers, however, said that the world's economic and strategic centre of gravity is shifting to Asia-Pacific region; and Washington under its "rebalancing" strategy is working to enhance its alliances and military presence in the region. The 2015 paper said that Beijing's security concerns have enhanced due to some proactive measures taken by other states to reinforce their military presence within the limits of Chinese claimed territories. It also observes that some states were meddling in the South China Sea affairs. However, the paper further stated it is a long-standing task of Beijing to protect its maritime right and interests in the South China Sea. The paper, however, clearly states that China has nothing to do with expansionism.¹⁸Beijing invite the Philippines and Vietnamese leaders to attend the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in September 2015 and Chinese President Xi Jinping, in his speech, said that China would reduce military personnel as first round of the 2014 reforms. Xi speech reflects that Beijing was taking measures to improve its working relationship with all regional states.

There can be another rationale behind China's maritime development and that is expansion of China's national interests from land to the sea. Besides, heightening sense of nationalism, national security, and reunification in China; overall social stability, and sustainable economic development are closely interlinked with China's core national interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁹ These factors pushed Beijing to not only modernise its maritime forces, but also to expand its influence in South China Sea and the region.²⁰

Beijing considers its peaceful development as strategic choice towards military modernization and to make itself strong and prosperous with more contribution to the progress of human civilization.²¹For Beijing, naval modernization was a fundamental interest to safeguard its national security, territorial integrity and other interests of national development.²²Furthermore,

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹Feng Zhaokui, What Are Chinas Core Interests?, *China & US Focus*, 21 October 2014, Online edition, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/what-are-chinas-core-interests-2/>.

²⁰Michael, Yahuda. Chinas New Assertiveness in the South China Sea, *Journal of Contemporary China* Vol 22, no. 81, 2013, 147.

²¹Chinas Defense Policy "defensive in Nature": White Paper. *Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China in the United States of America*, 6 September 2011, Online edition, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zhongguodehepingfazhan/t856656.htm>.

²²Military Power of the Peoples Republic of China 2009, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: Department of Defence, 6 September 2011), <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zhongguodehepingfazhan/t856656.htm>.

Beijing economic-strategic approach is another factor that increases Beijing concerns regarding its sovereignty claim as the disputed South China Sea hosts natural reserves worth billions of dollars. These reserves can help Beijing to reduce its dependence on imported energy, which it mostly transports through Strait of Hormuz and Malacca.

Thus, it can be said that China's economic-strategic interest was a driving force behind Beijing imposition of ban on fishing and increase of its naval vessels patrolling in the disputed waters. However, Chinese leadership's decisions increased a sense of fear among other claimant states, resulting in their joint military exercises with foreign states, including the United States, in the disputed waters.²³

Securing Energy Transportation Route

Since 1990, Beijing has been working to strengthen its offshore-military capabilities. The motive behind these measures was to secure its energy transportation route from the US Naval ships, operating in the EEZ of China.²⁴ In this regard, the Communist Party of China (CPC) had made it clear in 2007 that "Beijing will protect nation's territorial waters and maritime rights and interests, and safeguard the security of rapidly developing ocean industries, maritime transportation, and strategic routes to energy resources.

The South China Sea is international trade route which hosts trillions of dollars annual trade. In this situation, the United States involvement in maritime territorial dispute has furthered the sense of fear among Chinese leadership that the US is a potential threat to its economic development. Beijing's this perception is accentuated by the fact that China's centre of gravity is its economic development, which is strongly associated with the South China Sea. China's high need of energy, expansion in its middle-class population, and urbanization are some other factors that have contributed towards a sense of urgency to secure Chinese position in South China Sea.²⁵

Approximately 23 percent of crude oil and 29 per cent of natural gas produced in China are transported through the South China Sea.²⁶ It is the

²³Zhiming Chen & Dominique Caouette, Chinas South China Sea Policy and Its Implications for Canada: Claims, Strategies and Consequences, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 18, no. 3 (25 January 2013): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2012.737338>.

²⁴Don Durfee, China Urges U.S. to Stay out of Sea Dispute, *Reuters*, 22 June 2011, Online edition, sec. Politics, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-sea-dispute-idUSTRE75L14L20110622>.

²⁵Steven Chu and Arun Majumdar, Opportunities and Challenges for a Sustainable Energy Future 488, no. 7411 (2012): 298, <https://doi.org/10.1038>.

²⁶Ibid.

world's third largest net importer of oil and its consumption would be doubled by 2030.²⁷ Fluctuating energy prices in the international market and growing realization that any interruption to its energy route by regional or extra-regional powers would create a serious crisis to its domestic industry.²⁸

Heightening Sense of Nationalism and Shift in Regional Balance of Power

There exists a sense within China that the balance of power in the region is tilting in their favour and they should not miss this opportunity. The successful organization of “Olympic Games” of 2008 has further strengthened their nationalism.²⁹ They are more sensitive about their territorial sovereignty and national integrity. Chinese think that protection of country's sovereignty is important to strengthen China's comprehensive power for the maritime exploration.

This grown sense of nationalism can also be observed in the Chinese law, textbooks, and other official documents.³⁰ Besides, the Chinese leadership, on various occasions, has emphasized the need of national unification with regard to its territorial claim.³¹ Taiwan problem, extended trade route, intention to prepare itself for the second-strike nuclear capability, and the growing need of imported energy to boost its domestic industry are some other important factors that are motivating them to advance their maritime apparatus.³²

Beijing has long been arguing that the world is becoming multi-polar in nature. However, its assumption ‘turned’ into a reality in 2008 when the decline of the United States’ economy started. Following the decline, Beijing called for a more active foreign policy in 2009 to handle the international financial crisis. President Obama's visit to Beijing in November 2009 and seeking Beijing assistance in addressing the global problems further strengthen its position. During his tenure, President Obama himself conceded that the world has become multipolar in nature. Beijing active participation in the management of international affairs – such as its role in dealing with the

²⁷Military and Security Developments Involving the Peoples Republic of China 201 6, 47.

²⁸Masuda, Chinas Maritime Strategy and Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies: Quest for a Maritime Power, 49.

²⁹Michael Yahuda, Chinas New Assertiveness in the South China Sea, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22, no. 81, January 2013, p.454..

³⁰Military and Security Developments Involving the Peoples Republic of China 201 6, 49.

³¹Yahuda, Chinas New Assertiveness in the South China Sea, 454.

³²Chris Rahman and Martin Tsamenyi, A Strategic Perspective on Security and Naval Issues in the South China Sea, *Ocean Development & International Law*, 41, no. 4, 19 November 2010, 319.

Iran's nuclear issue³³ – gave it a confidence to develop new interpretations of maritime international law, to meet its immediate strategic and national interests.³⁴

Contextualising US Policy Transformation

The United States foreign policy has witnessed several major transformations, orchestrated in order to ensure a balance of power balance of power in the Southeast Asia, in its favour. However, territorial dispute of the South China Sea, China's naval modernization, construction of infrastructure over some Spratly Islands, and North Korea's subsequent provocations were some other driving factors behind its policy transformation.³⁵ Addressing the Australian Parliament in 2011, President Obama proclaimed, "The United States will play a larger or a long-term role in reshaping the Asia-Pacific and its future."³⁶ Later, his government also announced that it would intensify activities in the Asia-Pacific region to reshape its economic and security policies.³⁷

A flash-back on the history of Sino-US relations shows that the visible transformation in the US foreign policy towards Southeast Asia was started after 9/11 terrorists attacks. Then President George W. Bush not only transformed its foreign policy emphasis to the task of anti-terrorism, but he also began to realise American neglect towards the Southeast Asia. He regarded the region as the second front in the war against terror. However, China's maritime advancement proved to be a decisive factor.³⁸ Bush successor Obama gave additional attention and announced "Pivot to East Asia" regional strategy. In the region, strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening working relationships with emerging powers; enhancing engagements with regional-multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence, and advancing democracy and human rights value share some major features of the Obama

³³An Effective P5+1 Nuclear Deal with Iran and the Role of Congress, *Armed Control Association*, 27 February 2015, Online edition, <https://www.armscontrol.org/events/2015-02-27/An-Effective-P5-1-Nuclear-Deal-with-Iran-and-the-Role-of-Congress>.

³⁴Yahuda, Chinas New Assertiveness in the South China Sea, 447.

³⁵Sabrina Tsai, Obamas Second Term in the Asia-Pacific Region Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future, *Project 2049 Institute*, September 2013, 3.

³⁶Manyin, Mark E., Stephen Daggett, Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, Michael F. Martin, Ronald ORourke, and Bruce Vaughn. "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama administrations rebalancing toward Asia." Library of Congress Washington DC Congressional Research Service, 2012.

³⁷Mark E. Manyin, Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administrations "Rebalancing" Toward Asia, *Congressional Research Service*, 28 March 2012, 1, www.crs.gov.

³⁸Ming-Te and Liu, Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in Southeast Asia: Chinas Rise and U.S. Foreign Policy Transformation since 9/11*, 102.

government.³⁹ China's territorial dispute with Vietnam and the Philippines further increased the US reservations, and also gave it a rationale to make inroads in the regional affairs.

Beijing activism in the South China Sea during 2009 and 2010 further escalated US concerns in the region. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clearly stated at the ASEAN forum in 2009 that the US would support freedom of navigation and respect for the international law in the South China Sea. Her statement internationalized the dispute, for which, Beijing registered strong protest with the US officials. Besides, President Obama's openness for peace in commercial lanes demonstrates increasing importance of Southeast Asia to the US foreign policy agenda.⁴⁰

US active participation in and engaging itself with multilateral regional institutions showed that Washington is strongly involved in the Southeast Asia affairs. First ever visit of secretary-level delegation to the ASEAN Secretariat in 2010, appointment of the resident ambassador to ASEAN, Obama's participation in the East Asia Summit in 2011, holding US-ASEAN Summit in 2016 on the South China Sea dispute, US official quarters frequent participation in the regional affairs, and support of regional institutions in resolving the Spratly Islands dispute can be taken as unprecedented evidences in this regard.⁴¹ Some scholars considered that the US engagement in the Southeast Asian affairs is not intended for merely conflict resolution, rather several other factors prompted it to intervene, such as: freedom of navigation, freedom of flight, trade and commerce, providing reassurance to its allies and partners in the region, diplomatic resolution of the Spratly Islands, conforming the Spratly Islands claims to the UNCLOS, preparation of code of conduct and rebalancing in the Southeast Asia.

Freedom of navigation is the main interest of Washington to comply with its international role as 'security provider' of the international waters. Following this role, it terms maritime patrolling and activities in the international seas legitimate under the UNCLOS. China's interpretation in this regard is different and it wants the US to take permission before initiating any operation in the disputed waters. Though, Beijing did not impose this

³⁹Tsai, Obamas Second Term in the Asia-Pacific Region Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future, 3.

⁴⁰Tsai, 11.

⁴¹Ming-Te and Liu, Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in Southeast Asia: Chinas Rise and U.S. Foreign Policy Transformation since 9/11*, 105.

interpretation on Washington but Beijing stance would be a potential threat to the US ships if it exercises its claim in the disputed area.⁴²

Freedom of flight is another strategic area that involves the US in the South China Sea affairs. The fear that Beijing may attempt to impose an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the disputed waters, as it did in the East China Sea, increases Washington reservations and concerns.⁴³

Beijing claim on 'Nine-Dash Line' is another point of concern for the US as the claim counteracts the international law and norms, while Washington strongly endorses these norms being supportive of its positioning in the existing world order. It considers that acceding to this Chinese claim would affect the legitimate rights of the other states, which would be destabilising for the regional security and stability.

The US has taken several initiatives in order to address these challenges, such as: participation in joint military exercises with regional states, enhancing military apparatus sale to the regional states, increase in military patrolling in the disputed waters, efforts to make fresh alliances and revitalising existing alliances, shifting a substantial part of its maritime forces from Europe to the waters of the Asia-Pacific, deployment of maritime patrol aircraft and UAVs, enhancing deployments in Singapore and Thailand.

The US has focussed upon strengthening the relationship with other claimants in the region, in order to ensure peace and stability, and offset Chinese designs.⁴⁴ It has been working to improve its relations with all regional states which are in conflict with Beijing over the Spratly Islands. The US and its partners and allies in the Southeast Asia are well aware that their enhanced relationship is imperative to counter-balance China.

The escalated tensions between Beijing and Manila illustrate the need for the Philippines to shift its focus from internal security to maritime security and in this regard, the US-Filipino Mutual Defence Treaty and Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) provide frameworks to both to enhance their relationship.⁴⁵

⁴²Jeffrey Bader, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michael McDevitt, Keeping the South China Sea in Perspective, *He Foreign Policy Brief*, (August 2014): 6.<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/south-china-sea-perspective-bader-lieberthal-mcdevitt.pdf>.

⁴³Bader, Lieberthal, and McDevitt, 5.

⁴⁴Kurt Campbell and Brian Andrews, Explaining the US "Pivot" to Asia, *The Asia Group*, no. 1 (August 2013): 3.

⁴⁵Malaya! * J. Eduard, "Constitutional Processes" Requirement in the PH-US Mutual Defense Treaty*, *Phil .LJ* 85 (2011): 992-99. The alliance between Washington and Manila also bounds the US to provide security to the Philippines from external threat. The alliance talks

The VFA allows the US forces to resume its naval visits and conduct military exercises with the Philippines forces. The US combat forces have already been supporting Filipino military forces for fighting insurgency in Mindanao.⁴⁶ The US-Filipino formal alignment involves rights and obligations at the time of armed conflict. The alliance also bounds Manila to not contract similar treaties with China.⁴⁷

The Philippines government while taking aside all its differences with the US sent its Foreign Secretary Albert Del Rosario to Washington in 2011 to obtain security assurance against China.⁴⁸ Both the states not only discussed Beijing's assertive posture in the South China Sea but also agreed to improve their bilateral relations. Rosario also stressed upon Washington to clarify its position over Mutual Defence Treaty (MUT).⁴⁹

There is another perspective that the US rebalancing policy would not only be effective for the Philippines to counter China but would also be beneficial for other states in the region, seeking partners to counter-balance Beijing. There is discussion between Manila and Washington for enabling the US forces access to the Philippines military bases and positioning of equipment at these facilities, and for this, Washington also provided \$321 million as military assistance to Manila.⁵⁰

Like Manila, Washington is developing cordial ties with Vietnam. Both the states have consensus on various regional and international issues, including territorial dispute. Hanoi's strong security reservations against Beijing intentions have brought both the states closer to each other. The high-ups of both the states have been regularly visiting each other's country and

of providing security to the islands, vessels, and aircrafts in the international waters. The Americans think that China is capable of resorting to coercive diplomacy in the region, aimed at its territorial claim. Reflection of aforementioned perspective can be observed in the statement of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at ASEAN Forum in which she said that the US supports peaceful resolution of the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, as this is in the best interest of Washington. Exploration of natural resources and fishing rights are some other points of conflict between Beijing and the regional states, which Washington has been trying to help resolve. Bader, Lieberthal, and McDevitt, 5, 18.

⁴⁶Bates Gill, Evelyn Goh, and Chin-Hao Huang, The Dynamics of US-China-Southeast Asia Relations, *The United States Studies Centre* 1 (2016): 6.

⁴⁷Gill, Goh, and Huang, 7.

⁴⁸Gill, Goh, and Huang, 14.

⁴⁹Seokwoo Lee, The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan and the Territorial Disputes in the East Asia, *Law & Policy Journal Association*, 2002, 63, <http://pds25.egloos.com/pds/201208/12/82/11PacRimLPolyJ063.pdf>.

⁵⁰Sheldon Simon, US-Southeast Asia Relations: Philippines – An Exemplar of the US Rebalance, *Comparative Connections* 15, no. 2 (September 2013): 51.

their mutual interests played an important role in bringing them closer.⁵¹ They also concluded a military agreement, which is said to be the first of its kind after the Vietnam War. Although the agreement is limited to military cooperation in health and research sectors but it opened up the doors for a wider cooperation between them. Their cooperation and partnership has not only strengthened the US influence in the region but also gives Vietnam a chance to enhance its maritime security in the South China Sea. Besides, Vietnam was also part of the US proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – an agreement that US under President Trump has refused to ratify. Vietnam has taken an important position in the US rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific. Both the states are working to improve their trade and investment cooperation, and people-to-people relations to further boost their relationship. Bilateral trade between them has crossed the figure of \$25 billion and they have been working together in the areas of maritime security, law enforcement, military medicines, disaster response and search and relief, non-proliferation and defence capacity building of Vietnam. These developments are important for the United States and Vietnam to counter Beijing in the region.⁵² The annual Defence Policy Dialogue (DPD) is another important characteristic of US-Vietnam growing relations under which both the states have signed an MoU on advancing their bilateral cooperation, mainly in five areas, including maritime security, search and rescue cooperation.⁵³ They also signed an accord on coast's guard cooperation in October 2013 and under this agreement, the US will provide formal training to the Vietnam's coast guards in curriculum development.⁵⁴ Hanoi wants active participation of the US in the Spratly Islands dispute and it has sought to increase its role during the ASEAN Summit 2010.⁵⁵

Although Malaysia is not an aggressive claimant but has various reservations regarding the on-going territorial disputes in the South China

⁵¹Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B Poling, A New Era in U.S.- Vietnam Relations Deepening Ties Two Decades after Normalization, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 2014, 10, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140609_Hiebert_USVietnamRelations_Web.pdf.

⁵²Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, 18.

⁵³Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, A New Era in U.S.- Vietnam Relations Deepening Ties Two Decades after Normalization, Center for Strategic and International Studies (June 2014): 5. www.csis.org.

⁵⁴TN News, Vietnam, US Agree to Boost Coast Guard Cooperation, *Thanh Nien News*, 31 October 2013, Online edition, sec. Politics, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/vietnam-us-agree-to-boost-coast-guard-cooperation-786.html>.

⁵⁵James Bellacqua, The China Factor in U.S.-Vietnam Relations, *CNA*, March 2012, 8, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2012-U-000184-FINAL.pdf.

Sea.⁵⁶The dispute continues to be a latent challenge for the Malaysian government. Malaysia is another important state for the US rebalancing policy in the region. US-Malaysia relations have been improving with each passing day due to their shared interests in the region. Both the states have established a “comprehensive partnership” to boost their economic and security relations. Malaysia’s endorsement of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), bilateral efforts to improve international trade, and strengthening peace and prosperity are some important moves of the US-Malaysia’s partnership.⁵⁷Malaysia also played its role as the ASEAN chair in 2015 to engage the United States to further improve its economic and security relations with the states in the Southeast Asia.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Although the Southeast Asia remains at the helm of the world politics in the recent past for various other matters, however, the overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea remained the centre of attention. There can be many analyses of the dispute but the one which keeps dominating the regional political environment is the Sino-US increasing geostrategic competition.

The idea of Sino-US competition has been heard on various forums in the past couple of years but the islands dispute put the two great powers into geostrategic competition, and construction of military stations and maritime advancement on the part of Chinese government and open support of US to the Philippines stance after the decision of Permanent Court of Arbitration against China and increase in number of patrolling of US naval ships in Chinese EEZ proved to be detrimental factors to put the duo into geostrategic competition.

The two states are in a consensus to resolve the sovereignty disputes between the regional states through dialogue and for this they are ready to compromise diplomatically and politically; but as far as their strategic interests are concerned annual security reports and official documents complement their inflexibility in this regard.

Sino-US cooperation and good ties are important for the larger interest of the region and their misunderstandings and differences are threats

⁵⁶Ian E Rinehart, Malaysia: Background and U.S. Relations, *Nova Science Publishers, Inc* 24, no. 1 (19 November 2015): 3.

⁵⁷Murray Hiebert et al., *From Strength to Empowerment: The next Generation of U.S.-Malaysia Relations* (Washington, DC, May 2012), 12, Web: www.isis.org.my.

⁵⁸Dr Oh Ei Sun and Mr David Han, *Malaysias Relations with the Major Powers: China and the United States*, *RSIS*, 1 March 2016, 1–15.

to the regional peace and prosperity. In this regard, the role of regional states cannot be ignored as they can play major role in ensuring stability in the region. Therefore, there is an urgent need and desire to pull both the states for bringing mutual solution and in this regard, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia can play their individual and collective role.

The United States is bent upon containing – or at least hedging – against China, not only in the Southeast Asia, but overall at the system level. South China Sea and Asia-Pacific remained important theatres of the US re-balancing strategy. But at the same time strengthening the existing partnerships and forging the new alignments – such as with India, Japan – are the similar steps taken in order to achieve the foreign policy objective of limiting Chinese influence in the region and beyond.

China, on the hand, prudently has also embarked upon limiting the American freedom of action by softening its tone vis-à-vis regional states, and opening new avenues of cooperation. Such as China has started to invest heavily in Veitnam in order to placate the volatile situation. Similarly Beijing, despite knowing the fact that Philippines tried to drag it in Permanent Court of Arbitration, has increased cooperation with it. Present Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte, soon after being elected, tried to develop close linkages with China, and even downplaying the role of the United States in the region. Resultantly bilateral cooperation between the two enhanced tremendously, and in November 2018 Chinese president Xi Jinpeng visited Manila.

Great power politics is going on at the system level, and it automatically seeps down to the regional levels. China is rising and is demanding to have a *fair say* in the management of international system. The US, on the other hand, is trying to bi furcte Chinese influence, and in so doing it is exploiting the regional animosities so ensure a rough balance of power at the regional level.